2 Invasion, Conquest, and the Creation of Livonia

In the new millennium the peoples of the eastern Baltic littoral remained receptive to outsiders and, in a limited fashion, ventured beyond their own territories. Vikings and Russians as well as merchants of assorted backgrounds made their way in and out of these lands, and the Couronians periodically sailed across the Baltic to raid the coastal settlements of the Scandinavian peninsula. Christianity in its Eastern Orthodox variant had arrived on the peripheries of the littoral, and people of the eastern littoral lands paid tribute to the principalities of Polotsk, Pskov, and Novgorod. As far as we can judge, however, none of these contacts resulted in important permanent settlements, either by foreigners settling in the littoral or by littoral inhabitants settling elsewhere. Thus the Couronians, Semigallians, Livs, Selians, and Lettgallians generally remained in the territories they had marked out for themselves by the end of the ninth century.

Starting with the second half of the twelfth century, however, western in-wanderers began to think of the Baltic littoral as a permanent source of income and its peoples as pagans in need of Christianization. For the papacy, which was concerned primarily with consolidating its influence on the monarchical states of Western Europe, the Baltic area was peripheral but promising.

CHURCHMEN, MERCHANTS, AND CRUSADERS

Merchants from the German territories of the Holy Roman Empire had been making regular stops in the territory of the Livs around

the mouth of the Daugava River. In the mid-1160s they were accompanied by Father Meinhard (ca. 1125–96), an Augustinian monk from Holstein intent on Christianizing the Baltic pagans. He constructed a church in Ikšķile (in German, Uexküll) on the Daugava River, and from there missionaries sought converts among the surrounding Livs. In 1188, to formalize those efforts, Pope Clement III confirmed Meinhard as the first bishop of Ikšķile. Those early missions, however, did not yield much for the church because the Livs, though not antagonistic to the presence of foreigners, proved resistant to Christianity. Meinhard was evidently prepared to bribe the Livs by building them a castle, but, when this did not work, he began thinking about a crusade. In 1196 Meinhard died without converting many of the people he had lived among.[1]

Western appetites had been whetted by this experience nonetheless, and the next phase of the incursion coincided with the ascension in 1198 of Innocent III to the throne of Saint Peter. Perhaps the most ambitious of the medieval popes, Innocent entertained notions of ruling over both the religious and the secular world but was ambivalent on the subject of crusades within Europe. Although he felt that the greatest threat to the church in Europe was heresy, he did not think it proper for Christians to war against other Christians. Despite his doubts, Innocent did proclaim a crusade against the "pagan Balts"; it is in this context that another churchman, Berthold, a Cistercian abbot from Loccum, was named the second bishop of Ikšķile and arrived in 1198 at the mouth of the Daugava, this time with a contingent of soldiers. He, however, was killed in a skirmish with the Livs in the year of his arrival.

A year passed, and in 1199 Albert of Buxhovden, a nephew of the archbishop of Bremen, was named as third bishop. Albert was far more ambitious—an empire-builder, in fact—and a much better strategist than his predecessors; before coming to the Baltic, he convinced Innocent III to proclaim a second Baltic crusade. Thus Albert arrived at the mouth of the Daugava in the spring of 1200 with twenty-three ships and five hundred Saxon soldiers, having decided that a serious Christianizing effort required a permanent and intimidating presence and territorial control. To accomplish his goals, Albert first co-opted the Liv elders in the immediate area by taking them hostage and forcing them to agree to his terms. Recognizing that the earlier fortification in Ikšķile (far inland from the mouth of the Daugava) was militarily unjustifiable, in 1201 he began building the city of Riga close to the mouth of the Daugava near a cluster of Liv villages on the Ridzene River. In 1202 Albert transformed his military contingent into an order of knights called the Swordbrothers (in German, Schwertbrüder, sometimes also called the Brothers of the Militia of Christ or the Livonian Brothers of the Sword). Finally, like a feudal lord, he began making land grants (fiefs) to his soldiers, who thereby became his vassals.

