

History of the Crusades. Episode 189. The Baltic Crusades. Meet the Balts.

Hello again, and welcome to a whole new series of the Crusades. Yes, it's time to leave sunny southern France, put on our coats and wooly hats, and head north to investigate a series of military campaigns which occurred predominantly in the Baltic states.

Now, before we start on the introduction to the Baltic Crusades, I'd like to remind you that this podcast is powered by Patreon. For the sum of one US dollar per month, you can become a Patron of the podcast. Your contribution entitles you to a free episode every fortnight, and the satisfying feeling of being my employer. To join up, go to "crusadespod.com" and click on the "Patreon" link. For Patron supporters, we've just started a new three-episode series on the disastrous journey taken by Richard the Lionheart on his way back from the Third Crusade. It features maritime disasters, incarceration, and ransom demands. In the end, things got so bad that Richard wrote a sad little poem in honor of the occasion. If you would like to listen to this, and future subscription episodes, you just need to become a Patron. Once again, you can do that by going to "crusadespod.com" and clicking on the "Patreon" link.

Right, where were we? Ah, that's right, Baltic Crusades, Okay, to start with, we should try and work out where we are headed. If you decided to launch yourself off the east coast of England into the North Sea, and if you then kept sailing in an easterly direction, you would eventually bump into the country of Denmark, which is located on a peninsula which juts out from the continent of Europe. The peninsula which houses Denmark protrudes in a northerly direction from the European mainland, and it stretches towards an absolutely enormous peninsula pointing down towards mainland Europe from the Arctic Circle. Today, this enormous peninsula, known as the Scandinavian Peninsula, is shared by the countries of Norway and Sweden. Now these two peninsulas, the enormous Scandinavian peninsula pointing southwards and the peninsula housing Denmark pointing northwards, nearly touch, but not quite. You can just squeeze around the Danish peninsula, and if you do navigate around this piece of land, sailing up the west coast of Denmark, around its pointy tip to the north, and then back down the east side of the peninsula, you will find yourself in a body of water known as the Baltic Sea.

Okay, let's take a quick tour around the modern day Baltic Sea. If we sail in a clockwise direction around this body of water, it is bordered in the north by the Scandinavian Peninsula. The country of Sweden occupies the part of the peninsula which borders the Baltic Sea. As we sail around the coast line of Sweden and start to head north, the Baltic Sea branches off into the first of four gulfs which we will encounter. The Gulf of Bothnia stretches north, nearly all the way to the Arctic Circle. To one side of the Gulf of Bothnia is Sweden, but as we hit its northern point and start to sail back down southwards, the coastline is that of Finland. So the Gulf of Bothnia has Sweden on its west side and Finland to its east.

If we continue southwards along the coastline of Finland, we get to our second gulf, the Gulf of Finland. This body of water juts out of the Baltic Sea in an easterly direction. If you look at it on a map, it looks like a giant finger pointing at Russia. Sailing up the Gulf of Finland will take us along the southern coast of Finland into Russia. At the pointy tip of the finger-nail of the Gulf of Finland, so at its easternmost point, you will find the beautiful city of St Petersburg.

Leaving St Petersburg and turning back to the west, the southern coastline of the Gulf of Finland continues along the Russian border, until we reach the first of three countries which make up the so called Baltic States, the country of Estonia. Once we emerge out of the Gulf of Finland, we can continue southwards, still following the coastline of Estonia, until we arrive at the second of the Baltic states, Latvia. Latvia's coastline curves around the third of our gulfs, the Gulf of Riga. Leaving the Gulf of Riga, we continue southwards down Latvia's coastline until we hit the final Baltic state, Lithuania. We are now heading west.

Unexpectedly, nestled between Lithuania and its neighbour Poland, we find a little piece of Russia, known as Kaliningrad. Isolated from the motherland and surrounded by Lithuania and Poland, Kaliningrad's coastline forms the final of our gulfs, the Gulf of Gdansk. If we continue in a westerly direction, we leave Russian territory and find ourselves in Poland, arriving, unsurprisingly, at the Polish port city of Gdansk. Still traveling westwards we leave the shores of Poland and arrive at the coastline of Germany, and soon find ourselves back where we started, at the Danish peninsula.

