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Bring Witslaw Home?

The Duchy of Rügen's Trans-Baltic Contacts and the Repatriation of Human Remains

Abstract

Witslaw II, Duke of Rügen, died in 1302 in Oslo while visiting his daughter Eufemia, Queen of Norway. He was buried according to his wishes in the Church of St Mary in Oslo but his remains were excavated in the early twentieth century. His remains have since then been kept in an anthropological collection at the University of Oslo. The Rani dynasty of Rügen, which was established as vassals of the Danish Crown after the conquest of 1168, ruled the duchy from before the Christianisation and until the early fourteenth century, when the Slavic language had mostly disappeared from the area and the process of *Ostsiedlung*, with its drastic demographic, cultural and linguistic changes, had been completed. The present contextualisation of a local initiative to bring Witslaw's remains 'home' to Rügen demonstrates his cultural and political significance both in the past and in the present, as well as the complexities of repatriation cases.

Keywords: Rügen, Rani, Scandinavia, conquest, colonisation, Christianisation, *Ostsiedlung*, repatriation, human remains

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Introduction: The Duke in the Cardboard Box

In June 2022, the Chair of Nordic History at the University of Greifswald was contacted by Mr Albrecht Wernitzsch regarding the assumed remains of the medieval Duke Witslaw II[1] of Rügen (present-day Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany) in Oslo, Norway. Mr Wernitzsch emailed in the capacity of being the head of an initiative to bring Witslaw's remains 'home' to Rügen, as the current location of the human remains in a cardboard box in the Biological Anthropology Collection at the University of Oslo[2], was deemed unsatisfactory and unworthy considering the duke's status.

Issues of repatriation of human remains are complex, often painful and usually controversial. The repatriation of Witslaw's remains would present another chapter in a centuries-old history of connections between Norway or, more broadly, the Scandinavian countries, and the Baltic Sea region, with the medieval Duchy of Rügen in its centre. The Rani dynasty of Rügen, initially ruling the duchy before its Christianisation, became vassals of the Danish Crown following the conquest of 1168. The dynasty governed the duchy until the early fourteenth century, by which time the Slavic language had mostly disappeared from the region, and the process of *Ostsiedlung* had brought significant demographic, cultural and linguistic changes.

Processes of repatriation, specifically those involving human remains, present complex challenges. In these processes, it is therefore crucial to 'get insight into the cultural, political and historical contexts from which the remains stem'[3]. The present article intends to contextualise the initiative to bring Witslaw's remains 'home' to Rügen by presenting the medieval history of the area, specifically emphasising the connections between Scandinavia and Rügen, and highlighting contemporary debates regarding the repatriation of human remains. In the latter vein, the article first questions the colonial or pre-colonial nature of the power relations between Slavic and Germanic

[1] A note on spelling: most German texts use 'Wizlaw', while 'Vitslav' and other forms are common in English and other languages. The medieval sources vary in the spelling of the name of the dukes of Rügen: Wizslav, Witzlaw, Vitzlav and other variants all appear on seals and in diplomas.

[2] The anatomical collection comprises archaeological and historical human skeletal remains with related archival documentation, ranging from the Stone Age to the end of the nineteenth century, previously named *De Schreinerske Samlinger*, see *The Biological Anthropology Collection at the University of Oslo*, https://www.med.uio.no/imb/english/research/about/biological-anthropology-collection [accessed online 5 December 2023].

[3] Hallvard Fossheim, *Introductory Remarks*, [in:] *More than Just Bones: Ethics and Research on Human Remains*, ed. idem, Oslo 2012, p. 8.

speaking groups in the process of *Ostsiedlung*, considering the often-colonial background of repatriation processes.

'More than Just Bones?': The Repatriation of Human Remains

The repatriation of human remains is an often-controversial topic within the sector of cultural heritage and has become a 'contested issue' across several planes[4]. Many aspects are to be considered during the process, specifically regarding the wishes of the deceased, if at all possible to reconstruct; the wishes of potential descendants; the general political framework of the current location of the remains at the time of death and at present; as well as the scientific and scholarly interest in the remains, if they are kept in a scientific collection (such as in the case of Witslaw's remains)[5].

Many issues surrounding repatriations stem from colonial relations, and the power asymmetry at the time of the person's death, or in the periods after, making it difficult and painful for societies to deal with the issues. These imbalances were particularly evident during the periods when many of the remains, now housed in collections, museums or similar, were acquired. Such acquisitions were often driven by colonial ideologies that dehumanised Indigenous and other marginalised groups. Between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, Indigenous peoples and other minority groups were 'subjected to invasive and discriminatory research based on pseudo-scientific theories of racial superiority'[6]. Theories such as Social Darwinism and eugenics, now discredited, sought to endorse a specific European self-perception of civilised superiority as opposed to an Indigenous evolutionary primitivity through the measuring of skulls of both living humans and human remains to create a biased evolutionary scale[7]. In these pseudo-scientific attempts to define human races, human remains were stolen, kept as trophies or kept in anthropological collections. For many Indigenous communities, this is especially painful because of religious beliefs in which ancestors hold a specific spiritual significance[8]. Keeping these remains in such collections risks perpetuating

[4] Neil G. W. Curtis, *Human Remains: The Sacred, Museums and Archaeology*, Public Archaeology, vol. 3: 2003, no. 1, p. 21.

[5] Ibid., p. 7.

[6] *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Sámi Statistics in Norway*, Norwegian National Human Rights Institution, https://www.nhri.no/en/2020/a-human-rights-based-approach-to-sami-statistics-in-norway [accessed online 27 December 2024], p. 49.

[7] Alessandro Chechi, *Repairing Historic Injustice: The Return of Indigenous Peoples' Ancestral Human Remains Through Transitional Justice*, International Journal of Cultural Property, vol. 30: 2023, no. 4, p. 424.

[8] Ibid., pp. 422–423.

or repeating historical trauma and violence affecting these communities, as the dehumanisation behind the acquisition established patterns of dispossession that continue to exist today. Indeed, according to Alessandro Chechi, this 'colonial plunder has left a far-reaching emotional scar on former subjugated peoples and their descendants that has not healed despite the passage of time'[9].

This prolonged injustice derives from the inherent link between individuals and communities and these acquisitions (including human remains) linked to their culture or historical past, as the importance of these objects is 'accorded to them by people for the reason that such things are recognized by them as part of their identity and history'[10]. The discriminatory past and present associated with these acquisitions further strengthen the perseverance of claimants. As such, human remains become 'more than just bones'[11]. Therefore, the processes of addressing repatriation issues are fraught with painful memories and complicated presents for those involved.

