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Mäesalu, M.

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The St. George's Night Uprising (1343–1345) in Medieval Livonia. How an elite rebellion has been misinterpreted as a farmer-insurrection

Mihkel Mäesalu

The St. George's Night Uprising (1343–1345) was the only widespread uprising in the crusading regions in the Eastern Baltic – Medieval Livonia and Medieval Prussia – during the fourteenth century. Specifically for Livonia, where the insurrection occurred, it was the only large-scale revolt between circa 1300 and 1559. Historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries considered it simultaneously a farmer-insurrection directed against the nobility and a national uprising of the Estonians seeking liberty from the German-speaking elite who had subjugated them in the early thirteenth century.

Similarly to other large-scale popular uprisings in fourteenth-century Europe – such as the Rebellion in Maritime Flanders (1323–1328),¹ the Jacquerie (1358)² or the English Rising of 1381³ – historians have recently argued that the St. George's Night Uprising should not be seen as purely a farmer-insurrection.⁴ As the revolt 'was organised in advance, and its leaders concluded agreements with the rulers of Sweden and Pskov, and had also been in contact with the king of Denmark', it must have been led by individuals capable of conducting foreign diplomacy.⁵ The assumption that the rebellion was a response to the excesses of the manor-holding nobility has been challenged by a study identifying extraordinary taxation

¹ M. Pajić, 'Hostages and Exiles: The Townsmen of Bruges and Ypres and the Rebellion of Maritime Flanders (1323–28)' in: A. Jobson, H. Kersey, and G. McKelvie ed., *Rebellion in Medieval Europe, c.1000-c.1500* (Woodbridge 2025) 192–209.

² J. Firnhaber-Baker, 'The Social Constituency of the Jacquerie Revolt of 1358', *Speculum* 93.3 (2020) 689–715.

³ A. Prescott, 'Great and Horrible Rumour'. Shaping the English revolt of 1381' in: J. Firnhaber-Baker and D. Schoenaers ed., *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt* (London and New York, NY 2017) 76–103.

⁴ J. Kreem, 'Der Aufstand in der Georgsnacht 1343' in: K. Brüggemann et al. ed., *Das Baltikum. Geschichte einer europäischen Region, Bd. 1, Von der Vor- und Frühgeschichte bis zum Ende des Mittelalters* (Stuttgart 2018) 384–385.

⁵ A. Selart, 'The Struggle for Dominance, 1300–1400' in: A. Selart and A.V. Murray ed., *Medieval Livonia. History, society and economy of a territory on the Baltic frontier*. Outremer: Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East 18 (Turnhout 2025) 147–160: 153.

implemented by King Valdemar IV of Denmark (1340–1375) as its root cause.⁶

In her seminal 2016 study Linda Kaljundi asserted that fourteenth-century chronicles portrayed the insurgents as apostate Estonians – people who renounced Christianity and returned to paganism – rebelling against Christianity. It was only in the second half of the sixteenth century when Lutheran authors re-interpreted the event as a revolt of Estonian peasants against the German nobility. Kaljundi does not believe that the fourteenth-century chronicles accurately depicted the insurgents and their motives. In her view both labels – apostates and peasants – were used to delegitimize the rebels.⁷ Recent studies on Christianization indicates that it is highly improbable the rebels advocated a return to ‘paganism’ or held genuinely anti-Christian sentiments.⁸

Recent research into the St. George’s Night Uprising has thus largely been deconstructive. Criticism of earlier historiography has not resulted in new studies into the social background of the insurgents. This article does so by defining the social status of the rebels with the following methods. Firstly, I will present a thorough historiographical analysis of the construction of the farmer-insurrection narrative in modern scholarship. This will be coupled with a discussion on the changes in the depiction of the insurgents between fourteenth and sixteenth century chronicles, demonstrating why historians prior to 2016 paid no attention to these stark differences in the narrative

⁶ M. Mäesalu, ‘Taani kuninga asehaldur Konrad Preen ja Jüriöö ülestõus’ [Danish viceroy Konrad Preen and the Saint George’s Night Uprising], *Tuna* 2 / 2021, 9–24. An English translation of the paper is published in: M. Mäesalu and S. Pajung, *Danish-Estonian relations in the middle ages*. Studies from The Museum of National History at Frederiksborg 6 (Hillerød 2022) 237–264.

⁷ L. Kaljundi, ‘Pagans into Peasants. Ethnic and Social Boundaries in Early Modern Livonia’ in: T.M.S. Lehtonen and L. Kaljundi ed., *Re-forming Texts, Music, and Church Art in the Early Modern North*. Crossing Boundaries. Turku Medieval and Early Modern Studies 2 (Amsterdam 2016) 357–392.

⁸ T. Kala, ‘The Incorporation of the Northern Baltic Lands into the Western Christian World’ in: A.V. Murray ed., *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150–1500* (Aldershot and Burlington 2001) 3–20; T. Jonuks and T. Kurisoo, ‘To Be or Not to Be... a Christian: Some New Perspectives on Understanding the Christianisation of Estonia’, *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 55 (2013) 69–98; T. Jonuks, ‘Domesticating Europe – Novel Cultural Influences in the Late Iron Age Eastern Baltic’ in: A. Selart ed., *Baltic Crusades and Societal Innovation in Medieval Livonia, 1200–1350*. The Northern World 93 (Leiden and Boston, MA 2022) 29–54.

sources. Secondly, I will engage in a critical re-examination of both narrative and documentary primary sources with a focus on the military and diplomatic actions of the insurgents, the resources at their disposal and their depiction in contemporary narratives. By placing the achieved results in the context of recent research on societal change in thirteenth and fourteenth century Livonia, I will determine the social and ethnic background of the leading rebels.

The event and its setting

Medieval Livonia was a historical region roughly corresponding to the territories of present-day Estonia and Latvia.⁹ The area was inhabited by various Finnic and Baltic peoples who were conquered in the thirteenth century by crusaders from the northern parts of the Holy Roman Empire and Scandinavia. These conquests created this new historical region,¹⁰ which was both ethnically diverse and politically fragmented. In the early fourteenth century, the region was divided among the King of Denmark, the Teutonic Order, and four bishoprics with secular lordships, whereby the non-Danish areas were a loosely affiliated part of the Holy Roman Empire.¹¹

The uprising began on the 22nd of April 1343, the eve of the Feast of St. George – hence the name – and ended in February 1345. It started in Danish Estonia, but was confined solely to its western part, the region of Harjumaa. The eastern area of Danish Estonia – the region of Virumaa – was largely unaffected. In early May 1343, the rebellion spread to the neighbouring bishopric of Saaremaa (Ösel-Wiek in German scholarship). This bishopric consisted of two distinct areas: a mainland part called Läänemaa, and numerous islands, the largest of those being Saaremaa. Initially the uprising here was limited to Läänemaa. It was only on the 24th of

⁹ A. Selart and A.V. Murray ed., *Medieval Livonia. History, society and economy of a territory on the Baltic frontier*. Outremer: Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East 18 (Turnhout, 2025) offers the most recent overview of the history of Medieval Livonia.

