

History of the Crusades. Episode 196. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part II. An Unpromising Start.

Hello again. Last week we saw the German missionary Bishop Meinhard establish a Christian missionary outpost in the little Livonian village on the River Daugava, which was then known as Uxkull, and which today is called "Ikšķile". Bishop Meinhard then proceeded to build two stone defensive forts, on the promise that the locals would convert to Christianity once the forts were completed. However, when it came time to fulfill their end of the bargain, the Livonian pagans reneged, electing to instead keep both the stone forts and their pagan beliefs. Just when Bishop Meinhard must have been thinking that things couldn't get any worse, the Livonians then attempted to sacrifice one of Bishop Meinhard's fellow priests to their gods. So it would be pretty safe to say that the Christian conversion of Livonia had gotten off to a pretty rocky start.

All in all, the Christian missionaries were fortunate that the Livonians were not as warlike as the neighboring Lithuanians, or in fact some of the other people in the region. In fact, of all the pagans living in the vicinity of the Gulf of Riga, the Livonians probably presented the least threat to the Christians, and it was likely no coincidence that the missionaries decided to establish settlements in Livonian territory instead of in the territory of one of the other pagan peoples. Why did the Livonians pose less of a threat? Well, primarily because of their dislike of government and authority. The Livonian people were divided into family groups or clans, and each of these clans had an elder who would represent the clan in a tribal council. However, as William Urban points out in his book "The Baltic Crusade", it was rare that any one of these elders rose to dominate the tribal council. To put it another way, the power structure within Livonian society was quite flat, compared to the pyramid of the feudal system which operated through much of the rest of Europe. In Livonia, everyone had rights, even the common peasants, and no one really liked to be bossed around by anyone else. The lack of an overall chief in the tribal council meant that it was difficult, if not impossible, to raise an army, so their military methods were underdeveloped. Pitched battles were a rarity, and the most-used defensive and offensive military techniques were in the form of sudden raids by horseman, made up of farmers. In fact, pretty much everyone in Livonian society farmed the land. Peasants, of course, spent their days farming, but so did the members of the warrior class and even the elders. The size of the area you farmed, and the amount you could produce from your land, determined which class you fell into.

So basically, to summarize, the Livonians were primarily farmers who lived in family clan groups, who disliked the idea of a central governing structure, and didn't really like the idea of being told what to do. As a result, they didn't have an organized military and didn't pose much of a threat, militarily speaking, to other pagans living in the region, or to newcomers like the German missionaries. The Letts and the Kuronians also seemed happy to live individual lives and not be organized into armies by a central government, but they had a reputation of being fiercer than the Livonians. As a chronicler of the Teutonic Knights wrote when describing the land of the Kuronians, and I quote "Very few Christians come by intent to this land because they will be robbed of life and property." End quote.

But, sitting on top of the chart of scary pagans living around the Gulf of Riga were the Lithuanians. In addition to being war-like, the Lithuanians were able to organize themselves into very effective and quite large armies, which made them a much feared adversary in the region. So all in all, it's easy to see why the Livonians were keen for Bishop Meinhard to construct some stone forts to keep the Lithuanian raiders at bay,

although not so keen as to keep their promise to convert to Christianity in exchange for the forts, and not so keen as to refrain from attempting to sacrifice one of Bishop Meinhard's Christian brothers to their gods.

Now, before we move on, I think we need to know a little more about this attempted human sacrifice, particularly if I tell you that the Christian brother in question was saved by a horse. Okay, so enter onto the stage Brother Theodoric. Now, Theodoric was a Cistercian monk from a monastery near Hanover in Saxony. In his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban states that when Bishop Meinhard returned to the Holy Roman Empire for his formal investiture as a Bishop, he may have travelled to local monasteries, looking for recruits to accompany him back to pagan Livonia. It looks like Theodoric put up his hand, and the abbot of his monastery, gave permission for Theodoric to travel back to the Baltic region with Bishop Meinhard, as a missionary.

Now, Theodoric seems to have been a capable young fellow. Most people in the medieval era were pretty adept at supplying themselves with the necessities of life, by growing food, constructing shelters, etcetera, etcetera. But it seems that Theodoric may have possessed a particular knack for growing vegetables and other food staples. When he arrived in Livonia, he decided that living in a village with secure stone forts and other Christians didn't pose enough of a challenge, so he decided to take his mission to the next step by electing to travel northwards from Uxkull, or Ikskile, to settle down with a more isolated group of Livonians, living like the locals did and growing his own food. However, Theodore's skill at growing crops landed him in hot water. The region he had settled in was inundated by rain, and pretty much everyone in the group lost their crops, except for Theodoric. Now, these Livonians had been farming this region for centuries, if not millennia, and for their crops to die while the newly arrived Christian brother's crops survived set alarm bells ringing. Maybe by letting this Christian live amongst them they had angered the gods. There was one sure way to fix this problem. They clearly needed to sacrifice Theodoric to appease their gods and to ensure that their crops would once again thrive. Luckily for Theodoric, the question of whether or not the sacrifice would take place was to be decided by a horse.

Okay, so here is what our chronicler Henry of Livonia has to say about Theodoric and the sticky situation he found himself in, and I quote. "Because the crops in his own fields were quite abundant, and in their own fields dying because of a flooding rain, the Livonians prepared to sacrifice him to their gods. The people were collected, and the will of the gods regarding the sacrifice was sought after by lot. A lance was placed in position and the horse came up and at the signal of god, put out the foot thought to be the foot of life. Brother Theodoric prayed aloud and gave blessings with his hand. The pagan priest asserted that the Christian God was sitting on the back of the horse and was moving the horse's foot forward, that for this reason the back of the horse had to be wiped off so that the God might slide off. When this was done, the horse again put forward the foot of life as before, and Brother Theodoric's life was saved." End quote.

