Saxons, Slavs, and Conversion

*Toward a New Understanding of Crusade*

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Ever since twentieth-century historians began grappling with the semantics of the term “crusade,” attempting to create an encompassing definition for it, schools of scholarly interpretation concerning the matter have multiplied.¹ For instance, traditionalists hold that crusades were only those expeditions directed eastwards towards the Holy Land, while pluralists emphasize papal authorization as the defining feature of crusade.² A few more major methods of classification exist, yet these two have particular relevance in analyzing the Second Crusade of 1146 to 1148.³ This venture, approved by Pope Eugene III, consisted of three separate campaigns: one aimed at the Holy Land, another intended for the liberation of Lisbon, and a final one directed against pagan Slavs on the eastern borderlands of the Saxons.⁴ The only campaign considered successful was the Iberian venture, during which Lisbon fell to the...

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¹ The term “crusade” first surfaced in the early thirteenth century and did not become common in English until the eighteenth century. Thus, any attempt to define crusade is a matter of systematizing an idea of Christian holy war that was nebulous to those who created and developed it. This article uses “crusade” to describe those expeditions universally termed so, such as the First Crusade, but the term also serves as an elegant, if not entirely precise, shorthand for the various ideas, symbols, and acts associated with warfare conducted in the name of Christianity. See Giles Constable, “The Historiography of the Crusades,” in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 12.

² Ibid.


⁴ Ibid., 214.
Portuguese in 1147 and the last Muslim outposts in Catalonia were occupied by Christian armies in 1149. The poorly organized foray into the Holy Land concluded after Muslim forces trapped crusaders assaulting Damascus and forced them to withdraw. Although the Saxon expedition also ended inconclusively, its initiation represented a crucial shift in the paradigm of crusade.

The First Crusade of 1096, which had focused solely on the Christian conquest of the Holy Land, had generally treated non-Christian resistance as an obstacle to achieving the foremost goals of crusade: the liberation of eastern Christians and the capture of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The inclusion of the northern expedition in Eugene III’s call for crusade added an entirely new dimension to crusading—that of conversion. The Wendish Crusade of 1147, as the northern leg of the campaign is known, did not aim to capture any lands of spiritual significance to Christianity, but instead sought to expand the Christian flock. The Cistercian abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux—an influential preacher responsible for crucial monastic reforms and a chief proponent of the expedition—called for crusade against the heathen Slavs “until such a time as, with God’s help, either religion or nation shall be wiped out.” Such a perspective on crusade seems to support a pluralist interpretation, as the primary area where conversion took place was on the Saxon frontier and not within the Holy Land. Eugene III’s simultaneous approval of three parallel

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6 Ibid., 129.
9 The venture also sought to claim new land for Christendom and for the Saxons, as discussed elsewhere in this article, but these motivations were not as pronounced in contemporary records about the theology behind the crusade, which emphasized the aspect of conversion.
10 Riley-Smith, *The Crusades*, 123.
expeditions, all aimed in various directions, also suggests the legitimacy of a pluralist view. However, the regional context of the Wendish crusade cannot be disregarded. Saxon campaigns against the Wends began centuries before the crusade of 1147, so this specific conflict should also be viewed as the continuation of local warfare. A traditionalist interpretation of crusade underscores how the regional background of the Wendish Crusade significantly differentiates it from the First Crusade, which represented an unprecedented European military effort. In order to illuminate these various aspects of the Wendish Crusade, this article will examine the work of one of the campaign’s most important chroniclers: Helmold of Bosau’s *Cronica Slavorum*. Helmold found papal approval of crusade important, but he did not see the expedition itself as vastly different from earlier or later Saxon-Wendish warfare. His chronicle helps reveal that the Second Crusade saw an immense liberalization in what types of warfare could qualify for papal approval and constitute crusade.