The chronicles of the period do not fully explain these transactions or tell how Albert came into possession of the fiefs in the first place. We must assume that possession of the lands occupied by the Livs was simply asserted, just as designating the entire littoral as *Livonia* was asserted before the territory was fully conquered. We can further assume that those fiefs included their Liv inhabitants; later chronicles describe Albert's vassals as having fiefs populated by farmers.[2] In any event, Albert was the first Westerner to superimpose onto the territorial arrangements of the eastern littoral not only his control but also his geographic nomenclature. With his arrival began the construction of the medieval state known as Livonia.

MILITARY ACTION

The Swordbrothers wasted no time in moving against the pagans closest at hand, namely, most of the unconverted Liv population. In 1205 Salaspils, the center of Liv resistance, was taken by an armed force consisting of the Brothers, merchants, and already-converted Livs. In his battle against the Livs, Albert was able to strengthen the crusaders' cause by taking advantage of internal antagonisms and rivalries of the native populations; he thus called on the Semigallians, as well as the Christianized Livs, to do battle against their pagan brethren. By 1207, military action against the Livs had been concluded; the bishop of Livonia (Albert) received two-thirds of the captured territory and the Swordbrothers, one-third.

The Selonians were next in line. Their important centers were taken in 1207–1208 (Koknese) and in 1209 (Jersika). In Jersika the Swordbrothers took captive the wife of Visvaldis, the Jersika chieftain; Visvaldis then assented to become Albert's vassal and received part of his former lands as a fief. Simultaneous with the military actions in the southeast, Albert and the Swordbrothers moved northeast and in 1206 built a castle in Cēsis (in German, Wenden), which became the center for military action against the surrounding Lettgallian and Estonian territories.

In 1208 the Swordbrothers formed a military alliance with the Lettgallians of the Tālava region in order to move against the pagan Estonians to the north. The struggle with the Estonians weakened the Tālava Lettgallians, and in 1214 Albert added the Tālava region to his territories. Despite a brief Lettgallian-Estonian uprising in 1212 near Cēsis, Albert remained the master of this region. By 1216 the Swordbrothers had overrun nearly all of southern Estonia, and in the winter of 1216 they invaded the island of Ösel, off the Estonian coast in the Baltic Sea.

The successes of Bishop Albert and the Swordbrothers threatened the Russian principalities to the east, and in 1217 there were a series of

Estonian-Russian moves against the crusaders. In doing battle with the Estonians, Albert had to depend on both Livs and Lettgallians, especially in the battle at Viljandi in 1217, as well as assistance from the Danish king, Waldemar II. For the next ten years warfare continued between the crusader-Danish forces and the Estonian-Russian forces, but by 1227 this conflict had been concluded in favor of Albert and the Swordbrothers. The northern lands of the eastern littoral were finally under the firm control of the church, the crusaders, and the merchants who followed in their wake.[3]

As the conquest of the north proceeded, the Couronians in the western territories of the littoral were trying to head off a similar fate by launching raids against the military outposts the Swordbrothers had established on the edges of the Couronian territories. In 1210, when the Livs requested their assistance, the seagoing Couronians had sent a fleet of vessels to the mouth of the Riga. This venture, as well as the raids, came to naught, however, and in 1230–1231 the Couronians together with their Semigallian allies faced a major thrust by the crusaders to the west and southwest. The thrust was successful, and much of the Couronian territory was overrun and its inhabitants Christianized in 1230 through an agreement with Lamekin, the northern Couronian chieftain, and in 1231 with the other Couronian chiefs.

