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AN ITINERANT SHEEP, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE LIVONIANS: FRIEDRICH MENIUS'S *SYNTAGMA DE ORIGINE LIVONORUM* (1635)

Stefan Donecker

During the 1630s, Friedrich Menius, professor of history at the University of Dorpat, was the first scholar to investigate the ethnic origins and the ancestry of Estonians and Latvians at an academic level. His treatise, entitled *Syntagma de origine Livonorum*, has nevertheless been largely ignored by later generations. This is mainly due to Menius's bad reputation as an academic adventurer and notorious troublemaker. The present paper intends to examine Menius's theories, place them in the context of early modern intellectual history, and interpret them as an expression of the worldview and mindset of a seventeenth-century Livonian scholar.

Keywords: Intellectual history; Livonia; seventeenth century; genealogy; antiquarianism; Menius, Friedrich

In 1630, Friedrich Menius, recently appointed as a teacher at the Gymnasium in Dorpat, announces his intention to investigate the origins of Livonia's inhabitants. It is going to be 'enjoyable and pleasant', he promises, 'to know the origins of each land, district, city, castle, village and family, the provenance of their names, the first inhabitants of the country and how sovereignty was subsequently transferred from one nation to the other' (Menius 1630, A4^r). Menius had a talent for self-promotion, and he regularly advertised new treatises, all of which were invariably described as both 'useful and pleasant' to read. Unfortunately, he was also known for his empty promises, and most of the supposedly delightful publications he announced never appeared in print.

In this one case, however, Menius lived up to his promise. Five years after his announcement, he published the *Syntagma de origine Livonorum*, a historical treatise on the origins of the Estonian and Latvian peasants who inhabited Sweden's Baltic provinces (Menius 1635a). To a present-day reader, the *Syntagma* is probably not very useful – the theories it contains are utterly obsolete – and it is most certainly not a pleasure to read. Menius's efforts have therefore been largely ignored by modern scholars. Yet despite its shortcomings, the *Syntagma* provides interesting insights into the mindset of a seventeenth-century Livonian intellectual. Menius was the first scholar ever to investigate the origins of Estonians and Latvians at an academic level, so it is undoubtedly expedient to examine his theories on Livonia's ancient history. Through the antiquarian and genealogical elaborations in his treatise, Menius expressed his opinion on the Estonians and Latvians, their nature, their character, and their place in his worldview. As such, the *Syntagma de origine Livonorum* deserves closer scholarly scrutiny, an aim that the present article hopes to achieve.

Friedrich Menius – A Biographical Sketch

Friedrich Menius might not belong to the most influential figures of Baltic intellectual history, but he is certainly one of the most eccentric and interesting characters among the scholars of early modern Livonia. Contemporary sources depict him as a highly gifted individual, whose academic merits were overshadowed by a cantankerous personality and a notorious tendency to exaggerate his scholarly achievements. In his adventurous, though ultimately tragic life, Menius was, among many other things, an esteemed professor at Dorpat, an alleged bigamist, an unsuccessful mining entrepreneur, and a convicted heretic. He seems to have viewed his erratic lifestyle with a certain irony: on one occasion he is known to have characterized himself as *vagus agnus*, a vagrant lamb (Menius 1638).

The itinerant sheep was born in 1593 or 1594 in Woldegk, Mecklenburg, as the son of the mayor and town judge, Franz Mein.¹ Comparatively little is known about his childhood and youth, although it seems that his family was rather prosperous. Despite the early death of his father, Menius grew up in comfortable economic circumstances and attended the local universities of Rostock and Greifswald. In 1620, Menius launched his career as a scholar with three very different publications that demonstrated his wide range of interests: a treatise comparing the funeral customs of different nations (*Syntagma de ritibus funebris omnium gentium*), a collection of Latin poems (*Poëmata artificiosa varij generis*) that earned him the title of an Imperial Poet Laureate, and, most importantly, a collection of English drama in loose German translation entitled *Engelische Comedien und Tragedien* [*English comedies and tragedies*].

It is ironic that Menius is remembered mainly for this one publication from the very beginning of his academic career, despite the numerous scholarly projects he vigorously pursued later in his life. Menius's claim to fame is based on a rather simple editorial decision: he chose to include *Titus Andronicus* in his compilation of Elizabethan plays and, in doing so, provided German actors and audiences with the first printed translation of one of Shakespeare's plays. This pivotal contribution to the development

of German theater attracted the attention of modern scholars (Dahlberg 1989; Fredén 1939; Haekel 2004, pp. 117–20; Nordström 1921) and overshadowed all his later endeavors and achievements.

Menius left Germany for Poland in 1621, abandoning his wife Sophie, whom he had married just four years earlier. The autobiographical remarks which he penned later in his life provide no reason for this decision, which would turn out to have fateful consequences. By 1625, he had married again, this time the sister of a former fellow student at Rostock, Georg Mancelius, well-known to modern scholars for his important contributions to Latvian linguistics (cf. Viiding 2004). At roughly the same time, Menius started to collect material on Livonian history. It seems that his new wife and his brother-in-law, who were born in Courland, had turned Menius's attention toward the eastern Baltic area.

During the late 1620s, Menius managed to win the favor of several major Swedish dignitaries, including Axel Oxenstierna, the Lord High Chancellor, Johan Skytte, Governor-General of Livonia, and Field Marshal Gustav Horn. Horn's patronage secured him a position as a field preacher for the Swedish troops in Livonia. When Horn was recalled to participate in Gustav Adolph's German campaign, he left Menius as custodian of his Livonian estates. According to Menius's own account (1646, p. 338), it was Horn who suggested at that time that he, Menius, should write *justum opus Historiae Livonicae*, a proper work on the history of Livonia.

In 1630, Menius was offered the post as a teacher at the *Gymnasium* in Dorpat. Two years later, King Gustav Adolf ordered the elevation of the *Gymnasium* to the status of a full-fledged university, and Menius became the first professor of history and antiquities at the newly founded *Academia Gustaviana*. Menius himself published a detailed account of the university's opening ceremony where he expressed his hopes that the new institution of learning would turn Livonia into a refuge for persecuted Lutheran scholars from all over Europe, and could help to spread the Protestant faith further eastward into Russia (Sak 1997, pp. 9–10).

