

History of the Crusades. Episode 199. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part V. The Christian Pageant.

Hello again. Last week we saw the establishment of the Sword Brothers, a motley bunch of fighters who were members of a military Order stationed permanently in Livonia, with the Master of the Order answerable directly to Bishop Albert. We concluded last week's episode with the Sword Brothers combining forces with some local pagans to defeat the much feared Lithuanians. Now, before we move on to Bishop Albert's next recruitment drive in the winter of 1204 to 1205, let's just take a moment to step back and take a look at what is happening at this point in time in Livonia, and in Europe as a whole.

The city of Riga is really starting to make its presence felt in the region. As we have mentioned previously, the Daugava River snakes inland all the way to Russia, and Russian traders began to sail down the river to sell wax and furs at Riga, and German merchants from Riga were able to travel upriver as far as the Russian town of Polotsk, to sell cloth and iron to the Russians. The population of the town of Riga waxed and waned with the seasons, with merchants and traders from the Holy Roman Empire coming and going regularly during the warmer months, while the permanent citizens of the town bunkered down and did their best to survive the harsh winters.

In addition to its permanent population of men of the Church and the various Christian settlers needed to keep the town and citizens operational, Riga had a diverse population of fighting men. At the top of the heap, of course, where the Sword Brothers, German Knights fully equipped with warhorses, armor and European weaponry, who were becoming more and more familiar with the local terrain and the local people. The town of Riga itself also had its own militia, as was common in all frontier Christian settlements, but these men wouldn't have been as well equipped as the Sword Brothers, and unlike the Sword Brothers, operated solely in Riga. The local Christianized Livonians also had their own groups of fighters, who were occasionally organized into identifiable forces, having a banner and wearing similar clothing which would distinguish them from other local fighters. These forces will prove useful to the people of Riga. They will take turns being stationed in border fortifications, will report on the activities of other Livonian fighters in the region, and may assist in battle, generally being stationed on the wing, while the more heavily armored crusaders or Sword Brothers bore the brunt of the battle. Thrown into this mix were the visiting Crusade volunteers, who ranged from lowly infantrymen to more prosperous Germans who could afford to equip themselves with horses, armor and weaponry. So to summarize, Riga at this point in its history is becoming a regional trading hub, with an interesting mix of occupants, Christians, traders and fighters, whose population waxed and waned according to the seasons.

Right, so let's pan out a bit and look at the wider picture. What's happening in Europe? Well, King John of England has commenced his train wreck of a reign, and has already managed to lose most of the English possessions in northern France, including Normandy. The ripple effect of John's military failures are being felt as far away as the Holy Roman Empire, where the English-backed Saxon contender for the Imperial throne, Henry the Lion's son Otto, has suddenly found himself with less resources, as the English are forced to concentrate their efforts at home. This of course, was good news for the other leader in the Imperial Civil War, Philip of Hohenstaufen. As Otto's financial support started to dry up, men began deserting the Saxon cause and hopping on the Hohenstaufen bandwagon, with even Otto's own brother Henry deciding to switch over to the Hohenstaufens.

Pope Innocent, however, remained steadfast in his support of Otto, and had it not been for Papal support, the Saxon campaign for Imperial dominance may well have collapsed entirely at this point. King Valdemar of Denmark is taking full advantage of the Saxon decline to consolidate his conquests in the north. Not content with just military victories, King Valdemar is also successfully promoting Denmark on the diplomatic stage, the Danish King himself marrying into the Bohemian Royal House, and Pope Innocent intervening to ensure that the Danish Princess Ingeborg was reinstated as the Queen of France. At the moment, the King of Denmark seems happy to promote peace and happiness in the regions he has conquered while he sits back and watches Danish power and prestige expand and rise.

And something else has just occurred at this point in history, which will have an impact on the Baltic crusades - the sack of Constantinople, which took place in the year 1204, following the Fourth Crusade. Victorious Crusaders were beginning to make their way back from Constantinople to Europe, laden with the plunder they had scored. Far from being viewed as one of the darkest acts of the Middle Eastern Crusades, William Urban reports that, to the Latin Christians of Europe, this was a glorious victory, made even greater by the series of failed Crusades which had preceded it. Latin Christianity had dealt Orthodox Christianity a major blow, and this increased the confidence of those volunteering to fight on the borders of Orthodox Russia over in the Baltic lands. It also increased the popularity of crusading once again, as the riches pouring into Europe from the defeated city of Constantinople proved that crusading could have significant material as well as spiritual rewards.

