
The Medieval Empire, Volume 2

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THE
MEDIEVAL EMPIRE

BY

HERBERT FISHER

FELLOW AND TUTOR OF NEW COLLEGE, OXFORD

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE EXPANSION OF GERMANY IN THE NORTH-EAST.

How was the monarchy to exploit and to control this dangerous military sentiment, this abundant human material of war? In the eighth century the problem was more difficult, for the military energy of the Germanic races was still fresh and exuberant, and the internecine strife of the Merovingian sovereigns had made every Frank a fighting man. Yet it was met for a time by the first sovereigns of the Carolingian house in a manner which was at any rate of transitory efficacy. They do not indeed organize professional armies like the armies of the early Roman empire or of the Byzantines. Their levies receive no state pay. There are no standing legionary camps, there is no state commissariat, no war budget, no code of military discipline. But just as Napoleon utilized the amazing energy created in France by the Revolution to spread French culture and dominion through Europe, so the early monarchs of the Caroling house utilize the amazing energy of the fresh Germanic peoples to diffuse through Europe the Christianity of the Latin Church. They employ all the races of the

Frankish empire in a huge but connected series of missionary wars.¹

Now it was an integral part of the conception of the imperial office that the emperor should extend the boundaries of the Church and do battle against the heathen. In all the manuals written during the break-up of the Carolingian empire for the guidance of princes as well as in the prayer offered by the Church, this duty is enjoined with a mournful and a monotonous emphasis. At the coronation service of Otto I. in the Cathedral of Aix, the Archbishop of Trèves goes to the altar, takes thence a sword and a belt, and turning towards the king says to him, "Receive this sword, by which you may cast out all adversaries of Christ, all barbarians and evil Christians, since full power of the whole empire of the Franks has been given you by divine authority to the most firm peace of all Christians." And this missionary and military obligation is firmly enjoined in all the orders for the coronation service of a German king or a Roman emperor which have come down to us.

When the empire was transferred to the kings of the Saxon house it went to a quarter of Europe which was singularly fitted to be a basis for a series of effective crusades. The whole southern shore of the Danube, the whole region north and east of the Elbe, the whole of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway remained to be evangelized. The Baltic Slaves were divided into three great groups—the Obodrites, who occupied Holstein and Mecklenburg; the Wiltzi or Luticii, who formed a great block

¹ Frederick I. in the *Canonizatio Caroli Magni*, 1166, says, "In fide quoque Christi dilatanda, et in conversione gentis barbaricae fortis athleta fuit, sicut Saxoniam et Fresoniam Hispaniam quoque testantur et Wandali, quos ad fidem Catholicam verbo convertit et gladio" [Harz., *Conc.*, iii. 399, 400].

of tribes facing the Middle Elbe: and lastly, the Sorbs, in the upper valleys of the Elbe and the Saale.¹ But the line of Elbe was not a sufficient barrier. Slaves penetrated into the Altmark, as many place-names, such as Wendish-Apenburg, testify to this day, and there were Slavonian colonies in Swabia, in Hesse, in the Rhine land.² To reduce their Slavonic neighbours to subjection, to colonize the Baltic lands with Germans and with Flemings, who could till the heavy soils neglected by the light and careless cultivation of the Slave, to obtain possession of the Baltic ports and the Russian and Swedish trade, to spread Church organization through the vast plain which stretched from the Elbe to the Vistula, was a mission which seemed naturally imposed upon the German monarchy. The task was not one of excessive difficulty. Cyril and Methodius had by their sweetness and intelligence converted the Moravians quietly, speedily, and without bloodshed, and if ruder methods were to be employed now, there was every prospect that these too would succeed. There was, indeed, a time in the ninth century when Europe was menaced with the consolidation of a great Slavonic empire in the east stretching from the Vistula to the Drave. But then came the Hungarians driving their Magyar wedge between the Slaves of the south and the Czecks of Bohemia. From that time onward the Baltic Slaves, placed between the German hammer and the anvil of Poland and Bohemia, seem incapable of forming any large or strong combina-

¹ Riedel, *Die Mark Brandenburg im 1250*, vol. iii., pp. 8-14; Meitzen, *Siedelung und Agrarwesen*, ii., pp. 475-93; Schulze, *Die Kolonisierung und Germanisierung der Gebiete zwischen Saale und Elbe*. For a picture of a Slavonic round village, Meitzen, ii., p. 485.

² For the various subdivisions of these tribes, cf. Hauck, *Geschichte der deutschen Kirche*, vol. iii., pp. 74, 7.