¹⁰ M. Tamm, 'Inventing Livonia: The Name and Fame of a New Christian Colony on the Medieval Baltic Frontier', *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 60 (2011) 186-209.

¹¹ M. Mäesalu, 'Der Kaiser und die Landesherren Livlands in den Jahren von 1199 bis 1486' in: A. Levāns, I. Misāns and G. Strenga ed., *Das mittelalterliche Livland und sein historisches Erbe. Medieval Livonia and Its Historical Legacy*. Tagungen zur Ostmitteleuropaforschung 41/1 (Marburg 2022) 129-149.

July 1343 when the revolt spread to the island of Saaremaa. The insurgency in Harjumaa and Läänemaa was suppressed by the Teutonic Order in the winter of 1343–1344, whereas the rebels on the island of Saaremaa held out until February 1345. As modern history writing has often interpreted the uprising as a national insurrection of the Estonians, one must note here that it did not involve central and southern Estonia ruled by the Teutonic Knights nor the bishopric of Tartu in southeast Estonia.

The historiographical construction of a farmer-insurrection

Historical research on the uprising relies almost exclusively on the following four chronicles: Hermann of Wartberge's Livonian Chronicle (written ca. 1380),¹² the Chronicle of Wigand of Marburg (written ca. 1394),¹³ the 'Chronicle of the Province of Livonia' (first printed edition 1578) by Balthasar Russow († 1600)¹⁴ and 'Livonian Histories' (written before 1583) by Johann Renner († 1583).¹⁵ Both Hermann and Wigand were members of the Teutonic Order, whereas Renner served as a clerk of the Knights between

¹² E. Strehlke, T. Hirsch and M. Töppen ed., 'Hermann de Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae' in: *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum* II (Leipzig 1863) 21–116; A. Selart, 'Die livländische Chronik des Hermann von Wartberge' in: M. Thumser ed., *Geschichtsschreibung im mittelalterlichen Livland* (Berlin 2011) 59–85.

¹³ Wigand von Marburg, *Nova kronika pruska* [New chronicle of Prussia], S. Zonenberg and K. Kwiatkowski ed. (Toruń 2017); K. Kwiatkowski, 'Oryginalne fragmenty kroniki Wiganda von Marburg – opis źródłoznawczy, nowa edycja i polskie tłumaczenie' [Original fragments of the chronicle of Wigand von Marburg – Source study, new edition and Polish translation], *Studia Źródłoznawcze. Commentationes* 59 (2021) 107–143. See also the older editions: T. Hirsch, M. Töppen and E. Strehlke ed., 'Die Chronik Wigands von Marburg. Originalfragmente, lateinische Uebersetzung und sonstiger Ueberreste' in: *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum*, 2 (Leipzig 1863) 429–662; T. Hirsch, M. Töppen and E. Strehlke ed., 'Zwei Fragmente der Reimchronik Wigand's von Marburg' in: *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum* IV (Leipzig 1870) 1–8; U. Arnold and W. Hubatsch ed., 'Ein Fragment der Reimchronik Wigands von Marburg' in: *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum*, VI (Frankfurt am Main 1968) 44–49.

¹⁴ B. Russow, 'Chronica der Provintz Lyfflandt' in: *Scriptores rerum Livonicarum. Sammlung der wichtigsten Chroniken und Geschichtsdenkmale von Liv-, Ehst-, und Kurland*, 2 (Riga and Leipzig 1853) 1–194.

¹⁵ J. Renner, *Livländische Historien*, R. Hausmann and K. Höhlbaum ed. (Göttingen 1876).

1556 and 1561. All narrative sources thus only reflect the event from the perspective of the Knights either directly or by using earlier Teutonic Order historiography.

Fourteenth-century chronicles depict the insurrection as an act of apostasy by the Estonians. They describe the rebels slaughtering Christians, burning churches and monasteries, and killing priests and monks.¹⁶ Wigand of Marburg blames the Danish administration for causing the rebellion:

The king's knights and retainers oppressed the inhabitants [of Danish Estonia] with such great burdens and hardships that they raised their voices to the Master and the brethren [of the Teutonic Order] in excessive worry and painful complaint; namely those who are usually called Estonians, Osilians [i.e. Estonians of Saaremaa island], and also other peoples. Their violence was so great that they dishonoured their wives, deflowered virgins, seized their possessions, and treated them as slaves.¹⁷

This quotation comes from the abridged Latin prose translation of Marburg's chronicle, produced in 1464. Only fragments of the original High German verse chronicle are preserved, so the translation does not convey all the intricacies of the primary text.¹⁸ Even so, the passage clearly speaks of injustice perpetrated by the royal administration. How the abuse of power in Danish Estonia could incite rebellion in the bishopric of Saaremaa is left for the reader to decide. The depiction of the social aspects of the insurrection in fourteenth-century chronicles is thus limited to unjust rule. Neither mentions farmers revolting against the nobility.

Sixteenth-century authors Balthasar Russow and Johann Renner are the first to speak of peasant insurgents burning down the manors of the nobility and killing all nobles they got their hands on. Russow highlights the social side, whereas Renner emphasizes the ethnic background, but to both the words 'peasant' and 'Estonian' are identical. In their contemporary

¹⁶ Kaljundi, 'Pagans into Peasants', 365-374.

¹⁷ Wigand von Marburg, *Nova kronika pruska*, 216; Hirsch, Töppen and Strehlke ed., 'Chronik Wigands von Marburg', 501.

¹⁸ K. Kwiatkowski and E. Kubicka, 'Was kann die Translationswissenschaft über Konrad Gesselens Übersetzung der Reimchronik Wigands von Marburg sagen?' in: M.L. Heckmann and J. Sarnowsky ed., *Schriftlichkeit im Preußenland*, Tagungsberichte der Historischen Kommission für ost- und westpreußische Landesforschung 30 (Osnabrück 2020) 312-354.

sixteenth-century society, a German would hardly have been a peasant, whereas a rural Estonian could scarcely have been anyone else.¹⁹

Johann Renner offers the most detailed account of the events, which relies largely on a verse chronicle written circa 1350 by Bartholomaeus Hoeneke, a priest-brother of the Teutonic Knights.²⁰ Unfortunately, Bartholomaeus' chronicle has not survived. Its few surviving fragments were identified and published in 2011 and 2014.²¹ Their comparison with Renner's narrative has shown that he used the fourteenth-century Middle High German verses as a source of information for his Middle Low German prose. Usually he summarised or contracted the original, sometimes ignoring large portions, and in one case rearranging the sequence of the narrative.²² Even though based on the chronicle of Bartholomaeus Hoeneke and containing information not preserved in any other historical source, Renner's depiction of the uprising must be read as his own work. It cannot be considered as an accurate representation of the depiction of the uprising by Bartholomaeus Hoeneke.²³

Unfortunately, between 1872 and 2011 an opposite interpretation dominated historical research. In 1872 Konstantin Höhlbaum (1849–1904) came forth with the idea that Renner had rendered Bartholomaeus Hoeneke's verse chronicle into prose.²⁴ From that moment on, historians read Renner's take on the uprising as if it had been written circa 1350 by Bartholomaeus

¹⁹ Kaljundi, 'Pagans into Peasants', 374-386.