So for all these reasons - the success of the Fourth Crusade, peace in the Danish provinces, and the reversal of Saxon fortunes in the civil war - Bishop Albert's recruitment drive went remarkably well, and he was able to sail back to Riga with the largest crusading force yet mustered. William Urban, in his book "The Baltic Crusade", reports that the sheer numbers of the people in the Crusader army that year cowered the pagans in the immediate area around Riga into submission, and with resistance having waned, the pagans around the city were brought under control.

The same couldn't be said, however, about the pagans at Uxkull, or Ikskile. There were pockets of very dense forest around Ikskile, and as some Crusaders traveled through the forests on their way to Ikskile, they were attacked. They managed to escape from the Livonians, and they made it to Ikskile, which still enjoyed the protection of the fortifications provided to it by Bishop Meinhard. When they arrived at Ikskile, the Crusaders believed the village to be empty, so according to our chronicler, Henry of Livonia, the Crusaders decided to take possession of it. Not satisfied with just taking the village, they also decided to provide the new crusader stronghold with food stores, so they helped themselves to the crops grown by the Livonians, which were ready to be harvested, using not only scythes but even their own swords to collect the grain. According to Henry, they harvested so much grain that they, and I quote, "filled the town to the top" end quote.

In retaliation, the Livonians later attacked a group of crusaders who were heading out from Ikskile to collect even more grain, managing to kill seventeen of them, some of whom the pagans sacrificed to the gods. This act seems to have brought it home to the Christians that the local Livonian people were none too happy about being kicked out of Ikskile, which it turns out, may not have been abandoned after all, nor about having their crops, that they had worked so hard to grow and which were meant to sustain them and their families over winter, be stolen by the Crusaders and used to feed Christian mouths. It's difficult to tell

from Henry of Livonia's account, and it's incredibly frustrating not to have the Livonian side of the story, but it seems that a compromise was reached. Many of the pagans promised to be baptized, and in return the Christians gave them back some of their grain, although they weren't allowed back into the fortified village of Ikskile.

In order to prove that things were going splendidly in Livonia, and that they were really all one big happy family, the Crusaders decided to put on a play or pageant at Riga. This served the dual purpose of giving the restless Crusaders something to do, and provided entertainment for the culture-starved Christian inhabitants of Livonia. It also served to educate the Livonians, as the play was to have a religious theme. The purpose of the pageant was diligently explained to the Livonians, so they would understand what was going on, but during a battle scene, many of them became alarmed and took off into the forests. However, an intermission was called, and the Christians went off to find the Livonians and bring them back so that they could watch the rest of the play, which they did, without incident.

Henry of Livonia views this play as a watershed moment in the history of the Christianization of Livonia. He states that it acted like, and I quote, "a prelude and prophecy of the future" end quote. Apparently, scenes from the Old and New Testament were included in the play, and there are a number of battle scenes, which I imagine the Crusaders were happy to be involved in. Seeing the Livonians come to watch the play in trepidation, then flee as the battle scene started, then be persuaded to come back and watch peacefully into the end seemed to Henry to serve as a prediction of how the future Christianization of Livonia would proceed. The Livonians would be reluctant and fearful of Christianity and would flee from baptism, but eventually they will be persuaded to come back into the fold and everyone will be peaceful and happy. The pagans would watch the Christians do some pretty weird stuff on the stage, and everyone would applaud at the end.

Well, if this meant that the Christians of Riga thought that things would go smoothly from here on in, they were in for a bit of a shock, because in the year 1206 the tiny Christian settlement will face one of its biggest challenges yet, involving a dangerous showdown between the Russians in the town of Polotsk further up the Daugava River, and the Livonians, who decide to rise up in rebellion against the German Christians.

Now, in order to give this event the full attention it deserves, I'm going to leave things here until next week, which means that this episode will be a little short. But to leave on a cheery note, Brother Theodoric has been promoted. Yes, it's all very exciting. You know that monastery, which has been built at the mouth of the Daugava River? Well, Bishop Abbot has chosen Theodoric to head up the new venture, meaning that Brother Theodoric is now Abbot Theodoric. Woohoo!

So join me next week, as Abbot Theodoric travels upriver to Polotsk, gets himself detained by the Russians, and accidentally finds himself in the middle of a diplomatic tangle and a pagan uprising. Oops, spoilers. Until next week, bye for now.

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