Helmold was born sometime between 1118 and 1125 at an unknown location and spent time in Segeburg and Oldenburg before becoming pastor at Bosau, all locations on the northeastern Saxon frontier. Thus, he spent the majority of his life amongst belligerent Saxons eager to expand their holdings into pagan territories. He composed the *Cronica Slavorum* in two stages, between 1167 and 1172, basing the text on his own observations and opinions as well as on past accounts. Helmold produced a work well-grounded in contemporary reality: he avoided flowery classical allusions, rarely mentioned miraculous events, and only occasionally referenced the Bible. He displayed an authentic interest when describing his non-Christian subjects, distinguishing between the various Slavic tribes living on the Saxon borderlands and providing what

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13 Ibid., 20.
15 Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades*, 60.
16 Tschan, introduction to *The Chronicle of the Slavs*, 34.
information he knew about their pagan rites. Francis Tschan claims that Helmond’s commonplace style may be indicative of a humbler background. Writing in support of this thesis, Tschan states that Helmond almost certainly retained the relatively insignificant rank of pastor throughout his life and that the *Cronica Slavorum* lacks the sophisticated political insights present in the writings of more influential clergymen.

Although his origins remain obscure, Helmond clearly conveys his ideology and purpose through his text. The account describes the German political situation, international events involving the German emperors, and particularly important developments in Europe, such as the First Crusade, but these elements are interspersed only periodically so as not to distract from the focus of the work: the conversion narrative of the pagan Slavs living east of the Saxons. The *Cronica Slavorum* begins by describing the various Slavic tribes inhabiting the Saxon frontier, offering general information on the Abodrites, the Wilzi, and the Rugiani, who are “given to idolatry…. always restless and moving about.” Helmond praises those Saxon military campaigns which successfully converted these tribes, but he often condemns the materialistic motives of the Saxons as harshly as he does the heathen practices of the pagans. He blames military misfortunes of Saxon leaders on their failure to recognize “that the battle is of the Lord and that victory is from Him,” and for taxing certain newly Christianized Slavs too heavily. Helmond does give credit where he believes it is deserved, however, citing the example of Bishop Otto of Bamberg, who successfully converted Pomeranians by himself. Thus, Helmond’s appraisal of the Wendish crusade is mixed. He commends the heroic deeds of certain participants, but ultimately concludes that “the grand expedition broke up with slight gain,” pointing out that many of the

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17 Helmond also briefly describes Christianized Slavic nations, namely the Russians, Poles, and Bohemians, and includes Hungary as “a part of Slavania.” See Helmond, *The Chronicle of the Slavs*, 44-52.
18 Tschan, introduction to *The Chronicle of the Slav*, 33.
19 Ibid., 21.
21 Ibid., 52.
22 Ibid., 100.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 138.
supposedly converted Slavs swiftly gave up their baptisms.\textsuperscript{25} As Christiansen so eloquently states, “Helmold was a firm believer in a crusade that never happened.”\textsuperscript{26} For Helmold, a successful crusade would have had to live up to his existing standards for missionizing warfare: widespread, authentic, and lasting conversion of the group against whom the campaign was directed. This might suggest that, to Helmold, the Wendish Crusade was just another skirmish in a chain of conflicts between Saxons and Slavs. Yet he does distinguish the crusading army as “\textit{signo crucis insignata}” (“signed with the sign of the cross”), devotes an entire chapter to describe the preaching of St. Bernard and Pope Eugene III, and discusses the simultaneous campaigns to Lisbon and the Holy Land.\textsuperscript{27} Evidently, despite its seemingly unremarkable nature, the expedition bore some special distinction in Helmold’s mind.