The years as a teacher and professor at Dorpat in the early 1630s seem to have been the calmest and most productive time in Menius's troubled life. He was working on the grand chronicle of Livonia which Horn had proposed. Starting in 1630, he published a series of preliminary treatises related to this major endeavor (Donecker 2011b): an 'Introduction and Preamble to the great Universal Livonian Historical Description' (*Intrada und Vortrab der grossen Universal Lieffländischen Historischer Geschichten Beschreibung*, 1630); followed by the 'Historical Preliminary on Livonian Law and Government' (*Historischer Prodromus des Lieffländischen Rechtens und Regiments*, 1633); a 'Critical Explanation of the Names and Estuaries of the Baltic Sea' (*Diatribes Critica de Maris Balthici nominibus et ostiis*, 1634); and the *Syntagma de origine Livonorum* in 1635. He also found the time to work on several minor projects unrelated to the chronicle, including several collections of poetry, a sequel to his 'English Comedies and Tragedies' (*Liebeskampff*, 1630) and a theological treatise on the impending apocalypse (*Proba der letzten Zeit*, 1633).

In 1633, Menius proudly announced that he had completed not only his chronicle, but also a Livonian law code and a 'house book' dedicated to domestic economy: 'If every housefather had these three books to hand, in addition to a good Latvian or Estonian *postil*, it would undoubtedly be very beneficial both to him and to the entire

province' (Menius 1633, p. 67). All three manuscripts were just waiting to be published. Menius was, however, known to exaggerate the scope of his scholarly writings. Two years later, he presented an impressive and rather unbelievable list of 40 manuscripts that he had supposedly written and just needed to be edited (Donecker 2011b; Menius 1848, pp. 539–41). None of these, ominously enough, have ever resurfaced.

Menius's notorious unreliability casts serious doubts on his announcement. But even if the chronicle had indeed been ready for print in 1633, Menius would not have been able to publish it. His calm days were about to come to an end. In the mid-1630s, he was drawn into a quarrel between the mayor of Dorpat, Claus Teschen, and the pastor of the Estonian community, Erasmus Pegius. The affair started rather innocuously, with a misunderstanding between the two gentlemen's wives regarding the proper seating in church. As the dispute intensified, Menius was asked to reconcile the two parties. But, as he was to demonstrate on numerous occasions later in his life, Menius had far greater talent for making problems than solving them, and his mediation efforts proved absolutely counterproductive. Soon, he was fully involved in the spiteful exchange of malicious insinuations and petty intrigues. In the end, his enemies were able to present documents that proved Menius married his second wife while his first wife was still alive. Menius had to face serious charges of bigamy, and in early 1637 was warned that his arrest was imminent. Leaving most of his belongings behind, he managed to reach the island of Ösel, which at that time was still under Danish rule, and was subsequently outlawed by the authorities in Dorpat.

Even after this close escape, Menius was not one to remain quietly in exile. In 1638, the Danish governor of Ösel complained that the fugitive scholar had insulted several persons of rank and was causing unrest and outrage among the population. Later in the same year, Menius appeared in Stockholm, where the Livonian verdict of outlawry seems to have mattered little. With the help of his brother, Dietrich Mein, a retainer at Queen Kristina's court, he acquired the post of an inspector at a copper mine in Småland – a possibly profitable venture, since the demand for copper was high during the Thirty Years' War. Despite his high expectations and some initial success, the project ultimately failed. Menius's quarrelsome nature got him into trouble with neighboring landowners, local farmers and his own laborers. In 1640, he accused a rival of having bewitched his ore-melting equipment; his miners refused to work due to irregular payments, and his partners in the mining consortium grew restless with Menius's conduct.

After the failure of the mining enterprise, Menius returned to Stockholm, where he published an essay on esoteric philosophy, entitled *Consensus Hermetico-Mosaicus* (1644), under the pseudonym Salomon Majus (Urbaněk 1998). If he intended to win the favor of new patrons, the plan backfired in the most dismal way possible. Menius was accused of heresy (Lindberg 1991, pp. 351–56; Nordström 1921, pp. 56–80; Norlin 1868); his prosecutors claimed he had denied the incarnation of Christ and the existence of the Holy Trinity and proclaimed erroneous opinions on the nature of humans, angels, and spirits. Queen Kristina is said to have demanded the immediate decapitation of the heretic (Olofsson 1998), but in 1647, after a year in prison, Menius was released, having officially recanted his opinions.

His career as a scholar, however, was ruined. With unbroken optimism and considerable naivety, Menius offered his services as a historiographer to Queen Kristina herself, promising that he would finally present his lifelong enterprise, the Livonian chronicle. Unsurprisingly, the Queen was not inclined to accept the services of a recently pardoned heretic. It is usually assumed that Menius died in 1659. The last 12 years of his life remain obscure. In a letter dated 1649, Dietrich Mein seems to indicate that his brother left Sweden. Other sources claim that the unfortunate scholarly adventurer spent his last years as a menial miner at Falun, under constant surveillance to prevent his escape.

Syntagma de origine Livonorum

The ‘Treatise on the Origin of the Livonians’ (Donecker 2010, pp. 98–119) is the last and by far the most substantial of the preliminary tracts that Menius wrote during the 1630s in preparation for his unrealized chronicle of Livonia. The ‘Treatise’ was published in 1635, after a three-year delay caused by a dispute between Menius and Jacob Becker, the town printer of Dorpat (this explains why the title page erroneously shows 1632, the originally planned date of publication). The *Syntagma* is a rather small treatise, consisting of 98 numbered pages in octavo format and two attached tables that provide a concise overview of two complex matters: the geographical division of Scythia and the various tribes of the Suebi. The text is supplemented by Menius’s dedication to Johann Skytte, three Latin congratulatory poems (written by Georg Mancelius, Andreas Besicke and Timotheus Polus), and the *Catalogus lucubrationum*, a bibliography of Menius’s published and unpublished writings. The title page (Donecker 2010, p. 99) depicts two ancient Livonians, one male and one female, in their supposed folk costumes.

