

History of the Crusades. Episode 194. The Baltic Crusades. The Christianization of Poland.

Hello again. Last week we took time out from the Baltic Crusades to do some background on the Teutonic Knights. This week we will be taking some time out to do some background on the Christianization of Poland. Why? Well, because two listeners contacted me and pointed out that I had brushed over the establishment of Christianity in Poland and pointed out that the comment I made in Episode 191, that Christianity in Poland was established by Emperor Otto, wasn't entirely correct. Well, I went off to do some research and found out that not only was it not entirely correct, it was pretty much fundamentally wrong, and that the coming of Christianity to Poland was actually a fascinating subject that totally deserved its own episode. So, sorry Poland, and everyone please disregard everything I said about Poland in Episode 191, and replace it with this episode.

On a related matter, you know how I said in Episode 191 that the wrong bird town Stettin was in Prussia? Well, it's not. It's in Pomerania. And in fact, Stettin isn't the correct name for the town, it's the German version of its actual name, which is Szczecin. You will be happy to know that from now on in, I will be pronouncing the names of towns in their own language wherever appropriate. So a big thank you to listeners Mariosz and Pavel for putting me on the right track. Actually, I get the feeling that this sort of thing might start happening quite a bit, so if you are from Eastern Europe and you find Western bias is creeping into my narrative, or if I say something fundamentally wrong that has you clutching your head and moaning, don't suffer in silence. There's only one thing worse than getting something wrong in a history podcast, and that's getting something wrong in a history podcast without realizing it. So if you hear me make a clanger, contact me via Facebook or Twitter, or on email at "crusadespod@gmail.com".

OK, so we have now arrived at the question we need to ask, and that question is: Why was Poland Christian at the time of the Baltic Crusades? We've seen in our examination of the Wendish Crusade that, sandwiched between the Latin Christian Holy Roman Empire and Orthodox Christian Russia, were the pagan territories around the Baltic coastline. Well, they were all pagan, except Poland. A Christian island in a sea of pagans, with the Wends to the west and the Prussians to the east, Poland stood alone, waving the Christian flag. Clearly, the fact that Poland is Christian is going to have a huge impact on the way the Baltic crusades play out from here on in. So how did this happen? And a related question is: Why didn't Poland, when it became Christian, become part of the Holy Roman Empire, as did Saxony when the Saxons converted back in the ninth century? These are all pressing questions, which really need to be answered before we set off on our next Crusade.

To answer them, we need to go all the way back to the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne. Now, when Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day in the year 800, it marked the beginning of a new era of Christian rule in Europe, although Peter Wilson, in his book "Holy Roman Empire", contends that it's unlikely that Charlemagne had a conscious policy of creating a single Christianized state. Instead, he states that the expansion and consolidation of territory under Charlemagne was more about warfare than prayer. The goal of the Carolingian Empire was to acquire territory and thereby reap plunder and exact tribute, although it often did this by identifying non-Christian people as legitimate targets for conquest. Peter Wilson points out that the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire coincided with the revival of the Western European slave trade, and demand for slaves in the Empire

was met by raids across the River Elbe, into pagan lands. In fact, as Peter Wilson points out, the word "slave" is cognate with the word "slav", and the word "slave" began replacing the earlier Latin term "servus" during this period, perhaps indicating the degree to which the Slavic people were being enslaved by their Latin Christian neighbors.

When the new Holy Roman Empire conquered pagan territory, conversion to Christianity tended to follow. This started with baptism or christening of local pagans, and it was the job of local bishops and local rulers, such as lords, dukes or kings, to oversee this process, and to enforce the observation of holy days and the construction of churches. So conquest and conversion tended to go hand in hand. Christian missionaries ventured into pagan lands to attempt to convert the locals, but generally, once they had set up camp deep in pagan territory, they were on their own, militarily speaking. And as conversion of the local people to Christianity involved the payment of tithes and the acceptance of some sort of vassalage under the Holy Roman Empire, the attitude of local rulers was crucial to the success of the mission. Denmark, for example, repeatedly expelled Christian missionaries from its territory until the conversion of Harald Bluetooth, who was the King of Denmark and the King of Norway in the mid-tenth century.

