

STRANGE ANIMALS AS PORTENTS OF POLITICAL TURMOIL: THE CASES OF THE LIVONIAN CHRONICLES OF BALTHASAR RUSSOW AND DIONYSIUS FABRICIUS

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary descriptions of the Livonian War are characterized by vivid retellings of miraculous events that have taken place during the campaigns, often believed to be a proof that God is inflicting the war as punishment on Livonia. The aim of this paper is to analyse the descriptions of unusual animals in the Livonian chronicles of Balthasar Russow and Dionysius Fabricius in the context of religious beliefs in the 16th century regarding supernatural portents and miracles. By analysing the narrative structure and the language used, the meaning of animal sightings as portents of political upheaval is revealed. In both chronicles, descriptions of unusual animals are always contextually connected to contemporary political events, thus giving the interpretation of the military campaigns an additional religious dimension.

Keywords: portents, Livonian War, Balthasar Russow, Dionysius Fabricius.

INTRODUCTION

The time of the Livonian War (1558–1583) was a period of intense military action and political upheaval, and, furthermore, a time of religious confrontation, the more recent ideas of the Reformation taking deeper roots and coming into conflict with the long-established Catholic tradition. Contemporary descriptions of the war are characterized by vivid retellings of strange and miraculous events that took place during the campaigns, often

believed to be proof that God was punishing Livonia through the war. In recent years, scholars have showed growing interest in the religious aspects of ideas of war and crusading in the earlier centuries of Livonian history.¹ However, the later period of the Livonian war and the religious aspects of its understanding in Livonian society still present vast opportunities for further study.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the belief in appearances of unusual animals as portents of political turmoil displayed in two of the better known descriptions of the Livonian War: the chronicles of Balthasar Russow (c. 1536–1600) and Dionysius Fabricius (1564–1617). Both authors, devoted churchmen, interpret the war from a religious perspective. This includes descriptions of unusual events, such as comets, plagues, and the appearance of animals uncommon to the region of Livonia, believing that these are signs of God's displeasure or warnings of forthcoming danger.

A comparison of the two chronicles represents an insight into possible similarities and differences in the interpretations of the causes of the Livonian War among the two religious traditions concurrent in Livonia at the time, Russow being Lutheran and Fabricius Catholic. Chronicles have been chosen as the main sources of the author's research because, unlike sermons and theological treatises with obvious religious themes and rhetoric, chronicles reveal the religious beliefs held by Livonians in much subtler ways, and are less often used as sources in the analysis of theological ideas.

The approach to analysing the chronicles is based on observations by the medieval historian Sarah Foot, who states that, while annals and chronicles might sometimes seem like an uncritical collection of historical facts, "the form of annals and chronicles is not an impediment to comprehension but is a central element in conferring meaning on their content. If sets of annals are read entire, rather than as random assortments of variously collected (and unedited) notes, they convey significant narratives [...] made meaningful by selection, omission and careful interpretation" (Foot 2005, 102). Therefore, reports of wondrous and supernatural events are to be considered an integral part of the texts, just as much as the contemporary political and other events that are collected and included in the narrative.

The same idea will be applied to the analysis of the Livonian chronicles of Balthasar Russow and Dionysius Fabricius. Instead of dismissing descriptions of miraculous events as frivolous stories told by the chroniclers to engage their readers, as has often been done in historiography², these events will be analysed as integral parts of the narrative, consciously inserted by the chroniclers in a specific relation to other events in order to convey a deeper significance. Attention will also be paid to the terminology

used by the authors to describe the unusual appearances. All the cases of animals as portents reported by both chroniclers are represented in the article.

Stories of portents and miracles, common in broadsheets, sermons, chronicles and other types of texts, were an essential part of 16th-century European print culture. Reports of comets, eclipses, births of misshapen animals and children and other anomalies in nature fascinated and were highly demanded by readers (Pettegree 2010, 148). The function of portents was both polemical and pastoral (Parish 2019). In a pastoral setting, these strange events became examples of God's displeasure and were used by clergymen in sermons to encourage their congregation to repent. For theologians, these events also served as supporting evidence in their debates with ideological opponents: for example, Lutheran theologians could, and often did, argue that anomalies in nature proved God's displeasure with the Catholic order.³ The theological debates in Livonia were no exception. Both Balthasar Russow and Dionysius Fabricius actively claimed the wondrous and often disastrous natural events that took place in Livonia as a proof of the failings of their opponents.