Chechi has suggested several guiding principles for the return of 'ancestral human remains', namely: 1) those seeking to recover the remains offer to those institutions holding them persuasive evidence that the claimed remains have been illegitimately removed from the place of origin, taken by force, unequal treaty, theft, deception or without compensation and that this misappropriation disrupts their wellbeing; 2) those seeking to recover the remains demonstrate the 'cultural context' in which the claimed remains can 'meaningfully return'; and, lastly, 3) a meaningful debate between the restitution claimants, transitional justice and cultural heritage experts is facilitated to identify solutions[12].

In Witslaw's case, his remains were not removed forcefully or illegally from his homeland, as he died peacefully while visiting his daughter in Norway. After a long period of undisturbed burial in a church in Oslo, his remains were excavated and have since been kept in a biological anthropological collection at the University of Oslo. While medieval Indigeneity is an admittedly complicated and controversial topic[13], Witslaw (and his remains) neither represents a past nor present Indigenous community[14]. Nevertheless, the request

[9] Ibid., p. 420.

[10] Ibid.

[11] H. Fossheim, op.cit., pp. 7–10.

[12] A. Chechi, op.cit., p. 433.

[13] Suzanne C. Akbari, *Race, Environment, Culture: Medieval Indigeneity, Race and Racialization*, [in:] *A Cultural History of Race in the Middle Ages*, ed. Thomas Hahn (The Cultural History Series), London 2022, pp. 47–66; Adam Miyashiro, *Our Deeper Past: Race, Settler Colonialism, and Medieval Heritage Politics*, Literature Compass, vol. 16: 2019, no. 9–10, pp. 1–11.

[14] Certainly not according to the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention established by the International Labour Organization in 1989 (ILO 169), see https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169 [accessed online 27 December 2024].

to repatriate Witslaw's remains raises questions similar to other cases, namely: who has the right to decide where he should be buried? The dynasty he came from is extinguished and the Slavic speaking population in the Duchy of Rügen disappeared around the fourteenth or early fifteenth century. The political, cultural and economic developments which led to this are different from the consequences of modern colonialism and cultural genocide. These developments were caused by two processes: the Danish conquest of Rügen and their military success in the area on the one hand, and the broader settlement pattern called *deutsche Ostsiedlung*, on the other.

Danish-German Colonialism?

During the twelfth century, Danish kings led several military raids in the southern Baltic Sea region, in the wake of the call for a crusade against the Wendish pagans issued by the archbishop of Magdeburg in 1108[15]. After several backdrops, the Danish conquest of 1186 led to the typical Christianisation of the area during which the political elite agreed to baptism in order to create a viable political relationship with the new Christian rulers. By definition, the area was Christianised and integrated into Danish church structures. The Rani rulers became vassals of the Danish king, even though this status seems to have been contested and a vassal relation to the Holy Roman Empire existed for at least some parts of their dominion on the island of Rügen[16]. However, there was apparently no major Danish immigration to the area following the conquest. 'There were major economic benefits associated with the conquest, but apparently the ultimate goal was not to acquire new land for Danish colonies, as opposed to the simultaneous German expansion into the same region with a massive breaking of new land with the help of German-speaking immigrants, sometimes from as far away as Flanders'[17], as stated by Michael Bregnsbo and Kurt Villads Jensen. Indeed, the legal and geographical position of Rügen between the Danish kings and the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire seems to have led to a specific form of colonisation. While the exploitation of resources and the extraction of taxes and tributes were central to the relationship between the vassal and king, cultural and political domination usually unfolded quite differently from modern forms of colonialism. Most importantly, processes of religious change and acculturation were not framed within

[15] See Michael Bregnsbo, Kurt V. Jensen, *The Rise and Fall of the Danish Empire*, Cham 2022.

[16] On 13 January 1293, Witslaw II confirmed the land of Tribsees as a fiefdom of the bishopric of Schwerin, which could mean that Tribsees contributed to establishing a vassal relationship between Witslaw and German King Rudolf I of Habsburg, see *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Fürstenthums Rügen unter den eingebornen Fürsten*, Bd. 3: *Zweites Heft der Urkunden von 1260–1302*, hrsg. v. Carl G. Fabricius, Stettin 1853, no. 227.

[17] M. Bregnsbo, K. V. Jensen, op.cit., p. 62.

racist and pejorative constructions of the 'Other' in the same way as they have been since the early modern period. Nevertheless, the long-term results of crusades and conquests were similar to colonial rule in many ways: languages and populations disappeared, the demography changed, (urban) elites adopted and developed languages and cultures different from the rest of the population, knowledge of Latin literacy and administration became central, and political structures changed according to models from the centre of Christian Europe.

In Rügen, the processes of linguistic and cultural change are clearly visible, while the aspect of political domination after the Danish conquest seems negligible. The local rulers, the Rani, transformed into a dynasty according to the model of Christian rulership and were important political partners for both the Danish king and the emperor. Central to the foundation of Christian culture, in addition to integration into Christian kingdoms, was the spread of Latin literacy, which was visible in the Duchy of Rügen from the late twelfth century on, i.e. relatively soon after the conquest[18].

The process of *Ostsiedlung* has been heavily debated between German and Slavic scholars and was used as a legitimising tactic for German expansion in both world wars of the twentieth century. After the First World War, German scholars intensified their debates on the medieval processes of settlement and colonisation to support German territorial claims within and beyond the borders of the German Reich of 1871. The term *deutscher Kulturboden* held particular significance since it defined a cultural area of influence stretching beyond the political borders of 1918. It was mounted into drastic political measures during the Second World War. In the post-war decades, scholarship in East and West Germany followed radically differing trajectories: while the *Kulturboden* theory was carefully questioned only in the late 1970s in West Germany, East German historians pointed out the mutual relations between different ethnic groups in Eastern Germany and Central and Eastern Europe[19].

Despite the long-lasting political and ideological differences in the views on *Ostsiedlung*, there is little controversy about the fact that it led to massive demographic, cultural and linguistic changes in the region from the twelfth century onwards, some of them brought peacefully, some in the form of military campaigns and forced Christianisation.

The massive influx of settlers from areas west of the River Elbe was stimulated by demographic growth in these areas and local eastern territorial lords

[18] Sébastien Rossignol, *The Charters of the Princes of Rügen and the Display of Authority*, Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung, Bd. 66: 2017, Nr. 2, p. 160.