The *Syntagma* is a very rare book; both older and recent bibliographies (Jaanson 2000, p. 192; Klöker 2005, vol. 2, p. 131; Winkelmann 1878, p. 63) mention just two existing copies, one at the Latvian National Library in Riga and the other at the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg. In addition, there is a third surviving copy in the Livonica collection of the Episcopal library at Linköping, Sweden. The *Syntagma* was reprinted twice during the nineteenth century: in the second volume of the *Scriptores rerum Livonicarum* (1848) as well as in a collection entitled *Drey kleine Schriften über die Geschichte Livland’s*, dating from 1857. Both editions reproduce the text in its entirety, but omit tables and marginal notes that are essential for the understanding of Menius’s arguments.

Sources and Intellectual Background

In 1630, Menius outlined the contents of the major Livonian chronicle that he planned to write during most of his life, yet never managed to finish. His concept adheres precisely to the *Methodus describendi regiones, urbes et arcus* by Heinrich Rantzau and Albert Meier (1587), a questionnaire for travelers that lists the various aspects to which a scholar has to pay attention when describing a foreign country. Although Menius prefers not to disclose his indebtedness to Rantzau and Meier, most likely in an effort to make his outline appear more original than it was, he follows their

guidelines almost to the letter.² As part of its historical section, the *Methodus* stresses the need to determine the founders and most ancient inhabitants of the land, realm, or city in question. Even though Menius never came close to realizing his chronicle project, he managed to cover this one aspect when he published the *Syntagma de origine Livonorum* five years later.

One of the main purposes of the *Syntagma* was to demonstrate Menius's erudition and prove his aptitude for the professorship at Dorpat to which he had been appointed. Yet, even despite Menius's known tendency to boast and exaggerate the scope of his knowledge, the depth of the *Syntagma's* source material remains impressive. As a scholar of German origin who had lived for several years in Poland and had finally entered Swedish service, Menius was familiar with all major intellectual traditions in the Baltic Sea region. He later admitted that, during his stay in Poland, he had enlisted the help of Calvinist and Catholic acquaintances to acquire historical manuscripts on Livonian antiquities (Menius 1646, p. 337). This was a hazardous undertaking for a Lutheran scholar of that time, considering the strong denominational tensions during the early seventeenth century, and it explains why Menius was particularly well versed in Polish and Lithuanian historiography.

But Menius relied not only on the sources he had collected in Poland; he also had access to the major Livonian chronicles published during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In 1646, he attempted to reconstruct the private library he had owned during the 1630s, then subsequently lost in his escape from Dorpat (Menius 1646, pp. 343–52). He claimed to have possessed the printed chronicles of Balthasar Russow, Salomon Henning, and Laurentius Müller, as well as manuscripts of the unpublished writings of Moritz Brandis and Franz Nyenstede. But Menius remained unsatisfied with Livonian historiography. With his usual self-confidence he stated that the famous chronicles of Henning, Russow, and Müller were merely *recensiones imperfectae*, entirely inferior to his own treatises on Livonian history (Menius 1630, B2^r, B4^v). Nevertheless, he consulted and quoted them in the *Syntagma de origine Livonorum*, although sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Livonian historiography was, with the exception of Brandis, focused on more recent events, and contributed little to an examination of the ancient *origines Livonorum*.

For Menius, Swedish sources were far more relevant than the domestic Livonian literature. Historical scholarship in seventeenth-century Sweden was dominated by an elaborate genealogical doctrine usually referred to as Gothicism (Neville 2009; Schmidt-Voges 2004; Tuchtenhagen 2010, pp. 139–42). In the mid-sixteenth century, Johannes Magnus, the exiled Catholic archbishop of Uppsala, claimed that the Swedes were descended from the valiant Goths of antiquity and had inherited their martial prowess. He presented a complete genealogy of Gothic-Swedish kings that reached back to Magog, the alleged grandson of Noah. During the seventeenth century, the Gothic past formed the focus of Swedish self-perception, bestowing prestige on the young monarchy and legitimizing the expansionist politics and absolutist ambitions of the Swedish kings.

In his position at the Swedish university of Dorpat, Menius was well advised to adhere to the officially sanctioned doctrine. Johan Skytte, Menius's patron and first chancellor of the *Academia Gustaviana*, was known as an outspoken adherent of Gothicism.³ Johannes Magnus had emphasized the exodus of the Goths under their

king Berik as the focal event of Swedish-Gothic history. Accordingly, the Livonian chronology presented in the *Syntagma* begins with Berik's expedition. The subsequent sequence of Gothic kings is also taken directly from the Gothicist tradition.

On several occasions, however, Menius takes a surprisingly critical stance towards the authorities of Swedish Gothicism (Donecker 2010, pp. 109–10). In a bold and possibly ill-advised attempt to gain funding from the Swedish Privy Council, he directly challenged the authority of Johannes Magnus. Menius's 1635 letter accuses the founding father of Gothicism of numerous serious errors, including a confused chronology and an inappropriate reliance on superficial similarities between the names of different historical persons (Menius 1635b). Though such criticism would have already been considered rather provocative by the Swedish scholarly establishment, Menius was willing to go even further: That same year he announced a book under the peculiar title *Obstetrix Gothica*. His 'Gothic Midwife' was to be a 'sponge' to clean away the 'un-Christian stains' with which Johannes Magnus supposedly contaminated the 'most stalwart Swedish-Gothic nation' (Menius 1848, p. 540). Menius never had the chance to launch his frontal assault against the doyen of Gothicism before the bigamy trial ruined his career. If he had succeeded in refuting Johannes Magnus, such a feat would have undoubtedly placed him among the foremost Swedish historiographers of his time. But it seems more likely that Menius, with his tendency to get into trouble, chose an opponent who was quite out of his league.

