

History of the Crusades. Episode 200. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part VI. Polotsk.

Episode 200. Boom. How did that happen?

Hello again. Last week we saw a large number of crusaders travel to Livonia, which bit by bit is becoming Christianized.

Now, as we've seen so far in the Baltic Crusades, crusading and trading seem to go hand in hand, and while some Germans' primary aim seemed to be the Christianization of pagans in the Baltic region, for many others the opening up of new trade routes and commercial opportunities was the main goal. The establishment and resounding success of Lubeck as a trading port was the starting point for German commercial expansion into both the Baltic region and further afield into Russia. Prior to the establishment of Lubeck, Baltic trade was dominated by the Scandinavians, who used the island of Gotland as their base to trade, mainly with Russia. Consequently, as Philippe Dollinger reported in his book "The German Hansa", right from the get-go the Germans needed to come to an understanding with the people of Gotland. Henry The Lion negotiated an agreement with the Gotlanders, granting privileges to traders from Gotland and ensuring that German merchants were welcome in Gotland. Eventually, enough Germans were traveling to Gotland, as the first stepping stone in their exploration of trading opportunities in the Baltic region, that they formed an association which had the catchy title of, and I quote "The Community of German Merchants Regularly Visiting Gotland" end quote. The association had its own seal, and just as Lubeck was exploding in popularity, Gotland also enjoyed a parallel success.

As we've just mentioned, before Lubeck was established and before German traders came onto the scene, Scandinavian merchants had been busy plying trade routes, establishing trading outposts and connections, and setting up trading relationships with merchants as far away as Russia. With the arrival in Gotland of the Germans, the Scandinavians were able to share this knowledge with their new German trading partners. As a consequence, Germans began following the example set by the Scandinavians, traveling along routes in the Baltic region and out into the North Sea, forming trading relationships, obtaining privileges from faraway noblemen and lords, and formalizing commercial treaties, all stamped with the seal of The Community of German Merchants Regularly Visiting Gotland.

So you know, some of the German merchants who were regularly visiting Gotland formed the view that they could save time by actually moving to Gotland and establishing their homes there, instead of having to sail there regularly from Lubeck. Most of the new German settlers decided to move to Visby, a town on the west coast of the island. Visby was a Scandinavian town which boasted a couple of churches, but in the end, so many Germans moved there that, in the words of Philip Dollinger, it became a double town. The German residents of Visby and the Scandinavian residents each formed their own council, and governed the town jointly. Eventually, both these councils would amalgamate, but they would always contain both German and Scandinavian members.

Visby's rise mirrored that of Lubeck, only on a smaller scale. The town regularly held trading fairs, and it became the place where everyone traveling from the Holy Roman Empire to, well, really anywhere in the Baltic region, whether it be Sweden, Russia, Livonia, or elsewhere, would pull in for stores before setting out on their journey. Visby streets were filled not only with its permanent Scandinavian and German residents, but

with German missionaries, crusaders and merchants, all availing themselves of the hospitality offered in the town, and purchasing all the stores and equipment they would need for the next leg of their journey. At its peak, eighteen medieval Churches would be operating within Visby, which gives you an indication of its size.

Now, one of the ways in which Visby wanted to distinguish itself from other trading towns was via its connections with Russia. Phillippe Dollinger points out, that Visby endeavored to become the protector and director of German commerce in Russia. Russia was becoming increasingly important as a market for German goods, and as a place where wax and furs could be purchased and then sold on to markets in the Holy Roman Empire and in wider Europe. The Germans took to Russian trade like a duck to water. Initially, the Scandinavians acted as guides and hosts, showing the Germans the trade routes, introducing them to local contacts, assisting with language difficulties, which was very nice of them. If the Scandinavians had had crystal balls and were able to look into the future, however, they probably wouldn't have been quite so helpful, as their crystal ball would have revealed that the Germans would rapidly come to dominate trade with Russia, pushing the Scandinavians to the sidelines.

Anyway, how things would work was something like this. Novgorod, unfortunately, was a total nuisance to get to. It was way inland in Russia, but it was definitely worth the trouble to travel there because, for centuries, Novgorod had been the main trading link between the Baltic region and the Byzantine Empire. Vikings and other Scandinavian traders would make their way to Novgorod, and from there Scandinavian goods would wind their way all the way down to Kiev, and from Kiev to Constantinople. So to get to Novgorod, a German merchant ship would sail from Gotland all the way over to the furthest eastern point of the Baltic Sea and would pull in at the island of Kotlin or "Kronstadt", as the Germans called it, which was at the mouth of the River Niva, near the city of St Petersburg. On the island, the German cargo was transferred to smaller vessels, and Russian pilots were recruited to guide the ships up the Niva River. Now the Niva River empties into a massive lake, Lake Ladoga, which lies to the east of St Petersburg. Unfortunately for the traders, the lands along the banks of the River Niva were sparsely populated, but, unsurprisingly I guess, the region was home to bunches of pirates who would do their best to attack and board the vessels and steal their cargo. If you made it safely through the river into Lake Ladoga, then you had to sail across the lake until you reached the port of Ladoga. the port of Ladoga was a handy resting place, which was located at the mouth of another river, the Volchov.

