

**Christian Oertel. The Cult of St Erik in Medieval Sweden.
Veneration of a Royal Saint, Twelfth—Sixteenth Centuries**

Marita von Weissenberg

Volume 30, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099326ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29173/scancan243>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Canada

ISSN

0823-1796 (print)

2816-5187 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

von Weissenberg, M. (2023). Review of [Christian Oertel. The Cult of St Erik in Medieval Sweden. Veneration of a Royal Saint, Twelfth—Sixteenth Centuries]. *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies / Études scandinaves au Canada*, 30, 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.29173/scancan243>

© Marita von Weissenberg, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Christian Oertel. 2016. *The Cult of St Erik in Medieval Sweden. Veneration of a Royal Saint, Twelfth—Sixteenth Centuries*. 398 pages. Turnhout: Brepols. ISBN: 978-2-503-55507-2. eISBN: 978-2-503-56474-6.

Christian Oertel examines the posthumous reputation of the Swedish king Erik Jedvardsson (mid 12th century), demonstrating that the waxing and waning of the cult was intimately tied to his political potential as an ancestor, patron, lawgiver, crusader, and eternal king (*rex perpetuus*). As the author explains, a royal saint is highly useful for political actors, such as individual kings, royal dynasties, nobility, as well as farmers and miners. Thus, examining the cult of Saint Erik—the beliefs, rituals, and practices connected to his reputation of holiness—is an illuminating window into both the intertwining of religion and politics and the history of the Swedish state. Oertel synthesizes and critiques previous scholarship on Saint Erik but also makes significant contributions based on his own primary source analysis. One of the noteworthy aspects of the book is the author’s broad array of scholarship and sources: most prominently chronicles, numismatics, diplomatics, sigillography, and art.

The first chapter (“Religion, Politics, and the Cult of the Saints”) serves as an introduction to the work as a whole. The second chapter (“The Sources”) acquaints the reader with the broad variety of sources. Chapter three (“Royal Saints and the Shift of Faith”) summarizes royal sanctity from central Europe to Scandinavia, focusing in particular on the role of saints in general, and royal saints in particular, in the Christianization of Denmark, Norway, and Iceland—or at least in how later generations connected them to conversion, as Oertel notes. This chapter, while interesting and an excellent summary of the subject matter, has limited value for the purpose of the book as a whole. However, the brief overview of Saint Erik’s connection with Saint Henrik, Bishop of Finland, which is a recurring theme in the book, and a sub-section on Saint Olaf (d. 1030) are very useful. The latter introduces the reader to a saint who not only appears with Saint Erik in images (along with Saint Knut (d. 1086) of Denmark) but whose cult, Oertel argues, served as a role model for Swedes with designs on royal power. Olaf, like Erik later, would be designated eternal king or *rex perpetuus*, a mythologized king for whom mere mortal rulers were deputies—a useful concept for those with tenuous claims to rule, such as *riksföreståndare* [regents]. This is discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.

Chapters four through seven each begin with a historical background section that lays out the general political history of the era under scrutiny. This is helpful, especially as it gives those uninitiated into Swedish history the

relevant canvas on which Oertel paints the development of Saint Erik's cult but allows those very familiar with it to skip ahead to the study of the cult.

The fourth chapter ("The Early Cult (1160–c. 1250)") includes a section on the historiography of Saint Erik—this is the era the vast majority of scholarship focuses on—and Oertel analyzes claims and evidence for three types of veneration made by previous scholarship: of Saint Erik as a holy ancestor, eternal king, and saint venerated throughout Sweden. By examining how and where members of Saint Erik's own dynasty buried their dead and mentioned Saint Erik in their documents, as well as investigating numismatic evidence, Oertel argues against earlier scholars' claims. There is not enough evidence—indeed there is a notable lack of it—that Saint Erik's cult was promoted in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries by his descendants or that he would have been considered an eternal king at this time. Rather, the evidence points to his cult being locally centered on the bishopric of Gamla (Old) Uppsala as a diocesan saint. Oertel posits that the bishopric may have adopted the cult of a royal saint in order to set itself on par with Nidaros (Trondheim), the center of Saint Olaf's cult.

