

Framing the Frontier: The Green Isthmic Border of the Danish Baltic

Two riverbank duels

In order to settle a question of supremacy, so Saxo tells us in his *Gesta Danorum*, the King of Denmark and the King of Saxony arrange to meet on the banks of the river Eider. Here the two heirs to their respective kingdoms are going to settle the question in armed combat man to man. The Saxon prince actually brings a muscle-packed *athleta* to back him up whereas Uffo, son of the Danish king Vermund, thinks he can manage alone. The three men cross to an island in the middle of the river and have it out. Saxo would not be Saxo, the unparalleled historian of the grandeur of the Danish Empire through the ages, if Uffo did not win a resounding victory over both his adversaries, upon which he assumes control over both countries “*utriusque imperii procuratur ef-*

fectus” (Saxo 2005 IV 4).¹ Saxony had, not for the first and not for the last time in Saxo’s long History, become tributary to Denmark.

A near contemporary but rather less flamboyant narrative, the Annals of the monastery of Ryd, recount how the Danish kings Knud VI (1182-1202) and Valdemar II (1202-41) actually did take possession of the lands south of the Eider. This happened from about 1190 onward and was accomplished by 1203, precisely at the time when Saxo was writing up his legendary prehistory of essen-

1 Saxo IV 4. The story is already in Sven Aggesen, *Brevis historia*, cc. 2-3.

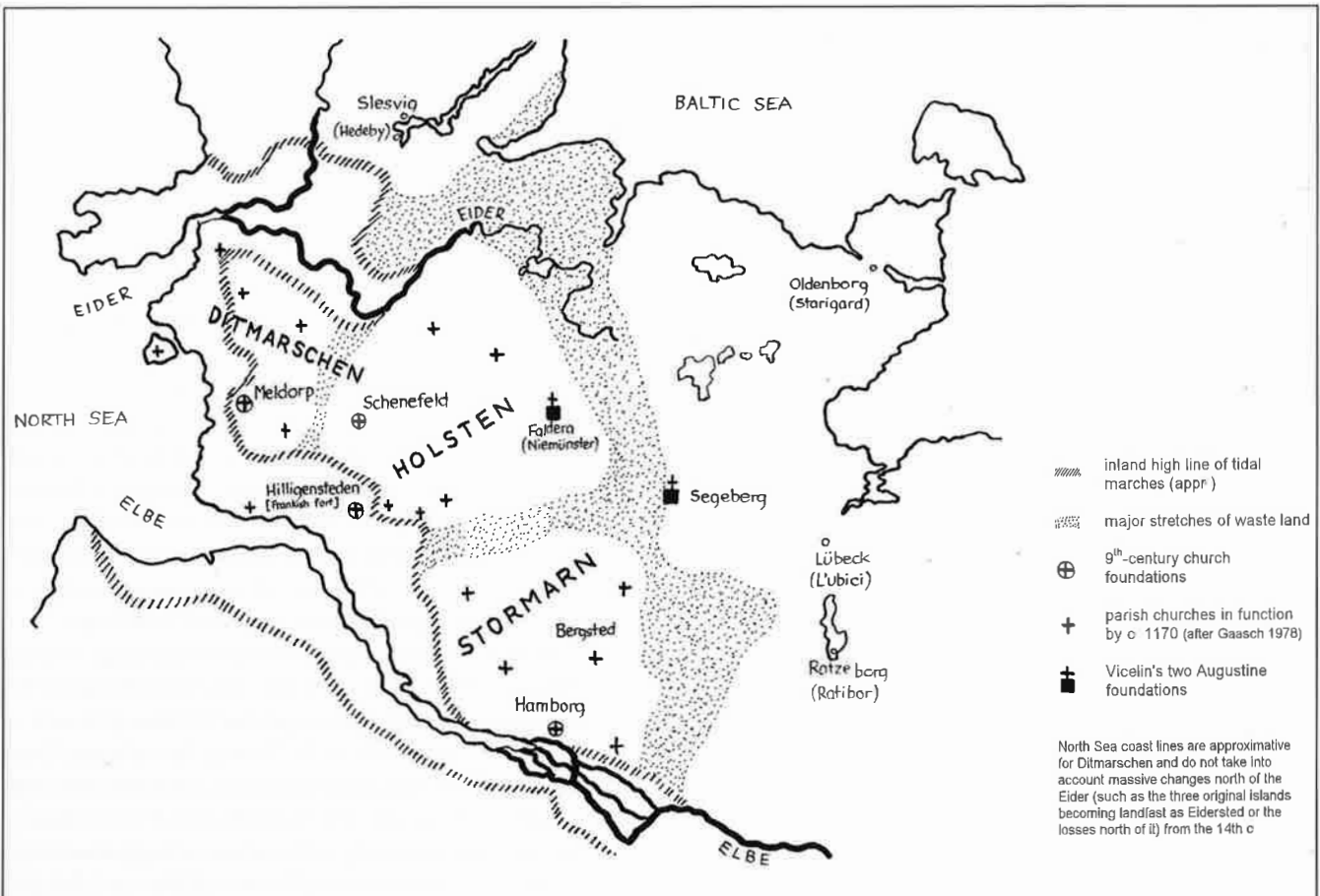


Fig. 1

tially the same political developments. Several years later, in 1215, “Emperor Otto [IV ‘of Brunswick’ from the 12th-century ducal Saxon family], *breaking the peace and violating the treaty which he himself had sworn to, came into Holsten in order to subject it to his rule. King Valdemar went against him with a huge army, including sixty thousand Frisians alone. In single combat Sven the Strong and Broðer the Old killed two of the Empire’s best warriors, upon which the Emperor dared not enter into battle, but fled back across the river Elbe.*” (Kroman 1980 p. 169)²

