

SUMMARY

*Life in Times of Darkness: Night and Winter
Time Activities in 13th–16th Century Livonia*

For medieval people, the night and the season of darkness concealed secrets and dangers. It was considered the time for thieves and criminals. In medieval literary texts, epic and lyrical poetry, night is the time for supernatural dangers, adventures and fear. Information from other medieval and early modern written sources, namely various kinds of regulations and ordinances, court materials, correspondence, town bylaws and other such sources create a more realistic, down-to-earth perception of life when it was dark outside, helping to make visible ordinary people alongside criminals and apparitions.

This article examines how inhabitants of medieval Livonia managed at night and when it was dark outside, including what dangers, orders and prohibitions they faced in times of darkness. The way public authorities regulated the use of night and times of darkness is considered along with an examination of the extent to which people observed the established norms. Due to the nature of the preserved sources, it is the urban Livonian society that is predominantly at the centre of attention.

Although night in the Middle Ages was meant first and foremost for rest from the work and bustle of daytime, night was also a time for working, feasting and celebration, the performance of magical rituals, concentration on prayer and spiritual contemplation, among other things. As a result, the dark nights were not at all ignored by the public authorities. On the contrary, ever more intense attempts were made to control it. In the medieval town the use of night was regulated to the greatest extent. Norms and rules concerning what town inhabitants and visitors had to bear in mind at night were laid down in town bylaws, town council regulations, the charters of guilds, and other such documents. The main fields of activity that town council prohibitions applied to and regulated were security, fire safety, ensuring peace and quiet at night, repression of competition arising from work done at night, as well as standing up for morality.

This article focuses not only on the night, but on the winter time as well. In the Middle Ages, night and winter had considerable negative connotations and both were related to restrictions on the modes of life. According to 13th century author Bartholomaeus Anglicus, they also had similar qualities, as both night and winter were regarded as cold and moist. Characteristic of medieval Livonia, the darkest and coldest time of the year – winter – was not a time when life and activity came to a standstill. Even the contrary is true, winter was altogether looked forward to. The advent of cold winter weather signalled the beginning of a season of intense interaction.

The time of cold and darkness were filled with parties and entertainment, joint social activity and joint undertakings.

Night and times of darkness were times of dangers and fears when people with evil intent moved about. Yet ordinary people also tried to use the night time for their own objectives while ignoring prohibitions and risking the imposition of penalties. Thus enterprising people regarded working at night and night time trading as a chance to circumvent economic principles suppressing competition. The spirit of enterprise and ambitiousness that was looked down upon in the Middle Ages had to hide itself under the cover of the night, at least at first. Generally speaking, it was considered convenient in the Middle Ages to relegate unpleasant or unsuitable phenomena under the cover of the night, at least until society was prepared to accept them in daylight as well.