At this point, the crusaders joined in an ambitious scheme, approved by the papacy, to gain control over the entire Baltic seacoast from the Prussian lands to the northeast. The plan involved the German Order (in German, Deutsche Orden), which was founded in Jerusalem in 1189 and had moved to Prussia by the early thirteenth century. The plan called for the German Order to move north and east and the Swordbrothers south and west, thus subjugating not only the Semigallians and Couronians but also the Prussian pagans and the Lithuanians, that is, those Baltic peoples who had not yet been conquered and Christianized. In those campaigns, the battle at Saule in September 1236 gave a combined force of Lithuanians and Semigallians a decisive victory. Virtually all the leaders of the Swordbrothers were killed, including the master, the knights of the German Order having proven insufficiently strong to make a difference. That battle had three important consequences: the remnants of the Swordbrothers were incorporated into the German Order in 1237, henceforth known as the Livonian Order; the Lithuanians gained time in their battle against the crusading orders; and in the north the Couronians and Semigallians took the opportunity to revolt. In 1242 the energies of the Semigallians were also fed by the defeat of the Livonian Order on Lake Peipus by the army of Alexander Nevsky.[4]

During the next two decades the Couronians and Semigallians remained restless and unpredictable, but by the early 1250s their opposition

to the Livonian Order had waned. There were some victories against the order, particularly at Durbe in July 1260, but in 1267 the defeated and exhausted Couronians signed a peace agreement. The only old territorial society that remained unsubjugated was that of the Semigallians, but a sequence of events that began with clashes in 1264 ended in their defeat. In 1265 the Livonian Order built a castle in Jelgava (in German, Mitau) that became the headquarters for the Semigallian wars. Not until twenty-five years later, however, did the Livonian Order subjugate the Semigallians and then only with the help of the main German Order, which by 1283 had defeated the Prussians and could thus send military assistance to its Baltic branch. In 1286 a particularly effective Semigallian chieftain called Nameisis even managed for a time to surround the city of Riga. In 1290, however, the last Semigallian stronghold at Sidrabene fell, and with that battle the military conquest of the eastern Baltic littoral by German church-men, crusaders, and merchants was completed.[5]

THE FEUDAL CONFEDERATION OF LIVONIA

The Livonian Confederation, which emerged on the territories formerly controlled by the Couronians, Semigallians, Livs, Selians, Lettgalli-ans, and Estonians, remained an important factor in the politics of northern Europe until the second half of the sixteenth century. The use of the term *Livonia* in the singular, however, belies the nature of this state because its several political elites—the ecclesiastics, the order, the Riga burghers—seldom acted in unison. The history of Livonia is one of continuous and bitter rivalry between the church and the Livonian Order, between the vassals and lords of these corporate entities and among the vassals them-selves, and between the cities, especially Riga, and all the other claimants to power and influence. Although technically a confederation, Livonia was an extreme example of medieval decentralization in which cooperation and collaboration emerged only when there was an external threat and some-times not even then.[6]

The reasons for the disputes were many, but the principal one was territorial control. In the thirteenth century the original formula for dividing newly acquired territories called for one-third of them to be placed under the jurisdiction of the order and two-thirds under the church, but this principle broke down when, after the conquest of each indigenous people, exceptions were made to the rule. This resulted in the order controlling far more territory than the church.

The number of influential ecclesiastics in Livonia, however, expanded,

as in the course of the thirteenth century bishoprics were created at Tartu, Ösel, and Tallinn (all in Estonian territory). Late in the thirteenth century, a Courland bishopric was formed as well, but because it was not capable of defeating the Couronians, it had to rely on the order, which then received most of the conquered Couronian land. When the bishopric of Riga was elevated to an archbishopric in 1251, the archbishop became the spiritual leader of all the Baltic bishops except the bishop of Tallinn. By the mid–fourteenth century, the Livonian Order had become the largest land-holder in the confederation, controlling about 67,000 square kilometers of land; the ecclesiastical lands contained only about 41,000 square kilometers. The largest church state was the Riga archbishopric, which controlled about 18,000 square kilometers. The Courland bishopric was next, with control over about 4,500 square kilometers. The lands of the order were in turn divided into some forty smaller districts, each governed by an official called a *Vogt*. The distribution of the ecclesiastical and order lands in Livonia, as shown in map 2, virtually guaranteed continuous friction.[7]