[19] For an overview of the twentieth-century debates, see Jörg Hackmann, *Deutsche Ostsiedlung*, [in:] *Handbuch der völkischen Wissenschaften*, Bd. 2: *Forschungskonzepte – Institutionen – Organisationen – Zeitschriften*, hrsg. v. Michael Fahlbusch, Ingo Haar, Alexander Pinwinkler, Berlin–Boston 2017, pp. 976–997.

creating favourable conditions. Arriving with the settlers were techniques of damming and agriculture, encouraging in turn the foundation of towns according to the Lübeck (and later Magdeburg) Law. The rulers' interests were the development of land and the successful growth of a tax paying population, while the settlers' interests were easy access to land and property as well as relative freedom of trade and business in the towns. The local populations remain mostly silent in the sources, although the archaeological finds shed light on their situation and testify to the existence of local cultural traditions until the end of the Middle Ages in some areas of settlement[20]. The language change and the disappearance of Slavic and Baltic languages and cultures is however difficult to date.

Regarding the question of Witslaw's remains, the evidence does not indicate any colonial relationship between Norway, or rather, the predecessors of today's Norway, and the Duchy of Rügen, at the time. While power relations between Germanic and Slavic speaking populations were complicated, the West Norse speaking areas played no role in this dynamic.

The Christianisation of the Rügen Area

The Principality of Rügen, formerly a duchy, existed between 1168 and 1325. The Slavonic dynasty of the Witslawids ruled the area during this period, before it died out with Witslaw II's son, Witslaw III. Archaeological records suggest that, in the locality of Arkona, some kind of settlement had existed since the eighth century, with a castle built in the ninth century, probably consisting of two structures with a main castle and an outer bailey. It is, however, unclear whether the outer wall was constructed only after the Danish attacks in the beginning of the twelfth century. The finds comprise objects testifying to trade and contact with Scandinavia as well as with the Carolingian Empire and to the North Sea[21]. These finds indicate that Rügen had formed part of a trans-Baltic and international trading network prior to the Danish conquest. The Latin historiography, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, portrays the history of the Christianisation of Rügen as an ambiguous development and the island's inhabitants as apostates[22]. Saxo suggests that the Rani population had been in

[20] Cf. *Slawisches Siedlungswesen im nordostdeutschen Raum. Archäologische Forschungen auf früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Fundplätzen von der Insel Rügen bis zur Uckermark*, hrsg. v. Felix Biermann (Studien zur Archäologie Europas, Bd. 33), Bonn 2019.

[21] Joachim Herrmann, *Arkona auf Rügen. Tempelburg und politisches Zentrum der Ranen vom 9. bis 12. Jahrhundert. Ergebnisse der archäologischen Ausgrabungen 1969–1971*, Zeitschrift für Archäologie, Jg. 8: 1974, pp. 201–202.

[22] Kurt V. Jensen, *Saxo and the War with the Slavs*, [in:] *A Companion to Saxo Grammaticus*, ed. Thomas K. Heebøll-Holm, Lars B. Mortensen (The Northern World, vol. 97), Leiden 2024, pp. 267–268.

contact with Christianity since the ninth century via Corvey Abbey, but had rejected the faith after the death of St Vitus of Corvey[23]. Just like major parts of the Scandinavian populations, the Rani successfully adopted Christianity and the political structures that came with it at some point during the twelfth century, even though a siege and conquest are described as the beginning of this religious change.

Central for the region was the Danish siege of Arkona in 1168. Saxo Grammaticus described in detail the temple and the Svantevit idol in it, which the Danish troops had difficulties destroying without getting killed themselves due to its massive weight and size. According to Saxo, the Svantevit sanctuary was the central place for offerings and collective rituals such as prophesies and sacrifices for the entire Slavic population of the area, and even Christian rulers, such as the Danish King Sven, paid their tribute in Arkona[24]. After the siege of the town and castle, the Rani surrendered to the Danish King Valdemar II, pledged allegiance and paid tribute to Denmark, and reportedly adopted the Christian faith.

Absalon, Bishop of Roskilde, accompanied the Danish king on the crusade, taking the Rani nobleman Jaromir for negotiations to the second most important town on the island of Rügen, named Karenz, which traditionally was thought to be located close to today's Garz, while other scholars suggest the fortress Venz close to Arkona as a more likely site[25]. Karenz was also the site of important Slavic idols and temples that were destroyed during the Danish military campaign.

As Saxo points out, the Danes made a point of not destroying the towns or killing townspeople during their conquest, focusing instead on creating bonds with the nobility and focusing on the adoption of the Christian faith. In the *Gesta Danorum*, the adoption of both the faith and the political structures of the victors is portrayed as having been a relatively smooth process resulting in mutual benefit. Tetislaw, who was named king and ruler of not only the island but also of the whole of Pomerania in the chronicle[26], became a vassal of the Danish king, with his brother Jaromar succeeding him as prince of Rügen in 1170. While this was celebrated as a central victory of Christian forces in the Baltic Sea and the start of several successful Danish crusades in the region, the actual Christianisation of the local population is, as in many other areas converted

[23] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, http://www.kb.dk/elib/lit/dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/index.htm [accessed online 5 December 2023], lib. XIV, cap. 39, 13.

[24] Ibid., lib. XIV, cap. 39, 8.

[25] Ibid., lib. XIV, cap. 39, 36–37; see also footnote 281.

[26] Ibid., lib. XIV, cap. 39, 46.

by force, not documented. Also, similar to other regions, the missionaries and clerics that followed the initial conquest spoke different languages from the local population. The princely chancellery, however, did not evolve into a stable institution before the 1280s[27]. While it is not known how long the people on the island and in the rest of the duchy spoke Slavic languages, legend has it that the Rani dialect disappeared in the beginning of the fifteenth century. In the ruling dynasty, language change must have come much earlier. The last of the rulers, Witslaw III (1265–1325), has long been seen as a troubadour producing courtly literature in Middle High German. His authorship of a collection of songs included in the *Jenaer Liederhandschrift* manuscript has been deconstructed by literary scholars but lives on in local folklore[28]. Witslaw III's chancellery was the first to issue not only Latin, but also German charters, and several members of the family excelled as patrons of German vernacular literature[29].