²⁰ A. Mentzel-Reuters, 'Bartholomaeus Hoeneke. Ein Historiograph zwischen Überlieferung und Fiktion' in: M. Thumser ed., *Geschichtsschreibung im mittelalterlichen Livland*. Schriften der Baltischen Historischen Kommission 18 (Berlin 2011) 11-58.

²¹ Mentzel-Reuters, 'Bartholomaeus Hoeneke', 53-58; M. Olivier, 'Zwei Exzerpte aus der "Jüngeren Livländischen Reimchronik" des Bartholomaeus Hoeneke?' in: B. Jähnig and A. Mentzel-Reuters ed., *Neue Studien zur Literatur im Deutschen Orden*, Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur, Beihefte 19 (Stuttgart 2014) 289-310.

²² Olivier, 'Zwei Exzerpte', 295-310.

²³ Mentzel-Reuters, 'Bartholomaeus Hoeneke', 37-53; A. Selart, 'Kas Bartholomäus Hoeneke „Läivimaa noorem riimkroonika“ on Jüriöö ülestõusu ajaloo allikas?' [Is Bartholomäus Hoeneke's *Younger Livonian Rhymed Chronicle* a historical source for the St. George's Night Uprising?], *Tuna* 2 /2015, 28-32; Kaljundi, 'Pagans into Peasants', 374-382.

²⁴ K. Höhlbaum, *Die jüngere livländische Reimchronik des Bartholomäus Hoeneke 1315-1348* (Leipzig 1872).

Hoeneke – the only chronicler contemporary to the rebellion, considered by many to have personally witnessed certain events of the uprising.²⁵

Renner's narrative was totally compatible with the social role historians used to ascribe to fourteenth-century Estonians. Baltic German historians of the nineteenth century firmly believed the crusader conquest had reduced the Estonians to serfs of the German nobility. Therefore, an Estonian insurrection must have been a peasant-rebellion.²⁶ The emerging Estonian nationalist discourse of the late nineteenth century embraced this portrayal which suited their perception of the Estonians as a nation of farmers suppressed by the German-speaking elite.²⁷ After Estonia became independent in 1918 the uprising was reinterpreted as an attempt by fourteenth-century Estonians to regain political independence.²⁸ Although historians in the 1920s began to date the beginning of serfdom with the early fifteenth century²⁹ while also arguing that the pre-conquest societal structures of the Estonians remained relevant until the uprising,³⁰ its portrayal as a farmer-insurrection persisted.

²⁵ S. Vahre, 'Die Darstellung des Estenaufstandes 1343 bis 1345 in Deutschordenschroniken' in: B. Jähnig and K. Militzer ed., *Aus der Geschichte Alt-Livlands. Festschrift für Heinz von zur Mühlen zum 90. Geburtstag*. Schriften der Baltischen Historischen Kommission 12 (Münster 2004) 55-69; K. Kļaviņš, 'Das mittelalterliche Livland und der christliche Westen: Symbiosen deutscher und baltischer Lebensformen nach der Jüngerer Livländischen Chronik des Bartholomaeus Hoeneke', *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein-Gesellschaft* 16 (2006) 205-225; G. Vercamer, 'Heiliger Kampf allein? Legitimitätsstrategien des Deutschen Ordens in Livland in der historiographischen Darstellung des 13./14. Jahrhunderts', *Preußenland* 13 (2022) 51-87: 66-71.

²⁶ F.G. von Bunge, *Das Herzogthum Estland unter den Königen von Dänemark* (Gotha 1877) 68-73, 88-90 and 125-129.

²⁷ M. Tamm, 'A Portable Fatherland: Afterlives of the St. George's Night Uprising (1343) in Estonian Cultural Memory' in: A. Erll, S. Knittel, and J. Wüstenberg ed., *Dynamics, Mediation, Mobilization. Doing Memory Studies with Ann Rigney* (Berlin and Boston, MA 2024) 191-198.

²⁸ H. Kruus, 'Eestlaste vabadusvõitlus 1343–45 [The Estonians' Struggle for Freedom, 1343–45]' in: H. Kruus ed., *Eesti ajalugu. II, Eesti keskaeg [History of Estonia. II, the Middle Ages of Estonia]* (Tartu 1937) 120-140.

²⁹ A. von Transehe-Roseneck, 'Die Entstehung der Schollenpflichtigkeit in Livland', *Mitteilungen aus der livländischen Geschichte* 23 (1926) 485-574.

³⁰ P. Johansen, *Siedlung und Agrarwesen der Esten im Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zur estnischen Kulturgeschichte*, Verhandlungen der Gelehrten Estnischen Gesellschaft 23 (Dorpat

The Soviet occupation of Estonia (1940–1941 and 1944–1991) did not result in any significant reassessment of the uprising. The focus of Soviet historiography on class struggle and the study of non-elite social groups strengthened its perception as a peasant-revolt, but did not invalidate its significance as a national insurrection of the Estonians. During the Second World War, Soviet propaganda used the 600th anniversary of the uprising to invigorate the Estonians to fight against their ‘national enemy’, the Germans.³¹ It may seem a paradox, but the historiography of Soviet Estonia largely conserved the core perceptions of earlier national Estonian history writing on the Middle Ages in all topics not involving Russians. The latter had to be depicted in a strictly positive light during the Soviet occupation.³²

Later international scholarship has largely relied on Renner’s narrative of a peasant-insurrection,³³ without offering any alternative interpretations. The study of the uprising as a research topic on its own has been exclusively pursued by Estonian historians. The most prolific scholar, Sulev Vahre (1926–2007), was a staunch supporter of Höhlbaum’s ideas on Renner having preserved the contents of Bartholomaeus Hoeneke’s chronicle.³⁴ The two papers published by Vahre and Artur Vassar (1911–

1925); O. Sild, *Eestlaste vabaduse järkjärguline kokkuvarisemine keskajal* [*The Gradual Disintegration of the Freedom of the Estonians in the Middle Ages*] (Tartu 1926).

³¹ Tamm, ‘A Portable Fatherland’, 194–195.

³² J. Undusk, ‘Retooriline sund Eesti nõukogude ajalookirjutuses’ [Rhetoric pressure in the history writing of Soviet Estonia] in: A. Krikmann and S. Olesk ed. *Võim ja kultuur* (Tartu 2003) 44–68; T. Kala, ‘Eesti vanem ja uuem medievistika’ [Older and newer medieval studies in Estonia] in: R. Veidemann and Ö. Kepp ed. *Kõnetav kultuur* (Tallinn 2011) 163–178: 171.