Given the feudal principle (by which powerful persons voluntarily subordinate themselves to overlords), as well as the fact that both the church and the order embodied the principle of hierarchy, one might have expected a high degree of political cohesion. The problem in Livonia, however, was that feudal superiors were not powerful enough to enforce continued loyalty, especially from their most ambitious vassals. Thus, for example, although in the order the lines of authority were clear—the master was elected for life, had his seat in Livonia (in Riga and later in Cēsis rather than far away, and was therefore well positioned to be an effective feudal lord—he had trouble guaranteeing the loyalty of his vassals. Such vassals lived in fortified castles and expanded their personal power, secure in the knowledge that only through them could the master effectively govern the order's territories. The vassals, in turn, depended on low-level district (in German, *Amt*) administrators. The higher officials of the order constituted a kind of parliament (*kapituls*), which functioned as an advisory council to the master. The master was subordinate to the master of the German Order, the headquarters of which were in Marienburg in Prussia. (From the early fourteenth century onward the Livonian Order enlarged its sphere of action and became less accountable to Prussian headquarters.) There was a feudal hierarchy, but by the early fourteenth century self-interest was doing battle with pledged personal loyalty.[8]

At the apex of the Livonian ecclesiastical hierarchy stood the arch-bishop of Riga, who was also the nominal head of the Livonian Confedera-tion as well as the city of Riga. As a landholder presiding over the properties of the archbishopric, the archbishop alternated residences among the castles at Rauna, Limbāži, and Koknese. Needing an armed force, the archbishop,

Map 2. Medieval Livonia, ca. 1400

■ City of Riga
▨ Ecclesiastical lands
☐ Lands of the Livonian Order

in a practice typical of the period, granted out the lands under his jurisdiction as fiefs to secular vassals, who then constituted his military. Given the above, the Riga archbishop appeared to be a powerful personage but in fact wore too many hats, each of which brought him into conflict not only with his own ecclesiastical subordinates and secular vassals but also with the nominally religious but increasingly secularly motivated order. Thus during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, power flowed increasingly away from the position of archbishop in the direction of the advisory councils and the secular power centers. The bishops, the other powerful churchmen in Livonia, were not much better off; the bishop of Courland, for example, depended almost entirely on the goodwill of the Livonian Order because he had little land to grant to create his own military force.[9]

Despite the order's territorial strength, the church, by means of the Christianization process, was developing an infrastructure in the nonelite population in its own and the order's territories. The new faith was not only a matter of beliefs but also of institutions, such as parishes, congregations (in Latvian, *draudzes*), clergy, places of worship and housing for the clergy, and formalized contributions from the congregations. There were also new forms of control: rules on admitting converts to the church, regulations about impermissible marriages with close kin, required attendance at worship, the manner and frequency with which sacraments were taken, and rules about burials. It is estimated that, by the end of the fifteenth century outside the city of Riga, there were some seventy congregations in the Latvian territories, each with its own church.[10] The evidence suggests that acquiring territorial control and creating parish-level institutions were but the first steps in the long-term Christianization process. Yet how far the process reached into the rural populations is difficult to estimate because there was evidently a shortage of clergy willing to serve outside the urban centers such as Riga.