The church structures were divided between the Danish bishopric of Roskilde, to which the island belonged, and the bishopric of Schwerin, which incorporated the mainland sections, stretching westwards along the coast behind the Darß Peninsula, south close to the town of Demmin, and east as far as the islands of Usedom and Wolin. Earlier missionary attempts had been led by Bishop Otto of Bamberg, who had travelled in the area between 1124 and 1128. Monasteries were founded in the duchy from the 1170s onwards, predominantly Benedictine and Cistercian, for example in Dargun and later moved to Eldena close to Greifswald in 1199, and in Bergen on the island of Rügen (Ger. Bergen auf Rügen) in 1193 (a female Cistercian convent). Both the foundation of the Church of St Mary and the Cistercian nunnery in Bergen auf Rügen were commenced by Jaromir I and functioned as suffragan and filiation of Danish church structures. The Church of St Mary was consecrated by Bishop Peter of Roskilde, and the nunnery was founded with twelve nuns from the Monastery of the Holy Virgin in Roskilde[30]. There is an unresolved

[27] In general, on population growth in the Duchy of Rügen, see Heike Reimann, Fred Ruchhöft, Cornelia Willich, *Rügen im Mittelalter. Eine interdisziplinäre Studie zur mittelalterlichen Besiedlung auf Rügen* (Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Mitteleuropa, Bd. 36), Stuttgart 2011.

[28] Burghart Wachinger, *Wizlav*, [in:] *Verfasser-Datenbank*, https://www.degruyterbrill.com/database/VDBO/entry/vdbo.vlma.4899/html [accessed online 30 April 2025].

[29] Mario Müller, *Wizlav (von Rügen?)*, [in:] *Verfasser-Datenbank*, https://www.degruyterbrill.com/database/VDBO/entry/vdbo.killy.7422/html [accessed online 30 April 2025].

[30] The preserved sources for the establishment and functioning of the monastery have been collected and published in Johann J. Grümbke, *Gesammelte Nachrichten zur Geschichte des ehemaligen Cisterzienser Nonnenklosters St. Maria in Bergen auf der Insel Rügen*, Stralsund 1833.

scholarly debate around the question of when the Benedictines in Bergen auf Rügen reformed into Cistercians, but before 1250 seems to be a likely guess[31].

Aside from the political interests, which led to recurrent conflicts between the duchies of Mecklenburg, Danish Rügen and Pomerania, the area proved a successful settlement area for the process of *Ostsiedlung*. The dukes encouraged settlement and supported the foundation of towns according to the Lübeck Law on the island and in the rest of the duchy, namely, Barth, Tribsees, Stralsund and Greifswald. The success of town law according to 'German' models has previously been seen by nationalistic scholars as the spread of a German *Geist* and superior cultural model. Investigations into town laws in medieval Sweden, however, have shown that, in actuality, only a lesser part of the law codes was drawn from the Lübeck model, and the rest consisted of locally specific rules and regulations. The 'German' law was basically a label for advertising, not the unconditional adoption of a model[32].

The Witslawid Dynasty and Their Relations within the Baltic Sea Region

Rügen was an important outpost for the Danish conquests in the Baltic Sea. Their immediate goals after the conquest of Rügen were in the neighbouring areas, and troops from Rügen supported warfare on Wolin and Usedom as well as in Wolgast. The Danish also came into conflict with the duke of Pomerania, who had, at the request of Duke Henry the Lion, supported the conquest of Rügen but received no rewards.

The dukes of Rügen used the title *princeps Ruianorum* in their charters, also Witslaw II's wife, Agnes, issued charters as *princeps Ruianorum*. Only Jaromar I briefly used *rex Rugianorum*[33]. This may have been connected to the period when Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa tried to broaden his influence in the Baltic Sea region and promised Jaromar the title of king if he would cease to be Valdemar's vassal and join the ranks of the emperor instead[34]. Jaromar refused, but this may have influenced his sense of significance in the region. He continued to maintain close ties with the Danish Crown and with Absalon, now the Archbishop of Lund. In the 1170s and 1180s, the war against the

[31] Sven Wichert, *Zur Geschichte des Klosters*, [in:] *Der Klosterhof und die Kirche St. Marien in Bergen auf Rügen*, Bergen auf Rügen 2005, pp. 5–6.

[32] Cf. Sofia Gustafsson, *German Influence in Swedish Medieval Towns: Reflections upon the Time-bound Historiography of the Twentieth Century*, [in:] *Guilds, Towns and Cultural Transmission in the North, 1300–1500*, ed. Lars Bisgaard, Lars B. Mortensen, Tom Pettitt, Odense 2013, pp. 109–130.

[33] S. Rossignol, op.cit., p. 161.

[34] Peter Ziemann, *Ranen, Rügen und Meer. Die Geschichte eines versunkenen, slawischen Volksstammes*, Elmenhorst/Vorpommern 2015, p. 94.

dukes of Pomerania was the main task in the region. As a result of his services, Jaromar and the Duchy of Rügen received the lands of Tribsees and Wusterhusen in 1194 from King Knut VI.

The main residence of the dukes seems to have been Garz[35]. After Jaromar's death, his second son Witslaw I took over the regency. Only very few charters and written sources testify to his reign. He also joined the Danish king in military endeavours, namely, he reportedly participated in the conquest of Livonia in 1219. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, nevertheless, the dukes of Rügen had become increasingly independent from their Danish overlords[36]. Connections with Livonia, however, remained. Since the conquest, the Witslawid dukes continuously donated to churches in Riga[37] and granted its inhabitants special trading privileges with Rügen. In Reval, under Danish rule, the Witslawids were patrons of the Church of St Olaf and the Cistercian nunnery. In 1281, Witslaw II confirmed all the privileges that his predecessors had awarded Riga's inhabitants[38]. The duke seems to have spent most of the year 1282 in Riga and Livonia, in peaceful endeavours and seemingly without the company of a Danish delegation[39]. The *Livonian Rhymed Chronicle* also mentions him as a participant of a successful military campaign against the Semigallians[40].

The political, religious and cultural assimilation of the Rani dukes to the Danish system seems to have been swift and successful for both sides. While the timeframe of how long the Rani continued to speak a Slavic language is unknown, all the material demonstrates that they were obviously capable of building an internationally acknowledged chancellery and functioned in diplomatic contexts in Denmark, the Empire and Livonia. Compared to the existing but marginal significance of Rügen as a place for trade and exchange in the Baltic Sea region before the Christianisation, the prospects of the Rani dynasty widened considerably with this contact. How the rest of the population perceived the change of the political and religious system and the massive influx of German speaking settlers, as well as the redistribution of land in favour of ecclesiastical institutions, is less certain.