An examination of the wider, European context behind the Second Crusade offers insight into the unique characteristics of the expedition against the Slavs and its significance in changing conceptions of crusade. Pope Eugene III’s 1145 letter calling for a new crusade, \textit{Quantum praedecessores}, granted participants a more significant remission of sins than that offered by Urban II during the First Crusade and developed policy that protected crusaders’ property while they were away, marking an even fuller papal commitment to supporting the campaign.\textsuperscript{28} St. Bernard preached the crusade widely and reached Frankfurt in November 1146, where he appealed to King Conrad III of Germany.\textsuperscript{29} In March 1147, certain Saxon rulers requested that they direct their campaigns against the Wends rather than the Muslims.\textsuperscript{30} St. Bernard agreed to this call and persuaded Eugene III to formally authorize the Wendish crusade in his letter \textit{Divina dispensatione}\.\textsuperscript{31}

Many contemporary records, such as the chronicle of Sigebert, echo the Cistercian’s view of this venture, stating that the campaign against the Slavs should continue until the Saxons “either exterminate the

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{26} Christiansen, \textit{The Northern Crusades}, 61.
\textsuperscript{27} Helmold, \textit{Cronica Slavorum} (repr., Hannover: Hahn, 1909), 122.
\textsuperscript{28} Riley-Smith, \textit{The Crusades}, 121.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 123-24.
neighboring people of the Slavs or [force] them to become Christian.”

That the Saxon request had to be approved by the spiritual leaders of the expedition indicates the unconventional nature of the idea and the shift in rhetoric that St. Bernard and Eugene had to adopt to sanction this crusade. St. Bernard’s words on the matter do not include a call for the geographic expansion of Christianity in northern Europe, but instead emphasize the hitherto nonexistent missionary aspect of the venture. They exemplify a profound shift in the theology behind crusade and a liberalization in the understanding of which warfare could constitute crusade.

Some historians have pointed out Pope Eugene III’s disinterest with originally including the Germans in the expedition, crediting the popularity of the crusade there to St. Bernard and explaining Eugene’s acceptance of Saxon involvement in northern Europe as a move of political calculus. Constable mentions that Eugene may have been concerned about the stability of the Empire during Conrad III’s absence and thus did not want the monarch to depart from Europe. This line of reasoning holds that when the opportunity presented itself to include the Germans on the campaign without having them depart from their homeland, Eugene eagerly obliged. However, such an interpretation stressing the practical motives of the Pope does not reduce the significance of the shift in the theology of crusade.

Bernard, the foremost apologist of the Second Crusade, approved of the Saxon proposal before Eugene did and, most importantly, adopted new rhetoric to account for the campaigns against the Slavs. The nature of this warfare, however, did not differ significantly from the 175 campaigns that the Saxons had already undertaken against the Slavs since 789. In spirit, the Wendish Crusade progressed as any other regional Saxon conflict and had very little in common with the campaigns directed towards the Holy Land.

The local quality of the Wendish Crusade and Helmold’s description of it indicate its unremarkable nature in the context of previous Saxon

33 Ibid., 256.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Eugene III’s supposed plan did not succeed, as Conrad III did lead armies towards the Holy Land despite the Saxon engagements along the German borderlands. See Constable, “The Second Crusade as Seen,” 213.
37 Ibid., 225.
warfare against the Wends. These aspects grant traditionalist historians some credibility, as the northern campaign never wielded the unique, momentous quality present in expeditions eastward, nor was its goal as significant to the whole of Christendom as the preservation of the Holy Land under Christian rule. The symbolic trappings of crusade—knights signed with the cross, the exhortations of a holy man, and papal approval—were all present in the Wendish Crusade as in others, yet the expedition was also part of the Drang nach dem Osten, or the more local phenomenon of the eastward expansion of German-speaking peoples. The German nobles and the Church in northern Germany had their own goals that did not shift because a crusade was declared. While some clergymen like Helmold had loftier aspirations for German Christianity, the local Church had a longstanding “hunger for land,” and “appetite for rich endowments.” Converted Slavs could be used to pay tithes to fill Church coffers and work Church lands as serfs, thus incentivizing Church expansion eastwards.