It is just about conceivable that the account from Ryd is not entirely ‘fictitious’ in the sense that during the prolonged encampment of the two armies on the north bank of the Elbe and while negotiations were going on, individual fighters may have entered into a kind of heroic brinkmanship with potentially disastrous consequences. Contemporary Norse sagas call this type of brinkmanship a “comparison of men” (*mannjafnað*, corresponding to the Latin *certamen* used in the Annals of Ryd), although the outcome of the confrontation was certainly not resolved by this outburst of heroism but rather by actual political considerations. If so, the memory of such a combat on the fringes of the country would have been the perfect vehicle for making sense of the events by couching them in an idiom that was as easy to memorise as it was pleasurable to tell. Whether the entry in the Annals of Ryd is actually a reflection of Sven Aggesen’s and Saxo’s version of Danish expansion across the Eider, or whether both texts are independent of each other, we cannot know. The point is that during the years of the ‘Valdemarian Period of Greatness’, a phrase coined by Kristian Erslev (Erslev 1898) when the ‘Danish Baltic Empire’ reached its apogee, tales were told

2 *Annales Ryenses in Danmarks middelalderlige annaler.* The extant redaction of the annals, which have convincingly been connected to the Cistercian monastery of Ryd, near Flensborg in South Jutland, dates from the 1280s. That would be roughly 70 years after Saxo wrote the first ‘legendary’ half of his *Gesta Danorum*, but it seems to me fairly certain that the spirit, if not the letter, of the entries for the Valdemarian period must date back at least several decades. The invasion of Emperor Otto is reported by a number of Saxon and Danish annals, while the Annals of Ryd are the first known source to include the ‘single combat’ scene. Since this highlighting of the Danish position in Northalbingia does not make much sense in the political context of the late 13th century, I believe that this embellishment, along with other specifically anti-‘Southern’ episodes, probably sprang up at some point before c. 1230, when the Northalbingian situation still was an issue.

that explained the political history of a certain region by way of representing the struggle for domination over the region as single combats on the banks of the two rivers that circumscribe it (Erslev 1898; Riis 2003; Jensen & Bregnsbo 2004. For Northalbingia see Gaethke 1994, 1995 and 1996).

Defining the frontier – South Jutland/Slesvig/Northalbingia

As a result of the political history of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Jutish or Cimbric Peninsula stretching from the Elbe estuary to Cape Skagen is now divided between Denmark and Germany, with a nation-state borderline between a larger Northern Danish part (Jutland proper) and a smaller Southern part forming the German federal *Land* of Schleswig-Holstein.³ Both geographical and historical attention have been focused on the narrowest stretch of the peninsula, the area between rivers Eider and Kongeå where the peninsula is only about 50-60 km wide. This part of the peninsula corresponds to the late medieval Duchy of South Jutland or Slesvig, a territory which was divided into nearly equal halves in 1920 as a result of the Treaty of Versailles. Both halves, South Slesvig within Germany and North Slesvig (or “Sønderjylland”⁴) in Denmark, are

3 Leaving the numerous historical and political boundaries aside, a reasonable geographical line for the base of the Peninsula would run from the upper end of the wide tidal estuary of the Elbe at Hamborg to the nearest place on the Baltic coast at Lübeck. Incidentally, this divide coincides with the territorial boundary of Holsten-Stormarn and the Duchy of Lauenborg, a divide that has had uninterrupted if changing political relevance from the mid-12th century until today. – A note on toponymics: I prefer to use regularised medieval Saxon, “Low German”, place names instead of their present-day official High German forms. The use of High German would tend to suggest the sort of clear-cut quasi-national character of Holsten as “German” which has had its vociferous advocates ever since the days of Saxo and has been the point of departure for both German and Danish nationalisms in Slesvig. For toponymic information and sources cf. Laur 1992.

4 There is a tendency in present-day Danish usage to apply “Sønderjylland” to the northern (now Danish) half of the ancient duchy only, opposing it to “Sydslesvig” south of the border. Historically, both “Slesvig” (mainly used from the late Middle Ages until about 1850 in Danish, and until recently in German) and “Sønderjylland” (the modern Danish term, coined by 19th century national liberalism) refer to the entire territory between Eider and Kongeå. But the intricacies of nomenclature are so fraught with national sensibilities that historical clarity more often

now very much seen as a border region. In fact, clashes between two competing integrationist nationalisms in this region have led to several European crises, two fully-fledged wars and the transformation of Denmark from a compound monarchy into a homogenised national state during the course of the 19th century, while the appeasement of ensuing bitterness from the 1950s onwards has given Europe a much-celebrated “model region” for conflict resolution.⁵ At the same time, it is true that the first fortifications making use of the isthmical character of the region – the earliest stratum of Danevirke – date back to the beginning of the 8th century AD, thereby predating the earliest written sources for borderline clashes by nearly a century and Saxo by more than half a millennium (Jankuhn 1957; Sawyer 1988).⁶ In fact, archaeological and historical evidence as well as present-day experience seem to suggest that the one and only border region in the peninsula is in fact South Jutland/Slesvig, the tract between Kongeå and Eider. North of the former is clearly “Denmark”; south of the latter is clearly “Germany”.