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[35] Ibid., p. 101.

[36] Krzysztof Guzikowski, *Verbindungen des Rügenfürsten Wizlaw II. (1261–1302) und seiner Ritter mit den Ostsee-Gebieten*, Studia Maritima, vol. 23: 2010, pp. 27–40.

[37] *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Fürstenthums Rügen unter den eingebornen Fürsten*, Bd. 1: *Einleitung*, hrsg. v. Carl G. Fabricius, Stralsund 1841, no. 31, p. 234 (16 September 1237).

[38] *Pommersches Urkundenbuch*, Bd. 2, Abt. 2: *1278–1286*, bearb. v. Rodgero Prümers, Stettin 1885, no. 1229, pp. 469–470.

[39] *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Fürstenthums Rügen*, Bd. 3, p. 24.

[40] *Livländische Reimchronik*, hrsg. v. Franz Pfeiffer, Stuttgart 1844, v. 9512–9666, pp. 256–259.

Witslaw II's Life and Death

Witslaw was likely born between 1240 and 1245 to Duke Jaromar II and Eufemia, daughter to the Duke of Pomerania Swantopolk II the Great. He was married to Agnes of Braunschweig-Lüneburg in 1263. The first time Duke Witslaw II is mentioned in a Norwegian context is in a letter of free passage dated (before 8 September) 1298 from the king of Denmark to King Eiríkr II Magnússon of Norway and his brother Duke Hákon Magnússon. The letter offered their entourage free passage to attend a meeting in the Danish historical province of Halland (in present-day Sweden), which was guaranteed by Duke Witslaw II of Rügen[41]. It is likely that the marriage between Witslaw's daughter, Eufemia, to Duke Hákon was planned during this meeting, as a letter written in Lübeck in late 1298 or early 1299 states that envoys would imminently arrive in Stralsund to bring the 'prince' of Rügen's daughter to Norway: 'The messengers of the king and duke of Norway will soon travel to Stralsund, to bring the daughter of the prince of the Rani to the duke of Norway'[42].

Eufemia would become much more prominent than her parents. Her influence remains especially significant in contemporary medieval scholarship, where she figures prominently not only as the crowned queen of Norway but as a major facilitator of cultural transmission who commissioned the first translations of French and German chivalric romances into Old Swedish[43]. Her mother Agnes' comprehensive education in Quedlinburg Abbey has been seen as influential to Eufemia's interest in continental courtly literature and education. The collection of early fourteenth-century texts known as the *Eufemiavisorna* contains *Herr Ivan lejonriddaren*, *Hertig Fredrik av Normandie* and *Flores och Blanzeflor*, and Eufemia is mentioned in colophons at the end of each text as the commissioner. Witslaw and Agnes of Braunschweig-Lüneburg's oldest son, Witslaw III, also profited from the comprehensive education offered by their parents. Indeed, it was Eufemia's brother who had been credited by scholars with the authorship of a number of *Sangsprüche* and *Minnelieder*, as transmitted in the *Jenaer Liederhandschrift*[44].

The wedding between Eufemia and Hákon was held in the summer of 1299, soon after which King Eiríkr died[45]. The dowry paid by Witslaw was 3,000

[41] *Regesta Norvegica*, Bd. 2: *1264–1300*, utg. Narve Bjørgo, Sverre Bagge, Oslo 1978, p. 945.

[42] 'Nuncii regis et ducis Norwegie Stralessundis venient in brevi, ut duci Norwegie adducent filiam principis Ruianorum'; ibid., p. 968.

[43] Bjørn Bandlien's extensive work on Eufemia seems the most relevant, see *Eufemia. Oslos middelalderdronning*, red. Bjørn Bandlien, Oslo 2012.

[44] Sabine Werg, Die Sprüche und Lieder Wizlavs von Rügen. Untersuchungen und kritische Ausgabe der Gedichte (doctoral diss., Universität Hamburg), Hamburg 1969.

[45] Per Holck, *Der rügische Fürst Witslaw II. und sein Grab in Oslo*, Baltische Studien. Pommersche Jahrbücher für Landesgeschichte, Bd. 87: 2001, p. 36; *Islandske annaler indtil 1578*,

Cologne marks, of which Hákon lent 2,000 marks to Valdemar of Sönderjylland, which is not the original intention of a dowry, but he gave Eufemia the Bygdøy Peninsula in the Oslo Fjord as income after his death[46]. Hákon and Eufemia were crowned in Oslo on 1 November the same year, as reported in the Icelandic annals: 'Duke Hákon took the kingdom and was crowned, as was Eufemia [crowned – C.H. and S.M.W.] queen'[47], and are reported as granting the Church of St Mary several gifts following their coronation as well as throughout their reign[48]. Several contemporaneous reports indicate that the church was especially important to the royals, who used it as their chapel and gave it privileged political and religious status[49]. Hákon and Eufemia's only reported child together, Ingibjørg, was born in 1301[50].

An Icelandic annal entry from 1302 states that Witslaw was among those present at the betrothal ceremony between Ingibjørg, his granddaughter, and Duke Erik Magnusson of Sweden in Bohuslän on 29 September[51]. In October of the same year, Hákon appealed to Lübeck and the other Wendish towns of the Hansa to support Witslaw against the Teutonic Order and promised them rewards in the form of political support for other causes[52]. Witslaw visited his daughter Eufemia after this, as it is reported that he celebrated Christmas in Oslo before falling ill and dying at the end of the same year[53].

His testament, signed 27 December 1302, states his express wish to be buried in the Church of St Mary alongside his donation of considerable sums to the church and its collegiate: 'Also, I choose to be buried in the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Oslo, for which I bequeath for the construction and repair of the parish churches of this church one hundred marks of pure silver of the Norwegian weight'[54]. The testament also states considerable donations

udg. Gustav Storm (Det norske historiske kildeskriftfonds skrifter, Bd. 21), Christiania 1888 (hereinafter cited as *Islandske annaler*), p. 72.

[46] *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, saml. 3, udg. Christian C. A. Lange, Carl R. Unger, Christiania 1855, no. 61, pp. 69–70 (Bergen, 10 December 1305).

[47] 'Hertugi Hakon tok konungdom oc var krunaðr oc sua Euphemia drottning'; *Islandske annaler*, p. 72.

[48] *Regesta Norvegica*, Bd. 2, p. 1012.