Now it's difficult to say exactly what was taking place here, but here's my take on it. In order to determine whether the gods really did want Theodoric as a sacrifice, the pagan priest of the village laid a lance or spear on the ground. A horse would be led so that he would walk over the lance. Whatever foot the horse placed over the lance first would determine Theodoric's fate. One foot was allocated as the "foot of life" and one as the "foot of death". So if the horse stepped over the lance and placed the foot or hoof of life down first, then Theodoric would live. Easy. Well, it turned out that that was exactly what

happened. The horse was lead over the lance and placed his "life" hoof down first. However, Theodoric was praying out loud and making gestures with his hands, which led the Livonians to speculate that perhaps the Christian God was sitting on top of the horse and guiding his steps. This was clearly a breach of the rules, so the horse was wiped down to ensure that the Christian God fell off, and then the exercise was declared to be the best of three. The horse was lead over the lance again, and the Hoof of Life came down first again. Woohoo! This time, there could be no disputing the outcome. Brother Theodoric was clearly not meant to be sacrificed, so he was able to continue living. This was no doubt fabulous from Brother Theodoric's point of view, but would turn out to be not so much of a good thing from the Livonians point of view, as we shall soon see.

Right, so while Brother Theodoric is being saved by the Hoof of Life, what is happening back in Uxkull? Is Bishop Meinhard going to throw in the missionary towel and head back to western Christendom, now that he has been duped by the pagans? Or is he going to grit his teeth and work extra hard to convert the Livonians? Poor Bishop Meinhard is now faced with a serious dilemma. He has incurred some serious debts creating his stone forts, and those debts really should be paid off by the tithes collected from the local converts. However, the Livonians seemed resistant to conversion, so where was he going to get the money? What he really needed to do was to convert a whole bunch of these pesky pagans, but it was pretty clear that the only way to do this would be by force, with the backing of an army from Western Christendom. Everyone in the region, from the Bishop to the Christian missionaries to the pagans, knew that this was the next logical step for the Bishop to take, and to prevent him from traveling back to the Holy Roman Empire, to muster such an army, the Livonians forbade him from leaving the country. However, the same travel restrictions didn't apply to the rest of the Christians in the region, so Brother Theodoric, perhaps imbued with a fresh post-sacrifice zeal for life, left Livonia and traveled all the way to Rome to request Papal authorization to use force against the pagans.

The authorization was duly granted, and according to William Urban in his book "The Baltic Crusade", Theodoric then traveled all the way back up north to Gotland to recruit an army from the German and Swedish merchants operating in the Baltic region. Now, the fact that Theodoric chose this region as the focus of his recruitment drive is interesting, as is the fact that the fighters were chosen from the merchant classes and not from the clergy. Despite the fact that this mission was sanctioned by the Pope and that the recruiter was Brother Theodoric, a Christian missionary, its appeal was largely commercial, and the men who put up their hands to take part in it were interested primarily in the commercial and financial gains they could make from the expedition, and not so much in the benefits which could accrue to the Christian Church. Pirates from the pagan regions along the Baltic coastline had frequently been disrupting sea trade, and the merchants from Scandinavia were keen to launch an attack against these scoundrels. And should the expedition then proceed to the Gulf of Riga and up the navigable river Daugava, which was already being used by German merchants, well, that sounded just fabulous.

It sounded so fabulous, in fact, that the Duke of Sweden himself decided to join the expedition, and Brother Theodoric, the Duke of Sweden and an army of German and Scandinavian merchants set sail from Visby in Gotland with high hopes. Almost immediately, however, things started to go wrong. They had planned to sail from Gotland to Kurland in Sweden, from there they would attack a notorious band of pirates known to frequent the area, and then they would head over to the Gulf of Riga. However, they were driven way off course by bad weather, and instead of heading to Sweden to deal with the pirates, they found themselves way over the other side of the Baltic Sea, in Estonia.

They managed to land ashore in Estonia, but before Theodoric could prevent them from doing so, the army decided to pillage and attack the local Estonians in an attempt to secure some booty. Theodoric was eventually able to get the attackers to stand down, but just when he was beginning to make some headway in his attempts to convince the local Estonians to convert to Christianity, the Duke of Sweden decided to call it a day. He jumped in his ship and headed back to Scandinavia, and just about the entire army followed his example. Poor Theodoric found himself left with only a handful of men who agreed to remain with him to go to the assistance of Bishop Meinhard.

Brother Theodoric and his tiny force made it safely to Bishop Meinhard in Ikskile, but they just weren't enough of them to make any impact on the Bishop's plans to convert large numbers of Livonians to Christianity. In his book, *The Baltic Crusade*, William Urban reports that Bishop Meinhard was disappointed by the outcome of Brother Theodoric expedition, and died in 1196, soon after the tiny band of crusaders arrived in Livonia.

So, so far, the attempts to convert the pagan Livonians to Christianity haven't gone very well. Despite Bishop Meinhard's best efforts, at the time of his death only a handful of Livonians had been baptized. But while the flame of Christianity appears to be burning pretty dimly in the pagan Baltic lands, and seems to be in danger of sputtering out altogether, the next couple of years will see some major political developments on the European world stage. Emperor Henry VI will die suddenly in 1197, plunging the Holy Roman Empire into a state of civil war, and in January 1198, a new pope will be elected, that Pope being Pope Innocent III. Not surprisingly, both these events will have quite an impact on the future conduct of the Baltic crusades. Join me next week as we see the dying flame of Christianity in the pagan east spark back to life, as the Crusade against the Livonians begins to get real. Until next week, bye for now.

End