THE CHURCH, THE LIVONIAN ORDER, AND THE CITY OF RIGA

When Bishop Albert founded Riga in 1201, the eastern Baltic littoral did not have any population concentrations large enough to be called cities. The number of people in and around the fortified places of the precrusader period may sometimes have reached town size, but these concentrations appear to have been fortuitous and impermanent. The founding of Riga, therefore, was the beginning of urban history in the area; the city was immensely significant during the active crusading and

Christianizing efforts of the first century and remained so even as other cities were founded in Livonia during the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Accurate population statistics do not exist for the medieval period, but the city is estimated to have had about ten thousand residents by the beginning of the fourteenth century.[11]

When its founder and lord, Bishop Albert, was alive, affairs in Riga were dominated by his agenda, except for a brief period before 1120, when Albert gave the city to the Danish king in gratitude for his assistance in the colonization effort. Even before this, however, the city had developed its own administrative institutions (a council of *seniores* [elders] is first mentioned in 1210) and political will. In 1221 the Rigans successfully challenged Danish rule and achieved a quasi independence, even though Albert tried to reclaim some of his prerogatives.

When Albert died in 1229, power in the city was concentrated in a council that originally had twelve members but grew as time went on. Judging by the fragmentary evidence in written sources, the social structure of the city consisted of a patriciate of wealthy merchants and tradesmen; a large middle group of artisans, craftsmen, and lesser merchants; and a fairly large number of persons who worked in various support occupations but did not have political rights. These political-economic structures became more rigid with time, particularly in the mid–fourteenth century when guilds began to control entry into urban occupations. As Riga became a typical medieval city, it also grew independent in spirit, reserving the right to choose its own patron, which was especially important after Albert died. The city adopted its charter of rights first from Visby (on the island of Gotland) and then from Hamburg when Riga became a member of the Hanseatic League in 1282.[12] In various revised forms, the charter remained in force until the seventeenth century, and all other cities in the Livonian territories copied their charters from Riga's.

Because trade had been a principal motive for the "discovery" of the Baltic littoral by central Europeans, Riga grew and thrived as a commercial center. But this also meant that the concerns and values of its permanent residents came to differ from those of the church (which was a landholder) as well as from those of the landed members of the Livonian Order. Because the Riga bishop (archbishop after 1282) remained an important figure in the area, and because the order remained a strong military force, a conflict over a host of issues was inevitable.

The main themes of these internal struggles concerned overlordship of the city, overlordship of the whole of Livonia, and, within Riga (where both the order and the archbishop had domiciles), influence over the city's political institutions. Overlordship and influence ultimately meant income,

which, because of Riga's growing prosperity, made the city a particularly attractive target to both the church and the order. Normally, but not always, Riga sided with the archbishop against the Livonian Order and periodically—especially during a thirty-three-year stretch from 1297 to 1330—was at war with the order. Riga's struggles with the order became so severe that it asked for military assistance from the Lithuanians, who in 1305, 1307, 1309, and later attacked the order's lands from the south. During the Avignonese papacy (1309–77), Riga archbishops made frequent visits to southern France to argue for their rights against what they felt were the order's usurpations. Later, especially after the defeat by the Lithuanians of the German Order in 1410 at Tannenberg, the weakened Livonian Order began negotiating with the Riga archbishop to obtain his help in subjugating the independent-minded city.[13]

The conflicts among the order, the church, and Riga also involved the peasantry. Riga remained a thorn in the side of all landowners, including the church, because, in the manner of all medieval cities, it attracted peasants fleeing from the increasingly harsh obligations of life in the countryside. More generally, no landowner was spared the danger of losing some of his rural labor force because peasants sought better conditions and readily left the areas of their birth to settle on the properties of other owners. Mutually satisfactory regulations among all the landowners, and between them and the city, were never devised during the entire medieval period.[14] Some of the fleeing serfs who ended up in Riga working in support occupations became the core of a non-German subpopulation of the city and thus introduced another source of antagonism.