The same critical approach to Gothicist tradition can also be seen in the *Syntagma*. Menius (1848, p. 521) explicitly disagrees with Johannes Magnus on the exact date of Berik's emigration. Later, he discusses whether the renowned Norse hero Starkad (*Starcaterus*) had been of Swedish descent, as Magnus claims, or of Estonian parentage, as Saxo Grammaticus suggests. Menius (1848, p. 529) sides with the Danish chronicler, who was known for his anti-Swedish sentiments.⁴ When Saxo, whom he held in high regard, offered him an opportunity to connect a legendary figure like Starkad to Livonia, Menius seemed unable to resist.⁵

Bearing in mind that Menius was a relatively junior scholar, working at a university with close ties to the Swedish state, his independent treatment of Gothicist doctrine is remarkable indeed. Yet, despite his criticism of Johannes Magnus that frequently lapsed into blatantly hostile accusations, Menius never questioned the basic assumptions of Gothicism: namely, the genealogical ties between contemporary Swedes and ancient Goths and the latter's crucial influence on the history of the Baltic region. Menius argued with Johannes Magnus about numerous details, but the Livonian prehistory presented in the *Syntagma de origine Livonorum* remained firmly within the framework of Gothicist thought.

The Origins of the Livonians, According to Menius

The *Syntagma* commences with some of the self-promotional efforts that are so typical of Menius's writings. He complains of the difficulties he faces in getting his work published, subtly reminding his readers that he is in need of financial support and patronage. Later, he tries to draw readers' attention to his future projects. He states that historical treatises like the *Syntagma* usually offer an introductory overview

dealing with the geography of the region in question. Since he is going to publish a treatise exclusively devoted to this issue, and he does not want to be repetitive, instead Menius asks his readers to refer to this forthcoming publication which, like most of his projects, would never be realized (Menius 1848, p. 515).

The sole comment on Livonia's geography that Menius feels obliged to include is a programmatic statement. He emphasizes that Livonia is neither a part of Poland, nor a part of Germany. Rather, it must be considered an independent geographical entity within the framework of a greater *Scythia Europea* (Menius 1848, p. 516). This statement should, most likely, be understood as a comment on the legitimacy of Swedish rule. Neither the local Germans nor the neighboring Poles can lay claim to Livonia's distant past. The Goths ranked foremost among the various tribes of ancient Scythia, and, according to Gothicism tradition, this implied that the Swedes (as their descendants) held a legitimate claim to Livonia.⁶ Menius's *Scythia Europea*, in this respect, can be interpreted as a model for the Swedish conglomerate state of the seventeenth century, inhabited by various nations but rightfully dominated by the Swedes.

After these introductory remarks, Menius returns to the primary topic of his treatise: the inhabitants of Livonia. 'The first among these . . . have, until now, not been determined, nor do I think it possible that they ever will be' (Menius 1848, p. 516). But one must take into consideration a wide range of nations that have lived in Livonia itself or in its vicinity when researching that country's prehistory. Menius presents an impressive list that is a credit to his erudition: 56 possible inhabitants of Livonia and the surrounding area, in roughly alphabetical order with references to both classical and contemporary sources.⁷ 'But it remains obscure', he has to admit, 'which [of these nations] preceded the others, which were synchronous, which were the first and which were the last' (Menius 1848, p. 517). He harshly criticizes authors such as his contemporary Nicolaus Specht, who, in a public oration at the University of Wittenberg, attempted to present an uninterrupted, linear genealogy of the Livonians (Donecker 2010, pp. 181–84; Specht 1630). 'Verily, I cannot believe that this extraordinary and miraculous benefaction of God should have been bestowed exclusively on Livonia, that it alone, among all the provinces of the entire world, would have remained untouched by the manifold incursions of people' (Menius 1848, p. 517).

Menius continues to explain that there is, in fact, no such thing as an 'indigenous people'. Even the ancient Germans, whom Tacitus characterizes as *indigenae* in a highly influential passage in the second chapter of his *Germania*, do not live up to the claim. In contrast to the pagan writers of antiquity, Christian historiographers know that the entire human race originates from Noah's Ark, and, at one time or another, migrated from Mount Ararat or the Plain of Shinar where the Tower of Babel had been erected. Therefore, no nation may claim to be indigenous in its native land.

According to Menius (1848, pp. 520–22), the first recorded settlers in Livonia – and therefore the closest one could get to a true indigenous inhabitant – belonged to the Suebi, a group of Germanic tribes described, most importantly, by Tacitus. Menius believed that the Suebi and their kinsmen, the Vandals, once inhabited the Baltic shores from Jutland to Livonia. Among the many different Suebic tribes,

Menius locates the *Nahanarvali* in Northeastern Livonia, the *Harii* and *Manimi* in Courland and the *Aesti* at an unspecified location on the Baltic Sea.⁸ The Suebic domain, he argues, stretched even farther to the East into Russia, and Menius tries to prove this by tracing a range of Russian place names to their putative Germanic roots: *Moscovia* is explained as *Mofßgouw*, a wet marshland, *Plescovia* as *Bloßgouw*, a desolate and devoid land, and for Kiev (*Kiovia*) he suggests *Kiüouw*, due to the abundance of cows in the area.

Menius is now able to leave this speculative part behind and proceeds to events that he believed to be solid historical facts. The remainder of the *Syntagma* consists of a timeline of events and rulers in the history of Livonia, in chronological order from 770 BC to 1148 AD. On several occasions, specific events prompt Menius to digress from the timeline and include an excursus to summarize more complicated migration movements, to discuss questions of etymology, or to promote one of his unpublished manuscripts.

The timeline of Livonian history begins with the legendary departure of the Goths from Sweden under their King Berik, which supposedly took place in 770 BC, or 3180 years after the creation of the world (Menius 1848, p. 522). Berik leads the Goths across the Baltic Sea, conquers Prussia, Courland, Samogitia and Livonia and subdues the Suebic tribes who live there. But his campaign is not depicted as an arbitrary act of aggression. The inhabitants of these areas had molested Sweden with incessant raids, and Berik merely put an end to their ongoing piracy. Menius briefly mentions six other Gothic kings, successors of Berik, who ruled over Livonia before the Goths continued their migration and departed for the Black Sea area in 657 BC. As soon as they left, the Suebi and Vandals reclaimed their former domains, where they intermingled with some remaining Goths.