³³ C.A. Christensen, ‘Stig Andersens benyttelse af Valdemar Atterdags segl og forudsætningerne for salget af Estland’ [Stig Andersen’s use of Valdemar Atterdag’s seal and the preconditions for the sale of Estonia], *Historisk tidsskrift*. 11. række 5:4 (1958) 381–428: 395–396; S. Tägil, *Valdemar Atterdag och Europa* [Valdemar IV Atterdag and Europe] (Lund 1962) 117–123; N. Skyum-Nielsen, ‘Estonia under Danish rule’ in: N. Skyum-Nielsen and N. Lund ed., *Danish Medieval History. New Currents* (Copenhagen 1981) 112–135: 129; H. von zur Mühlen, ‘Livland von der Christianisierung bis zum Ende seiner Selbständigkeit’ in: G. von Pistohlkors ed., *Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas. Baltische Länder* (Berlin 1994) 25–172: 74–78; A. Bysted, C.S. Jensen, K.V. Jensen and J. Lind, *Jerusalem in the North: Denmark and the Baltic Crusades 1100–1522*, *Outremer* 1 (Turnhout 2012) 332–333.

³⁴ S. Vahre, *Bartholomäus Hoeneke Liiwimaa noorem riimkroonika (1315–1348)* [Bartholomäus Hoeneke’s *Younger Livonian Rhymed Chronicle (1315–1348)*] (Tallinn 1960).

1977) in 1956 in Soviet-occupied Estonia approached the uprising in the frameworks of medieval peasant rebellions and class struggle.³⁵ Historian Peep Peeter Rebane (1940) – an Estonian residing in the United States of America – argued in 1974 that ‘it was a rebellion of Estonians of various classes who rose in a desperate national uprising against the occupying foreigners.’ Yet he still saw it as one of the ‘peasant rebellions which swept Europe in the fourteenth century.’³⁶ In 1983 Enn Tarvel (1932–2021), working in Soviet-occupied Estonia, rejected the framing of the uprising as a peasant rebellion, presenting it as a purely national insurrection instead. However, Tarvel firmly believed the insurgents were farmers.³⁷ In his view, medieval Estonians lived in an egalitarian society without any rigid social hierarchies.³⁸ These self-governing farmer-communities, which had been subjugated to foreign rule in the thirteenth century, now rebelled to regain their independence.³⁹

Sulev Vahre fervently defended the idea of a farmer-insurrection in his 1980 book on the uprising. When analysing Renner’s statement that the insurgents of Harjumaa ‘elected four Estonian peasants as their kings’,⁴⁰ Vahre acknowledged that the word ‘peasants’ (*buren*) might be a later addition by Renner not found in Bartholomaeus Hoencke’s original text, but quickly

³⁵ S. Vahre, ‘Eesti talurahvasõja (Jüriöö ülestõusu) lähtekohast’ [On the starting-point of the peasant war of 1343-1345 in Estonia] *Eesti NSV Teaduste Akadeemia toimetised* 1 (1956) 66-74; A. Vassar, ‘Miks Eesti talurahvasõda 1343. aastal puhkes teatud tähtpäevadel?’ [Why the Estonian peasant war of 1343 broke out on certain special dates] *Eesti NSV Teaduste Akadeemia toimetised* 1 (1956) 75-79.

³⁶ P.P. Rebane, ‘The Jüriöö Mäss (St. George’s Night Rebellion)’ in: A. Ziedonis jr., W.L. Winter, and M. Valgemäe ed., *Baltic History*, Publications of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies 5 (Columbus, OH 1974) 35-48, quotes from pages 43 and 44.

³⁷ E. Tarvel, ‘Zur Problematik der Bauernaufstände in Estland im Kontexte der Christianisierung und Kolonisation des Landes’ in: Z.H. Nowak ed., *Die Rolle der Ritterorden in der Christianisierung und Kolonisierung des Ostseegebietes*, Ordines militares. Colloquia Torunensia Historica 1 (Toruń 1983) 115-124: 119-123.

³⁸ E. Tarvel, ‘Die Interpretation der sozialhistorischen Terminologie in den livländischen Geschichtsquellen des 13. Jahrhunderts’ in: J. Staecker ed., *The European Frontier. Clashes and Compromises in the Middle Ages. International symposium of the Culture Clash or Compromise (CCC) project and the Department of Archaeology, Lund University, held in Lund October 13–15 2000*, CCC Papers 7 (Lund 2004) 310-314.

³⁹ E. Tarvel, ‘Saarlaste jaagupipäeva ülestõus 1343. aastal’ [The St. James’s Day Uprising of the Estonians of Saaremaa in 1343], *Tuna* 2 / 2005, 10-13.

⁴⁰ Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 86: *Dar na koeren se 4 Eestische buren to koningen*.

dismissed any consequences which could arise from it: 'if the leaders were peasants, then men of knightly rank cannot have been among the insurgents. In this case the participation and leading role of vassals of Estonian origin in the uprising can be ruled out.'⁴¹ This is exactly what Vahtre did. He was convinced that any Estonians who had integrated with the immigrant German nobility could not partake in the uprising, because they had aligned themselves with the oppressive foreign regime.⁴² In Vahtre's view the traditional societal elite of the Estonians was leading the uprising. He was even arguing that the rebel Estonians began to create their own nobility.⁴³ Although one of the staunchest proponents of the farmer-insurrection interpretation, even Vahtre saw it foremost as a national uprising of the Estonians seeking independence.⁴⁴

A new social history of the uprising

The uprising occurred during an acute political crisis in the Kingdom of Denmark. The election of Valdemar IV as king in 1340 ended an eight-year-long interregnum, which saw the introduction of extraordinary taxes to buy out territories previously pledged to the counts of Holstein and other German noblemen. Valdemar's rise to power was backed by Margrave Ludwig of Brandenburg (1323–1351, † 1361) who also had certain financial claims on the king. Valdemar IV offered Danish Estonia as collateral and Ludwig unsuccessfully sought to arrange a sale of the area to the Teutonic Order in 1340–1341. The local nobility in Danish Estonia vehemently opposed the sale, and Valdemar IV was clearly not in any hurry to seal the deal. The territory remained under Danish lordship until 1346, when Valdemar IV himself sold Danish Estonia to the Teutonic Knights who also had to buy out Ludwig's claims to the area.⁴⁵ The Knights were the leading military force in

⁴¹ S. Vahtre, *Jüriöö [St. George's Night]* (Tallinn 1980) 57.

⁴² S. Vahtre, 'Kuningamehed ja Jüriöö ülestõus' [The King's Men and the St. George's Night Uprising], *Vikerkaar* 4 / 1993, 52–59.

⁴³ Vahtre, *Jüriöö*, 58–59.

⁴⁴ Vahtre, *Jüriöö*, 91–92; Vahtre, 'Die Darstellung', 55–57.

