

History of the Crusades. Episode 201. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part VII. Livonian Uprising.

Hello again. Last week we saw Abbott Theodoric depart on a mission up-river to meet the neighbors, that is the Russian Prince of Polotsk, with a view to establishing diplomatic ties and opening trade routes. However, things went awry when the horse Theodoric was taking as a gift was stolen by the Lithuanians en route to Polotsk. When the giftless Theodoric arrived at Polotsk he discovered that the Livonians had already met with Prince Vladimir and had convinced him to attack the Latin Christian settlements in Livonia with the aim of driving them out of the region. Theodoric was able to send word of the imminent Russian attack to Bishop Albert in Riga, with the result that Prince Vladimir has now called off the attack and is considering his next move.

Now those of you who are following with interest the unusual role that horses are playing in the Livonian Crusade will have noticed that this diplomatic incident was sparked by a horse. The magnificent warhorse complete with its own set of armor, which was meant to set diplomatic relations between Russia and the Holy Roman Empire off on a firm footing, is now enjoying the company of its new owners, the Lithuanians. Had the horse been safely delivered to Polotsk, there is every likelihood that Prince Vladimir would not have been persuaded by the Livonians to launch an attack on Riga. Now, I'm not suggesting for a minute that the horse took the initiative and managed to remove itself from Abbott Theodoric's party, with a view to upsetting diplomatic relations between Riga and Russia. Henry of Livonia, in his Chronicle, states that the warhorse disappeared from Theodoric's possession after Theodoric was, and I quote, "robbed on the road by a band of Lithuanian bandits" end quote. But it is clear that horses seem to be shaping events to an unusual extent in this Crusade. Abbot Theodoric's life was saved by a horse, Bishop Berthold was killed by horse, and now a horse has thrown diplomatic relations between the Russians and the Latin Christians into disarray. So for those keeping a tally on horses versus Christians in the Livonian Crusade, the horses have now pulled ahead.

Anyway, this horse-initiated diplomatic crisis is actually looking pretty serious. Bishop Albert's aim in sending Theodoric up-river to Polotsk was to set the stage for the establishment of friendly relations between Polotsk and Riga, with the ultimate goal of forming commercial ties between the two towns which could see Polotsk emerge as a gateway for trade into Russia. Why should the Baltic Sea traders have to make the arduous journey to St Petersburg, across to Lake Ladoga, and then all the way inland upriver to Novgorod, when they could just call in at Riga, go up the River Daugava to Polotsk and then on to Smolensk or other Russian trading centers? It was a gamble that Bishop Albert was willing to take, and had the warhorse been presented to Prince Vladimir, perhaps it would have paid off.

But of course, the flip side to this coin was the fact that it was really in Russia's interests to remove Latin Christian influence from the region. Polotsk had been trading with the Livonians since the establishment of the town, and no doubt its long term goal would have been to convert the Livonians to Orthodox Christianity and extend Russian influence all the way to the shores of the Baltic Sea. That long term goal has been thrown into doubt by the arrival of the pesky Latin Christians from the Holy Roman Empire, who had now muscled in and established permanent settlements at the mouth of the Daugava, and were pressuring the Livonians into converting to Latin Christianity. It's not difficult to see why Prince Vladimir was persuaded by the Livonian elders to attack Riga with a view to driving the Saxon invaders from the region.

Fortunately for Bishop Albert though, Abbott Theodoric was an old hand at diplomacy. His three separate journeys to Rome must have placed him in good stead and taught him the arts of persuasive discourse, because he was able to convince Prince Vladimir that the best way to resolve the issue was not by warfare but by negotiation. Prince Vladimir agreed to send an embassy down-river with Theodoric to Riga. The Russian officials would then act as impartial facilitators, mediating the dispute between the Latin Christians and the Livonians. The meeting between the Livonians and the Latin Christians was set to take place on the banks of the Ogre River, at the place where it emptied into the Daugava River, which was a short distance up-river from Uxkull, or Ikšķile. The date of the meeting was set for the 30th May, which would give the pagans plenty of time to travel around the region, telling Livonians far and wide about the meeting and inviting them to attend. Apparently, the invitation was extended to the pagan Letts as well, but in the end they decided not to make an appearance. As the day of the meeting drew closer, however, it was clear that the Livonians were not intending to parlay with the Christians. No, as more and more armed Livonians poured into Holm, it looked more and more like an uprising was on the cards.

Henry of Livonia reports that the Livonian elders from Holm, whom he alleges were the instigators of the plan, traveled up-river to Ikšķile and tried to convince the German Christians living there to travel with them to the conference site. Sensing a trap, the Germans refused. However two Livonian Christian converts who were living alongside the Latin Christians in Ikšķile convinced the commander of the town, a man called Konrad, to let them go with the Livonians as representatives of Ikšķile. Their argument was that they wouldn't be harmed by their kinsmen and could report back on what occurred at the meeting. Apparently, Konrad thought that this was a terrible idea and tried to talk them out of the plan, which in hindsight was good advice. Here is what Henry of Livonia has to say about this, and I quote. "Konrad earnestly strove to dissuade them from this foolishness, warning them of the manifest malice of the Livonians, but when overcome by their earnest entreaty, he allowed them to go their way." End quote.