Menius (1848, p. 521) stresses that, up to that point, all the protagonists in his Livonian history (Suebi, Vandals, and Goths) had been of Germanic descent. This, however, changed drastically in the year 503 BC, when Darius the Great, King of the Persians, embarked on a campaign against the Goths in the steppes north of the Black Sea.⁹ His opponent, the Gothic ruler Authinus, withdrew northward and lured the Persians into the interior of his realm, thus avoiding a pitched battle and depleting his enemy's strength through successful hit-and-run attacks. Menius is not interested in the war between Goths and Persians, but in the consequences that these distant events had on Livonia. The area entered by the withdrawing Goths was inhabited by various barbarian tribes who chose to abandon their lands rather than face Authinus and his army. They fled northward, through Russia, until they arrived in Livonia. The local Suebi and Vandals realized that they could not defend themselves against the invaders and withdrew westward across the Vistula. The barbarian tribes divided their new lands among themselves (Menius 1848, p. 524).

The migrations that Menius describes follow a simple domino pattern – a popular motif among both ancient and early modern historiographers (Vajda 1973/74, pp. 44–8). One nation displaces another, who in turn pushes the next tribe, and so on. The Persians drive the Goths before them, the Goths expel the local barbarians, and the barbarians oust the Suebi from Livonia. As a result of this chain reaction, Livonia is, at the beginning of the fifth century BC and for the first time in its history, under the control of non-Germanic inhabitants.

Menius's foray into prehistory has finally arrived at the immediate ancestors of the Livonian peasantry. He argues that the barbarian invaders 'were divided into two languages, one of which is called Estonian or Liv, the other Latvian' (Menius 1848, p. 525). Menius explains that these Proto-Estonians and Proto-Latvians consisted of numerous different tribes, including the *Issedones*, *Bastarnae* and *Neuri* who claimed the North, the *Agathyrsi*, *Gelones* and *Thrausi* in southern Estonia and northern Latvia, and the *Livii* further south along the coast. Most of these ethnonyms are borrowed from Herodotus. In a way, this is appropriate, since Herodotus provided the history of the Persian war that inspired Menius's fanciful account. Interestingly enough, Menius includes the *Harii* and *Manimi*, who supposedly settled in Courland and Semgallia, among the barbarian newcomers; although he previously counted them among the preceding Suebic tribes. It seems that he himself was confused by the sheer number of exotic ethnonyms he had to handle.

Menius is convinced that he has found the forebears of the Livonian peasants in these numerous tribes of migrating barbarians from the Ukrainian steppe. Yet one problem remains unsolved: both Estonian and Latvian, he observes, contain words thought to be of Hebrew, Indian, Greek, and Latin origin. Is this a purely linguistic resemblance, or did these notable nations also belong to the ancestors of the Livonians? 'There are those who believe', he writes, that Jews, Indians, Greeks and Romans 'had once lived here, or had at least founded colonies' in Livonia (Menius 1848, p. 525).

Far-fetched as they may seem from a modern point of view, such genealogical hypotheses were widely accepted during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Donecker 2011a): Johannes Leuenclavius (1596, p. 121), an influential German orientalist, believed that the Latvians were of Jewish origin. Later generations of scholars developed this idea into a peculiar tale of descent that combined blatant anti-Judaism with a dislike for the Livonian peasants (Donecker 2010, pp. 243–53; Rauch 1972). The Roman and Greek genealogies had been borrowed from other countries in the region: Lithuanian humanists claimed that the Grand Duchy had been founded by exiled Roman noblemen, while their Prussian colleagues identified Prusias of Bithynia, historically a minor Hellenistic ruler in the second century BC, as the eponymous founder of their country. Livonian scholars later adapted these theories and argued that the Roman and Greek colonists had not only been present in Lithuania and Prussia, but had also ventured into Livonia (Donecker 2010, pp. 228–43). The fourth and most exotic tale of descent, the alleged Indian presence in Livonia, seems to have been Menius's own idea. He was inspired by Frisian historiographers who tried to trace the origin of their countrymen to India (Borst 1957/63, p. 1002).

Menius discusses the alleged genealogical ties between Estonians and Latvians and their putative Greek, Indian, Jewish or Roman ancestors in great detail. He compares the vocabulary of the languages in question and even notes the melody of an Estonian folksong that supposedly resembles Jewish music.¹⁰ Ultimately, all four hypotheses fail to convince him (Menius 1848, pp. 526–33). He considers it unlikely that a major long-distance migration which led Jews, Romans, Greeks or Indians to the Baltic area could have remained unnoticed. The medieval Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, whom Menius appreciates as the most reliable source for the ancient history of northeastern Europe, would not have failed to note such an important event. Some Greek words in

the local languages do not prove a Greek heritage. Menius had already explained that the barbarian ancestors of the Livonians lived in the Black Sea region before migrating to the Baltic, and they could easily have picked up some Greek vocabulary while they still inhabited areas in the vicinity of Greek colonies.

The idea of a Roman colonization that Lithuanian humanists developed to enhance the prestige of their country is equally presumptuous. Yet Menius (1848, p. 533) is not willing to discard the idea of a Latin influence on the Baltic area. The linguistic similarities between Latin and the local languages are, to Menius, beyond doubt. Furthermore, the name of the Prussian temple site at Romuva supposedly indicates that its founders had ancient Rome in mind when they instituted the pagan cult there. Since a direct Roman migration to the Baltic region is out of the question, Menius (1848, p. 533) proposes a model of indirect cultural transfer. In his theory, the Romans are replaced by Wallachians, from the ancient province in Dacia in present-day Romania. These Wallachians are a suitable alternative to a direct Roman colonization: Their language resembles Latin, and their territory lies at the periphery of the ancient world. An expedition from Italy to Livonia could not possibly escape the attention of the chroniclers, but if the migration originated from Dacia, on the fringe of barbarian Scythia, it could have easily remained unnoticed.