⁴⁵ Christensen, 'Stig Andersens', 404–23; Tägil, *Valdemar Atterdag*, 111–137; N. Bracke, *Die Regierung Waldemars IV. Eine Untersuchung zum Wandel von Herrschaftsstrukturen im spätmittelalterlichen Dänemark*, Kieler Werkstücke. Reihe A 21 (Frankfurt am Main and New York, NY 1999) 211–215.

suppressing the insurrection and seem to have used the rebellion to their advantage in bargaining for a suitable price and ensuring a peaceful transfer of power in 1346.⁴⁶

The extraordinary royal taxes were met with strong resistance in Danish Estonia. Cistercian Abbeys refused to pay them in 1340, prompting the viceroy to seize their lands and collect the taxes himself. The abbeys asked the Teutonic Knights to mediate a truce with the viceroy, appealed to the pope and obtained papal mandates ordering the viceroy to stop taxing church property.⁴⁷ Laymen also approached the Teutonic Order with similar pleas, and sent an embassy to the King Valdemar IV. The injustices perpetrated by the Danish administration recorded by Marburg of Wigand may thus refer to the resistance to these extraordinary taxes, and the methods of their collection employed by viceroy Konrad Preen.⁴⁸ Although the social status of the laymen is not mentioned, there is no reason to assume they were farmers.

The uprising was pre-planned and caught the Danish administration completely by surprise. The insurgents formed a secret alliance with the Swedish viceroy of Finland in the winter of 1342-1343⁴⁹ and were expecting his fleet to aid them in subjugating Tallinn, the administrative centre of Danish Estonia. King Magnus Eriksson of Sweden and Norway (1319-1364) was at war with Valdemar IV in the years 1341-1343, whereas Danish Estonia was in 1342-1343 also involved in a war against Pskov as an ally of the Teutonic Knights, and the bishoprics of Tartu and Riga. Viceroy Konrad Preen had moved to the castle of Narva on the eastern border in early 1343, whereas the Teutonic Order was preparing a campaign against Pskov in April.⁵⁰ The rebels had sent envoys to Pskov urging for an attack against Danish Estonia.⁵¹ Their plan appears to have involved keeping Konrad Preen and the Knights involved in warfare with Pskov, while they would capture Tallinn together with the Swedes.

⁴⁶ I. Leimus, 'Kes võitis Jüriöö?' [Who won the St. George's Night Uprising?], *Ajalooline Ajakiri* 3 / 2001, 39-54; Mäesalu and Pajung, *Danish-Estonian relations in the middle ages*, 224-229 and 256-260.

⁴⁷ C.A. Christensen, H. Nielsen and P. Jørgensen ed., *Diplomatarium Danicum. 3. række, 1340-1412. 1. bind, 1340-1343* (København 1958) Nos. 143 and 164.

⁴⁸ Mäesalu and Pajung, *Danish-Estonian relations in the middle ages*, 241-245.

⁴⁹ Leimus, 'Kes võitis Jüriöö?', 50.

⁵⁰ Mäesalu and Pajung, *Danish-Estonian relations in the middle ages*, 221-222 and 244-251.

⁵¹ Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 91; Russow, 'Chronica', 25.

The revolt itself began on the 22nd of April 1343 in Harjumaa, the western part of Danish Estonia. The insurgents besieged Tallinn and sacked the Cistercian Abbey of Padise. As mentioned above, fourteenth-century chronicles reported the rebels slaughtering all Christians they came upon, whereas sixteenth century chronicles spoke instead of the murdering of nobles and the burning of their manors, without mentioning any names and places. In addition to these generic depictions of violence, the chronicle of Johann Renner reports the insurgents raiding the village of Ravila in Harjumaa to bring 'a big herd of livestock' to their camp at Tallinn.⁵² Apparently the rebels did not shy away from looting villages, which might suggest that the insurgents were not farmers themselves.

A charter issued on the 11th of May 1343 in Tallinn by interim viceroy Bertram Parenbeke, and eleven royal vassals curiously avoids any direct mention of the rebels. Speaking in the passive voice, it mentions honest men recently being slaughtered, and robbery, burning and killing in Harjumaa, and of the need to reinforce the castle of Tallinn.⁵³ The clerk who composed the text carefully avoided mentioning an insurrection, let alone any rebels, although Tallinn was at the time besieged by the insurgents. The most plausible explanation is that the interim viceroy and the eleven vassals sought to avoid any possible future accusations on slander. They were foreseeing the possibility of either a rebel victory or a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Basically, preparing for any kind of future outcome where the former rebels and their opponents would have to coexist together, their differences laid aside. This would make sense only if the social status of the insurgents was similar to theirs, so that the victorious rebels could claim they acted for the common good and treat any reference to rebellion as slander.

The Teutonic Order quickly reacted to the uprising. The Master of Knights – Burchard von Dreileben (in office 1340-1345) – offered to mediate between the insurgents and the Danish administration. The negotiations took place on neutral ground in the Teutonic Order castle of Paide between the fourth and tenth of May 1343. When the talks failed, Burchard von Dreileben made an unexpected move, he incarcerated both the viceroy of Danish Estonia as well as the envoys of the insurgents. The envoys of the insurgents

⁵² Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 87.

⁵³ Christensen, Nielsen and Jørgensen ed., *DD 3/1*, No. 321.

resisted and ended up being murdered, but Konrad Preen and his entourage were freed in June 1344.⁵⁴

Thereafter, Dreileben set forth on a campaign to Harjumaa and defeated the insurgents besieging Tallinn on the fourteenth or 15th of May, just a few days before the arrival of their Swedish allies. Now, on the 16th of May 1343 fifteen royal councillors and five royal vassals issued a charter wherein they suddenly spoke of an 'invasion of infidel Estonians, plundering and killing their lords, despoiling and devastating their goods, and their numerous misdeeds'.⁵⁵ Eight of these twenty men had been among the issuers of the charter from the 11th of May. Their surprisingly swift change of attitude regarding the rebels requires explanation.

The charter of the 16th of May depicts the situation as so dire, that the only way to 'save and pacify' Danish Estonia and avoid its alienation from the Kingdom of Denmark is to place it under the guardianship of the Teutonic Order and hand two royal castles (Tallinn and Rakvere) over to them. The royal councillors must have been in a desperate situation indeed if they saw no other options than to accept as their guardian the man who had recently imprisoned the viceroy of Danish Estonia. A second charter from the 27th of October 1343 issued by several clerical and lay authorities of Danish Estonia reinforces this statement by presenting the Knights as the only force capable of bringing the neophytes 'back into obedience to their lords and to the unity of the church'.⁵⁶ Similar statements were also made by the bishops of Tartu and Saaremaa at 'the end of the year 1343' who argued the Devil had incited the neophytes to relapse into apostasy.⁵⁷ These three charters are the only existing examples of a much larger corpus of testimonies and letters composed in 1343 at the instigation of the Teutonic Knights to spread the narrative of an anti-Christian revolt of apostate Estonians.⁵⁸ Denouncing their enemies as 'infidels' was a common diplomatic strategy in

⁵⁴ Mäesalu and Pajung, *Danish-Estonian relations in the middle ages*, 251-253; Selart, 'Medieval Livonia', 153-154.