Things didn't go well for the two Livonian Christians. When they arrived at the meeting place, the Livonian elders took them aside and tried to convince them to renounce Christianity and return to their pagan ways. However, the two Livonian converts refused, so Henry of Livonia reports that the two men had their feet bound by ropes and then were killed by being sliced down their middles. The bodies of these two martyred men currently lie at the church in Ikšķile, next to the tombs of Bishop Meinhard and Bishop Berthold. So the Livonians have killed the only two Christians who showed up at the meeting. I guess it won't surprise anyone to learn what happened next. The Livonians used the remainder of the meeting to formulate a plan to force the Latin Christians out of their lands. They decided to base themselves at the fort at Holm.

The town of Holm, incidentally, is now called Salaspils. The German name for the town, Holm is a shortened version of the name "Kirchholm" meaning "Island Church". The Latvian name "Salaspils" means "Island Castle", both words referring to buildings established by the Latin Christians at the site. The town of Holm is located approximately halfway between Riga and Ikšķile. So basically, if you travel around eighteen kilometers up-river from Riga, you get to Holm. Continue traveling another twelve kilometers or so up-river, and you arrive at Ikšķile. Just as an aside, during World War Two, Salaspils was the site of the largest Nazi concentration camp in the Baltic region, with historians estimating that between 2,000 and 3,000 civilians died at the camp.

Okay, so the Livonians have decided to use Holm as a launching pad for a full scale attack on Riga. They get word out to all the pagans living in the vicinity of the River Daugava that an uprising against the Christians was on, and quite a few men answered the call. Not just Livonians either, even some Lithuanians decided to join the fight. Now, at this stage, you might be asking, "What are the Russians doing?" They had come down-river to mediate between the Germans and the Livonians, but now this chance to talk things over seems to have blown up into a full scale uprising by the pagans. Well, unfortunately, I can't supply you with an answer. Henry of Livonia is the only source for this incident, and he doesn't mention the Russian reaction, nor the actions of the Russian ambassadors sent to smooth things out between the Germans and the Livonians. But really, the Christians being booted out of the region by the locals is an outcome that the Russians wouldn't mind at all, so I imagine that they are backing quietly away from the rising tensions and the military buildup, and are tiptoeing back to Polotsk to report to Prince Vladimir.

So if the Russians are out of the picture, how are the Christians of Livonia reacting to the uprising? Well, only a few days after the date of the scheduled mediation meeting, Bishop Albert met with his advisors and representatives from the Crusaders and the Sword Brothers and decided, not surprisingly, to launch an attack against Holm before the pagans could organize themselves any further. So around 150 Germans, armed with crossbows and small portable catapult machines, set sail up the river for Holm, arriving there on June the 4th. The Christians from Riga were way outnumbered. There were only 150 of them, compared to what Henry of Livonia described as a, and I quote "multitude" end quote, of pagans. However, the pagan weaponry set was limited to stones, simple bows, and lances. The crossbow and portable catapult machines were weapons they hadn't come across before, and they really didn't have an answer for them. The Christians advanced, taking first the riverbank and then, after some fierce fighting, the town of Holm itself. They then advanced all the way north to Treiden, the town where Abbott Theodoric had chosen to live when he first came to Livonia. Treiden had chosen to join Holm in rebellion, but like Holm it was no match for the advancing archers, and the relentless catapult machines which battered the walls of the town. Eventually, the Christians were victorious, the pagans of Holm and Treiden surrendered, and the head of the leader of the pagan uprising was sent downstream to Bishop Albert as a victory prize.

But it's a little bit early to be declaring a Christian victory. It wasn't just Holm and Treiden which had risen in rebellion. Pretty much the majority of the Livonians living along the River Daugava had expressed their desire to drive the Germans out of Livonia, and the Christians were going to need all the help they could get to fully quash the uprising. So they called on the neighboring Semigallian tribes for assistance. According to Henry of Livonia, the Semigallians were only too happy to help. Their leader sent 3,000 men to Riga to join the fight against the Livonians, who many Semigallians viewed as their traditional enemy. This pretty much did the trick. The Livonian uprising was declared defeated, and Bishop Albert decided to journey back to Saxony to gather more crusaders to put a stop to these pesky pagan uprisings once and for all.

But wait, as Bishop Albert is sailing off into the sunset, although actually it wasn't a sunset at all, he sailed straight into a storm and was forced back to Riga, before waiting a few days and trying again. So as Bishop Albert is sailing back to Lubeck, what's this? A bunch of Livonians heading up-river to Polotsk to update Prince of Vladimir on the situation regarding the uprising, and to request military assistance from Polotsk to boot the Germans out of Livonia.

So the Germans in Livonia look like they might be in a spot of bother. Bishop Albert has sailed back to Lubeck, but the elders of the Livonian tribes have sent representatives up-river to Polotsk, and Prince Vladimir is seriously considering their request for military assistance against the Latin Christians of Riga. Join me next week as we see Bishop Albert wrestle with two major powers who wish to claim overlordship of Livonia, Russia and Denmark. Until next week, bye for now.

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