BALTHASAR RUSSOW'S "CHRONICA DER PROUINTS LYFFLANDT"

The first instance of Balthasar Russow describing an animal appearance that can be interpreted as a portent is the story of the siege of Wesenberg (modern day Rakvere, Estonia) in 1574. He mentions that 14 days before the lifting of the siege, a "strange and wondrous ghost" appeared in the camp outside the town walls:

During this siege [of Wesenberg], 14 days before it was lifted, a strange and wondrous ghost [seltzam unde wunderlich Gespenst] arose with the wolves, which came to the camp near Hausen several evenings one after the other, not bothered by the great number of people and the loud noise there, and began to howl persistently and so horribly that many people's hair stood on end (Russow 1584, 88).

In medieval and Early Modern European societies, any irregularity in the otherwise strictly ordered and predictable rhythms of nature was believed to be a sign through which God communicated with humankind, most often to express His dissatisfaction with the wayward actions of His creation. Here, too, Russow presents an example of animals acting in a way that is unnatural for them. While most wild animals would be wary of human presence, especially avoidant of large crowds and loud

noise, the wolves depicted by Russow are not intimidated by humans and instead act in a manner that terrifies the people gathered in the camp. This deviation from the norm clearly points to a supernatural element in the behaviour of the wolves, which is further emphasized by Russow's use of the term "ghost".

Similarly, Russow tells of an event that took place in 1575 during the arrival of representatives of Denmark and Reval to the Estonian town of Padis for negotiation. During their talks, a large flock of seabirds appeared, the likes of which, as Russow makes sure to point out, had never before been seen in Livonia. The chronicler paints an ominous scene of the birds settling down on roofs of houses and refusing to leave even when the townspeople attempted to scare them away by shooting at them:

[..] *When the aforementioned men and the envoys from Reval arrived in the Padis castle around the evening time, at the same time a large flock of wild and unusual seabirds, not very dissimilar in size and shape to geese appeared and sat down with their flat feet on the roofs and battlements of the buildings. It is a strange and wondrous Monstrum [ein seltzam unde wunderbarlick Monstrum], such strange and unknown birds, which had never before and never thereafter been seen [in Livonia]. The birds sat stiffly on the buildings and took no heed that some of them were shot down. The next day, however, they had disappeared* (Russow 1584, 94).

In describing the strange birds, Russow uses the Latin term *monstrum*, which in classical, medieval and early modern cultures held two possible meanings: developing from the Latin words *monere* (to warn) and *monstrare* (to show, demonstrate), a *monstrum* could thus be thought of as an omen, a sign pointing to an approaching misfortune. The second possible meaning of this word: a monster, something physically repulsive and frightening. Conflating these two meanings, a *monstrum* is then an unusual, most often frightening creature or entity (for example, a celestial object) that through its strangeness functions as a sign for humankind. As summed up by researcher Stephen Asma, "to be a monster is to be an omen" (Asma 2011, 13).

In texts produced in Early Modern Livonia, *monstrum* seems to have been most often used to describe human beings with medical afflictions that caused either all or parts of their bodies to be misshapen. Interestingly, in this case Russow applies the term *monstrum* not to a human being, but to a large group of animals, further drawing attention to the fact that this was a very unusual and even terrifying sighting. It can be thought that the chronicler's use of the term *monstrum* was intended both to describe the birds as something visually terrifying (he focuses on describing

the outward appearance of the birds: their strange, webbed feet and the large size of the flock), and also as a sign (*monstrare*). This interpretation of the strange birds functioning as an omen of future events is further supported by the fact that Russow clearly connects the strange appearance of the birds with the aforementioned diplomatic activities taking place during the Livonian War. This event follows a trend present throughout the entirety of Russow's chronicle, where all of the supernatural events described in the text are contextually connected to events of the Livonian War, thus emphasizing the author's claim that the war was a form of God's punishment for the greed and ignorance of the Livonian people (Orlova 2022, 42).