The conflicts among the church, the order, and Riga reflected the inevitable fault lines in Livonian society that resulted from the ambitions and powerful personalities in these corporate groupings. Even the creation in 1419 of a Livonian diet (in German, *Landtag*) did not help. This institution, called at the initiative of the Riga archbishop and meeting for the first time in 1422, consisted of four sociopolitical orders (or *curiae*). The first was the Riga archbishop and the other Livonian bishops; the second, the higher officeholders of the Livonian Order; the third, all of the persons of vassal status in Livonia; and the fourth, the representatives of the Livonian cities. Although the *Landtag* met regularly during the fifteenth century and beyond, its presence did not substantially affect the rivalries among the elites. Whereas in Western European societies one monarch after another successfully challenged the forces of feudal decentralization, Livonia remained decentralized and therefore entered the sixteenth century as an exceptionally weak state, a tempting target to ambitious neighbors because of its strategic location.

THE LIVONIAN PEASANTRY AND THE EMERGENCE OF LATVIANS

The consolidation of power by the new elites of the eastern Baltic littoral expressed itself in the imposition of new borders and subdivisions on Baltic territory, in the appearance of chroniclers and other record keepers and through them of the first written historical sources, and in the transformation of the indigenous populations into peasants. These developments combined to make it virtually impossible to answer the question of what happened in the period 1200–1400 to those peoples who, before the arrival of the crusaders, bore the designations Couronians, Livs, Semigallians, Selonians, and Lettgallians? The written sources for the period—such as the *Chronicle* of Henry of Livonia (1225–26)—described principally the activities of the upper social orders and, in the Baltic as elsewhere in medieval European society, provided information about peasants only to the extent that they were of importance to the functioning of administrators and churchmen and to the occasional curious observer. Of even greater importance for a history of the Latvians was that the record keepers had limited interest in the processes of change affecting the non-Germans (in German, *undeutsche*) of the area, that is, those populations that did not use German (or Latin). In these medieval chronicles and accounts the Couronians, Semigallians, Livs, Selonians, and Lettgallians begin to show up as "non-Germans" or as "peasants" just at that point in Baltic history when it is important for us to know how they were changing as peoples. The problem continued beyond the medieval period, of course, because the indigenous populations did not directly create historical records in their own language until the nineteenth century.[15]

The question concerning the indigenous peoples is twofold: how did they become a peasantry, and how (and possibly whether) did they become Latvians? Although we know nothing precise about the relative sizes of the different population groups in the Livonian state, there is no doubt that the nonecclesiastical, nonmilitary, and nonmercantile groups—that is, the cultivators of the soil, the agriculturists, the peasants—made up the vast majority of the population, as they did elsewhere on the European continent. At the start of the thirteenth century, then, it is estimated that there were four to five persons per square kilometer in the "Latvian" territories of the Livonian Confederation, yielding an estimated total population of 250,000 to 350,000.[16] The upper orders constituted about 5–10 percent of this number, as elsewhere.

It would be a mistake, however, to conceive of the upper and lower

orders in terms of an urban/rural division. The countryside in fact dominated: the German- and Latin-using churchmen, knights, and administrators and their entourages were, in effect, swimming in a sea of non-German rural folk and having to find ways of dealing with them on a daily basis. Only in Riga and a few other towns would this image need to be reversed, and even in Riga there appears to have been a sizable complement of non-German residents. Below the well-organized merchant and artisan guilds, there were a host of support occupations and shopkeeping enterprises in which, sources suggest, non-Germans were important numerically and perhaps even dominant.[17] Even so, the vast majority of the total population of 300,000 or so did not live in cities, and the vast majority of the rural dwellers were not recent in-wanderers.

Whereas in Western Europe by the fourteenth century, serfdom and manorialism were already rural institutions, in the Baltic littoral they were the products of the last centuries of the medieval period. Dating the appearance of Baltic serfdom (in Latvian, *dzimtbūšana*) as a formal institution is particularly tricky because a convincing case can be made that it did not begin in the littoral until the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries. In this interpretation Baltic serfdom was not a medieval institution at all and did not play a formal role in transforming Balts into peasants in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Those centuries involved various relationships of dependency and obligation between landholders and peasants but not, evidently, hereditary servility (in German, *Erbuntertänigkeit*) and the corvée labor associated with developed serfdom.[18]

At issue here are transformatory processes lasting some eight to ten human generations (one generation = twenty-five years), none of which there is adequate documentation for; descriptive statements must be inferred from a few words in the written sources. Personal subordination was normal in all social strata. Vassals were subordinate to lords who in turn were vassals of other lords, and, as mentioned, the highest power holders in the Baltic littoral had superiors outside the area: the pope and the master of the German Order. Some sources mention a category of slaves, who were evidently captives taken in battle, criminals sentenced to slavery, or people unable to pay their debts.