⁵⁵ Christensen, Nielsen and Jørgensen ed., *DD 3/1*, No. 322.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, No. 376.

⁵⁷ O. Stavenhagen and L. Arbusow jr. ed., *Akten und Rezesse der Livländischen Ständetage. Erster Band (1304-1460)* (Riga 1933) No. 39.

⁵⁸ S. Vahre, 'Die Briefe an den Papst über den Estenaufstand 1343', *Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte* 1 (2006) 45-55.

East-Central Europe of the fourteenth century.⁵⁹ The accusation of apostasy could be used to justify warfare against the apostates to force them to return to the Christian faith.⁶⁰ It was truly a cunning method to delegitimize the insurgents. Any Christians who continued to aid the insurgents could now be labelled as supporters of infidels, a strategy which the Teutonic Order often used against their Christian adversaries.⁶¹ In the aftermath of a brief war between the Knights and the Bishop of Saaremaa in 1298, the Order orchestrated the production of testimonies accusing the Osilians who fought on the bishop's side of apostasy.⁶²

When the Swedish viceroy of Finland arrived on the 19th of May 1343 to aid the rebels in besieging Tallinn, he saw the insurgents defeated, Danish Estonia protected by the Order and signed a truce with Danish Estonia on the 21st of May 1343. The truce avoids any references to the uprising.⁶³ The same goes for the agreement on resolving all differences between Danish Estonia and King Magnus made on the 5th of September 1343.⁶⁴ Apparently, both sides shied away from mentioning Swedish involvement in the rebellion. The labelling of the insurgents as infidels may have led the viceroy of Finland to end all cooperation with them to avoid possible accusations of supporting an anti-Christian rebellion.

A letter by Valdemar IV to Burchard von Dreileben from the 24th of June 1344 also avoids mentioning the uprising. Valdemar thanked the

⁵⁹ A. Marzec, 'Infideles et perfidi schismatici. Crusades and Christianisation as Political Tools of the Polish Kings in the Fourteenth Century' in: P. Srodecki and N. Kersken ed., *The Defence of the Faith. Crusading on the Frontiers of Latin Christendom in the Late Middle Ages*, Outremer: Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East 15 (Turnhout 2024) 283-293.

⁶⁰ M. Tamm, 'How to Justify a Crusade? Conquest of Livonia and the New Crusade Rhetoric in the Early Thirteenth Century', *Journal of Medieval History* 39 (2013) 431-455; M. Ščavinskas, 'On the Crusades and Coercive Missions in the Baltic Region in the Mid-12th Century and Early 13th Century. The Cases of the Wends and Livonians', *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 46 (2014) 499-527.

⁶¹ A. Anikowski, 'The Teutonic Order arguments during trials and peace negotiations in the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century' in: W. Sieradza ed., *Arguments and Counter-Arguments. The Political Thought of the 14th -15th Centuries During the Polish-Teutonic Order Trials and Disputes* (Toruń 2012) 19-34: 32-33.

⁶² C. Schirren, *Verzeichniss livländischer Geschichts-Quellen in schwedischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* (Dorpat 1868) 133 and 159.

⁶³ Christensen, Nielsen and Jørgensen ed., *DD 3/1*, No. 324.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, No. 355.

Knights for safeguarding his castles during a time of 'impending grave danger,' asked them to now return the castles, and suggested the Knights should cooperate with his newly appointed viceroy 'so that the paths of peace, justice and faith be renewed in that land.'⁶⁵ Avoiding any mention of an infidel uprising might mean that Valdemar IV did not accept this narrative spread by the Knights as valid.

If deliberate avoidance is the only contemporary alternative to labelling of the insurgents as infidels, then the search for the social background of the rebels has gained an *argumentum ad silentium*. There must have been something awkward about the insurgents which prompted those who wrote these charters and letters to avoid setting it in writing. In my opinion such an awkward situation would have been if the leadership of the insurgency consisted of both immigrant and native Estonian elites.

Some historians have suggested the insurgents aimed to bring Danish Estonia under the rule of King Magnus.⁶⁶ While this interpretation aligns with the observations above, it fails to explain the uprising in the Bishopric of Saaremaa and the continuation of the insurrection in Harjumaa after the Finnish viceroy withdrew his support. The insurgents in Läänemaa behaved similarly to their counterparts in Harjumaa. They besieged the castle and town of Haapsalu, the administrative centre of the bishopric in May 1343. Burchard von Dreileben led his Knights on a campaign to deliver Haapsalu defeating the insurgents in battle in the same month.⁶⁷ Chronicles give no further details on the rebellion in Läänemaa. Two short chancery notices from the early sixteenth century refer to two letters from 5th and 6th of June 1343 informing the pope of an anti-Christian rebellion of the neophytes of the bishoprics of Tallinn and Saaremaa.⁶⁸ Apparently the label of apostasy was also used to delegitimize the insurgents of Läänemaa.

The success of the Teutonic Knights on the battlefield did not bring the uprising to an end. Instead, it began to spread in the summer of 1343.

⁶⁵ C.A. Christensen, H. Nielsen and P. Jørgensen ed., *Diplomatarium Danicum. 3. række, 1340-1412. 2. bind, 1344-1347* (København 1959) No. 62.

⁶⁶ T. Lukas, 'Jüriöö võimalused' [The possibilities of the St. George's Night Uprising], *Akadeemia* 4 / 1993, 691-698; Leimus, 'Kes võitis Jüriöö?', 50-54; Selart, 'Medieval Livonia', 154.

⁶⁷ Strehlke, Hirsch and Töppen ed., 'Hermann de Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae', 71; Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 87 and 90; Russow, 'Chronica', 25; Vahre, *Jüriöö*, 61-63 and 74.

⁶⁸ M. Hein and H. Koeppen ed., *Preussisches Urkundenbuch III* (Marburg 1961) Nos. 768-769; Vahre, 'Die Briefe an den Papst über den Estenaufstand 1343', 46-49.

Unfortunately, information on the events from June 1343 until its end in February 1345 is very fragmentary. The next recorded event is the start of the uprising on the island of Saaremaa on the 24th of July. The insurgents besieged the Teutonic Order castle of Põide forcing its garrison to surrender.⁶⁹ The Bishop of Saaremaa also had a castle on the island, at Kuressaare but its fate during the uprising is unknown.⁷⁰ The surprisingly long delay between the start of the rebellion in Läänemaa and its spread to Saaremaa is hard to explain as the intervening events are not recorded.