Menius is not the first to replace the alleged Roman settlers in Livonia with Wallachians from Romania (Donecker 2011c). The hypothesis was first noted in 1565 by Caspar Peucer (Melanthon & Peucerus 1580, p. 477) in the influential history textbook of Lutheran Germany, the *Chronicon Carionis*. In accordance with the *Chronicon Carionis*, Menius (1848, p. 533) considers these Wallachians responsible for bringing Latin language and culture to the Baltic area. They arrived in Livonia in the late sixth century AD and intermingled with the local proto-Estonian and proto-Latvian barbarians. Their linguistic vestiges, Menius argues, misled later scholars to the erroneous belief that the Romans had settled Livonia. Though such a conjecture is no more than *anilis fabula*, an old wives' tale (Menius 1848, p. 529), the Latin influence on Livonia cannot be denied – one merely has to understand that it was conveyed by the Wallachians, as intermediaries, and not by the Romans themselves.

Menius's account of the *origines Livonorum* might seem overly complicated due to his tendency to overwhelm the reader with encyclopaedic enumerations of obscure tribal ethnonyms. Yet, his elaborate view of Livonian history can be condensed into a simple three-stage model. In the most distant past, Livonia was dominated by Germanic tribes (the Goths, the Suebi and the Vandals). They, however, are ethnically unrelated to the Estonian and Latvian peasants and cannot be considered their ancestors. The second wave of migrants, in the fifth century BC, consists of various barbarian tribes that had been expelled from the Black Sea region in the aftermath of Darius's campaign. The third group, the Wallachians, arrived in the sixth century AD. They subsequently merged with the resident barbarians. From their union, Menius claims, both Estonians and Latvians originate.

The final pages of the *Syntagma* are only loosely linked to the question of Livonian origins. Menius narrates several expeditions and campaigns allegedly undertaken by various Scandinavian kings who tried to conquer Livonia. Subsequently, he embarks on a detailed discussion of the etymology and heritage of neighboring nations like the Russians, Poles and Prussians. Menius concludes the *Syntagma* with the famous

Aufseglung, the arrival of Hanseatic merchants to Livonia (Johansen 1961) which, according to him, took place in the year 1148 AD: ‘When the Germans came to Livonia, they brought religion and their own language with them’ (Menius 1848, p. 538). This incisive event marks a turning point in the history of the region. Livonian prehistory, the time of the ‘origins’, has come to an end. From now on, the fate of the land lies in the hands of the Germans.

Impact and Reception

It seems that Menius’s efforts had drawn the attention of Livonian scholars to the question of the *origines Livonorum*. Previous contributions on that issue had, almost without exception, been formulated by historiographers abroad (Donecker 2010, pp. 94–5). Among domestic scholars within Livonia, only Moritz Brandis (1600, pp. 15–17) and the rather insignificant Mathias Strubycz (1577, p. 36) had shown some interest in the origins of the local peasants, but even they did little more than quote foreign authorities on the subject. Johannes Renner (1583, p. 70) offers a brief comment on the ancestry of the Semgallians, yet it is nothing more than an isolated and marginal note in the context of his chronicle.

Menius’s *Syntagma* marks a change in perspective. During the latter half of the seventeenth century, all major Livonian historiographers (Thomas Hiärn, Gustav von Lode, David Werner, Hermann von Brevern and Christian Kelch) discussed the ancestry of the Estonian and Latvian peasants in great detail (Donecker 2010, pp. 196–221). Though the *origines Livonorum* had become an integral part of Livonian historiography, Menius himself was rarely quoted and acknowledged, due to his bad reputation as a heretic and bigamist and the rareness of his writings.

Friedrich Menius is one of the last generation of Livonian historiographers to remain comparatively unconcerned with the differences between Estonians and Latvians. To him, they were primarily *Undeutsche*, ‘non-Germans’ (Lenz 2004), defined through their social position as serfs. But from the mid-seventeenth century onward, scholars began to place a stronger emphasis on language as the determining factor for ethnicity and were consequently no longer inclined to ascribe the same origin to two groups with no linguistic similarity whatsoever. Estonians and Latvians began to be seen as different ethnic entities – a major rethinking of categories that found its first expression in Paul Einhorn’s *Historia Lettica* (1649), and was explicitly stressed in the chronicles of Thomas Hiärn (1678) and Christian Kelch (1695). Menius’s theory of a shared origin of Latvians and Estonians among the barbarian tribes of Scythia seemed no longer acceptable.

In 1693, one of Menius’s successors at the University of Dorpat, Olaus Hermelin, published his own treatise *de origine Livonorum*. In accordance with the prevailing opinion of his time, Hermelin emphasized the differences between Estonians and Latvians, and provided each of them with a separate genealogy. While he located the origins of the Estonians, for obvious linguistic reasons, among the Finns, he retained the Romanic-Wallachian heritage that Menius had proposed for the Latvians (Hermelin 1693, pp. 560, 564). The success of Hermelin’s work (reprinted due to public demand in 1717) relegated Menius’s earlier efforts to obscurity.

Johann Christoph Brotze was one of the few eighteenth-century scholars still interested in the *Syntagma* (Donecker 2010, p. 16).

By the nineteenth century, Menius was all but forgotten. Occasionally, local Livonian periodicals mentioned, misquoted, or ridiculed him as an example of obsolete and nonsensical erudition (Donecker 2010, p. 17). Even when the *Syntagma* was reprinted in 1848, the editor was not particularly interested in Menius's opinions, but chose to include it in the *Scriptores rerum Livonicarum* collection as an academic oddity, to demonstrate how 'indigestible' and 'devoid of esprit' seventeenth-century scholarship had been (Napiersky 1848, p. xvii).

Concluding Remarks: Livonia between Civilization and Barbarism

For the present-day reader interested in the ancient history of Latvians and Estonians, the *Syntagma de origine Livonorum* seems to provide little more than a confusing plenitude of Scythian tribes and some thoroughly obsolete genealogical hypotheses. Yet, we have to bear in mind that, in his time, Menius's treatise was an absolutely reputable piece of historiography, appropriately in line with the scholarly methods and paradigms of the early modern period. And even to a modern reader, the *Syntagma* offers important insights on the mindset of a seventeenth-century scholar and the way he perceived the world around him.