At Ladoga, the Germans could relax a bit. In time, a German church would be built in the town so that Germans could pray for assistance in familiar surroundings. At the port of Ladoga the cargo would have to be transferred to different ships once again, ships which could handle the rapids and fast flowing waters of the Volchov. Then Russian boat towers and guides were hired to make the grueling five hundred mile journey against the flow of the river, upstream to Novgorod. Really, when you think about this journey, one which was taken by countless merchants over the centuries, it says something about the tenacity of these early traders and of their eagerness to open up these new trading routes.

Even today, the journey from Novaya Ladoga to Novgorod is a bit taxing. The Internet travel site WikiTravel.org advises tourists that you can catch a bus from St Petersburg to Ladoga, which will take you about fifty minutes and will cost around twenty five rubles. Strangely, the site states, and I quote, "It's not terribly easy to tell when you have arrived in Stary Ladoga if you haven't been there before, so it's best to ask a local to tell you when you have arrived," end quote. If you manage to get off of the right stop, just like back in

medieval times when you had to change ships at Ladoga, you have to change buses at Ladoga to get to Novgorod. In fact, you'd better hope you haven't taken too much luggage because you actually have to walk from the bus station over the river Volchov to catch the connecting bus because, as the Wikitravel site helpfully points out, buses don't cross the river. Anyway, after a twenty minute walk, probably longer if your luggage is heavy, you can try and find the right bus stop for the bus leaving to Novgorod. Now apparently, this is quite a challenge; according to WikiTravel, it's quite difficult to find. The best WikiTravel can manage is that the stop is, and I quote, "On the further side of the road from the side-shows." End quote. Apparently, there's another stop beside the park after the bridge, although WikiTravel advises, and I quote, "You had better find the timetable for the bus before trying this route though, because the schedule is sparse, with intervals up to two hours, especially late in the evening and may not be available on the stops," end quote. Apparently, even if you are waiting at the right stop, the bus might not pull in and pick you up unless you wave it down.

At this stage, you may have thrown your hands up into the air and wished that things were like the good old days back in medieval times when you could do it all by boat. Anyway, in the unlikely, by the sounds of it, chance that you managed to get on the right bus, you can settle back for the six hour journey by road to Novgorod. Of course, back in medieval times, when you are on boats which in many cases had to be physically hauled up the river against the currents to Novgorod, it would have taken much much longer. By the year 1205, so many Germans had made the grueling journey from the Baltic Sea to Novgorod that they had set up a permanent establishment called the Peterhof in the marketplace at Novgorod, which was granted privileges by the Russians.

But as you can imagine, at the back of many German traders' minds, was the same question as that being asked by tourists on board the bus from St Petersburg, and that question is, "Isn't there an easier way to get to Novgorod?" Or for the medieval traders, the question may be able to be taken one step further. "Isn't there an easier way to access the Russian markets? Surely we don't have to travel all the way to Novgorod. Maybe, for instance, we could travel to Russia via the River Daugava in Livonia?"

Well, in the year 1206, as the streets of Riga were once again filled with crusaders from Saxony and Gotland, many of whom were either merchants or who had commercial connections, that's exactly the question that was being asked. Russia at this time was divided into principalities, many of which covered vast areas of land. Now, although it sounds impressive to be a Russian Prince in one of these principalities, in many cases the wealth and prestige of the Russian Princes wasn't all that great. They did, however, have historical ties to the region and exercised authority within their vast principality.

The principality which concerns us was called the Principality of Polotsk, and it stretched right around the region controlled by the Lithuanians, and continued past the upper reaches of the Daugava River into the region neighboring the lands of the Letts and the lands of the Livonians. Now, the seat of power for the Principality of Polotsk and the place where its Prince resided was the town of Polotsk, which was located in the upper reaches of the River Daugava. To be more specific, Polotsk was around four hundred kilometres up-river from Riga. If you are interested, today, the cheapest way to get from Riga to Polotsk, which is currently located in Belarus, is by night train, which will take you around seven hours and set you back nine euros.