DIONYSIUS FABRICIUS' "LIVONICAE HISTORIAE"

While Balthasar Russow does not expressively pronounce his own verdict on the meaning of the animal portents described by him, Dionysius Fabricius often depicts unusual animal sightings as mirror-like symbols of the political situation. In one case, the chronicler gives an account of the siege of Dorpat (modern day Tartu, Estonia), which was one of the first Livonian towns to fall to the forces of Ivan IV in 1558. In the very same paragraph, Fabricius describes a strange event that took place shortly before the attack on Dorpat:

[...] This tragedy was preceded by a miraculous omen [omen mirabile]. There is a type of fish common in the lakes of Muscovy, called the Stink or Stint, which gives off a bad smell when caught. These fish are also called Muscovites because they come from Muscovy. They were found in large numbers in the vicinity of Dorpat not only in the rivers and flowing streams, but also in the puddles and bogs, and also scattered on the roads. In order to say what this means, the reader must think for himself (Fabricijs 2016, 134).

One of the main points emphasized by the chronicler is the fish appearing in several habitats unusual for the species: instead of swimming in the rivers and streams, as would be normal, these fish were also found in puddles, bogs and scattered along roads. As in the examples from Russow's chronicle, Fabricius places a great emphasis on divergence from the regular order of nature, thus pointing to a supernatural element in the event, which is further underscored by him outright describing it as a miraculous omen (*omen mirabile*).

The author is quite heavy-handed in pointing out that the species of fish is very common to the region of Muscovy, so much so that the fish are

even commonly called Muscovites. Fabricius nods at a deeper significance of this event, intriguingly stating at the end of the paragraph that each reader must think for themselves to discover what it means. However, it is quite clear that the chronicler is alluding to the appearance of the fish as an omen of the soon following attack on Dorpat by the forces of Ivan IV. Fabricius follows this paragraph up with a statement that “righteous divine punishment befell the Livonians for their arrogance and conversion to the Lutheran heresy” (Fabrīcijs 2016, 135).

The next animal portents Fabricius mentions are connected to a later period of the Livonian war, when several other political powers around the Baltic Sea joined the fighting. The chronicler tells of the Polish King Stefan Bathory arming himself and taking the Russian city of Polock in 1579. Along with this story, Fabricius describes not one, but two events in the natural world that were witnessed in the same year:

In the year 1579, King Stefan took up arms against the Muscovites and first went to the Russian town of Polock, which he took in fierce battle on August 13th. In that same year, a strange occurrence was seen in Riga [omen visum est mirabile]. People remembered that in the tower of the castle a crow had made its nest for many years. In that Spring, when King Stefan had besieged Polock, an unseen and rare bird for this region – a stork – tried to take the nest from the crow. The crow fought without any success for about a month, but it was forced to give up its nest to the stork. The older and wiser men of the time explained this mysterious omen [ominis mysterium], as follows. The crow was seen to represent the German rulership, because the Germans had ruled over all of Livonia for a long time. The stork was interpreted to be the Poles, which were unknown beforehand, but now, as was seen, they were pushing out the Germans. Just as importantly, in this year, during bad weather, a whale, uncommon to this region, was thrown out of the Baltic Sea, which could not get back into the water, suffered for a long time in the sand, until the sailors killed it (Fabrīcijs 2016, 180).

In the story of the raven and stork fighting over the nest, Fabricius provides the reader with a clear interpretation, seemingly giving not just his own opinion, but that of respected authority figures in Livonian society. The raven, which has been making its home in Livonia for years, represents the Germans, and the previously unseen and unfamiliar bird (again, the author's emphasis of the animal's uniqueness for the region of Livonia must be noted) – the stork – represents the new power coming into play in the region: Poland. Thus, Fabricius demonstrates that in Livonian society

strange events in the natural world were often thought to be connected to political events by symbolically reflecting them.