Now, in modern times, we don't have to sail all the way back around the Danish Peninsula to get out of the Baltic Sea, because the wonders of modern engineering have enabled a canal to be built through German territory at the base of the peninsula which houses Denmark. So you can take a short cut through this waterway, known as the Kiel Canal, out of the Baltic Sea back into the North Sea. In medieval times, however, you would be forced to take the long way around, sailing all the way around Denmark back to the North Sea.

So to summarize, here are the countries bordering the Baltic Sea in modern times, proceeding in a clockwise direction: Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany. It's worth taking a quick look at a map of the region to familiarize yourselves, as we will be spending quite a lot of time here.

Of course, we aren't concerned with the modern Baltic region, but with the region in medieval times. So what was this part of the world like in the twelfth century, just prior to the Crusades? Well, in a nutshell, it was pretty much isolated from Latin Christian Europe, and was filled predominantly with pagans who spent their lives trading and raiding within their own language groups, and spent their days procuring and preserving food, and cutting wood to ensure that their families didn't starve and freeze during the harsh winters.

Much of the region that now comprises Poland and the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was, in pre-Crusade times, covered by thick forests and wetlands. The landscape was largely unsuitable for road building and for large scale agriculture, meaning that most traveling was done by sea, and that much of the food eaten by the people who lived there was obtained by fishing, hunting or foraging, and by tilling small fields and sowing crops.

Nowadays, we're used to viewing the world in a top down sort of way, via maps. The planet is neatly divided into countries with clear borders, and most people have a pretty good idea where they fit on those maps. Not so the people living in the Baltic Sea region before the Crusades. There were no countries, and no borders that could be drawn on a map. Instead, the region was occupied by people belonging to one of four distinct language groups. People tended to mix predominantly with others who spoke the same

language, with the borders between the separate language groups remaining fluid and blurred. So what were these four language groups?

Well, the first were the Norse speakers, also known as the Scandinavians, who spoke a variety of different languages grouped under an umbrella known as Norse. These included the Northmen from what is now Norway, the Swedes and Goths from what is now southern Sweden, and the Danes from Denmark. The Viking era had opened up this area of the world to trade and to outside influence. They regularly traded with England and other countries from western Christendom, and will not play a big role in our examination of the Baltic Crusades.

The second main language group were the Slavs. The land of the Slavs was vast, comprising a number of different tribes, stretching across eastern Europe, up into Russia, and throughout the countries now known as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. These regions were divided into areas ruled by various kings, and there tended to be a lot of fighting and aggression between the various clans and factions. In the mid to late tenth century, a man called Ibrahim Ibn Yaqub, from Tortosa in Spain, accompanied the Caliph of Cordoba into the Slavic regions of central Europe, and made a report of his observations. Of the Slavs he observed, and I quote, "In general the Slavs are violent and inclined to aggression. If not for the disharmony amongst them, caused by the multiplication of factions and by their fragmentation into clans, no people could match their strength." End quote.

An offshoot of the Slavs were the Baltic Slavs, also known as Balts. They occupied the region now covered by the countries of Latvia and Lithuania, and extended further to the south-west, into the region which it would eventually become known as Prussia. It is these people who will be central to our series, so let's take a closer look at them. According to Eric Christiansen in his book "The Northern Crusades", the Balts were established as part of one of the earliest migrations of the Indo Europeans, and by the eve of the Crusades they had been living in the region for around three thousand years. They had organized themselves into four separate groups, each within its own geographical limits, and each speaking a variant of their own language. These four groups were the Prussians, the Lithuanians, the Latvians and the Curonians.

Like their Slavic neighbors, most Balts lived in small villages and tended to associate within their own small groups or tribes, rather than seeing themselves as belonging to a larger nation or country. Groups of villages could form defensive forts, and small armies could be raised from the villages protected by the forts, to either defend their territory or go raiding into the territory of neighboring groups.