Okay, so despite the fact that it was going to be an arduous undertaking to trek four hundred kilometres up-river to Polotsk in the year 1206, it was decided that someone from Riga needed to do this, and the person selected to undertake this journey was the man who had already traveled to Rome three times at the direction of the Bishop: Brother, sorry Abbot Theodoric. Now the exact purpose of Theodoric's visit is a little unclear, but it was most likely to establish ties and do a little ground work on exploring future commercial opportunities. Henry of Livonia stated that Bishop Albert's aim in sending Theodoric up-river was to, and I quote, "Acquire the friendship and intimacy of King Vladimir of Polotsk" end quote. So Bishop Albert gave Theodoric a fully armored warhorse to give to Vladimir as a gift, and Theodoric set off on his long journey.

Now this encounter, the first formal one between the Russians and the new Latin Christian invaders, was always going to be a bit of a diplomatic minefield. As William Urban points out in his book "The Baltic Crusade", the Prince of Polotsk had traditionally exercised a vague sovereignty over the lower reaches of the River Daugava, and now, clearly, the Latin Christians were encroaching on that territory. The Russians had formed loose ties with the Livonians living on the Daugava and had traded with them. Now merchants, missionaries, and crusaders from the Holy Roman Empire had set up camp along the Daugava, and were converting and terrorizing the Livonians, and spreading, not Russian Orthodox Christianity, but western European Latin Christianity in the region. The Russians, of course, would have rather Orthodox Christianity to be brought to the pagans, and were probably none too happy to be seeing Latin Christian towns springing up along the Daugava.

If Bishop Albert and Abbot Theodoric thought that Theodoric's arrival in Polotsk would be met with a high five, a few bear hugs, and easy access to lucrative trade markets inside Russia, they were about to be disappointed. Firstly, Theodoric's journey did not go well. There were no roads in the region of course, so the only way to get to Polotsk was by trekking through dense forests along the banks of the river. Of course, traveling from Polotsk to Riga would be much easier. You would just pop on a raft or a boat and be carried downstream. But Theodoric was traveling in the opposite direction, uphill, against the flow of the river. Of course, his journey wouldn't have been made any easier by the fact that he was taking with him a giant warhorse, complete with its own set of armor. It also didn't help that he was traveling through territory he was unfamiliar with, and which was home to pagans, some of them hostile. During the journey, Theodoric and his party were attacked by a group of Lithuanians who took everything of value from them, including the war horse. Abbot Theodoric, however, decided to press on to Polotsk, now disheveled, without any possessions of any value, and without the generous gift that Bishop Albert had hoped would set the relationship between the Germans and the Russians off on the right foot.

The good news was that Abbot Theodoric did manage to make it to Polotsk. The bad news was that the reception he received from the Russian Prince was decidedly frosty. Why? Well the lack of gifts probably didn't help, but Henry of Livonia reports that a group of Livonians had been sent by the elders to Polotsk and had arrived in the town before Theodoric. They had met with Prince of Vladimir and had, and I quote, "asserted that the Bishop, with his followers, was excessively harsh to them and that the yoke of faith was intolerable," end quote. To put it simply, the Livonians had countered the Germans' move by getting their representatives to Polotsk first and by imploring the Russian Prince not to welcome the Germans with open arms, but to meet them with force and drive them out of the region.

Prince Vladimir may have been pondering the position put by the Livonians when the empty-handed German representatives arrived, full of stories about the wonderful, generous gift they had brought the Prince, but which had apparently disappeared on route. Prince Vladimir ordered Theodoric and his men to be kept in close confinement and then made plans to send his army down-river to Riga to sort this German problem out once and for all. Theodoric, once he heard of the Prince's plan, decided that he needed to warn Bishop Albert of the imminent Russian invasion. Luckily for the Germans, he found an impoverished man in Polotsk who was from the village of Holm, near Uxkull (or Ikskile). He gave him a half mark of silver to carry a letter to the Bishop of Riga as quickly as possible. In the letter, of course, Theodoric warned Bishop Albert of the fact that the meeting with Prince Vladimir had not gone as planned and that the Russian army was headed their way. When he received the letter, Bishop Albert immediately canceled his plans to head back to Saxony on his annual recruitment drive, and convinced a bunch of crusaders, who were about to sail home, to stay and protect Riga from the Russians.

Meanwhile, Prince Vladimir had discovered the fact that Theodoric had managed to warn the Bishop about the Russian plans, and realizing the chances of a quick and decisive Russian victory had been dealt a major blow by the fact that a bunch of well-armed crusaders and Sword Brothers were now fully prepared and expecting the Russian invasion, he decided to call off the attack on Riga, for now. Join me next week as we see how the citizens of Riga face their first major diplomatic and military challenge, an uprising by the Livonians combined with Russian hostility. Until next week, bye for now.

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