

Oertel, Christian: *The Cult of St Erik in Medieval Sweden. Veneration of a Royal Saint, Twelfth–Sixteenth Centuries*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers 2016. ISBN: 978-2-503-55507-2; XIII, 398 S.

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Christianization, the gradual establishment of a Church organization and the introduction of spiritual institutions were all of great importance to the social transformation that took place during the first centuries of the second millennium in Northern and Central Europe. Christianization was connected with the emergence of new and Christian monarchies and the development of novel forms of politics and government, which could be described as incipient state powers. Alongside with Poland, Hungary, Denmark and Norway this was a development and a transformation that characterized medieval Sweden.

The Swedish realm was, however, comparatively late regarding both the religious and political development. There were also great regional variations within a Sweden in making. These specific features are not least reflected in the cult and veneration of the royal saint St Erik. Christian Oertel studies in this book the development from the origins in the middle of the twelfth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Reformation and the origins of a more organized state meant a transformation of Erik's life as a saint and is an obvious chronological end.

St Erik and his cult have previously been widely studied and sometimes intensively discussed. This book is a new, fresh narrative based upon thorough and broad insights of previous research. Most of earlier scholarship has been published in Swedish and this is the first comprehensive study of this topic published in English. The author's familiarity with the different kinds of sources is impressive. He discusses many different types of material to reconstruct the development of the cult, amongst them the depictions of St Erik. Essentially all sources indicating the veneration of St Erik are taken into consideration. The interdisciplinary approach is a great

merit. His study is an impressive synthesis of what is known about this rather opaque king and the veneration of him. Oertel presents many new perspectives and interpretations.

Introductory chapters present the sources and there is also a discussion concerning the moot question of medieval royal saints and the shift of faith. The Christianization meant changes in the legitimization of power and the making of royal saints were essential. As Oertel stresses the idea royal saints was introduced to Scandinavia from Anglo-Saxon England. The most successful royal saint in Scandinavia was St Olaf of Norway. He fell in 1030 and his cult was spread and accepted widely. Olaf became an ancestral saint legitimizing his dynasty, but also of the Christian monarchy; he was also regarded as Norway's eternal king. He quickly became the principal model of a *rex iustus*, not least in Sweden.

St Erik of Sweden was a late-comer as a saint and in almost every respect he has been regarded as a bleak copycat of St Olaf. There are no contemporary sources from his reign. His ancestry is unknown, but he is supposed to have been killed May 18th, probably in the year 1160, at Uppsala and as a result of conflicts between throne pretenders. The early cult was confined to the bishopric of Uppsala and the surroundings in the province of Uppland.

From the middle of the thirteenth century the cult, however, developed. One important prerequisite was the foundation of a secular cathedral chapter at Uppsala in 1247. The regular chapter of Cistercians that existed to 1220s did not do much to promote the cult of a supposed holy monarch. Oertel argues convincingly that the role of the Dominicans in the making of St Erik as a royal saint was of decisive importance. The legend of Erik was probably created at the convent at Sigtuna and, as parallel, the legend of St Henry at the convent at Åbo (Finnish: Turku). St Henry was the bishop who achieved his martyrdom in Finland in connection with King Erik's war expedition to convert the Finns. Oertel suggests that the man behind these two legends was a certain Brother Johan, prior at the Sigtuna convent to 1286 and thereafter bishop of Åbo.

It has been questioned if there was actually

an expedition against Finland in the 1150s, but St Erik was anyhow more than 100 years later made a crusader king and in company with a missionary bishop. These legends were written during a period with a Swedish expansion to the East. What nowadays is Finland became more integrated within the Swedish realm, not least through crusading wars against non-Christian Carelians and schismatic Novgorodians. The royal saint thus legitimized the territorial expansion.

St Erik became a saint for the ruling royal family, by later historians often termed as the Bjälbo dynasty. His cult was still mainly confined to Uppland. He was a diocesan saint for Uppsala, and his missionary bishop Henry for Åbo. The other Swedish bishoprics had other patrons.

During the reign of King Magnus Eriksson (1319–1364) the cult of St Erik was politically promoted as a parallel to his Norwegian counterpart Olaf. King Magnus was due to dynastic circumstances also King of Norway. Oertel underlines how the great breakthrough of Erik as a national and also a more popular saint took place in the 15th century during the period when the three Scandinavian realms were united under one regent, the so-called Kalmar Union. After the great revolt in the 1430's against the King of the Union St Erik advanced as a national symbol. Erik represented Sweden on the new seal of realm after the overthrow of the King of the Union. Erik became the incarnation of the good old and just (and Swedish) king to the farmers and also the miners of the iron-production region of Bergslagen. He had been a king that did not impose burdensome and unjust taxes like the King of the Union did. He was often attributed as an ancient and benevolent law-giver.

The high tide of the medieval cult was in the late fifteenth century. It was period when the King of Union seldom was recognized by the ruling Swedish aristocratic elite. Sweden was governed for long periods by regents (in Swedish: riksföreståndare). They were all but in name king and they, notably Sten Sture the elder (1470–1497, 1501–1503), often promoted St Erik in their anti-Union propaganda and politics. He became a national saint, extensively venerated in most of the Swedish

provinces.

The volume contains several maps illustrating the geographic and chronological varieties of his veneration. Added value is provided by an appendix with the legend's Latin text, and also list of the saint's miracles, charters using St Erik's feast day and depictions of Erik. Oertel gives thus a detailed, varied analysis of the relation between the religion and politics. The development of the cult of St Erik reflects the complicated political trajectories of medieval Sweden and how the veneration of him legitimized the monarchy and an emerging state power. The book is an excellent and inspiring contribution to the history of royal saints in general and to the political history of medieval Sweden in particular.

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