[49] Sverre Bagge, *Kanslerembedet og Mariakirken i Oslo*, [in:] *Oslo bispedømme 900 år. Historiske studier*, utg. Fridjtov S. Birkeli, Oslo 1975, pp. 143–161.

[50] *Islandske annaler*, p. 72.

[51] Ibid., p. 73.

[52] Riksarkivet, Svenskt Diplomatariums huvudkartotek över medeltidsbreven, https://sok.riksarkivet.se/SDHK [accessed online 5 December 2023], no. 1980 (Kungahälla, 6 October 1302).

[53] *Islandske annaler*, p. 73.

[54] 'Item apud ecclesiam beate Marie virginis Asloy eligio sepulturam, cui lego ad structuram et fabricam ipsius ecclesias parrochiales ipsius ecclesie centum marcas puri argenti ponderis Noricani'; *Pommersches Urkundenbuch*, Bd. 4, Abt. 2: *1307–1310*, bearb. v. Georg Winter, Stettin 1903, p. 68.

to the nearby Cathedral of St Hallvard, as well as smaller donations to other clerical institutions in Oslo, being the Dominicans, the Franciscans, Hovedøya Abbey, Nonneseter Abbey, the Church of St Nicholas, the Church of St Clemens, the Church of the Holy Cross and the Hospital of St Laurentius[55]. King Hákon, Queen Eufemia, Duke Erik of Sweden, the king's chancellor, and Witslaw's chaplain and secretary are listed among the witnesses. The fact that Witslaw had time to write or dictate the testament indicates that his death was not acute and that the wishes expressed should be treated accordingly as bearing direct witness of Witslaw's individual wish. According to the oldest surviving Swedish historical chronicle, *Erik's Chronicle*, most likely written in the 1320s or early 1330s, Witslaw died two days later, on 29 December[56].

Excavation and Location of the Remains

Through correspondence with Julia Kristine Kotthaus, collection manager at the Biological Anthropology Collection at the University of Oslo (then *De Schreinerske Samlinger*), it was established that the remains referred to by Mr Albrecht Wernitzsch were indeed present in the collection[57]. These remains were excavated from the ruins of the medieval Church of St Mary in Saxegårdsgate, Oslo (then Christiania), in 1868 by archaeologist Nicolay Nicolaysen[58]. The remains were found in a single brick tomb located in the middle of the church choir, directly connected to a separate double burial. Following the excavations, the remains from the single burial were placed in the anthropological collection of the Anatomical Institute of the Royal Frederik's University (Nor. *Det Kongelige Frederiks Universitet*, now the University of Oslo), where they were listed as the 'Prelate' (Nor. *Prelaten*) due to the remains carrying a silver finger ring with the inscription *Ave Maria gratia plena* ('Hail Mary, full of grace')[59]. The remains were then partially assembled for educational purposes, most likely due to a pronounced bone tumour on the right femur. According to Julia Kristine Kotthaus, the tumour has at some point during this process been cut, examined, and the remaining fragments reattached to the femur[60].

The double burial also found in the church choir was not excavated until 1961–1963. These remains, consisting of two individuals, were identified as belonging to King Hákon V Magnússon of Norway and his Queen Eufemia of Rügen, on the basis of historical texts that record their burial in the church and

[55] *Regesta Norvegica*, Bd. 3: *1301–1319*, utg. Sverre Bagge, Arnved Nedkvitne, Oslo 1983, p. 66.

[56] P. Holck, op.cit., p. 39.

[57] Personal correspondence, Julia Kristine Kotthaus, 16 June 2022.

[58] P. Holck, op.cit., p. 39.

[59] Ibid., pp. 39, 41.

[60] Personal correspondence, Julia Kristine Kotthaus, 16 June 2022.

the dating of the skeletons by Doctor of Medicine Per Holck[61]. As historical texts also record the burial of Eufemia's father, Duke Witslaw II of Rügen, in the Church of St Mary following his death in Oslo in 1302, and subsequent age determinations of the remains coincide with that of the duke, the individual buried in the single tomb is therefore likely identifiable as him. At the will of King Olav V of Norway, the remains of King Hákon and Queen Eufemia were interred in the walls of the royal crypt of Akershus Fortress (the construction of which was initiated during Hákon's reign), in 1982, where they remain to this day. The remains of Witslaw II continue to be stored in the Biological Anthropology Collection in Oslo.

In 2011, Professor Per Holck received a request from the congregation of the Church of St Mary in Bergen auf Rügen regarding the possible repatriation of the remains of Witslaw II[62]. It was then noted that the duke's own testament from 1302 requested burial in the Church of St Mary in Oslo, and the congregation have taken no further action. In June 2022, the Chair of Nordic History at the University of Greifswald, Germany, was, as stated in the introduction, contacted by Mr Albrecht Wernitzsch regarding his initiative to repatriate Witslaw II's remains to Rügen.

The Politics of Repatriation: Report, Interest-Holders and Conflicts of Interest

On the basis of the above information given in Witslaw's testament, specifically pertaining to the duke's request for burial in Oslo, the Chair of Nordic History at the University of Greifswald submitted a report to Mr Wernitzsch informally advising against the initiative to have the remains associated with Witslaw II repatriated from Oslo to Rügen. Nevertheless, in this report, it was stipulated that the current location of the human remains, in a cardboard box, is not in accordance with the duke's testament. Because of this, suggestions were made for reburial or re-commemoration in the form of a memorial plaque near the ruins of the original burial place, the Church of St Mary. As the church is now in ruins, a potential reburial within the church itself might not be possible. It was nevertheless emphasised that the ruins form part of what is today known as *Middelalderparken*, a culturally significant component of the Oslo cityscape. A plaque commemorating King Hákon's burial site within the ruins exists today, and a similar plaque could be proposed for that of Witslaw's burial site.

If a reburial or commemoration in the Church of St Mary is not feasible, then the other clerical institutions located in Oslo, as mentioned in Witslaw's

[61] P. Holck, op.cit., p. 41.

[62] Personal correspondence, Julia Kristine Kotthaus, 16 June 2022.

testament, are possible locations for reburial. The ruins of Hovedøya Abbey and the Cathedral of St Hallvard are the best preserved of these and therefore also the most feasible for potential reburial. A reburial within the Norwegian royal crypt in Akershus Fortress would see the presumed remains of Witslaw and his daughter Eufemia reunited in similar fashion as in their original burial sites in the Church of St Mary, however such reburial in the royal crypt might be complicated for a foreign head of state. On a final note, as highlighted in the report, the current location of the remains in the Biological Anthropology Collection at the University of Oslo, while understandably unsatisfactory on several levels, is not unethical. The collection manages all remains in a responsible and dignified way[63].

