

Sent: Monday, February 12, 2001 9:13 AM

Subject: Nikolaus Breakspear

I found belatedly your site where you asked for information on Nikolaus Breakspear. Below, I will tell you what I know of his activities during the years 1152-1154 when he visited Norway and Sweden, in the hope that it contains information you'll find novel and interesting. In return I would be very interested to learn more of his earlier life, i.e., before 1152, so any information you can provide would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

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Nikolaus Breakspear's mission as a papal legate to north makes him an important figure in Nordic history. Contrary to what you write, he established only one archbishopric, that of Norway. In all likelihood he attempted to do the same in Sweden but was unsuccessful. However, he had an important, if indirect effect on Finland. This is chronicled in medieval legends, although it has long been argued whether they reflect actual events.

In Norway Nikolaus tried to settle a long-lasting feud between three co-kings and half-brothers, Inge, Sigurd and Öystein. He endorsed Inge, nicknamed Hunchback, perhaps because Inge was the only legitimate son among the claimants. He also established six Norwegian bishoprics, including such geographically demanding locations as North Sea islands, Greenland and Iceland. His choice as the first archbishop was Jon Birgersson, bishop of Stavanger. His organization of the Norwegian church proved durable, the political settlement didn't. Before long the Haraldsson brothers and their factions were up in arms again, and in the end all three died a violent death.

Sweden was nominally under the rule of one king, the elderly Sverker, but in truth bitterly divided between north (Svea) and south (Götaland). Sverker was to be murdered in three years' time, and his successor to the throne was his rival Erik Jedvardsson. When Nikolaus came to Sweden, Sverker's hold on Svea was already tenuous, Erik being the king there in all but the name. Erik, today known as St. Erik, ruled for only four years before he too was murdered. The ensuing rivalry between the descendants of these two kings was to dominate Swedish politics for a whole century, Sverkersson kings alternating with Erikssons.

Representatives of the Swedish church met Nikolaus in Linköping in the autumn of 1153. Saxo, the Danish chronicler, tells that the feud between Svea and Götaland prevented Nikolaus from establishing a Swedish archbishopric. The local representatives couldn't agree on who the archbishop should be and where he should sit, and Sverker's declining influence precluded forcing the issue. Another obstacle was probably Eskil, the formidable archbishop

of Lund. Although his seat was in Skåne, then part of Denmark, his domains had included both Norway and Sweden, and apparently he was not eager to relinquish his control.

Nikolaus returned to Rome, leaving the papal pallium intended for Sweden to Eskil. The Swedish archbishopric was established in 1164, when Eskil gave the pallium to Stephan in Uppsala, Svea. It is noteworthy, however, that later correspondence between Rome and Lund refers to the arrangements made by Adrian IV as the basis of the Swedish organization. It thus appears that in the final months of his visit Nikolaus came to an agreement with Eskil, who accepted the principle of a Swedish archbishopric in exchange for a retained authority over it. This authority was later confirmed by pope Innocent III in 1198, in a letter to archbishop Absalon of Lund.

Both Finnish folk tradition and catholic legends describe how king Erik took the cross and invaded Finland, bringing Christianity to that hitherto pagan people. With him came Henry, bishop of Uppsala, and when Erik returned to Sweden Henry stayed behind to continue his missionary work. Already the next winter he was axed to death by a disgruntled Finnish peasant chief called Lalli. After a series of miracles, the late bishop was proclaimed a saint, becoming the apostle and patron saint of Finland. His remains were held as relics in the Turku cathedral until the reformation. According to the legend, Henry was an Englishman who had followed Nikolaus from Rome and was chosen for the bishop's seat in Uppsala by Nikolaus.

Unfortunately, the first written accounts date to the late 13th century, more than a century later than the events they describe, and consequently their historical basis has been the subject of intense debate among Finnish scholars. The majority opinion today accepts that a missionary worker named Henry indeed lived and worked in Finland, and met with a violent death at the hands of Lalli. His identity as an English bishop from Sweden is less reliably documented, as is of course the role of Nikolaus in bringing him to Uppsala. Nevertheless, in legends and tradition at least, the visit of Nikolaus is associated not only with the organization of the Scandinavian church but also with the baptism of a whole country, Finland.