In August 1343 the insurgents of Harjumaa and Saaremaa planned a coordinated attack against other areas of Livonia. The campaign failed because the rebels of Saaremaa made their move eight days before the agreed upon date. The Teutonic Order unsuccessfully attacked the insurgents of Harjumaa in the summer of 1343, but it is unclear if before or after the failed coordinated attack. By August the situation had become so dire that Burchard von Dreileben asked for reinforcements from the Grand Master of the Knights in Prussia.⁷¹

Six to seven hundred riders from Prussia arrived at the end of October and soon thereafter the Knights renewed their attack. They stormed two strongholds of the insurgents in Harjumaa and looted the whole region. In February 1344 they advanced to Saaremaa, stormed another stronghold and executed a leader of the rebels.⁷² When the Knights departed from Saaremaa and were riding through Läänemaa, envoys of the remaining insurgents of Harju- and Läänemaa approached them, asking Burchard von Dreileben for his grace and offering to surrender, which he accepted.⁷³ In February 1345

⁶⁹ Strehlke, Hirsch and Töppen ed., 'Hermann von Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae', 71; Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 92; Russow, 'Chronica', 25.

⁷⁰ I. Jürjo et al., *Saare-Lääne piiskopkond, 1227–1573: kõige rikkam territoorium [Bishopric of Saare-Lääne, 1227-1573: the Most Prosperous Territory]*, ed. K. Rikson, Võimukeskused 1 (Tallinn 2023) 133.

⁷¹ Wigand von Marburg, *Nova kronika pruska*, 222; Hirsch, Töppen and Strehlke ed., 'Chronik Wigands von Marburg', 503; Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 92; Vahre, 'Die Darstellung', 63-64 and 68.

⁷² Wigand von Marburg, *Nova kronika pruska*, 222–225; Hirsch, Töppen and Strehlke ed., 'Chronik Wigands von Marburg', 503-504; Strehlke, Hirsch and Töppen ed., 'Hermann von Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae', 71-72; Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 92-93; Vahre, 'Die Darstellung', 64-69; S. Jóźwiak, 'Wyprawa armii krzyżackiej z Prus do Estonii w latach 1343–1344' [The expedition of the Teutonic Order's army from Prussia to Estonia in 1343–1344], *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 4 / 2002, 495-501.

⁷³ Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 93.

the Teutonic Order again attacked Saaremaa, looting until the envoys of the insurgents pleaded to negotiate a surrender. According to Renner, the insurgents had to give hostages, surrender their weapons, and dismantle their stronghold of Mapenzar,⁷⁴ while Russow instead speaks of an alleged obligation of the rebels to build a new castle for the Teutonic Knights.⁷⁵ The Teutonic Order apparently favoured a military solution to simply ending the conflict through negotiations.

The episodic nature of the sources makes it nearly impossible to say anything on the diplomatic activities of the insurgents after May 1343, other than the rebels on the mainland succeeding in convincing the Estonians of Saaremaa to join the rebellion and agreeing to make a coordinated assault against their enemies. The use of envoys by the insurgents to negotiate their surrender suggests internal hierarchy but does not really tell us anything about their social status. Yet, the use of strongholds by the insurgents implies their elite status.

Historians have usually identified the two strongholds in Harjumaa with Varbola and Lohu – the power-centres of the Estonians of Harjumaa during the crusades of the early-thirteenth century.⁷⁶ Lohu has not been archaeologically excavated, but archaeological data from Varbola shows its continuous use until the mid-fourteenth century.⁷⁷ The locations of the two insurgent strongholds on Saaremaa are debatable. Recent archaeological research suggests that the anonymous stronghold destroyed in February 1344 might have been Valjala. This was the central stronghold of Saaremaa in 1227, whose surrender to the crusaders led to the subjugation of the whole island.⁷⁸ Valjala was abandoned in the second half of the thirteenth century but refortified for a short period of use in the middle of the fourteenth century.⁷⁹ If these attributions are correct, then the leading circles among the insurgents

⁷⁴ Ibidem, 93-94.

⁷⁵ Russow, 'Chronica', 25-26.

⁷⁶ Vahre, *Jüriöö*, 84.

⁷⁷ K. Siig, 'Varbola: on the function of an 11th to 14th-century stronghold in northwestern Estonia based on location analysis and written sources', *Estonian Journal of Archaeology* 28 (2024) 120-167.

⁷⁸ M. Mägi, 'Ösel and the Danish Kingdom. Revisiting Henry's Chronicle and the Archaeological Evidence' in: M. Tamm, L. Kaljundi and C.S. Jensen ed., *Crusading and Chronicle Writing at the Medieval Baltic Frontier. A Companion to the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* (Farnham and Burlington, VT 2011) 317-341.

⁷⁹ M. Mägi, 'Valjala hill fort in Saaremaa', *Archaeological Fieldwork in Estonia 2023* (2024) 117-130.

must have included the native Estonian elite. Especially the case of Valjala would suggest an attempt to reinstate a former seat of power which had lost its importance after Saaremaa was subjugated to crusader lordship and divided into territories ruled by the bishop of Saaremaa and the Teutonic Knights.

Varbola and Valjala were no exceptions. Several strongholds of the Estonians, as well as of other native peoples of Livonia continued to be in use in the fourteenth century, which means that the native elite must have been integrated into the lordship structures of Medieval Livonia.⁸⁰ At the same time, at least in the territory of Modern Estonia, all known castles of the nobility date to the second half of the fourteenth century or later.⁸¹ Fortified places in the territories of the uprising were thus either native Estonian strongholds still in use, or castles belonging to the King of Denmark, the bishop of Saaremaa, and the Teutonic Knights.

The nobility of Danish Estonia largely consisted of German and Scandinavian immigrants but also included native Estonians.⁸² As in all other crusading regions, crusader conquest was followed by immigration from the areas the crusaders came from. For Livonia, these were the northern parts of the Holy Roman Empire and the Scandinavian kingdoms.⁸³ The actual proportions of immigrants to natives around 1340 cannot be given due to

⁸⁰ H. Valk, 'The Fate of Final Iron Age Strongholds of Estonia' in: H. Valk ed., *Strongholds and Power Centres east of the Baltic Sea in the 11th–13th Centuries. A collection of articles in memory of Evalt Tõnisson*, Muinasaja Teadus 24 (Tartu 2014) 333–379; M. Mägi, 'Political centres or nodal points in trade networks? Estonian hillforts before and after the thirteenth-century conquest' in: A. Mänd and M. Tamm ed., *Making Livonia. Actors and Networks in the Medieval and Early Modern Baltic Sea Region* (London and New York, NY 2020) 48–69.

⁸¹ A. Hein, *Stenbus'id, arx'id, torne'd... Eesti mõisaarhitektuuri vanim kihistus [Stenbus'es, arx'es, torne's...the oldest layer of Estonian manor architecture]*, Õpetatud Eesti Seltsi kirjad 11 (Tartu 2016).

