

History of the Crusades. Episode 191. The Baltic Crusades. The Wendish Crusade Part 2. Wrong Bird!

Hello again. Before we get started, a small clarification from last week's episode. I repeatedly referred to Conrad the Third as Emperor Conrad, but this is actually incorrect. Conrad was crowned Conrad III, King of Germany, but was never crowned Emperor, so he wasn't one. So sorry about that. Everyone clear? Goody-O.

Last week we looked at the Holy Roman Empire in general, and the Duke of Saxony Henry the Lion in particular. This week we're going to pop over the fence and take a look at the neighbors, the people who live to the east of the Saxons. Now, back in the first half of the twelfth century, the eastern border of Saxony was pretty much delineated by the River Elbe. In fact, it was not only the Duchy of Saxony which stopped at the River Elbe, the Holy Roman Empire and western Christendom itself ended at the river. Today, the River Elbe starts in the Czech Republic and winds its way through a goodly chunk of northeastern Germany, with cities such as Dresden, Magdeburg and Hamburg situated along its banks. The current capital city of Germany, Berlin, is situated firmly to the east of the Elbe, meaning that back in the early twelfth century it was firmly outside western Christendom in the land of the pagans.

As is so often the case, however, despite the fact that we have a border marked by the River Elbe, it wasn't quite that simple. During the first few decades of the twelfth century, intrepid settlers and adventurers from Saxony would venture across the Elbe and form settlements on the other side of the river. In his book "The Northern Crusades", Eric Christiansen points out that, while the Saxons had developed a reputation for, and I quote "bigness, bravery and brutishness" end quote, the frontiersman who moved across the river into the region they named Holsatia, were acknowledged by the Saxons themselves to be even more fearless, lawless and ferocious than your average Saxon.

And really they needed to be. They weren't living a nice, comfortable existence surrounded by people of their own kind. No, they were out in the badlands, surrounded by hostile people who were constantly trying to force them back over the river into Latin Christendom. These Holsatians divided their time between farming their land and fighting. In fact, they developed quite a reputation as skilled warriors and fearless fighters, so much so that many of them were able to supplement the meager income they earned from the land by hiring themselves out as mercenaries. There was a downside to hiring a Holsatian as a mercenary, however. They didn't take kindly to being ordered around, and the Kings and Dukes who hired them were only able to keep them in line by tempting them with the possibility of gaining booty for themselves, and by threatening to withhold their payments. The Holsatians weren't loyal or trustworthy soldiers, but they were ferocious fighters.

Now, although in the early years of the twelfth century it was only the intrepid Holsatians who made the move to settle over the River Elbe, this wasn't always the case. Over one hundred years earlier, Emperor Otto II had made a valiant effort to conquer and subdue the lands beyond the Elbe, and annex them to the Holy Roman Empire. He had established the Bishopric of Brandenburg around the region which contains modern-day Berlin today, and the neighboring Bishopric of Havelberg. However, these new settlements didn't last long. Emperor Otto's attention was taken up with troubles in Italy, and the Slavs of the region took full advantage of the overstretched Imperial army to rebel against the incursions into their territory, and the settlements were eventually abandoned. Since the days of Otto II, subsequent Emperors hadn't shown much interest in pushing the

boundaries of the Empire back over the Elbe. The only Western Christians to venture into the region where the frontier settlers, the Holsatians, and Christian missionaries who occasionally travelled across the Elbe in an attempt to convert the pagans living there.

That changed, however, when Lothair, Duke of Saxony, became Emperor. With a Saxon on the Imperial throne, conquering the lands to the east of Saxony moved up the Imperial list of priorities. In 1134 Lothar handed a swath of land beyond the River Elbe to a Saxon called Albert the Bear, who immediately set about conquering and subduing his new territory. How did the Germans go about this? Well, as a general rule, small groups of heavily armed Knights would move into the new territory and construct small blockaded forts and halls, from which they could base themselves to defend their new land. Then colonists would be invited to join them - farmers to clear the land, and missionary priests to convert the locals.

Who were the locals? Well, in this part of the world, it was a group of Slavs called the Wends, who populated the region between the River Elbe and the River Oder. Today, the River Oder runs down the border between Germany and Poland, so the region between the Elbe and the Oder is now within Germany, the eastern part of Germany. In fact, the land of the Wends was situated snugly within what was Eastern Germany during the latter half of the last century, during the Soviet era.

The Slavic Wends didn't view themselves as a nation or as a united people. They were basically made up of a bunch of separate tribes who farmed, cleared areas of land and hunted in the forests. The Wends occasionally fought amongst each other, but the tribes located near the Saxon border had honed their skills over the years fighting the Saxon invaders. Earlier incursions into Wendish territory by the Saxons had merely involved the Wends paying tribute to their new Saxon overlords and being converted to Christianity. The Saxon settlers would live pretty much in the same manner as the Wends they had conquered, and the fiercely independent Wends, as soon as the Saxons moved on or were forced off the land, would stop making payments to the Germans and would go back to their pagan ways.