Incidentally, Harald Bluetooth no doubt lived and died blissfully unaware that over one thousand years into the future, his name would come to refer to wireless connections between electronic devices. Apparently, the designers of Bluetooth technology were history buffs, and in the same way as Harald Bluetooth unified Denmark and Norway, the wireless technology unified various communications devices, so they named the technology Bluetooth, and the little symbol which pops up when the Bluetooth wireless communications have been activated, is actually the runic symbol for the letters H and B, standing of course for Harold Bluetooth. But I digress. Where were we? Ah, yes, Christians versus pagans.

A prime example of the Latin Christian conquest of pagans was the subjugation of Saxony, which was achieved following a series of military campaigns known as the Saxon Wars in the eighth century. Actually, achieving dominance over Saxony was no easy task for Charlemagne. It took more than thirty years of warfare, of missionaries entering Saxon lands to convert pagans, of beheading Saxons who, after having converted to Christianity went back to their pagan ways, and of crushing the regular Saxon revolts. But in the end, Saxony was Christianized, and eventually became a Duchy, a state within the Holy Roman Empire.

Now, by the beginning of the tenth century, the entire region around the southern coastline of the Baltic Sea was pagan, and was effectively sandwiched between Latin Christendom, ending as we've seen at the River Elbe, and Orthodox Christian Russia, way over to the east. As we've already seen, these pagans were loosely divided into language groups, with the Wends living adjacent to the Holy Roman Empire across the River Elbe. The Wends themselves had a reputation as competent fighters, due to centuries spent honing their skills against their Saxon neighbors. Next to the Wends, however, in a large inland territory, lived a distinctly un-warlike people. They were Slavic, like the Wends, but instead of fighting, they concentrated their activities around agricultural pursuits, and were known as the Polania people, or the people of the fields. Their strong ties to the land distinguished them from their northern neighbors, Slavs who lived along the coast of the Baltic Sea and relied on sea trade as their main source of food and income. These people were known as the Pomegania people, or the people of the seaboard. These regions would eventually become known as Poland and Pomerania.

In his book "The Polish Way", Adam Zamoyski describes the Polania as being profoundly attached to their land, which made them somewhat introverted and protected from the outside world. Adam Zamoyski goes on to state that the Polania manner of settlement was to base themselves in clusters of homesteads or small villages, each of which was largely self-sufficient and separated from other villages by uncleared land. According to Adam Zamoyski, this resulted in the Polish people developing very strong regionalist tendencies, with people forming a fundamental attachment to their particular village or region, rather than to the wider Polish region or peoples. Adam Zamoyski also says that this degree of regionalism is unique in Europe, and has persisted into modern times.

At some stage during the ninth century, a dynasty of rulers rose to rule over the Polish people, a dynasty which would have a massive impact on the history of Poland. This became known as the Piast dynasty. The Piast princes established themselves as protectors and overlords of the Polish people, and by the middle of the tenth century the Piast rulers had established a sophisticated financial system, and had built castles in key strategic locations, these castles forming a strong defensive network backed up by a standing army of around three thousand horsemen. It was at this time that the Poles came into contact with Latin Christendom. Otto I, King of the Germans, crossed the River Elbe in the year 955 and went raiding into Slavic territory. His incursion into the land of the pagans was halted when he was confronted by the network of castles and the Polish army. The Piast ruler at the time of the raids was Prince Mieszko I, and future interactions between Otto and Mieszko will form the basis of the Christianization of Poland.