While the Chair did advise against repatriation to Rügen, its report instead suggested possible steps for further action to be taken in order to facilitate a more dignified final resting place for Duke Witslaw. These were as follows; the remains should not be removed from Oslo, Norway, as stipulated in the testament of the duke; alternative burial sites should be considered on the grounds of the duke's testament; and a symbolic ceremony during reburial, or minimally in the case of no reburial, commemoration, ought to take place.

A particularly significant part of building the historical context of the remains is naturally the notion of dignity, respect for the individual 'behind' the remains. Questions such as 'what would the person behind the remains have wanted' and 'what would they have found unacceptable' are important hypothetical questions to ask critically when dealing with such cases[64]. Nevertheless, researchers are not impartial and objective judges, and present-day factors such as attitudes to the dead, relationships with the past, scientific and cultural bias, as well as diverging ethical concerns affect processes involving human remains. Furthermore, as Malin Masterton has accentuated, 'most of the time we do not know the expressed wishes of the dead, but it can be reasonably assumed that the past person would wish to remain buried in the original location, or at least would not have expected to be stored in a museum'[65].

Honouring the wishes of the individuals 'behind' historical human remains is, naturally, not necessarily always straightforward and can be particularly complex as there is often no extant evidence of their requests. However, in the case of Witslaw's remains, his testament from 1302 expressively states his

[63] This became particularly clear to the authors during the research stage of writing the initial report, as the transparency and cooperation of the collection managers was crucial for the research to succeed.

[64] H. Fossheim, op.cit., p. 8.

[65] Malin Masterton, *Duties to Past Persons: The Moral Standing and Posthumous Interest of Old Human Remains*, [in:] *More than Just Bones: Ethics and Research on Human Remains*, ed. Hallvard Fossheim, Oslo 2012, pp. 115–116.

wish to buried in Oslo, specifically in the Church of St Mary. On the grounds of this wish, it seems not sensible to remove the remains from their current location in Oslo. However, the fact that the church is now in ruins and the remains of Witslaw have since been removed to be placed in the anatomical collection, complicates the case significantly and somehow disrupts the duke's wishes for burial.

At the same time, as Hallvard Fossheim notes, 'the bodily remains of a human being rarely, if ever, represent only the individual in question'[66]. As social beings, we act and react in relation with other people, which Masterton argues leads to a 'decentralized subject which is partly fragmented'[67]. Who are the so-called 'interest-holders'[68] in this case, at the time of burial, exhumation and replacement, and who benefit from the (re-)relocation or continued presence of the remains today? Over 720 years separate the testament from the present day, and at the time the remains were exhumed and moved to the collection, the church had already been in ruins for several centuries as the building was demolished in 1534[69]. Now in ruins as part of *Middelalderparken*, would Witslaw have still wanted to be buried in the Church of St Mary, also knowing that his daughter Eufemia had been relocated to the Norwegian royal crypt in the nearby Akershus Fortress? Would Witslaw maybe rather have wanted to be interred alongside his daughter and his son-in-law in the crypt? Is the current location of the remains in the anthropological collection necessarily unethical or undignified? Does Witslaw's Latin Christian faith affect any of these questions and what might have been his view on the relocation of his and others' remains[70]? Whose integrity and interest do we protect after their death? The answers to these questions all depend on who is asked, and unfortunately but unsurprisingly Witslaw is not one of them.

In the process of writing this article, we contacted three (potentially) interested or otherwise affiliated parties (possible interest-holders) in order to further investigate their relationship or attitude towards the location of Witslaw's remains at the university collection in Oslo and their viewpoint on a possible

[66] H. Fossheim, op.cit., p. 8.

[67] M. Masterton, op.cit., p. 115.

[68] Ibid., p. 117.

[69] S. Bagge, op.cit., pp. 143–161.

[70] In medieval Christianity, human remains could inhibit several 'attributes' and the relocation and moving of remains and bodies, such as in the case of holy relics, was not unusual. Relics were indeed both relocated and traded across wide spaces, both as part of their religious context as well as part of business ventures. Thus, Witslaw himself might have viewed the relocation of his remains in a different light than we do today. See, for example, Elizabeth Wiedenheft, Circulating Saints: A Study of the Movement of Corporeal Relics in Three Regions of Western Europe, c. 800–1200 (doctoral diss., University of Nottingham), Nottingham 2018; *The Archaeology of Death in Post-Medieval Europe*, ed. Sarah Tarlow, Berlin–Boston 2015.

repatriation to Rügen. These included the original initiator, Mr Albrecht Wernitzsch; the Human Remains Committee of the National Research Ethics Committees of Norway; and lastly, the Royal Court of Norway via their contact form.

After receiving the report from the Chair of Nordic History that informally advised against repatriation of the remains to Rügen, the main initiator of the suggested 'homecoming', Mr Wernitzsch, expressed agreement that the final wish of the duke to be buried in Oslo should be respected[71]. He further expressed the wish for other possibilities 'to grant the father of a Norwegian queen a dignified final rest' ('dem Vater einer norwegischen Königin eine würdige letzte Ruhe zu gewähren') to be examined. Mr Wernitzsch additionally suggested that it would be in the interest of the Norwegian royal family to have Witslaw reunited with his daughter Eufemia in the royal crypt of Akershus Fortress. In response to our questions[72], Mr Wernitzsch expressed that he considered it both unworthy and disrespectful to keep the remains of a duke of Rügen ('Fürsten von Rügen') in an anatomical collection. Regarding the question of Rügen as a more appropriate burial place for the remains than Oslo, Mr Wernitzsch emphasised the function of the location as being the homeland of the remains, highlighting further that the remains of Witslaw appear to be the only extant remains from the dynasty on Rügen. Concerning an appropriate location for reburial of the human remains, Mr Wernitzsch explained that his efforts to find a place in the principality of Rügen had not been particularly successful, primarily due to well-known bureaucratic communication complications.

The Human Remains Committee of the National Research Ethics Committees of Norway is a Norwegian research committee consisting of ten members that 'evaluates the ethical aspects of research where the source material consists of human remains which are in public museums and collections […]'[73]. The authors contacted the committee in mid-November 2023, asking them for a comment about their position in relation to a potential repatriation to Germany and the current location of the remains in the anthropological collection. Secretary of the committee, Lene Os Johansen, informed that the inquiry

[71] Personal correspondence, Albrecht Wernitzsch, 17 November 2023.

