

SUMMARY

*Papal Authority in a Crusading
Area: Did William of Modena create
a “buffer state” in Estonia?*

On the 24th of June 1218 bishop Albert of Riga and bishop Theoderich of Estonia promised to give the whole of Estonia over to king Valdemar II of Denmark in exchange for his involvement in the crusade against the Estonians. A promise from which bishop Albert retreated in the autumn of 1219 after the king had successfully begun his conquest of Estonia. The ensuing conflict ended in the summer of 1222 with the treaty of Saaremaa, between the King of Denmark, the bishop of Riga and the Order of the Sword-brothers by which the two provinces of Southern Estonia (Ugandi and Sakala) were to belong to the Germans and the rest of Estonia to the Danes.

The stability brought by the treaty of Saaremaa was however short-lived. The uprising of the Estonians at the end of 1222 and the capture of Valdemar II by the count of Schwerin in May 1223 enabled the Germans to renew their claims on parts of Danish Estonia. In the autumn of 1225 the vassals of the bishop of Tartu invaded the Danish province of Virumaa, an action that could have brought about open warfare between Denmark and Livonia. Bishop William of Modena, the papal legate to Livonia from 1225 to 1226, intervened and took the provinces claimed both by the Danes and the Germans under papal protection. This has been interpreted as either an attempt of the legate to create a “Papal State in the East” subject to direct papal authority or as a creation of a “buffer-State” between the opposing parties.

A closer reading of the sources reveals that legate William took upon himself the position of an arbitrator of the conflict and that his power over the provinces under papal protection laid merely in the right to excommunicate anyone who attacked them and the right to confirm the possession of the provinces to the side that should rightfully own them. Since he was not able to end the conflict before his departure from Livonia in May 1226, he had to give his position over to his vice-legate John.

After the departure of William, open warfare began between the Danes and the Germans that ended in 1227 with the expulsion of the Danes from Estonia. Vice-legate John divided the former Danish provinces (including the provinces under papal protection) between the bishop of Riga and the Order of the Sword-brothers. In doing so, he acted only as the mediator between the Livonian powers and not as the arbitrator between the Danes and the Germans.