The paragraph continues with another description of a strange animal appearance in Livonia. If this were to be a simple curious story intended to draw in the attention of the reader, the author could have placed this description anywhere in the text. However, the description of a whale being beached on the shores of Livonia is purposefully placed in the very same paragraph as the story of the raven and the stork which, as has already been discussed, is clearly connected to the events of Stefan Bathory's attack on Polock. Fabricius himself describes the appearance of the whale as no less important, and, while he mentions it only in a single sentence, this event, too, seemingly carried a deep significance for the author and the readership of the chronicle. While the physical fight between the raven and the stork symbolically mirrors the battles of different political powers, the whale seems to be an omen of forthcoming danger or misfortune. Here, Fabricius could have been trying to show that the whale was a precursor to the political upheavals, which followed soon after.

In Medieval European culture, it was common for whales to be connected with evil, especially the figure of the Devil. One of the basis for such interpretations is the Biblical books of Jonah and Job, which feature stories of large sea creatures. Other legends include popular stories of whale tricking smaller fish into swimming into its mouth in order to eat them. Similarly, the Devil deceives humans into abandoning their faith. The large size of the whale's body is also often cited as a reason for its frightening reputation, and the appearance of whales on land was quite rare, which further solidified their interpretation as omens of misfortune or proof of God's displeasure (Silver 2015, 262–273).

The misfortune suffered by the animal depicted by Fabricius, unable to return to the water and ending up killed, could only foreshadow trouble for Livonia, as well. This adds to the general atmosphere of horror and uncertainty that permeates the time of the Livonian War.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Livonian chronicles of Balthasar Russow and Dionysius Fabricius, the descriptions of strange animal appearances provide an interpretation of contemporary events in accordance with the authors' religious beliefs and worldview: belief that God is present and actively partaking in worldly events, uses mysterious signs and portents to communicate with humankind, and is punishing Livonians for their sins through the events of the Livonian War. Even in the cases when the authors do not provide explicit

interpretations of the portents, they are clearly contextually connected to events of the Livonian war (sieges, negotiations between conflicting sides) and fit into the overall interpretation of the war as God's punishment. In every case, the chroniclers especially point out how unusual these animals are, either never before seen in the region, or behaving in a way that is entirely uncommon for the species, thus giving them a supernatural quality, inferring that God has sent them as signs for the inhabitants of Livonia.

The confessional aspect of the religious identity of both chroniclers is also at play. Russow believed that God was angered by the many sins of the Catholic rulers of Livonia, their bad influence leading to immoral behaviour in wider society. Meanwhile, Fabricius claimed that God punishes Livonia because of its inhabitants abandoning the Catholic faith for Lutheranism. Therefore, the portents described by both authors also function as a polemical tool, in an attempt to disprove the legitimacy of the opposing religious tradition.

Interestingly, while Fabricius is widely believed to have relied on Russow's chronicle for much of the factual material on the military and political aspects of the Livonian War, the portents described by the chroniclers are entirely different. Both chroniclers seem to have drawn upon different sets of sources, possibly heavily relying on oral history and local legends.

These and other examples of belief in divine portents, numerous in chronicles and other texts produced during the period of the Livonian War, reveal the anxieties of a society during war. Religious belief was still an integral part of this world-view, through which Livonians attempted to understand and interpret their surroundings.

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- ¹ A monograph on the theology of the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia by Carsten Selch Jensen (Jensen 2019) and an article on belief in miracles displayed in the same chronicle by Marek Tamm (Tamm 2011) can be highlighted as notable examples of recent interest in the interconnection of religious beliefs and historiography in medieval Livonia.
- ² One of such examples is the Latvian translation of Balthasar Russow's chronicle, first published in 1926. In it, entire sentences and paragraphs detailing miraculous events have been shortened or cut entirely, apparently believed by the translator to be unimportant. For further information see (Orlova 2022).
- ³ A well-known example is a pamphlet published by Reformation theologians Martin Luther and Philipp Melnachthon in 1523, describing a misshapen creature found in the Tiber river in Rome, which they likened to a monstrous sign of papal power (Luther, Melanchthon 1523). Thus, the importance of miraculous events and warnings signs as a powerful polemical tool was at the forefront of Reformation theology since its inception.