[72] During this correspondence, the Chair asked Mr Wernitzsch three specific questions related to the case: 1. What is your opinion on the repatriation of Witslaw's remains? 2. What was the reasoning behind your proposal to transfer the remains to Rügen and why you find this satisfactory for both the remains of Witslaw and the local community of Rügen? 3. Where will the remains be located if transferred to Rügen?

[73] National Research Ethics Committees, https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/about-us/our-committees-and-commission/skjelettutvalget/about-the-national-committee-for-research-ethics-on-human-remains [accessed online 5 December 2023].

was discussed during a committee meeting on 20 November 2023 and that the committee could not comment on the specific case, as there was too little information to build an assessment on[74]. On a general note, Johansen emphasised the many factors influencing a repatriation process of human remains, including who demands the repatriation, the human remains' close kinship to living persons, affiliation with a marginalised group, unethical acquisition, and similar.

The authors contacted the Royal Court of Norway via the contact form available on the website of the Royal House of Norway on 16 November 2023. Here, we asked whether the Royal Court could comment on their attitudes towards the human remains, a potential repatriation from Norway to Rügen and the current location in the anthropological collection. On 7 December, we received a reply from the leader of the Royal Collections, Gunhild Varvin[75]. She thanked us for the interesting inquiry and informed that neither the Royal Collections nor the Royal Court were appropriate recipients for these types of inquiries and asked us to instead turn to other institutions for perspectives on this particular case.

Of course, the relocation of the remains of Witslaw could potentially be to a museum. Here, several options would theoretically be possible, such as one of the museums in Oslo or even the Pomeranian State Museum (Ger. *Pommersches Landesmuseum*) located in Greifswald, being the regional museum for Pomerania. Relocation to a museum could foster broader dissemination of medieval history to the public. Nevertheless, the display of human remains in museums is not necessarily unproblematic either and carries with it some of the same complexities inherent in cases of repatriation. The display of human remains in museums can be problematic due to concerns surrounding cultural sensitivities, respect for the deceased individual, and the potential perpetuation of colonial practices or injustice[76]. In the case of Witslaw, relocation to a museum would also still not solve the problem associated with respecting the wishes of the deceased as expressed in his testament. However, relocation to a museum would offer more scope for education and dissemination of information about Witslaw to the broader public, which in itself could be beneficial.

Should we return to Chechi's suggested guiding principles for the repatriation of ancestral human remains[77], none of the three suggestions seem to coincide fully with the situation surrounding Witslaw's remains. Firstly, while there is evidence that the remains have been removed from their original resting

[74] Personal correspondence, Lene Os Johansen, 22 November 2023.

[75] Personal correspondence, Gunhild Varvin, 7 December 2023 (no. 2023/2470).

[76] M. Masterton, op.cit., pp. 115–116.

[77] A. Chechi, op.cit., p. 433.

place (the church burial) during excavation, the remains were neither removed illegally nor taken by 'force, unequal treaty, theft, deception or without compensation'. Furthermore, it can be argued as to the extent to which the current location of Witslaw's remains is disrupting the well-being of the Rügen community[78]. Secondly, no appropriate reburial location in the principality has so far been identified. However, the present article might represent an initial attempt to follow Chechi's third principle, namely facilitating a meaningful debate between the claimants and cultural heritage experts. While the article has identified several solutions to the conundrum of a suitable location for the duke's remains, no final 'conclusion' can be offered at present.

The repatriation of historical human remains is not uncomplicated. Even when the wishes of the deceased are known, current socio-cultural and political factors affect the possibilities for relocation and circumstances change across decades, centuries or even millennia. Simultaneously, various interest-holders may have different ideas of what represents the best alternative for relocation or repatriation.

Conclusions

A cardboard box on a shelf is not stereotypically deemed an appropriate resting place for human remains. Mr Wernitzsch, the initiator of Witslaw II's intended 'homecoming', did not only rightfully point out this fact, but he also highlighted an interesting and mostly forgotten aspect of the medieval history of the Baltic Sea region and its international connections. While a claim for 'repatriation' usually includes the uncovering of historical crimes and inequalities, this process rather sheds light on a period in which the little island of Rügen was well-connected as part of international trading routes and political strategies, and the centre of a Slavic dynasty during a process of religious, linguistic and cultural change. While many aspects in the larger process of the Baltic Crusades such as *Ostsiedlung* and Christianisation had violent aspects and led to the forceful oppression of cultures and languages, the integration of the Rani dynasty and the population of Rügen into the Christian cultural sphere seems to have followed a model of initial military defeat followed by long-lasting mutually beneficial relations.

It is not advisable to 'bring Witslaw home'. Indeed, a repatriation of the human remains to the island would contravene his final wish as expressed in his testament, and furthermore, identifying a suitable burial location on Rügen presents inherent challenges since there are no other burial places of the Rani dynasty left on the island.

[78] Ibid.

However, a multitude of compelling reasons exist to establish a more dignified and more prominently situated final rest for the duke's remains. Options include the ruins of the Church of St Mary or the royal crypt at Akershus Fortress, where interment beside his daughter Eufemia and his son-in-law could be feasible. Relocation to a museum could also be possible. Or perhaps, somewhere entirely different should instead be considered.

The story of Witslaw, who died shortly after Christmas while visiting his daughter in Oslo in 1302 and was buried according to his rank and his wishes at the time, unfolds as a noteworthy and positive historical account. Witslaw's case illuminates intercultural contact and mutual learning during the Middle Ages, specifically highlighting the far-reaching connections of a small island and its rulers. Moreover, it reflects positive and strong relations maintained by at least some of the present-day inhabitants of Rügen with the distant past of their home area. The narrative encapsulates the Slavic roots of the area, processes of cultural and religious change, and the complexities inherent in the collective memory of modern nation states. These multifaceted elements inherent in the case of Witslaw's remains, currently located at the Biological Anthropology Collection in Oslo, warrant emphasis both within Witslaw's native region of Rügen and in his designated final resting place in Oslo. The present contextualisation of the initiative to bring Witslaw's remains 'home' to Rügen demonstrates his cultural and political significance both in the past and in the present, highlighting, again, the many benefits of medieval and present-day intercultural relations as well as the complexities of repatriation cases.

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