Otto I, King of the Germans, was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in the year 962, and his reign was marked by his military conquests of, and the conversion to Christianity of, the Empire's pagan neighbors. He led raids against the Wends and established German settlements in Wendish territory. He scored a major victory in the 950s against the Magyar people, and against the large group of Slavs living to the south of Polish territory, known as the Bohemians. In the year 950, the ruler of Bohemia pledged homage to Otto and was baptized as a Christian.

This gave the Polish Prince Mieszko pause for thought. In his book "The Polish Way", Adam Zamoyski points out that conversion to Christianity had brought the Bohemians a number of political and cultural benefits. In his book "God's Playground: A History of Poland", Norman Davies points to the inexorable advance of Christendom in general, and the Holy Roman Empire in particular, into pagan territory as being foremost in Mieszko's mind. Whatever it was, the benefits to his reign of conversion, or the desire to avoid a military confrontation with Otto, Prince Mieszko elected to accept Christianity from the Bohemians. In the year 965, he married a Bohemian princess and the following year not only Prince Mieszko, but his entire court converted to Christianity.

Really, it was a smart political move. By voluntarily accepting baptism from his formally pagan neighbors, Mieszko was cementing ties with Bohemia while also putting a check on Otto's expansionist ambitions. If Otto had intended to invade Poland due to the fact that it was a heathen pagan territory, well Mieszko had just removed that pretext. Had Otto invaded, and had the Polish Prince been forced to accept Christianity from the Germans at the point of a sword, it's likely that Poland would also have become a vassal of the Empire. By anticipating Otto's move and converting before being forced to do so, Mieszko hoped to preserve a degree of independence for his people, and prevent them from coming under the thumb of the Holy Roman Empire.

And if that had been Prince Mieszko's intention, he pretty much achieved it. The remainder of his reign was marked not by bowing down and submitting to the powerful Latin Christians of the Holy Roman Empire, but by pursuing his own expansionist policies, even when those policies brought him into direct conflict with the Empire. Intent on conquering Pomerania, and securing for Poland a piece of the Baltic coastline, Mieszko led a military campaign into the region, but was soon blocked by a northern Imperial lord who was also intent on conquering Pomerania, but for the Holy Roman Empire.

By this time Otto II was Emperor, and Otto II intervened, leading the Imperial army in a major military expedition against the Poles. But he was defeated. Yes, that's right. The newly Christianized Polish prince beat back the Imperial forces and won for himself the region of Pomerania, securing access to the Baltic for the Kingdom of Poland. To celebrate, he founded a new city at the point where the Vistula River empties into the Baltic Sea. This new city, Gdansk, would play a vital role in the history of Poland from that time forward.

Not content with just out classing the Holy Roman Empire on the battlefield, Prince Mieszko reached out to other European powers, forming his own diplomatic ties with the Caliphate of Cordoba in Spain, for example. This again emphasized Poland's independence from its neighboring Christian powers, and ensured that the rest of Europe was aware that Poland was no vassal of the Holy Roman Empire. As a final flourish, just before he died in the year 992, Mieszko drew up a document detailing the boundaries of his realm and, in a savvy move, he dedicated his lands to Saint Peter, and requested that they be placed under Papal protection, providing yet another safety buffer against any future annexation by the Holy Roman Empire.

Now there was a chance, of course, that on Mieszko's death, Christianity may have faded and Poland may have reverted to the pagan entity it was at the beginning of Mieszko's reign. But it didn't. The Piast Dynasty, in fact, continued for centuries. Mieszko's descendants kept to the Christian Faith and the Kingdom of Poland managed to maintain its independence as a distinct Christian kingdom in the Baltic region.