This is so much a truism that we hardly ever stop to consider whether it really holds true for all periods in history in the same way. Even when discussing a period such as the early 13th century, when the Danish kings had clearly gained control of Northalbingia between Eider and Elbe⁷ and when two successive Roman Emperors

formally accepted the river Elbe as the future boundary between the Empire and Denmark⁸, modern historians unfailingly speak of Holsten as “German” territory.⁹ The same holds true for the eastern borderline of Holsten, the Slavonic frontier. Here, a clear linguistic boundary¹⁰ coincides with a religious divide, the sort of divide which would have been the most meaningful to any articulate medieval observer. In fact, the triple movement of demographic expansion, political subjugation, and conversion, into the territory of the Wagrian, Polabian and Obodrite Slavs that got under way around the

Saxon-Slavonic divide also known as the Carolingian *Limes saxonicus*, ran in an almost straight line from the Baltic at Kiel to the Elbe at Lauenborg. The divide was in fact rather less an ethnic/linguistic than an ecclesiastical divide: the fairly well-established archdiocese of Hamburg(-Bremen) in the west and the very unstable missionary bishoprics of Starigard/Oldenburg (later at Lübeck) and Racibor/Ratzeborg in the east. From the mid-12th century onwards, the ecclesiastical divide began to lose its importance as the eastern bishoprics in question were in fact integrated into the province of Hamburg(-Bremen) to which they had formally belonged ever since their first nominal establishment in the 9th century.

8 DD I 5 n° 48 = MGH Const. II n° 53 (Metz, 1214). (Diplomatarium Danicum/Danmarks Riges Breve; Monumenta Germaniae Historica)

9 E.g. H. V. Gregersen, in his 1981 volume on Slesvig and Holsten until 1830 as part of the authoritative *Politikens Danmarks Historie* (still the only major history of the region in a Scandinavian language), arranges his subject matter systematically in chapters on “Danish South Jutland” as opposed to “German Holsten”. Otto Gaethke in the summary of his fair and thorough study of the Valdemarian conquest and domination of Northalbingia, characterises the latter as “*das deutsche Land zwischen Elbe und Eider*” (Gaethke 1996 p. 37). The tendency to view Holsten as squarely “German” has been even more pronounced for modern history, a view which goes right back to the development of competing nationalisms in the 1940s and the ensuing civil wars within the Danish monarchy. For a profound reassessment of the question, see Frandsen 2008.

10 It was a much clearer divide than the Danish/Saxon frontier. Though the latter coincided fairly well with the Danevirke line (the classic study on this is Bjerrum 1944), the two languages are so close that they probably were more or less mutually understandable during the Middle Ages. As indeed they were until modern times when the local dialects (Danish-Jutish *Synnejysk* and the Slesvig variety of *Plattdüüdsch*) were used in a rather macaronic way alongside the two official languages of Danish and German (and coastal Frisian, which is a different matter again.)

than not rather confuses the issue; cf. Hansen 2002. In 12th–13th century usage the whole region, which was then becoming perceived as a territorial unit in its own right as a special earldom or *ducatus* to be given a preferred son of the reigning king, was clearly within Denmark and is always called “South Jutland (*Sunderiutia* etc).

5 For a criticism of the essentialist view of ethnic, linguistic etc. binomial inherent in this picture, see Knudsen (1994) and Rüdiger (2005, 2006).

6 Charlemagne’s subjection of Saxony south of the Elbe (775–802) led to a thorough destabilisation of Northalbingia which for a time came under the sway of Charlemagne’s Obodrite allies. The establishment of Frankish outposts north of the Elbe led to a confrontation with Danish chieftains (considered “kings” in Frankish sources) which was resolved by an agreement that the lands north of the Eider were out of bounds for Frankish expansion; cf. the syntheses in Jankuhn (1957) and Sawyer (1988).

7 *Northalbingia* (a word much employed by Adam of Bremen in his *History of the Church of Hamburg*) is a convenient term for the early medieval history of the lands between rivers Elbe (Latin *Albis* or *Albia*) and the Eider (Latin *Eidora/-us*, *Egdora* etc.), the North Sea, the Baltic and, to the east, the Saxon–Slavonic divide. The

middle of the 12th century has become famous as part of the much-decried “*German Ostsiedlung*”. More recently, it has become known as part of the “Europeanisation of Europe” (Bartlett 1993) and possible nuances within the territories of “Old Europe” fade out of sight when contrasted with the massive expansion into Slavonia. Here again, Holsten is more or less axiomatically grouped as “German” within an overarching binomial opposition.

Paradoxically, then, the very fact that two of the major conventional division lines of European history – the Central (or Carolingian)/North European and the Old Christian West/New Christian East divides – intersect in Holsten actually shrouds the characteristics of Holsten as a historical region in its own right.¹¹ Interest has to date entirely been focused on either the “Slesvig question” or the Eastern expansion of Western Christendom but has left the areas immediately “on the inside” of the great European divides largely unattended. The history of Holsten has by and large been left to be studied within the framework of German territorial history (*Landesgeschichte*). More often than not, however, historians are then confronted with the difficulty that Holsten differs considerably from Germany south of the Elbe in almost all respects: the “special position” (*Sonder-*