As a general observation, the forests in which the Balts lived were dense and in some places nearly impenetrable. There were also vast tracts of marshland, all of which made clearing the land for agriculture an arduous business. As a result, most of the large scale settlements were located on the coast or in river valleys. The forests themselves teemed with wildlife, and oryx, bison, bear and elk roamed the woods. To clear the land, a Baltic farmer would burn and cut his way into the forest to make a clearing, and then use a wooden plow to plant crops, generally spelt, rye and millet. They also kept cattle and horses, although their horses were much smaller than those used in Western Christendom at this time. They were more like ponies, and the heavy war horse had not yet made an appearance in the region. They also grew flax and linen, and their clothes were made of linen and wool. Hunting and foraging for food from the forest and the sea made up a

significant part of the Baltic diet. The forest provided meat and fur from hunted animals, as well as honey and wax from bees. The sea provided fish as well as amber, the petrified resin of the fir tree, which would wash ashore along the coastline. Amber was a highly prized commodity, particularly amongst the Europeans living around the Mediterranean Sea, and for many centuries it was the most profitable export from the Baltic region.

Like their Slavic neighbors, the Balts could be pretty ferocious when they wanted to be. Small armies could be formed from groups of farmers, and while they didn't wear armor, they did protect themselves with shields and helmets, and weren't the type to run away or retreat when attacked. As such, Christianity hadn't made much of an impact in the region, with Christian missionaries often killed or expelled before they could achieve large scale conversions.

Unsurprisingly, the religion of the Balts in the pre-Crusade era centred around their environment. Certain plants and animals were revered and holy places were established in the forests. Gods were worshiped and animals were sacrificed to those gods during religious festivals, or during times of need. Eric Christiansen reports in his book "The Northern Crusades" that some festivals were still being observed, and some lesser pagan domestic rituals were still being performed in the region, as late as the eighteenth century. So now we've met the Balts.

The final main group occupying the region around the Baltic Sea, where the Finno-Ugrian people. They were the smallest in number but occupied the largest region, with their people stretched thinly over the land from current-day Estonia right up into current-day Finland and across into current-day Russia. Their main occupations, other than eking out a living from the harsh environment, seemed to have been fighting with the Scandinavians and trading with the Russians, with the Russian city of Novgorod firmly established as a significant trading post, funneling trade from the region around the Baltic Sea, all the way down to the Byzantine Empire.

For these four groups who lived around the Baltic Sea, the interactions between themselves and between the wider people of western, central and eastern Europe were dominated by trading and raiding. Trading involved taking items of value such as furs, wax, amber and dried fish to markets in the borderlands of their territory and swapping them for imported luxuries or silver. Raiding involved two types of military actions: the summer raid and the winter raid. The summer raid took place either in May or June before the summer harvest, or in August and September when the harvest had been collected. The winter raid took place around Christmas, either before or after the mid-winter festivals. Taking advantage of the fact that bogs and rivers, which usually proved to be obstacles, were now frozen, the winter raids were usually quite short, constrained by the cold weather and a lack of food. In fact, even the summer raids tended to be short campaigns, only involving small groups of people.

Unlike the regions of central, western and southern Europe, where the Roman empire had established nice straight roads crisscrossing the landscape, dotted regularly with towns and cities, the region around the Baltic Sea, and in particular the region which would one day comprise the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, had not been conquered by the Romans. The landscape, with its thick forests and extensive network of rivers and wetlands, was not amenable to the establishment of roads, and was difficult to traverse, especially if you are part of a large group. Consequently, much raiding was done by sea

rather than by land, which limited the size of the forces which could be used, and the land which could be taken.