To the resident elites, early modern Livonia seemed like an endangered periphery on the fringes of civilization. Almut Bues (2005, p. 40) aptly characterized their attitude as a 'triple frontier mentality': a defensive stance against menacing Muscovy, Catholic Poland, and also against the allegedly untrustworthy and disloyal Estonian and Latvian peasants within the country. The scholarly writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries document these prevailing notions of menace and threat (Donecker 2009a; Kreem 1996). Livonia's elites saw themselves as inhabiting a threatened outpost, beleaguered by all kinds of barbarism – *ille limes christiani orbis*, 'the frontier of the Christian world', as Augustinus Eucaedius (1567, p. 399) wrote during the Livonian War.

In the symbolic geography of the seventeenth century, Livonia was situated in a precarious position between civilization and savagery. German burghers, Lutheran pastors, a Swedish university, and the institutions of early modern statehood provided a familiar setting to which any contemporary European would have been accustomed. But other aspects were far from common. The Livonian peasants allegedly adhered to pagan beliefs and all kind of bizarre customs (Donecker 2010, pp. 71–9; Johansen 1963), and in the countryside an unwary traveler supposedly risked encountering werewolves, serpent worshipers, and abominable specters. Livonia was characterized by both familiarity and otherness, a liminal place that did not fully belong within civilized Europe, but was not fully beyond it. In the discourses of the local elites, notions of inclusion and exclusion were simultaneously present, mutually reinforcing each other. Through their interdependence, they defined Livonia as a periphery.

Menius's treatise on the origins of the Livonians is a typical representative of the genealogical method commonly applied by scholars of his time (Burke 2000;

Grafton 1991; Helmuth 2003; Tuchtenhagen 2010). Scholars of the early modern period were thoroughly fascinated by questions of origin and ancestry: 'Fabricating genealogies was a major intellectual activity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. . . . To understand a word, a people, a belief, or a custom meant locating it on a genealogical stemma which revealed its ancestors and kin. Human culture was a series of complicated derivations and transmissions from the book of Genesis to the present' (Ryan 1981, p. 532). Through genealogical inquiry, scholars sought not simply to understand the past. Even more importantly, they strove to use the past in order to comprehend the present. 'Their goal is always the present and the future: their investigations are precisely intended to explain – to explain causes, to explain essences, to explain how the world was and how it should be' (Geary 2006, p. 10).

Formally, the *Syntagma de origine Livonorum* is an account of the most distant prehistory of Livonia. Yet I believe it should be understood as an expression of Menius's views about the present. As outlined previously, Menius argues that Estonians and Latvians have a dual heritage¹¹ – descending, on the one hand, from various tribes from the Black Sea area and, on the other, from the Wallachians originating from the Danube region. The former are, explicitly and repeatedly, characterized as barbarians; and Menius (1848, p. 524) does not hesitate to stress *how* barbaric they were. The most notorious among these proto-Livonian tribes were the *Issedones* and the *Neuri*. The former supposedly practiced anthropophagy, while the latter were said to be shape-changers who transformed into wolves once a year. Such accounts correspond to the early modern image of Livonia as a land known for its vicious werewolves (Donecker 2009b). It would seem that the Estonians and Latvians inherited their talent for diabolic shape changing from their barbarian ancestors.

The Wallachians, however, are a very different case (Donecker 2011c). Menius explains that they are the offspring of intermarriages between Goths and Romans. Bearing in mind that Menius was based at a Swedish university, this was high praise indeed: *Ex Italis & Gothis mixti*, thus combining the virtues of the Goths, the renowned ancestors of the Swedes, with the glories of Rome.¹² Menius was certainly well aware that he credited the Wallachians with the most prestigious pedigree possible.

Their dual origin bestows a very ambivalent image upon Estonians and Latvians. They embody the vices of their barbarian ancestors, sorcerous savages who once roamed the steppes of the Ukraine. Yet at the same time, they partake in the heritage of noble Romans and valiant Goths through their Wallachian forebears. Menius's genealogical model displays the very same dialectic of familiarity and otherness, inclusion and exclusion, that characterized Livonia as a periphery in the symbolic geography of early modern Europe. Formally, his *Syntagma de origine Livonorum* was an inquiry into the distant past. Yet, at the same time, it provided him with a way to comprehend the present, and to express the liminality of Livonia and its inhabitants in his personal mental map.

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Notes

- 1 The account of Menius's life is based primarily on the biographical material collected by Nordström (1921) and Fredén (1939, pp. 19–81).
- 2 Meier and Rantzau suggest that the proper scholarly description of a country should be divided into eleven chapters: *I. Cosmographica* (longitude and latitude, climate zone, duration of day and night), *II. Astronomica* (a horoscope for the country, based on the dominant stars and zodiacal signs), *III. Geographica* (islands, rivers, coastlines etc.), *IV. Chorographica* (regional division, neighboring countries, cities and villages, and transport routes), *V. Topographica* (detailed description of important cities and landmarks), *VI. Georgica* (agriculture, natural resources, flora and fauna), *VII. Nautica* (harbors, navigational hazards, currents), *VIII. Politica* (population, administration, laws, institutions, and local customs), *IX. Scholastica* (notable scholars, schools and universities, and archaeological sites), *X. Ecclesiastica* (religion, superstitions, and prominent churchmen), *XI. Historica* (divided into *Historica generalia*, covering the country's origins, its most notable rulers and their deeds, and *Historica chronologica*, an annalistic account of events, focusing on natural disasters, wars and prodigies) (Rassem & Stagl 1994, pp. 160–8). Menius's first concept of the Livonian chronicle copies these 11 chapters and arranges them into two books (Menius 1630, B4^v–C3^v). The *Syntagma de origine Livonorum* covers the first part of the historical chapter: 'How old is the country, and for how long has it been inhabited, according to the ancient historiographers?' 'Who were the first inhabitants?' 'How, and on which occasion, was it obtained by other, and finally by the present inhabitants?'
- 3 In a notable speech delivered in Marburg in 1599, Skytte presented the history of Sweden according to the Gothicist tradition. The oration was translated into Swedish and published five years later (Skytte 1604). Menius dedicated the *Syntagma* to Skytte, an indication that he intended to place his treatise firmly in a Gothicist framework.
- 4 Menius's relationship to Denmark is an interesting aspect of his career: in 1634, Menius visited the Danish island of Ösel, where the governor, Friedrich Rantzau, allowed him to consult several important documents on Livonian history. Expressing his gratitude, Menius dedicated the *Diatribe critica de Maris Balthici nominibus et ostiis* to Rantzau. He also planned to write a genealogical tract that traced the governor's noble lineage back to his illustrious twelfth-century ancestor, Count Wiprecht of Groitzsch (Menius 1848, p. 541). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the *Methodus describendi regiones, urbes et arces*, on which Menius modeled his planned Livonian chronicle (see above), had been co-authored by the governor's grandfather, Heinrich Rantzau. This is another indicator of the close ties between Menius and the Rantzau family. It is therefore understandable that Menius sought refuge on Ösel when he fled from Dorpat in 1637. Unfortunately, Friedrich Rantzau had by then been replaced as governor, and Menius never managed to establish amiable relations with his successor, Anders Bille. Later in his life, Menius (1646, pp. 348–49) claimed that his first visit to Ösel in 1634 had