NEPARASTI DZĪVNIEKI KĀ BRĪDINĀJUMA ZĪMES PAR POLITISKIEM SATRICINĀJUMIEM: BALTAZARA RUSOVA UN DIONĪSIJA FABRĪCIJA LIVONIJAS HRONIKU PIEMĒRI

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ANOTĀCIJA

Laikabiedru veidotajiem Livonijas kara aprakstiem raksturīgi stāsti par militāro kampaņu laikā pieredzētiem neparastiem un brīnumainiem notikumiem, kuri nereti tika izprasti kā pierādījumi tam, ka Dievs izmanto karu, lai sodītu Livoniju. Raksta mērķis ir analizēt Baltazara Rusova un Dionīsija Fabrīcija Livonijas hronikās aprakstītos neparastu dzīvnieku parādīšanās gadījumus 16. gadsimta reliģisko priekšstatu par pārdabiskām brīdinājuma zīmēm un brīnumiem kontekstā. Analizējot teksta struktūru un autoru lietoto terminoloģiju, tiek atklāta neparastu dzīvnieku kā pārdabisku brīdinājuma zīmju funkcija tekstā. Abās hronikās neparasto dzīvnieku apraksti tiek kontekstuāli saistīti ar politisko notikumu aprakstiem, tādējādi militārajām norisēm piešķirot arī reliģisku interpretācijas dimensiju.

Atslēgvārdi: brīdinājuma zīmes, Livonijas karš, Baltazars Rusovs, Dionīsijs Fabrīcijs.

KOPSAVILKUMS

Rakstā analizēti Baltazara Rusova (ap 1536–1600) un Dionīsija Fabrīcija (1564–1617) Livonijas hronikās demonstrētie priekšstati par neparastiem dzīvniekiem kā pārdabiskiem politisku pārmaiņu priekšvēstnešiem jeb brīdinājuma zīmēm Livonijas kara (1558–1583) laikā. Viduslaiku un agro jauno laiku Eiropā reliģiskajos priekšstatos aktuāla ir pārliecība, ka novirzes no ierastajiem dabas pasaules ritmiem (ekstrēmi laikapstākļi, neparasti debesu ķermeņi, netipiska dzīvnieku uzvedība) ir Dieva komunikācijas ar cilvēci izpausmes, visbiežāk, lai demonstrētu neapmierinātību ar cilvēku grēcīgām darbībām. Gan Baltazars Rusovs, gan Dionīsijs Fabrīcijs savos Livonijas kara pārskatos apraksta dažādas neparastas parādības, kuras atbilstoši savai koncepcijai par Livonijas karu kā Dieva sūtītu sodu (luterāņu garīdznieks Rusovs to skaidroja ar Dieva dusmām par katolisko valdnieku pārmērībām, kamēr katoļu priesteris Fabrīcijs Dieva dusmu iemeslu saskatīja

livoniešu pāriešanā luteriskajā ticībā) interpretē kā pārdabiskas brīdinājuma zīmes Livonijas iedzīvotājiem.

Viena no šādām brīdinājuma zīmju grupām ir Livonijas reģionam netipisku dzīvnieku parādīšanās un dzīvnieku uzvedība pretēji dabā ierastajam. Abu autoru hronikās katra epizode, kurā tiek aprakstīti neparasti dzīvnieki, kontekstuāli tiek saistīta ar Livonijas kara militārajām un politiskajām norisēm (pilsētu aplenkumiem un ieņemšanu, diplomātiskām aktivitātēm un tamlīdzīgi), tādējādi uzsverot šo parādību kā brīdinājumu par kara izcelšanos un dažādiem tā pavērsieniem funkciju.

Šie un citi piemēri Livonijas iedzīvotāju ticībai pārdabiskām brīdinājuma zīmēm, kas daudzskaitlīgi sastopami hronikās un citos Livonijas kara kontekstā tapušos tekstos, atklāj sabiedrības satraukumu, dzīvojot kara apstākļos. Ticība joprojām bija būtisks šīs sabiedrības pasaules uzskatu aspekts, ar kura palīdzību Livonijas iedzīvotāji centās izprast apkārtējo pasauli un tajā notiekošo.