The ongoing success of the dynasty and its firm Christian foundations were cemented by the work of Mieszko's son and successor, Boleslaw the Brave, and by a monk called Adalbertus, who managed to get himself killed by a bunch of pagans in Prussia. Okay, so this is what happened. Adalbertus was no mere humble monk but was actually part of a powerful and wealthy Bohemian family, and he had once been the Archbishop of Prague. Caught in the middle of a dispute between his family members and other noble power-brokers, he was eventually forced into exile, and after a few tumultuous years found himself in Poland, having traveled there after deciding to become a missionary. Adalbertus was received by Boleslaw with full honors. However, he only stayed at the Polish royal court briefly because his true calling was to travel to neighboring Prussia to convert the pagans living there. This didn't go well at all, and the following year, in the year 997, he was killed and his corpse was mutilated.

If his story had ended there Adalbertus wouldn't have had a big impact on European history, but it didn't end there. Boleslaw arranged for Adalbertus' body to be returned to Poland. Legend has it that he traded the corpse with the Prussians for its weight in gold, but it may have been a little less dramatic than that, with Norman Davies in his book "God's Playground" asserting that the body was handed over in return for a mere sack of

gold. Regardless, gold changed hands and Adalbertus' body was returned to Poland, where it was buried with full honors in the cathedral at Gniezno, which was one of the Piast dynasty's main cities. Word of the martyrdom of Adalbertus and his burial at Gniezno reached Rome, and in the year 999 Adalbertus was canonized. Importantly, In addition to turning Adalbertus into a saint, Pope Sylvester took the momentous step of elevating Gniezno to the status of an Archbishopric, a move which further cemented the identity of Poland as an independent Christianized state, recognized as such by Rome.

But wait, there's more. In the year 1000, Emperor Otto III, who incidentally had been friends with Adalbertus and was also on friendly terms with Pope Sylvester, decided to make a pilgrimage to the final resting place of the new saint in Gniezno. The visit by the Holy Roman Emperor to the Polish court was a smashing success, and apparently left Otto III gobsmacked at the wealth of his Polish neighbors. A chronicler described every knight and every lady in the Polish court dressed in expensive furs and finely-woven clothes trimmed with gold and silver. It seems that Otto III was completely bowled over by Boleslaw's wealth and magnificence.

The chronicler stated, and I quote, "Seeing his glory, his power and his riches, the Roman Emperor cried out in admiration 'By the crown of my Empire, what I see far exceeds what I have heard.' And taking counsel with his magnates, he added before all those present 'It is not fit that such a man should be titled a Prince or Count as though he were just a great Lord, but he should be elevated with all pomp to a throne and crowned with a crown.' Taking the Imperial diadem from his own brow, he placed it on the head of Boleslaw, as a sign of union and friendship, and for an ensign of state he gave him a nail from the Holy Cross and the lance of Saint Morris, in return for which Boleslaw gave him the arm of Saint Adalbertus. And they felt such love on that day that the Emperor named him 'brother' and 'associate of the Empire', and called him the 'friend' and 'ally' of the Roman nation." End quote.

So there you have it. The shock result of Otto III making a pilgrimage to the final resting place of St Adalbertus in Poland was that the Kingdom of Poland fully came into its own, with its ruler Boleslaw being recognized as a King by the Holy Roman Empire. And Otto III himself didn't come away empty handed, having scored the arm of Saint Adalbertus. Woohoo!

So, as we get set to embark on the next Baltic Crusade, the state of play around the southern shores of the Baltic Sea is as follows. We have the Latin Christian Kingdom of Denmark, and underneath that the Holy Roman Empire, also Latin Christian. The boundaries of the Empire have now been pushed eastwards over the River Elbe, and the formerly Wendish pagan territory is now the Duchy of Mecklenburg, part of the Holy Roman Empire. The eastern neighbours of the Empire are the Pomeranians, who are now part of the independent Latin Christian Kingdom of Poland. Poland's eastern neighbours are the pagan Prussians, and pagans of various tribes and language groups fill the remainder of the Baltic shoreline, until we reach Orthodox Christian Russia. Will the Latin Christians attempt to Christianize these pagans? Oh yes, they will.

Join me next week as we embark on our next major military incursion into pagan lands, the Livonian Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

End