11 “Holsten” is sometimes employed for Northalbingia as a whole. Northalbingia consisted of three *populi* (cf. Adam of Bremen II 17): Ditmarschen on the eastern bank of the mouth of the Elbe (coinciding with the present-day *Kreise* of the same name), Stormarn around Hamburg (coinciding roughly with the present-day City of Hamburg and the *Kreise* of Pinneberg, Segeberg and Stormarn) and Holsten proper (*holtseti* meaning “woodland settlers”, coinciding with the *Kreise* of Steinburg and Rendsburg). The three cores of settlement on the high sand plains of the *geest* – easy to toil but not very fertile – were separated by vast marshes which during the Iron Age probably were uninhabited. By the High Middle Ages, however, the population was more or less evenly spread across the area, and continuous cultivation of the tidal marshes along the North Sea coast and the lower Elbe had begun to give some extremely good soils. The distinction between Holsten and Stormarn tended to even out during the Middle Ages, especially since they came to form one county (normally designated only by the name of Holsten), although the double name remained in official use right up until 1972 when Queen Margrete II, on accession, renounced the title. Ditmarschen, on the other hand, became a self-governing “republic” of landowners with its own intricate constitution only to be conquered by the Danish-Holsten monarchy in 1559. In this article, I focus on Holsten proper and Stormarn, lumping them together as “Holsten” in accordance with both medieval and modern usage.

stellung) of Holsten is a recurrent phrase in historical writing on matters ecclesiastical, juridical and political. Within the overall German framework, however, the originalities of Holsten tend to be viewed as mere curiosities or remnants of the past in a peripheral corner of Germany that has particular difficulties with catching up on developments.¹² Historians have to cope with a Holsten which is supposed to be a part of Germany but which lacks all essential features of Ottonian, Salian or Hohenstaufen Germany.

Frontier societies

In this article, I propose to resolve the problem by recourse to the concept of “frontier societies”, which in recent years has been successfully applied to a number of medieval regions.¹³ The title of this article is, in fact, a calque on the thought-provoking study by Kurt Villads Jensen “The Blue Baltic Border of Denmark”, in which he suggests that Valdemarian Denmark as a whole might be viewed as a frontier society, especially with regard to the military and ideological shaping of the Sjælland based kingship from c. 1160 onwards (Jensen 2002). The well-established “blue Baltic” maritime frontier zone encompassed the Southern Danish isles of Lolland, Falster, parts of Funen and their archipelagos and the opposite coast of the Baltic with its predominantly Slavonic population and syncretistic gentile cults, characterised by partly peaceful, partly violent economic and social relations without much interference from extra-regional forces. The “blue Baltic” was split into a binary opposition by means of applying elements of the crusading movements to the Baltic situation and was then radically remodelled by the momentum that would carry Valdemarian expansion as far inland as the rivers Elbe and Elde, and as far eastward as Estonia (KV Jensen 2002; Hansen et al. 2004; Harck & Lübcke 2001).

The objective in Kurt Villads Jensen’s article was the Danish-Slavonic frontier; the southwestern corner of the Baltic was not within the scope of his study. Con-

12 See, for instance, March (1972) for a particularly articulate example of this general trend which is very obvious even in the most recent and most widely marketed publications on the history of Holsten (e.g. Ibs, Dege & Unverhau 2005 pp 17-20 and p 79 etc.).

13 See for instance Burns (1984) and Nirenberg (1996). For methodological discussions, see Bartlett and MacKay (1989), Power and Standen (1999), and Abulafia and Berend (2002). See Berend (2001) for possibly the most remarkable monograph on the concept. See Staecker (2004) for a recent collection of studies applying the concept to Northern Europe.

tinuing in a similar vein, I feel that there is much to gain by viewing the southernmost root of the Cimbric peninsula – Holsten, not Slesvig – as the “green isthmus” border of the emergent Danish thalassocracy centred on the “Danish delta”. This shift in no way contradicts Jensen’s findings, in fact it rather supplements them because it shows the effect of the Valdemarian action on another neighbouring territory, one which by virtue of its (at least nominal) adherence to both the Empire and to Christianity differed a lot from the Slavonic and Estonian areas of expansion. Any element of crusade was clearly out of the question when it came to encounters between Eider and Elbe.

Giving a full description of the development of the different aspects of Holsten’s character as a frontier is beyond the scope of this paper. Notably, I shall leave out the representational aspects, such as questions of how writers (formulating differing views and interests) conceived of Holsten relationally, in terms of Them and Us as it were; a detailed study of the representational strategies in for instance Adam of Bremen, Saxo or Snorri Sturluson would fill a monograph.¹⁴ I shall restrain myself to pointing at two “structural” features of medieval Holsten, namely its church organisation and its aristocracy.

The Church in Medieval Holsten/Northalbingia

A few years after the conquest of Saxony proper, Saxon Northalbingia was included in the Frankish kingdom and its ecclesiastical structures.¹⁵ In 811, a church was built at its southernmost bridgehead, Hamborg. Twenty years later, it was elevated to be the archbishopric of the Scandinavian mission, a title it would somewhat

self-consciously defend for centuries, although after a series of Viking raids, the actual archbishopric was merged with the bishopric of Bremen, the estuary south of Hamborg. Despite some half-hearted attempts at reviving both the pretensions over the Christian North and the actual see, no bishop would ever return permanently to Hamborg. Left derelict for long intervals during the 9th and 10th centuries the Hamborg church was only really revived around 1140 by the permanent re-establishment of a cathedral chapter, which made Hamborg-Bremen a diocese with one bishop but two chapters. For a long time, it had also been a church province with no suffragan bishoprics, another ecclesiastical peculiarity. Very early on, the two other Northalbingian *populi* had had baptismal churches, one at Meldorp in Ditmarschen and one at Schenefeld in Holsten proper. Reports of a fourth church at Hilligensteden exist, and it probably served the Frankish garrison at nearby Esesfeld.

