Landscapes of holy war and colonisation:
The ecological impact of the crusades in the medieval eastern Baltic

with Dr. Aleks Pluskowski and Dr. Alex Douglas Brown

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Aleks Pluskowski teaches the archaeology of later medieval Europe and crusading. His interests include exploring ecological diversity across medieval Europe, focused on zooarchaeology and inter-disciplinary perspectives of human-animal relations.

Alex Brown's research interests centre on the application of palaeoecology as a tool for investigating past human-environment interactions over the course of the Holocene. He has also worked extensively across Central and Eastern Europe, most recently as part of the Ecology of Crusading Project.

The crusades waged against pagans in the eastern Baltic region from the late-12th century AD were fundamental to the development and consolidation of a European society, united under Christianity. Throughout the Middle Ages, this region was a cultural frontier which came to be dominated by crusading institutions into the 16th century. The most important force behind the conquest and colonisation of this north European frontier was the Teutonic Order, a group that has left a profound social, political, agrarian and ecological legacy. The Order secured its territories with castles, ranging in design from fortified monasteries to isolated towers. Today, many of these have vanished or lie ruined and abandoned within forests, whilst others have been restored and preserved as some of the most spectacular historical monuments in Europe. At a time of deteriorating climate, the impact of these castles on the local environment, especially plants and animals, would have been profound. Since many aspects of the natural world were sacred to the Baltic tribes, this impact would be synonymous with the cultural changes that created a new world - a European world - at this frontier of Christendom. In this paper we will present the background and initial findings of the "Ecology of Crusading" project, which has been investigating the detailed environmental impact of castle construction by the Teutonic Order in the medieval Baltic, through a comparative study of sites in Prussia and Livonia.