

SUMMARY

The Bishops of Courland between Livonia and Prussia in the First Half of the 16th Century

This article observes the relations between the Bishops of Courland, Hermann Ronneberg (1524-39) and Johannes von Münchhausen (1540-60), with Margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach Wilhelm (Coadjutor of the Archbishop of Riga 1530-39, Archbishop 1539-63). The main question is whether the Bishop of Courland was a politically marginal force, who always followed the political line of the Teutonic Order's Livonian branch or was he more similar to the Prince-Bishops of Tartu and Ösel-Wiek, who were able to affect Livonia's domestic policy, once leaning towards the Order and then favouring the Archbishop of Riga?

Until the beginning of the 16th century, the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order in Prussia had a major effect on the appointment of Bishops of Courland. However, in 1525, the domains of the Prussian Order were secularised. Former Grand Master Albrecht (Grand Master 1511-25, Duke 1525-68) became one of the most serious opponents of the Order, who successfully made his brother Wilhelm the Coadjutor to the Archbishop of Riga. However, Duke Albrecht could not influence anymore the succession of the Bishops of Courland: Hermann Ronneberg was the former secretary of the Livonian Master of the Order and Johannes von Münchhausen, who was a relative of an influential officer of the Order, in 1541 also became Bishop of Ösel-Wiek with the support of the Order.

In 1530, all Bishops of Livonia, except the Bishop of Courland, supported Margrave Wilhelm as the Coadjutor of Riga. A little later, the Bishop of Courland sought support from Wilhelm, in the hope of solving his dispute with an Order vassal in Courland. Presumably, the Bishop also attempted to amend his relations with Wilhelm's brother Albrecht. In the onset of the Feud of Ösel-Wiek (1532-36), Wilhelm aspired to become the Bishop of Ösel-Wiek, temporarily supported by both the Order and the Bishop of Courland. As of the beginning of 1534, other Livonians, including the Bishop of Courland supported Wilhelm's opponent as successor to the position of Bishop of Ösel-Wiek. This however, had no severe implications on the relations between the Bishop of Courland and Margrave Wilhelm.

In the 1540s, Wilhelm as appointed Archbishop of Riga had a disagreement with the city of Riga that refused to accept him as their lord. The Order attempted to interfere with the appointment of Livonian Bishops. The Bishop of Courland supported the Archbishop in these disputes and in 1546 the Order quit direct intervention, also the Archbishop's joint authority in Riga was restored. In return, Wilhelm had to promise not to take a prince as his coadjutor without the other Livonians' consent. The Bishop

of Courland offered Wilhelm to become each other's coadjutors; however, this plan was not carried out. In 1546, Archbishop Wilhelm planned to introduce reformative church order. The Bishop of Courland, similarly to other Livonian lords, opposed this plan; more likely due to political rather than religious reasons.

Relations between the Order and the Archbishop grew tense in the 1550s, when Margrave Wilhelm decided to appoint Duke Christoph of Mecklenburg as his coadjutor, as devised by foreign rulers. The Order and the bishops (including the Bishop of Courland) decided that the dispute had to be solved by the Livonian Diet. During the sessions of the Diet in spring 1556, the bishops supported the Order and criticised the Archbishop of curtailing their secular freedom. Additionally, the Diet demanded that the Archbishop should not claim for himself the highest authority in Livonia, but rather accept his position as equal territorial lord among others in Livonia.

An agreement between the Archbishop and the Livonians was not successful. At the beginning of the Coadjutor's Feud (1556-57), Margrave Wilhelm was imprisoned and released in 1557 only at the demand of the King of Poland. During the Feud, bishops supported the Order, although the Duke of Prussia hoped to lead the Bishop of Courland over to his side. At the beginning of the Livonian War in 1558, the Bishop of Courland with the Master of the Order hoped for aid from Denmark, while the Archbishop relied on Poland. In 1559, Bishop Johannes sold his episcopal offices in Ösel-Wiek and Courland to the King of Denmark, while concealing this deal from the Archbishop.

During the 16th century the Bishop of Courland by and large supported the Order's policy, but in many cases he was more benevolent towards Wilhelm than the Order. The most important reason behind this obviously was the bishop's wish to maintain his relations with his closest neighbour, the Duke of Prussia. The geographical proximity of Prussia provided the bishop some room for manoeuvre: in case of a conflict with the Order he could play the Duke against the Order. As a rule, however, the Bishop of Courland aimed to keep good relations with both the Order and the Archbishop.