Chapter five ("The First Wave of Cult Intensification (c. 1250–1319)") examines how the combination of an ambitious new royal dynasty, a growing archdiocese, and a mendicant order, all with ties to the local aristocracy, set the stage for a broader Saint Erik cult. The centralizing and expanding Bjälbo kings connected their dynasty to Erik, for example by claiming him as an ancestor, burying their dead in a church connected to the saint, and naming several sons Erik. A new cathedral in Östra Aros (renamed Uppsala), the site of Erik's death, was dedicated to Saint Erik (and Saint Lars). The era saw the rise of liturgical texts for Saint Erik, as well as hagiography. The aristocracy of Uppland was intimately connected with the cathedral, primarily through scions of the family serving there as canons, and there is evidence of aristocratic veneration. The cult also shows early signs of spreading outside Uppland in miracle stories, even if depictions of the saint centre on Uppland. The Dominicans in Sigtuna and Åbo (Turku) became central figures in promoting the rising cult, including the story of Saints Erik and Henrik's crusade to Finland, and Oertel convincingly claims the authorship of Erik's legend as Dominican.

Chapter six ("Times of Stagnation versus the Rule of Magnus Eriksson (1319–89)") surveys private and institutional veneration. Private veneration among the nobility can be seen in donations to the altar of Saint Erik in Uppsala, individuals' dating of charters, and images—for example on seals. Institutional veneration was ecclesiastic and centered on Uppsala, but liturgies across Sweden began including Saint Erik. Oertel demonstrates that while the cult of Saint Erik did not grow in overall popularity, Magnus Eriksson (r. 1319–1364) combined personal and institutional interest in Saint Erik. The king elevated Erik from a dynastic saint of the Bjälbos and cathedral patron in Uppsala to a

royal patron and Swedish saint. For example, King Magnus undertook a crusade to Finland, perhaps in imitation of Erik, whose role as a crusader rose to prominence at this time. Magnus is also the first king we have evidence for having taken the *Eriksgata*—the tour through the regions of Sweden tied to royal power. Saint Erik was adopted by most subsequent kings.

Oertel shows that the cult of Saint Erik reached its peak during the Kalmar Union when Sweden (including Finland), Norway (with Iceland and other North Atlantic islands), and Denmark were brought together in a personal union. This is examined in chapter seven. While new dynasties tapped into Saint Erik to create unity and to connect to previous ruling houses—Queen Margrete, for example, named her adopted heir Bogislav Erik (of Pomerania)—Saint Erik gained the role of *rex perpetuus* through resistance to royal (Danish) power and the Union, most notably on the part of Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson, a noble who led a rebellion against King Erik of Pomerania (1434–1436), and the regent (*riksföreståndare*) Sten Sture the Elder (d. 1503), who joined forces with the archbishop. Both juxtaposed Sweden and Swedish interests against Denmark and Union power. This was picked up by the farmers and miners who supported the Engelbrekt uprising. They embraced Saint Erik as a just king (*rex iustus*) who would not unfairly tax his subjects and Engelbrekt as his vicar. They, together with burghers and knights, joined the nobility and clergy in furthering the cult. By the time Gustav Vasa (r. 1523–1560) introduced the Protestant Reformation and ended all cults of the saints, Saint Erik was venerated by all social strata in Sweden, and his image was on the seal of the realm (*rikslämna*). The cult of Saint Erik had reached its peak.

The last chapter, (“St Erik Among the Canon of Saints”) introduces Saint Erik’s cult outside Scandinavia, calling for further study of the cult’s spread, in particular in regions with heavy Swedish influence. Locations for Erik’s cult outside Sweden are most notably areas where Swedes engaged in trade on the Baltic Sea.

The Cult of St Erik has a detailed list of illustrations with brief but very helpful contextualizing notes. In addition, the author includes numerous useful maps and appendices, including the legend of Saint Erik (in Latin), the miracles of Saints Erik and Olaf, a list of charters using Saint Erik’s Feast Day for dating (the use of these for analyzing the cult of Saint Erik is particularly fascinating), depictions of Saint Erik and all three royal Scandinavian saints (Saints Erik, Olaf, and Knut), genealogical tables, and a summary of the monograph in German.

Christian Oertel has succeeded admirably in his exploration of the cult of Saint Erik and offers convincing evidence that its growth and decline was due to political developments in Sweden and Scandinavia. *The Cult of St Erik* is exemplary as an interdisciplinary study of a saint’s cult, and well worth reading even for scholars of sanctity with limited interest in Scandinavian history. At the same time, the book—and most notably the historical background sections—

is a great primer on medieval Swedish history, regardless of a reader's interest in the history of saints and sanctity.

Marita von Weissenberg
Xavier University, 2023