However, from the 1140s onwards, the new manner of settlement, that of Knights claiming new territory, building forts, then establishing Saxon villages, heralded a new era of conquest. These new Saxon settlers were difficult to displace, and the Wends, instead of living alongside their conquerors, paying them tribute, and converting to their religion, tended to be pushed out of their traditional lands. This broke up the lines of authority between the Wendish peasants and their Wendish rulers, and disrupted the practice of their religion, which was centered around sacred sites within their lands. Between the years 1140 and 1143, around a dozen Saxon noble families had settled within Wendish territory, and by the year 1145 the Wendish Lord Niklot had deemed his territory in the border lands to the west to be lost to the Saxons, while in the South, the Wends living in the region controlled by Albert the Bear had partly accepted the presence of their new Saxon ruler.

This, then was the state of play when Pope Eugenius issued his Papal Bull in April 1147, authorizing the Christians of northern Europe to launch a crusade against the Wendish people across the River Elbe. Now it wasn't just the Saxons who responded for the Papal call to arms. The Christian Danes, who ruled over the Danish peninsula, also joined the Crusade, as did the Christian Poles. The Polish Christians had been around since the time of Emperor Otto. When Otto had pushed into the territory across the River Elbe, he

established a Christian base in Poland. Unlike the Wends, who reverted to paganism as soon as the conquerors turned their backs, the Polish Church survived, primarily because the Polish ruling family converted to Christianity.

For most of the eleventh century and for the first few decades of the twelfth century, various Polish Princes, some of whom were under vassalage to the Holy Roman Empire, and others of whom were independent, vied for the Polish Crown. Their various grabs for power pushed them to conquer new territory, primarily the area occupied by the Pomeranians to the north, on the shores of the Baltic Sea, and the Prussians, to the east, but they also pushed westwards into the area between the River Elbe and the River Oder, the region occupied by the Wends. In his book "The Northern Crusades", Eric Christiansen points out that the idea of crusading against their pagan neighbors was a novel one for the Saxons, Poles and Danes. All three of these Christian peoples would have been familiar with the concept of crusading. Christians from all three regions had joined the First Middle Eastern Crusade, and for some of them, their ancestors had had Christianity forced upon them at the point of a sword in the not too distant past. But actually Crusading against people they had been attempting to conquer was a whole new kettle of fish.

Relations to date between the Saxons, Poles and Danes and their Wendish neighbors had primarily centred around land grabs, the aim being to enter pagan territory, seized the land, settle it with Christians, and prevent it from being re-taken by the Wends. Converting the Wends to Christianity was generally an afterthought and came third on the to-do list, after taking land and exacting tribute. Now, however, the situation was to be reversed.

The primary aim of this new military action against the pagans was a spiritual one. The Wends were to be converted to Christianity, and the rewards for the Crusaders were to be spiritual rather than financial. So converting the pagans to Christianity would now be placed at the top of the list of priorities. Seizing land would only take place if it was necessary for the conversion of the locals, and there would be no tribute exacted from them. Still, this was to be a major military expedition conducted under the banner of the Church, and despite the subversion of financial rewards and the predominance of spiritual rewards, they were quite a few Saxons, Danes and Poles who answered the call to arms. It was, of course, an easier way to receive remission of your sins than having to undertake the expense and inconvenience of traveling all the way to the Holy Land. For many men, the chance of joining a homegrown Crusade seemed like a good idea.

Eric Christiansen points out however, that for many participants it was still the possibility of financial gain, as well as the desire for revenge, which drew them to join the Crusade. The Danes had been regularly attacked by heathen pirates and slavers, and for them this was a chance to push back. Likewise, the Poles had experienced mixed success in conquering and subduing their Pomeranian and Prussian neighbors, and the Crusade seemed to provide the perfect opportunity to strike out with force. For many Crusaders, it was the old lure of land and conquest that drew them to join, rather than the opportunity to convert people to Christianity.

And the recruitment drive received a boost in June 1147. What happened in June 1147? Well, just two months after the issuing of the Papal Bull, the Wendish Lord Nyklot led an attack against the newly established German settlements in Wendish territory to the north. The attack indicated to the Latin Christians that the pagans, or some of them at least, would not be content just to let the Germanic settlers move in and take over their land. This push-back by the Wends, which led to a number of newly established Christian

settlements being destroyed, acted as a significant recruitment booster as the armies of the Crusade were being mustered.

By the late summer of 1147, only a couple of months after Nyklot's successful raid, a total of two fleets of Danish crusaders, led by two contenders for the Danish throne, Canute V and Sweyn III, and two armies of Saxon Crusaders, one led by the young Henry the Lion, were ready to strike the first blow in the Baltic Crusades. The action was to take place across the River Elbe to the north, in the same region where Nyklot had attacked the Christian settlers. Nyklot had fortified the tiny outpost of Dobin, a little settlement to the north, just inland from the Baltic coast, which was surrounded by marshes and lakes. It was decided that the Danes would descend on Dobin to the north by sailing down to Wendish territory from Denmark, then marching inland to Dobin, while one of the Saxon armies, led by the seventeen year old Henry the Lion, would march to Dobin from Saxony. At the same time, another German army would assemble in the Holy Roman Empire at the town of Magdeburg and, led by the Papal Legate Bishop Anselm of Havelburg, would cross the River Elbe, then march an astonishingly long distance of more than 135 miles to the northeast, to the fortress at Demmin.