These mid 9th century foundations of churches are of course fairly early compared to Denmark, let alone Norway and Sweden, and do not really indicate any lag between Northalbingia and Saxony as a whole. By the year 1000, however, the number, density and importance of ecclesiastical institutions in Saxony south of the Elbe were in every respect equal to the Frankish territories, whereas there is no indication of any further churches being founded, built or endowed north of the Elbe for another three hundred years. Apparently, the existence of one baptismal church for each of the three Northalbingian *populi* (Hamborg counted for Stormarn) was considered sufficient to maintain that nominally the region was included into the *orbis Christianus*. Moreover, it is not even certain – in fact, due to repeated “heathen” raids from sea or land, it would seem rather improbable – that the three or four churches that were there could function with any degree of permanence.

By the year 1100 and singularly within the whole of the Christian West, in a territory of more than 7 000 sq km (roughly the area of the island of Sjælland), there were no more than three or four churches. During the course of the 12th century, a small number of “proto-parish churches” were built, probably matching the subdivisions of the local law circumscriptions, so that by the Valdemarian Age, Holsten proper and Stormarn had five to six churches each, and Ditmarschen probably had seven. This compares very poorly with both Saxony south of the River Elbe and with Denmark, where right up to the Slien-Danevirke line, parish churches were fairly numerous and occasionally impressive structures, such as the churches at Sørup, Husby and Ulsnæs. By

14 For Adam of Bremen and Helmold of Bosau and other contemporary chroniclers questions of identity and self-perception have been (in my opinion, not too convincingly) addressed by Scior (2002) and Fraesdorff (2005). I will discuss the issue fully in a later publication.

15 That is, Saxony south of the Elbe, which was the object of Charlemagne’s wars. In early medieval sources, the *Northliudi* “people of the North”, i.e. the Northalbingians, always appear tagged on to the main tripartite Saxon *regnum* of Westfalians, Eastfalians and Engers. It is not clear in how far the Northalbingians were considered to be part of the province and later the duchy. Adam of Bremen, writing from the perspective of his South Elbian see, divides the population of the diocese into three quasi-ethnic groups: “our” Saxons, the Frisians, and the Northalbingians.



Fig. 2 The church at Bergsted in Stormarn retains essentially its original 12th century structure, with minor alterations (roof form, Late Gothic windows in brick mountings, an 18th century tower and west front, modern supporting pillars). According to a 13th century source it was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and St Wilhad, the patron saint of the cathedral church at Hamborg and the founder bishop of the diocese of Bremen respectively. The Virgin Mary came to be regarded as *advocata et adiutrix* of Holsten as a whole, as she was of other Baltic frontier zones like Prussia and Livonia.

contrast, the architecture of nearly all Northalbingian churches was extremely basic: a rectangular nave built of local rubble stone, an open or flat wooden ceiling, no chancel or apse.¹⁶

16 Very few of the churches, for example Schenefeld and Bergsted, are preserved with no major alterations. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, during the “Florissant” period of the Oldenburg monarchy, most of the churches were rebuilt. See Rauterberg (1978) for an overview and Beseler (1969) for summaries on individual sites. Destroyed in a fire in 2003 the ruins of the 13th-century church of Hademarschen was excavated and for the first time in Holsten revealed evidence of a wooden church on the same site as a later stone structure. However, the results of the excavation showed that the primitive building could not predate the stone built church by more than a century.

Shortly after 1200, only two of the churches – the cathedral at Hamborg (which it nominally still was) and the church at Meldorp, the central town in wealthy Ditmarschen – were sumptuously re-built in bricks in a style not unlike that of Ribe Cathedral (Mathieu 1973; Schulze 1992). By the end of the Valdemarian period, a few of the newly founded towns¹⁷ had their own Early

17 Except for Hamborg there were no towns or even market places in Northalbingia. In fact, Adam of Bremen (c. 1070) and Helmold of Bosau (c. 1160) speak of Slesvig as the one *civitas Transalbingiorum*. Hamborg was probably much smaller than Slesvig, up until the 1190s, when a merchant town was established just outside the old episcopal settlement. It is uncertain whether Meldorp was more than a market place for the essentially peasant community of Ditmarschen; clearly there were no major trading places in Holsten or Stormarn.

Gothic parish church; characteristically they all lay at the fringes of Holsten and Stormarn or in the newly acquired lands in the Slavonic East, whereas by 1300 there were still no towns in the older zones of settlement. By then, parish boundaries had become fairly stable due to their increased importance in church administration, so “Old” Holsten’s and Stormarn’s extremely few and extremely large parishes became “fossilised” for centuries, making a sharp contrast to the smaller and more numerous parishes of Slesvig and East Holsten.

In contrast to the regions of inland Saxony and Frankland, or indeed England, not a single monastery or convent had been founded in Northalbingia before c. 1130¹⁸. By 1200 there were only two monasteries in the region. There is no evidence of local cults of saints; even the cathedral church at Hamborg shows an astounding lack of sustained effort at highlighting the relics it did possess, among which were relics from prominent early Roman martyrs. Ansgar the “Apostle of the North” was all but forgotten, but was superseded by the patron of Bremen, Wilhad (*Villads*), as the only local saint of any resonance. While the adjacent Slavonic zones had their inclusion into the *orbis Christianus* organised into what has been viewed as distinct “sacral zones”, there is no indication of a systematic preference of certain patron saints, feasts, or even cults of relics in Holsten prior to the wave of monastic foundations in honour of St Mary Magdalen in the wake of the battle of Bornhöved (1227, on her feast day) (Petersohn 1979). To all intents and purposes, in terms of church organisation Holsten is clearly much more similar to Scandinavia (and even here, Norway rather than Denmark) than to any part of Carolingian Europe. Its nominal inclusion into the latter has obscured this fact and has led scholars of European history to assume too rashly that the medieval “newly Christianised North” only began at the Eider.