⁸² H. Moora and H. Ligi, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaftsordnung der Völker des Baltikums zu Anfang des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Tallinn 1970) 84–93; K. Kaljusaar, 'Exploiting the Conquerors: Socio-political Strategies of Estonian Elites during the Crusades and Christianisation, 1200–1300' in: A. Selart ed., *Baltic Crusades and Societal Innovation in Medieval Livonia, 1200–1350*, The Northern World 93 (Leiden and Boston, MA 2022) 55–89.

⁸³ A. Selart, 'Post hoc oder propter hoc? Eroberung, Einwanderung und Gesellschaftswandel im mittelalterlichen Livland', *Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte* 154 (2018) 429–453.

lack of data. As Estonian elites began to adopt Christian and Germanic names in the thirteenth century,⁸⁴ and intermarriage between native and immigrant families was likely,⁸⁵ there is little reason to draw an ethnic dividing line within the local nobility. These conclusions also apply to Läänemaa as well as to the majority of Medieval Livonia, but not to Saaremaa.⁸⁶ The position of the native elite was particularly strong on this island and there is no information on immigrant nobles residing there at the time, except for the Teutonic Knights.⁸⁷

The only rebel mentioned by name was Vesse, the alleged king of the rebel Osilians. His Estonian name makes his ethnic background rather obvious. Unfortunately, he is the only leader recorded in fourteenth-century chronicles, whereas Renner and Russow do not speak of him. Vesse was executed in a particular way, by being hanged with his feet up from a siege engine,⁸⁸ probably a trebuchet. The only other recorded rebel execution is of a German who sided with the insurgents and was captured when the Teutonic Knights crushed the besiegers of Tallinn. This anonymous German was also hanged with his feet up.⁸⁹ While Renner presents this as the fate of a traitor to his people, the similarity to Vesse's death suggests this German was likely among the leaders of the insurgents.

The social background of the four kings of the Harjumaa insurgents mentioned by Renner might also have been local nobility. These four kings accompanied by three *knechten* formed the embassy of the insurgents killed in

⁸⁴ A. Selart, 'A New Faith and a New Name? Crusades, Conversion, and Baptismal Names in Medieval Baltics', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47 (2016) 179-196.

⁸⁵ A. Selart, 'A Crusader and the Chieftain's Daughter. Connubium between Conquerors and Natives during the Baltic Crusades' in: T.K. Nielsen and K.V. Jensen ed., *Legacies of the Crusades. Proceedings of the Ninth Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East*, Odense, 27 June – 1 July 2016, Volume 1, Outremer. Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East 11 (Turnhout 2021) 239-260.

⁸⁶ H. Valk, 'From the Iron Age to the Middle Ages. Local Nobility and Cultural Changes in Estonia in the 13th Century' in: J. Staecker ed., *The Reception of Medieval Europe in the Baltic Sea Region. Papers of the XIIth Visby Symposium held at Gotland University, Visby*, Acta Visbyensia 12 (Visby 2009) 273-292.

⁸⁷ M. Mägi, *At the Crossroads of Space and Time. Graves, Changing Society and Ideology on Saaremaa (Ösel) 9th–13th centuries AD* CCC papers 6 (Tallinn 2002) 148-150.

⁸⁸ Strehlke, Hirsch and Töppen ed., 'Hermann de Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae', 72; Wigand von Marburg, *Nova kronika pruska*, 226; Hirsch, Töppen and Strehlke ed., 'Chronik Wigands von Marburg', 504.

⁸⁹ Renner, *Livländische Historien*, 90.

the castle of Paide.⁹⁰ Renner's account of the Paide negotiations was based on the now-lost verse chronicle of Bartholomaeus Hoeneker. Teutonic Order verse chronicles and other texts in German usually called Danish royal vassals *koniges man* (the king's men), distinguishing between *ritter* (knights) and *knechten* (armigers – nobles not yet knighted).⁹¹ It seems plausible to speculate that Bartholomaeus's original text might have referred to the envoys as the king's men, four knights and three armigers.

Conclusion

Since fourteenth-century sources never describe it as a peasant-uprising, a modern historian would have no need to emphasize the elite background of the rebels were it not for the historiographical tradition of framing the event as a farmer-insurrection. This interpretation was created by sixteenth-century chroniclers. The construction of a farmer-insurrection in modern historiography stems from a strikingly uncritical reading of Johann Renner, based on the flawed assumption that he faithfully retold a lost verse chronicle from the 1350s. The strongly nationalist interpretation of the uprising by twentieth-century Estonian historians who saw it foremost as a rebellion of Estonians seeking political independence did not reject Renner's narrative. They either perceived of medieval Estonians as an egalitarian farmer-nation or dismissed any possibility of tensions between common and elite Estonians attributing social oppression solely to foreign rule.

The portrayal of the event in fourteenth-century chronicles as an anti-Christian rebellion of apostate Estonians reverting to paganism can be traced down to a group of charters, testimonies and letters produced during the uprising at the behest of the Teutonic Order. In 1343 the representation of the insurgents as enemies of Christianity served to justify certain actions of the Teutonic Order, as well as to delegitimize the rebels in hopes of severing their ties with their allies, especially the Swedish viceroy of Finland. The ethnic aspect was inherently tied to the religious one in these texts. The fact that the Estonians had been Christianised little more than a century before the uprising made the accusation of apostasy believable for distant contemporary audiences. Therefore, the characterization of the uprising as an ethnic Estonian revolt is as dubious as the apostate rebellion.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, 88.

⁹¹ Mäesalu and Pajung, *Danish-Estonian relations in the middle ages*, 165-167.

Unfortunately, primary sources offer nothing else but an inexplicable avoidance of any mention of the insurgents and the rebellion in several charters and letters. The thorough preparation of the uprising suggests that its leaders were acutely aware of the diplomatic and military situation at the time and were able to act and react appropriately. Making a secret military alliance with Swedish viceroy of Finland means the insurgents were able to perform diplomatic activities before the beginning of the uprising without raising any suspicions. The attempt by the Teutonic Order to mediate between the insurgents and the Danish viceroy implies the uprising was initially directed against the Danish administration. The few instances in Renner's chronicle pointing towards a German in the leading circles of the rebels and the envoys of the insurgents possibly being Danish royal vassals, infer their leadership may have consisted of the local nobility regardless of their ethnic background. The avoidance-narrative, especially as it appears in the charter of the 11th of May 1343 serves as a further argument in support of such an interpretation.

In conclusion the St. George's Night Uprising should not be seen as a popular revolt. The leading circles of the rebels must have belonged to the local nobility. Whereas the elite on Saaremaa island was still predominantly Estonian, the nobility in Harjumaa and Läänemaa largely consisted of immigrants who had integrated with native elites. Therefore, one cannot regard it as a purely ethnic Estonian revolt either. Finally, one must remember that the historical misinterpretation of this event as a peasant-insurrection stemmed from a persistent uncritical reading of a sixteenth-century chronicle by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Baltic German and Estonian historians coupled with their strongly national approaches to history.

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