- been a secret mission. The Swedish Governor General had allegedly ordered him to retrieve important documents from Danish custody. In this version of the story, Menius leaves the impression that he cunningly used Rantzau's gullibility to gain access to the sources. It seems he was trying to downplay his apparent friendship with the Rantzau family to the Swedish authorities, which could have been seen as inappropriate, considering the strained relationship between Sweden and Denmark.
- 5 Menius was occasionally critical of Saxo (Menius 1635b, where he mentions that his contemporary, the Swedish historiographer Johannes Messenius, allowed himself to be 'seduced by Saxo Grammaticus' into erroneous beliefs on the origins of the Swedish kings). In general, however, Menius considered Saxo to be a very reliable source (Menius 1848, pp. 526, 532). The concluding sections of the *Syntagma*, which deal with the campaigns of various Danish kings against Livonia, are largely based on the *Gesta Danorum*. In 1635, Menius announced he was going to publish a commentary on Saxo Grammaticus, which, like most of his projects, was never realized (Menius 1848, p. 541).
 - 6 Menius (1848, p. 516) asserts that the Scythians are not an ethnic group as such, but rather a common denominator for all those people who dwell in the North. It is therefore wrong to equate the Scythians exclusively with the Tartars, or to consider them a Germanic tribe by explaining their ethnonym as '*die Schützen*', the archers. The term subsumes a wide range of northern peoples, including the Sarmatians, the Slavs, the Vandals as well as the Scandinavians. In the mid-sixteenth century, Johannes Magnus established that the Goths, the ancestors of the Swedes, belonged to the Scythians. On this occasion, Menius unreservedly agrees.
 - 7 The list contains names, such as the Goths or the Wends, that seem to fit in an ancient history of the Baltic Sea Region, even from a modern point of view, while others seem far-fetched, to say the least. For Menius, even the Byzantines were possible inhabitants of Livonia. The complete line-up consists of the following ethnic groups: *Agathyrsi*, *Alauni*, *Aorsi*, *Arii*, *Arimaspi*, *Bastarnae*, *Budini*, *Burgundiones*, *Byzantini*, *Carbones*, *Careotae*, *Cimmerij* resp. *Cimbri* or *Cymbri*, *Curetes* resp. *Curones* or *Curi*, *Daci*, *Essedones* resp. *Issedones*, *Estij* or *Aestii*, *Efflui*, *Galindae*, *Gelones*, *Gethae*, *Glessarij*, *Gepidae*, *Gothini* resp. *Gothi*, *Gythones*, *Hellespontici*, *Heruli*, *Jazyges*, *Igillones*, *Jyrtae*, *Manimi*, *Massagethae*, *Melanclaeni*, *Lemovij*, *Livones*, *Longobardi*, *Naharvali*, *Nervij* resp. *Neuri*, *Osii* resp. *Hosij*, *Ombrones*, *Pagiritae*, *Peucini*, *Phenni* resp. *Phinni* or *Finrones*, *Rugij*, *Salii*, *Savari*, *Sembi*, *Semgalli*, *Sitones*, *Sudeni*, *Sulani*, *Vandali*, *Venedae* resp. *Wendi*, *Veltae*, *Winuli*, *Ulmi-Rugi*, *Wallachi* and *Werlici*.
 - 8 Menius provided a table that shows the ethnic division of the Suebi and the territories inhabited by their different tribes. It has been omitted from the modern editions of the *Syntagma*, but is reproduced in Donecker 2010, p. 115. Contrary to the consensus of modern researchers (Bammersberger & Karaliūnas 1998), most early modern scholars believed that the *Aestii* mentioned by Tacitus in the first century AD were direct ancestors of the Estonians (Donecker 2010, pp. 271–7). Menius seems undecided in this question. He mentions the *Aestii* twice: once among the Suebic tribes and later again among the barbarian invaders of the fifth century BC. The former are, according to Menius, unrelated to the Estonians, while the latter are their immediate ancestors. This contradiction remains

- unresolved and has, most likely, to be considered a mistake on the author's part (Donecker 2010, p. 275–6).
- 9 Menius's account is based on Herodotus's *Histories*, 4, 120–42. Herodotus describes a war between the Persians and the Scythians. Menius, however, replaces the latter with the Goths. In doing so, he is in line with seventeenth-century Swedish historiography, which tended to consider Goths and Scythians as the same nation.
 - 10 Some of the similarities noted by seventeenth-century scholars, for example the connection between Latvian and Latin, were later confirmed by Indo-European linguistics. Others, such as the alleged affinity between Hebrew and Latvian that Menius claimed, depended on purely random and superficial semblances between single words.
 - 11 Disregarding the initial Germanic inhabitants of Livonia (Suebi, Vandals and Goths) who, according to Menius's tract, preceded the Estonians and Latvians and were unrelated to them.
 - 12 In a marginal note (Menius 1635a, p. 74) omitted in the 1848 edition.

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