It is easy to imagine how little chance there was for the population to be “Christianised” to any degree beyond baptism, a more or less perfunctory allegiance to *here Crist* and a vague acquaintance with some elements of Christian teaching. Even those were hard to come by when for much of the population; the nearest church was some thirty or forty kilometres difficult inland travel away. Possibly even the new 12th century churches would only be visited on special occasions such as the seasonal

thing gatherings.¹⁹ We are in the fortunate position to have some knowledge about the religious ideas of at least one Holsten peasant. Around 1200 the visions of an aged and ailing peasant called Godskalk were written down by his parish priest, and a short time after by the priest of the neighbouring parish.²⁰ This highly original mélange of otherworldly images of pain and pleasure, derived from rudimentary preaching and a peasant’s everyday experience, is, despite its many textual problems, a valuable source. The *Visio Godeschalci* is not only one of a very small number of texts of afterlife visions from the high medieval peasantry, it is doubly valuable since it was recorded in a region which has left hardly any other narrative sources.

Godskalk was in a quite privileged position to assimilate at least some elements of contemporary Latin Christian doctrine because he lived just a few kilometres away from his parish church, which was also the church of an Augustine convent. The recently founded convent had a considerable library (probably the only reason why his vision was recorded at all). Without doubt, the founder of this convent, the South Saxon Vicelin – who went on to become “the Apostle of the Slavs” and first bishop of the re-erected see of Oldenburg in Slavonic Wagria – did not exaggerate when he found the Holsteners of his time “Christians not by religion, but only by name” (*nichil de religione nisi nomen tantum Christianitatis habentes*) (Helmold 1963). He accordingly started his missionary activities with some show of exorcism among the locals. Certainly they were in no position to provide the point of departure for the massive conversion campaign directed at the neighbouring Slavs which Vicelin himself was the first to undertake. The eastward expansion went rather “over the heads” of the local Saxon-speaking population, from the densely populated areas of Flanders and Westphalia straight into the under-populated settlement zones of the Obodrites – and, it should be added, into some newly cultivated

18 There is written evidence for an early *cella* at “Welanao” adjacent to the Frankish fort near Itzehoe. However, the *cella* cannot have existed much of the 9th century and it left no trace or tradition. Cf. Gaasch 1952, 1953 and 1954.

19 *Goding* and *lotding* corresponded roughly in size and importance to the Icelandic *fförðungsþing* and *várþing*. There were four *lotdinge* to a *goding*, but we know practically nothing about the actual proceedings. Due to our lack of knowledge about the places where most *dinge* convened, even the assumption that the 12th-century parish churches were built along the *ding* pattern cannot be fully substantiated.

20 For translation into German, see *Godeschalcus* (1979). Quite a few historians with medieval perspectives, such as Peter Dinzelbacher and Aaron Ja. Gurevič, have subsequently used this source. For an overview of recent studies in the subject, see Bünz (1995).

marginal areas of Holsten and Stormarn, such as the Elbe marshes. Within a generation, the Northalbingian frontier zone was all but turned upside down. The locals could hardly be expected to view the newly arrived with unmitigated acceptance, especially since the new arrivals were given considerable privileges. It is surprising how many scholars have (influenced no doubt by preconceptions about the Christian/heathen or the German/Slav binomials) automatically assumed that the Holsteners joined wholeheartedly in the eastward move freeing them of any further danger of the “Slavonic deluge”²¹ and providing them with a one-time opportunity to cash in on the occasion. In fact, while some of them did so to some extent²², others were more wary of the developments and at times joined with their Slavonic neighbours (supposedly their heathen enemies) in armed revolt and wholesale slaughter of “those detested settlers who are pouring in from everywhere”.²³ In other words, local attitudes were typical of a frontier region, which suddenly finds itself in the throes of violent re-modelling brought upon by external forces, upsetting an age-old if sometimes precarious *modus vivendi*.

The secular rulers in medieval Holsten/Northalbingia

At about the same time, local magnates found that their habits and attitudes were coming under increasing pressure. Up to the middle of the 12th century, Northalbingia had differed fairly sharply from Carolingian Europe in secular as well as in religious aspects, the main feature being the absence of any clearly recognisable aristocracy

(let alone nobility).²⁴ While a number of leading “families” – which recent scholarship would probably prefer to characterise as “groupings” or “factions” – with probably considerable material resources clearly stand out, the topographical and archaeological evidence suggests that no larger land holdings and hardly any fortifications can be discerned in the high Middle Ages in Holsten and Stormarn. If some of the basically equal landholders were more important than other landholders, these distinctions were of grade rather than class, and could be lost as well as gained. “Family” groups such as the Dasonids, who appear to have controlled much of the central Holsten uplands, and the Ammonids, who profited from the marginal location of their major holdings near the Slavonic territories offering opportunity for occasional plunder and redistribution, obviously had the upper hand and marked their top positions by assuming honorific titles such as the *overbode* title.²⁵ It is probably a good guess to imagine the local chieftains along the lines of the *höfðingjar* of contemporary Norse historiography, with all the informal vagueness and intimation of the ability to use brute force, which the term implies.