The geography was not the only factor preventing large scale military campaigns; the other factor was the weather. For your average villager in this region, much of the year was spent preparing for the winter. If you failed to store and preserve enough food to last you through the winter months, you and your family would starve. If you failed to cut enough wood to stockpile, to burn during the winter, you and your family would freeze to death. For those reasons, men were not available for raiding during the spring or autumn. In spring, the men and the horses were required to stay in their village, plowing the soil and preparing it for planting. Likewise, in the autumn, when the harvest was in full swing, all available hands were required to bring the crops safely in from the fields, in preparation for the long winter. So trading and raiding were limited to some extent, but they did take place, and resulted in the people of the Baltic region interacting with outsiders. And it was conflict caused by this interaction, which led to the Baltic Crusades.

Ah yes, the Crusades, that's why we're here. The Baltic Crusades, also known as The Northern Crusades, were a series of military campaigns, which kicked off in the year 1147 and finally ended in the year 1505. Unlike the Middle Eastern Crusades, where the separate campaigns went in chronological order, with handy rests in between them, the Baltic Crusades, unhelpfully, tend to overlap, meaning we have a choice. Do we proceed along strictly chronological lines, meaning that we might end up with more than one Crusade being discussed one time, or do we treat each Crusade as a separate subject, discussing it in its entirety before moving on to the next one? I've gone with Plan B, so we will examine each separate Crusade in turn, which means we will be zigzagging back and forth along the timeline, which is a nuisance, but I think it would be just too messy and confusing to try and stick to a strict chronology.

Now, before I embark on a new podcast series, I tend to state a disclaimer about how I'm limited by the number of sources we have, and the historical analysis off those sources. Well, for the Baltic Crusades, there's an extra disclaimer. Until relatively recently, the Baltic Crusades had been largely overlooked by English speaking historians. It wasn't until the 1980s, would you believe, that a couple of English speaking historians decided to tackle the largely untouched subject of the Baltic Crusades. Those historians were Eric Christiansen, a medieval historian from Oxford University in England whose ground-breaking work "The Northern Crusades" was published in 1980, and William Urban, an American history professor specializing in the Baltic Crusades and the Teutonic Knights, who has published a raft of books on the subject.

Now a word of warning: Don't get muddled between the Baltic region, which as we've seen in this episode concerns the area around the Baltic Sea, and the Balkans. The Balkans is a region in southeastern Europe containing countries with often disputed borders, such as Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, etcetera, etcetera. The Balkans are very different to the Baltic, and aren't the subject of the Northern Crusades. I stumbled across an entertaining interview with William Urban when I was researching this episode, in which he stated that after he began getting a name for himself as an expert in the Baltic Crusades, publishers began mistakenly sending him books about the Balkans. As a result, over the years he accumulated a collection of around eighty books on the Balkans and ended up reading some of them, even taking a trip to the Balkans to check the region out. So don't make the same mistake as those

publishers. We're not concerned with the Balkans, lovely and interesting though they may be, we're staying well to the north, in the Baltic region.

I will be relying heavily on the works of Eric Christianson and William Urban as we move through these Crusades, as well as other more recent English language works on the subject. If you're interested, there's a full list of the books I will be using on the website. Just go to "crusadespod.com" and click on the Reading List tab. Of course, there were no doubt mountains of valuable resources and texts out there which are not in English, but unfortunately English is the only language I know, and so I will have to limit myself to those historians who have generated material in the English language.

Now, talking about language, that brings us to my final disclaimer. During this series I will be wrestling with pronouncing names and places in languages ranging from Polish to Russian to German and to the vast array of tricky languages which pepper the Baltic States. A couple of kind listeners who live in those regions have offered to assist me with pronunciation, and I will, as always, be relying heavily on the wonderful pronunciation website Forvo, but still, things are bound to get messy. So I can only hope that the listeners who are well versed in German, Russian, Polish, and the Baltic languages are as stoic and as understanding as the French speakers who listened to the Crusade Against The Cathars and the Arabic, Turkish, and French speakers who listened to the Middle Eastern Crusades. There will be some wincing and some raising of eyebrows, I'm sure, but all I can say in my defence is that: I try, but pronunciation just isn't my strong point, and to be honest, I have enough trouble with English.

Anyway, with all disclaimers and apologies out of the way, it looks like we're ready to launch into it. So join me next week as we embark on the first of our Baltic Crusades, the Wendish Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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