Now, on paper, this would have looked like a smart move. The fortress at Demmin was located to the east of Nyklot's position at Dobin. Therefore, while the Danes approached Dobin from the north and Henry of Saxony's army approached Dobin from the west, Bishop Anselm's Saxon army would totally surprise the Wends and approach Dobin from the Wendish heartland in the east. The Wendish warlord Nyklot would then be essentially trapped in Dobin, as the Crusaders approached him from just about every direction.

Trouble was, many plans that look great on paper just don't work out in practice. It turned out that Nyklot possessed quite a talent for military strategy. He managed to keep Henry the Lion's Saxon army occupied at Dobin, and then worked to effectively isolate the two Danish armies and prevent them from linking up with the Saxons. He arranged for the Slavs of Rugen, an island that juts out into the Baltic Sea off the northern coast of Wendish territory, to attack the Danish forces at sea, as they were sailing across from Denmark. The Danes who did manage to land ashore were attacked by a force of Wends, sent out from Dobin with specific orders to restrict them to one side of the lake adjacent to Dobin, to prevent them from receiving reinforcements from the Saxons. The rival Danish Kings leading the Danish army soon became disheartened, and under attack from the Wends, without any assistance forthcoming from the Saxons, they retreated back to their ships and sailed back to Denmark.

Duke Henry and the Saxon forces attempted without success to force their way into Dobin, but they didn't seem all that keen to do significant damage to their Wendish neighbors. Some crusaders suggested that they go on a killing spree and lay waste to the countryside to force Dobin to surrender, but they were overruled by their Saxon commanders, who stated, and I quote, "Is not the land were devastating our land, and the people we are fighting our people?", end quote, which in itself is an interesting statement. In complete contrast to future crusading commanders, such as Simon de Montfort in the Crusade against the Cathars, it seems that the Crusader army in this first Crusade in the Baltic region was happy to take a more merciful and gentle path, although Eric Christiansen viewed this attitude as an indication that the Crusaders didn't want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg, and although the aim of the Crusade was to convert the pagans or destroy them, they didn't wish to harm their long term territorial interests by carrying out this goal.

In the end, the Wendish garrison of the fortress at Dobin agreed to be baptized, in exchange for the Crusader army withdrawing from the region. So everyone was happy. Some pagans got converted, the countryside remained productive and unspoiled, and the army of Saxon Crusaders, with their sins remitted, got to brush themselves off, declare a good day's work done, and travel back home to Saxony. Of course, the biggest winner of all was Nyklot, who managed to force the Danish and Saxon armies out of his territory.

"But wait" I hear you ask, "what happened to the other Saxon army, the one led by the Papal Legate that was meant to attack Nyklot's position from the east at Demmin?" Well, unfortunately, they never took part in the action because they never made it to Demmin. This Crusading army was composed of a weird mix of heaps of senior clergy, no doubt attracted by the fact that the Papal Legate was in charge, and a bunch of land hungry Saxon frontiersmen. Two Saxon Barons who had been granted territory in the Wendish lands, Albert the Bear and a man called Conrad, accompanied this army. They did make it deep into Wendish territory and were nearing the Baltic coastline when the Saxon Barons convinced the Bishop to divert from their course and swing away to the east, towards Prussia. Their target was the city of Stettin, which the Barons were intent on seizing and occupying. This ended up being a terrible idea.

The march towards Stettin sent them way off course and pretty much sunk any chance of them being able to turn around and head all the way back to Dobin to assist the other Crusading armies. With Plan A having been blown, and with Bishop Anselm's army now having been convinced to commit to Plan B, the army marched to Stettin and surrounded it. However, shortly after the siege commenced, the Crusaders were shocked to find crosses and other religious items being paraded around the city walls. The city was Christian. Awkward.

Without the Saxons getting the memo, it appeared that the city had been brought under the control of a Christian Polish Prince, and it even had its own clergy and Bishop. The Pomeranian Bishop who was in the city, Bishop Albert, and the Christian Prince of the city both came out to put the record straight, and the Crusaders threw their hands up into the air in disgust and headed back home. Eric Christiansen has a nice turn of phrase when explaining this embarrassing incident in his book "The Northern Crusades". He states that after the Crusaders had surrounded Stettin, and I quote "Crosses appeared on the walls. The Pomeranian Bishop Albert and Prince Ratibor came out to explain "Wrong bird". The leaders parlayed, the men grumbled and, grumbling, trailed off home." End quote.

So the first military campaign of the Wendish Crusade was not exactly a resounding success for the Crusaders, with Niklot managing to keep the Danish and Saxon forces from his stronghold and the Saxon army led by the Papal Legate attacking the wrong bird in Prussia. Never mind, there's more to come. Join me next week as we continue our examination of the Wendish Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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