Much as Snorri Sturlasson’s magnates quickly grew impatient with any king who appeared to be getting above himself, the relations between the “big men of Holsten”²⁶ and those recent additions to the local power

21 In 19th and 20th centuries German historiography the term “Slavonic deluge” was a widely used metaphor, right down to the cold-war editions of the widely distributed overview in the prestigious Ploetz series by Scharff (1966); however it was toned down in the 1980s edition. The term was also used in many textbooks.

22 Cf. Helmold’s much-quoted account (c. 57) of how and where different groups of settlers, including Holsteners and Stormarners, placed claims for or were allocated various parts of Slavia. However, local short-range migration must have been considerably less important than the immigration from the West. To this day, Low German has a marked dialectal divide between Old Saxony and the formerly Slav territories where the main linguistic traits are shared with Flemish and Westphalian, but not with adjacent *Holstenisch* or indeed North Saxon generally.

23 Helmold (c. 63) writes: “*propter odium advenarum quos comes [Adolf II] late congregaverat ad incolendum terram*”.

24 See Hoffmann (1975) for the most even-handed account of earlier scholarship and a thorough assessment of the question of a Holsten aristocracy. The account is not marred by the author’s (in my opinion unnecessary) insistence on classing a clearly recognisable but not formally differentiated group of leading men as “*Volksadel*”.

25 The title of *bode* (for a regional assembly) or *overbode* (for all Holsten or Stormarn), juxtaposed in some sources to the Latin *legatus*, would seem to originate at the appointment of eminent locals and with the intention of voicing the interests of the far-away Saxon dukes (Liudolfings, later Billungs). In 12th or 13th century sources, however, it is rendered as *senior* or *prefectus (terre)* or even *secundus post comitem* (Helmold c. 92), a sort of “head of the local society”. Clearly, eminence did not come with the title, but being awarded the title did mean universal recognition of eminence. This did not preclude, in fact it probably rather induced, acrimonious competition for the appointment; cf. among others Schröder (1887), Hoffmann (1975), Lammer (1981) and Gaethke (1995).

26 This is my rendering of Helmold’s expression *virtus Holzatorum* (c. 92; cf. *Francigenarum virtus* in c. 59; the word is in Biblical usage) which I believe was an attempt at finding an etymological equivalent of a word like *manschop* (similar to the Norse *mannaforráð*). At any rate, it is a collective singular noun carrying tones of manliness and eminence, and *not* a precise social or even juridical term. Alternatively Helmold uses (c. 67) the expression

politics, the “Counts of Holsten and Stormarn”, were far from cordial. In 1111, the Counts were first appointed to act as deputies for the absentee new duke Lothar. In fact, the first Counts of the house of Schouwenborg in South Saxony, Adolf I (d. 1130) and Adolf II (d. 1164), had a fairly weak power base consisting of a single stronghold at Hamborg and probably a limited number of land holdings awarded them by the duke. It was only with the eastward expansion that the Counts, like many other newcomers to the region, made their fortune, establishing themselves in some newly fortified places, accumulating holdings and even challenging the powerful duke Henry the Lion in the race for Lübeck, the most attractive site for long-distance trade markets. While the Counts lost the bid over the site of the future medieval megalopolis of Lübeck to the powerful duke, they managed to gain considerable economic power elsewhere in the territory, which was added to their original circumscription and was later to be known as East Holsten.

Count Adolf III seems to have been the first to try to introduce elements of princely rule to a country which had, up to then, been left largely undisturbed by the attempts of the successive dukes of Saxony and their one-time deputy margraves from the Billung family to assert themselves. He clashed head-on with almost all of the Holsten chieftains. As early as 1148/9, there was flagrant dissent, and a local magnate called Æðelher decided to bring about a change in the control of the region by inviting the Danish king Svend Grathe into the country to topple Adolf II, and boosting his cause by a lavish distribution of wealth. Count Adolf II was able to repel the incursion at the banks of the Eider where Æðelher, who had clearly hoped to replace the Schouwenborg count from Saxony as an outside overlord's deputy in the frontier zone, lost the fight as well as his life. One generation later, a number of leading men from Holsten and Stormarn, alienated by Adolf III's increasingly self-assertive rule, left the country and offered the Danish King Knud VI the sovereignty in Northalbingia. Mainly by virtue of his alliance with the main sources of power, Knud acquired Holsten for Denmark, which included removing the last supporters of Schouwenborg rule along with Count Adolf III. The count fled, but was captured in a futile attempt at reclaiming Hamborg, and was later released and left for his Saxon possessions, never to return to Holsten. The Holsten chieftains, however, soon realised that they had moved out of the frying

omn[is] fort[is] de Holzatia meaning “all that is strong of Holsten”.

pan into the fire. Neither King Knud VI nor Valdemar II was going to leave the cornerstone of their Baltic empire to an unruly self-governing oligarchy; instead, a new outside count was appointed: Albrecht of Orlamünde, who was King Valdemar's nephew. In hindsight, it was probably largely Albrecht's undiplomatic handling of the Holsten chieftains that lost Valdemar their support and brought about their new change of allegiance when, seizing the occasion of Valdemar's famous capture on Lyø in 1223, they invited their former count's son Adolf (IV) back to rule the country.