In this context, serfdom (hereditary subordination to a particular landholder) would not have been judged a remarkable invention when it did appear in individual instances and became widespread. On fiefs, peasants were already subordinated in the economic sense because most paid rent of some kind and performed some obligatory labor. Twice a year representatives of landholders traversed the countryside and gathered rents from peasant communities. In fifteenth-century sources there are a number

of complaints about "fleeing" peasants, a phenomenon that originally seems to have been connected to the inability to repay accumulated debt. But later complaints appear to have been based on landholders' assumptions that peasants should stay in place regardless of whether or not they had debts. From here it was only one step to the emergence of a heritable status that carried with it perpetual labor services and dues of other kinds. Certainly by the end of the medieval period, there were more frequent appearances in the sources of such terms as *Erbbauer, Erbleute,* and *Erbherr* (hereditary peasant, hereditary persons, hereditary lord), all of which suggest that relationships of dependency had become fixed. We do not know, however, the pace at which these new relational forms spread, whether their spread was geographically differentiated, and how their intensity varied from place to place.

When manorialism emerged is a somewhat easier question to answer because it involves real estate rather than hard-to-interpret personal obligations.[19] Although we think of manorialism and serfdom in medieval Europe as two sides of the same coin, they do not have to be and, in fact, were not in the Baltic littoral. Manors (in Latvian, *muiža,* from the Liv *moiz;* in German, *Gut*) made their first appearance simultaneously with the granting of Baltic lands as fiefs to vassals in the thirteenth century, but their internal arrangements took a long time to standardize. During the centuries in question, *muižas* and peasant holdings coexisted, and free (not enserfed) peasants lived on manorial properties alongside peasants whose ties to the manorial lord were more formalized. Both peasants and manorial lords held their land from someone else, of course, but not all land being worked by peasants was manorial land. Manor holders who could not command peasant labor had to pay for it. By the end of the fifteenth century (traditionally the end of the medieval period), it is probable that a large proportion of the agricultural land in the Baltic littoral had not yet been absorbed into manorial properties, and it is certain that the vast majority of *muižas* founded by that time did not rely entirely on corvée labor.[20] The spread of the classic serf estate in the Baltic, then, did not begin until the sixteenth century.

The question of how the indigenous peoples of the Baltic littoral became peasants is answerable by reference to the new institutions that absorbed them: the Livonian statelets, the Livonian state as a whole, and the manor. A multilevel social hierarchy in which location depended on birth and upward mobility was almost impossible in part because of the German/non-German cleavage. How the indigenous peoples became Latvians is a more difficult question, not only because we do not know whether, in the precrusader period, there really existed a group identity for, say, the Semigallians that they would have sought to retain but also because

we do not know what *being Latvian* would have meant in the late medieval era, beyond having a childhood language different from those of the upper orders. However useful it is to employ the term *Livonia* for the eastern Baltic littoral during the late medieval centuries, beneath this territorial designation group identities were in the process of changing. Some of these changes manifested themselves in immigrants from Central Europe beginning to feel more Livonian and less German, and others probably entailed Couronians, Semigallians, Livs, Selians, and Lettgallians coming to feel more Latvian.