Some historians, such as James Westfall Thompson, go so far as to claim that the German Church’s motives were wholly material and devoid of any missionary intention. Saxon nobles had their own goals. They were satisfied once tribute had been exacted from the Slavs and were willing to grant the Wends more local autonomy than the Church, allowing them to keep their pagan gods. Nevertheless, the expansionary zeal of the Church caused Slav rebellions to break out in 983, 1018, and 1066, leading to widespread devastation that Helmold describes. During the final and most aggressive rebellion, “the stronghold of Hamburg was razed to the ground and even crosses were mutilated by the pagans in derision of our Savior.” The see of Oldenburg remained vacant for eighty-four years, or until the Wendish Crusade itself. This campaign must be considered against a backdrop of violent and unceasing regional

39 Thompson, “The German Church and the Conversion of the Baltic Slavs,” 210-11.
40 Ibid., 211.
41 Ibid., 218.
42 Ibid., 220.
43 Ibid., 220-28.
44 Helmold, The Chronicle of the Slavs, 98.
warfare and local disputes. Indeed, the conduct of German nobles during the Wendish Crusade resembled previous interactions between Saxons and Slavs rather than that of a crusader army.

Upon learning of the expedition against the Abodrites, their leader, Niclot, attempted to negotiate with the Saxon Count Adolph of Wagria, reminding him of a previous pact that the two had concluded. Adolph responded diplomatically, hoping to preserve his warm relations with Niclot without angering the leaders of the crusade. Such an interaction was expressly against St. Bernard’s dramatic call to convert or kill all heathens. According to Helmold, the crusader army itself lost heart while assaulting the Abodrite stronghold of Dobin, agreeing to end the siege in exchange for the Slavs’ lukewarm and temporary acceptance of Christianity and the return of some Danish captives. Such a lack of Christian zeal places the expedition in sharp contrast to the First Crusade, which demanded far greater sacrifices of its participants who nonetheless persevered and eagerly advanced towards the Holy Land.

Fulcher of Chartres, a chronicler of the First Crusade, described how the Christian army “endured cold, heat, and torrents of rain,” but “gladly ran the full course of martyrdom.” Formally, the Wendish campaign of 1147 had all the outward symbols of crusade, yet its conduct resembled the regional, small-scale conflicts that had existed along the Saxon borderlands for centuries rather than the spiritually imbued warfare of the First Crusade.

The Wendish Crusade presents an intriguing case for modern historians to deduce the essential elements of crusading warfare. For pluralists, Pope Eugene III’s formal authorization of the expedition as part of a larger crusading venture in Divina dispensatione remains the most important factor classifying the Saxons’ campaign as a crusade. Other factors also support this line of reasoning. St. Bernard’s call for converting or exterminating heathens is clearly intended for the northern armies rather than those entering the Holy Land, while Helmold’s account distinguishes the participating armies as signed by the cross and describes

46 Ibid., 176.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 180.
49 Riley-Smith, The Crusades, 17.
them as an integral element of the three-pronged crusade. Yet the expedition against the Wends can also be interpreted as divorced from the essential elements of crusade as defined by traditionalists. After all, the conflict in 1147 was one small part of the centuries-long process of German expansion eastward. Neither the German Church nor the Saxon nobles changed their regular habits for the sake of crusade. The Saxons continued to view expeditions against the Slavs as strategic military ventures involving diplomacy and negotiations rather than zealous holy war.

In his assessment of the conflict, Helmold used the same standard that he applied to all warfare between Germans and Slavs. Taking both arguments into account, the Wendish Crusade can legitimately be termed so, yet the course that the conflict took had little in common with existing notions of crusade. St. Bernard’s rhetoric and the events of the Saxon campaign created a new understanding of Christian holy war that would hold grave implications for the fate of the Baltic and the peoples surrounding it. The Teutonic Knights, formed in the Holy Land at the end of the twelfth century, came to adopt this liberalized meaning of crusade during their exploits in northern Europe beginning in the thirteenth century, this time using St. Bernard’s rhetoric to justify their campaigns against the still unconverted Balts.51 Although the Wendish Crusade failed as a missionizing venture, its application of the crusading ideal to an entirely new sort of conflict—one focused on the conversion of pagans rather than on the liberation of Christian lands and peoples—provided Christian Europe with a crucial precedent.

51 Riley-Smith, The Crusades, 80.
Bibliography