Framing the frontier

By that time, however, it had become obvious that the days of regional manoeuvring on the leaside of political tempests were over. For a long time, initiatives of the major power brokers had stopped short of the lands between Elbe and Eider. Henry the Lion had fought his major struggles in South Saxony and the Empire. While he had shown a marked interest in establishing friendly principalities and bishoprics obedient to the lines of the Saxon church all over the Obodrite lands, he had been much less concerned with Holsten and Stormarn. The power struggles in Denmark in the period after Erik Ejegod had very much affected the southern isles, and Slesvig had been both the seat of Earl Knud Lavard and the site of the slaying of King Niels, but the lands south of the marches between Slien and the river Eider had been left out of these struggles.²⁷

However, major changes in the distribution of power were soon noticeable after the Obodrite East was opened for “Westerners” to acquire new positions. Some of the major chieftain families were engaging in the move themselves, but compared to the possibilities now open to the counts (both the Schouwenborgs and their Valdemarian replacement Albrecht) it was a losing race. Acrimonious debates about the tithes and other dues levied on the new holdings ensued, in which the Holsteners claimed in vain that exemptions were valid in “Old” Holsten and Stormarn, where tithes had mostly been left unpaid. The Holsteners refused ever to “bow their necks under the iron ring of servitude”, adding with a sneer that most tithes were ending up in powerful lay-

27 At one time, both contenders to the kingship, Niels and Erik Emune, appealed to count Adolf II for help. The count consulted the chieftains, who were in favour of Erik; it is possible but not certain that some of them took part in the battle of Fodevig in 1134.

men's cash boxes anyway.²⁸ Rather more to the point, there were plans to plunder and burn their adversaries' possessions and "flee to the Danes" – in other words, to transfer allegiance to a more worthy overlord. But the tides were turning. Duke Henry and King Valdemar I agreed not to encourage insubordination, and the Holsteners finally had to accept their new "servitude". From both sides, the frontier was being "framed". The main power brokers in Brunswick and on Sjøælland had decided once and for all that the vague and fluid frontier zones between the Storstrøm and the Lüneborg Heath had had its day. The difficult but ultimately effective cooperation with regard to the Slavs on the Southern Baltic, culminating in the Danish conquest of Rügen in 1168/9, was the first and most important act of framing the frontier. That meant giving the area firm structures in terms of domination and control by elevating some locals and putting down others, and in terms of mortar and brick by building new churches, monasteries, and castles, as well as by subtly changing the practice if not the substance of local juridical traditions, thereby integrating the fluid zone into their respective orbits. In 1180 in Saxony, this movement was abruptly interrupted by the downfall of Henry the Lion and the subsequent dismemberment of the ancient duchy by the partisans of Henry's long-time adversary, Frederick I Barbarossa. No single power south of the Elbe would again be in a position to do any serious "framing" north of the river for several centuries. By then, local actors like the Schouwenborg counts in Holsten had enough resources to continue the "framing" on their own account. Individual actors would suffer serious setbacks, like Adolf III who was chased from his county by the Holsten chieftains in 1200/03, and King Valdemar I's appointee Albrecht who suffered a similar fate in 1224. On the whole, however, the princes won the day. Like their Danish counterparts before them and their Norwegian counterparts at around the same time, the next generations of the once self-governing Holsten chieftainry found themselves increasingly drawn into the orbit of the Schouwenborg counts, and challenged by new men "made" by the princes.

The overall change, however, did not only affect the chieftains. If it had, it would be a minor transfer of power decided within the elite. However, "framing the frontier" was a more complex process than that. Changes in the political and juridical ways and methods affected the outlook and the mentality of everyone who had a say in

28 Helmold (c. 92) admits that they rather had a point there "non multum aberrantes a veritate".

his own affairs. There were additional changes brought about by intensified pastoral care (or control) and by the advent of more monasteries. In the first half of the 13th century, a dozen new monasteries were added to the two existing ones. Perhaps most profound were the changes brought about by large-scale immigration from the west. All of these changes have long been noted and classified as *Landesausbau* by a German scholarly tradition of progression and unification. In a wider European context, it may be more meaningful to recur to the term "frontier society", which would turn the focus from general structures and mechanisms to local actors and "actees", i.e. those who had to learn to manage the changes, and whose reaction to the changes may have been less than welcoming. At the same time, the term "frontier society" gives an opportunity to view parts of the *Landesausbau* progression model as false. If frontier societies, like 13th century Holsten, are no longer seen as mere backwaters compared to more advanced regions within the overall conceptual frame, but instead seen as societies with their own specifics and with similarities to other geographically distant frontier societies, many peculiarities are resolved, while other seemingly clear-cut phenomena acquire different shades. For instance, the double tales of heroic brinkmanship on river banks mentioned above – Saxo's account from the Eider, and the account in the *Annals of Ryd* from the Elbe – do not denote a temporary lack of clarity about the true destiny of "German" Holsten. The accounts actually reflect a pivotal moment when the durable boundary could easily have turned out to be at the Elbe rather than at the Eider, as was the case after the battle of Bornhöved. More than that, Saxo and the *Annals of Ryd* also represent the final exchanges of argument about the boundary and its position. In a way, Holsten was only then becoming "Europeanised" in the same sense which Robert Bartlett and his numerous successors have applied the term to regions like Livonia and Prussia, Ireland, and Central Spain, but certainly also areas like Occitania or parts of Southern Italy: self-contained, loosely knit and highly localist societies with a characteristic overall lack of clear-cut features which were now on their way to becoming peripheries of rather more thoroughly structured systems of reference.

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