There are, of course, no sources that directly describe these processes of ethnolinguistic transformation. From the thirteenth century onward, when the chronicles describing the conquest were written, historical evidence about the area continued to describe and reflect the doings of the new upper orders, with evidence about the peoples that had become the peasant stratum appearing only incidentally. The processes through which the indigenous peoples lost their group identities therefore must be inferred from various kinds of descriptions of surface events. It is clear, however, that whereas in the thirteenth century the chroniclers were liberal in their use of the old group designations, by the sixteenth century the sources tended to use the German term *Letten* (in Latvian, *latvieši*) when they did not use the designation *undeutsch* (non-Germans).[21]

What happened in the last two centuries of the medieval period is not clear. One possibility is that during the thirteenth century—the period of the most intense warfare—there was a great deal of internal migration, some of it fleeing from warfare itself and some of it, during the war century and after, searching for better places to farm because many previously populated places had lost their residents. In this supposition, the populations of the old tribal societies simply dissolved as identifiable entities, fragments of each merging with fragments of others as a result of demographic shifts. The result was a new large population, the territorial base of which was now the southern part of the Livonian Confederation. The Lettagallians, having been the most numerous, became the dominant element.

Another possibility is that, by the end of the thirteenth century, the consolidation of power by the new elites resulted, over the next eight generations, in the disappearance of the old local elites in a process of assimilation, for which the German term *Enthauptung* (decapitation) could be used. Having lost their leadership class and the possibility of restoring it, the five indigenous peoples also lost a major source of group distinctiveness and therefore the incentive to maintain group identity. The process through which the old political elite disappeared is not well known or described. Some historians maintain that the indigenous political leaders

became minor vassals of the new feudal lords, adapting in the process to the ways and language of the latter; others, that the old leaders left the eastern littoral and migrated to Lithuania, where the new German elites had not been implanted. Having migrated into Lithuanian territory, they assimilated to Lithuanians in due course.[22]

Another possibility is that a confrontational situation between, on the one hand, a new set of powerful elites that had the same cultural background (German language, central European) and, on the other, the heterogeneous subordinated population evoked in the latter a unifying reaction, so that in due time the old distinctions no longer mattered. Thus by establishing themselves as the new elite, the German churchmen, merchants, and crusaders ironically became the reason the indigenous populations merged into a Latvian population—a process that had not been in evidence before the German speakers came.

There is, of course, another possibility, which is that the old group identities, never having been firmly or evenly fixed in the minds of the five indigenous peoples, gradually faded and were replaced by a more general—Latvian—identity. As a result of internal population movements, the spoken languages of the five societies ceased to be distinctive, with all the speakers of the earlier tongues adopting a more widespread language, likely some transformed version of Lettgallian. This process, however, did not need to be accompanied by the emergence of a common national or political consciousness vis-à-vis the new elites or neighboring peoples. The residents of Livonia could have remained highly conscious of linguistic differences even though they did not manifest themselves as national group boundaries. Clearly, how this question is answered for the period 1300–1500 plays a large role in how the history of the Latvians as a people is interpreted in the succeeding centuries.[23]

The meager evidence about these processes suggests that change was taking place but not enough to make unambiguous statements about it. By the end of the fifteenth century, a Livonian society had come into being that, when stabilized in terms of social structure, differed substantially from its pre-thirteenth-century predecessors. Among the Couronians, Livs, Lettgallians, Selonians, and Semigallians in those eight to ten generations, the memory of earlier social and political structures and arrangements must have dimmed and eventually disappeared. They must have lost the sense that they as individuals somehow belonged to peoples designated by such group names. How deep a new Latvian consciousness had become is an open question. That legitimate political power could be exercised by socioeconomic elites who were not Latvians gradually became an accepted aspect of life for most people, as the imperatives of daily survival took over

and thoughts of revenge receded. Most Latvians at the end of the period were peasants, and most peasants in the southern regions of Livonia were Latvians. Those urban people who were non-German sought to assimilate to the German elites and probably perceived themselves as having far more in common with their fellow urbanites than with the peasantry.