

History of the Crusades. Episode 219. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part 1. Pre-Christian Prussia.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Valdemar II of Denmark suffer a shock defeat at the Battle of Bornhoved, which effectively spelled the end of the Danish occupation of Saxony. We also saw the pirates of Oesel suffer a military loss at the hands of the Crusaders, which saw them surrender and agree to accept Christianity, and then we waved goodbye to the Livonian Crusade for the moment. But we're not finished with the Livonian Crusade, not by a long shot. The Livonian Crusade in fact continues on and off until the sixteenth century, but while we have spent the past twenty or so years in Livonia and Estonia, events have been taking place in other parts of the Baltic, and it is to those events which we shall now turn. So we will leave the Livonian Crusade on pause, with the whole of Livonia and Estonia now Christianized, with Bishop Albert and the Sword Brothers still having major roles to play, but with the region effectively under Papal control following the intervention of William of Modena.

Now, we left the Livonian Crusade with the defeat of the Pirates of Oesel in the year 1227, and you will be pleased to know that the military campaign known to history as The Prussian Crusade starts, you guessed it, in the year 1227. But unfortunately, we aren't just going to jump straight into the year 1227 and continue merrily along the timeline. Why? Well, because nothing would make any sense. No, to understand the launch of the Prussian Crusade in the year 1227, we first need to delve into the background of three very interesting subjects. To be more specific, we need to take a look at what's been happening in Prussia, what's been happening in Poland, and what's been happening with the Teutonic Knights. So, without any further ado, let's get started.

Firstly, we'll orientate ourselves to exactly where Prussia is. Okay, so to get to Prussia from where we are now, we need to travel south from Livonia into Lithuania. Now, Lithuania is pretty large. As well as bordering Livonia and Curonia to the north, it borders the Russian Principality of Polotsk to the east and southeast, but to the west Lithuania borders Prussia. Now, of course, at this time, the borders of the pagan lands were very fluid, but in general terms, Lithuania didn't really have access to much coastline. The Semigallians controlled most of the coastal lands bordering Livonia to the south, and if you kept walking in a southerly direction along the shores of the Baltic Sea from the Semigallian lands, you would find yourself in Prussia, while the bulk of the territory controlled by the Lithuanians swings inland towards Russia. If you kept walking around the Baltic coastline, the lands controlled by the Prussians eventually border the Duchy of Pomerania in Poland. So Prussia is essentially wedged on the Baltic coast line between Lithuania / Semigallia and the Kingdom of Poland. The southern border of Prussia also rests against the Kingdom of Poland. More specifically, it rests against the duchy of Mazovia, with a tiny portion of the southern Prussian border also abutting one of the Russian principalities. So Prussia's neighbors are essentially Lithuania and Poland, with a small nod to Russia as well.

So now we know where Prussia is located, the obvious next question is what was going on inside Prussia during this time, and why was Prussia still defiantly pagan? By the year 1227, the Letts, Livonians, and Estonians had all, in some sort of a fashion, submitted to the Christian yoke, yet Prussia and Lithuania, both of which were located closer to Latin Christian Europe than Livonia or Estonia, was still pagan. Why was this so? Well, two factors probably contributed to the fact that Prussia, by the year 1227, was largely un-Christianized. Firstly, was the terrain. Prussia was dotted with marshes, bogs, thick

forests, and waterways, which made any large scale invasion by a Latin Christian army a major challenge. Secondly was the fact that the Prussians themselves, like the Lithuanians, had the reputation of being aggressive, skillful fighters.

Now, recently, a listener asked me if I could do an episode on the pagan beliefs of the people living in the Baltic region. I thought this sounded like a fabulous idea, as the actual beliefs of the pagans are something that is generally just skimmed over in the current texts about the Baltic Crusades. I went off happily to do some research and quickly discovered that there is a reason why the pagan beliefs are skimmed over in the current texts about the Baltic Crusades, that reason being the pagans left no written record of their beliefs. The only contemporary observations or commentary about the beliefs are recorded by people hostile to those beliefs, so it would be very easy to do those beliefs a disservice by discussing them. A further problem is the fact that, unlike a religion such as Christianity, there was no one overall central pagan belief system. The beliefs and practices varied from region to region, and many evolved around specific trees, groves or other sacred places. However, despite these difficulties, much work has been done by scholars in recent times in an attempt to shed more light on pre Christian beliefs in the Baltic region, and archaeologists in particular have been able to point to some solid evidence of pagan beliefs and practices. Alexander Pluskowski in his book "The Archaeology of the Prussian Crusade, Holy War and Colonization" states as follows, and I quote. "In the absence of any indigenous written accounts and relying on echoes of earlier beliefs captured by later Christian commentators, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the cosmological or theological complexities of pre-Christian Prussia. However, the fragmentary evidence does point to a set of practices, and perhaps then beliefs, with both shared and distinctive elements found across the eastern Baltic." End Quote.

So let's take a look at those pagan beliefs, practices and elements which we can identify to date, although of course we should keep in mind the fact that, as Alexander Pluskowski points out, despite the fact that a number of German and Polish archaeologists and historians have been working solidly on this topic for at least a century, the subject remains very much a work in progress, and Alexander Pluskowski predicted that even by the time his book was published, which occurred in the year 2013, the information provided in it may well be outdated. Okay, so with all those disclaimers in mind, what do we know?

Well, the Prussians seemed to live in regions centered around large family groupings. The culture within these groupings was militaristic, and the nobility within the society were warrior horsemen. Horses played an important role in society, and there is evidence of the ritualistic killing of horses. If a nobleman died, his wife, his weapons, his horse, cattle, hunting birds, and clothes were burnt with him on a funeral pyre, in the belief that all would be resurrected with him in the afterlife. Horses were also sometimes buried separately. There is archaeological evidence of horses being buried, both dead and alive, together with grave goods of their own, with possible rituals taking place involving the use of plants, fire and charcoal. Interestingly, items that have been uncovered in the remains of funeral pyres include swords, battle axes, spearheads, broaches, belt buckles, bronze bowls, ceramic containers, combs made out of bone, knives, and rings. Items found with horses have included painted wooden saddles, bridles, harnesses and stirrups.

Alexander Pluskowski notes that pagan cult sites in pre Christian Prussia have been difficult to investigate archaeologically, as they tended to gravitate around natural features in the landscape, such as hills, forests, rivers and lakes. Most of the early Christian

observers of Prussian pagan practices noted the emphasis placed by Prussians on the veneration of trees. Specific species of trees were associated with particular gods and Alexander Pluskowski notes that the veneration by the Prussians of trees may account for the fact that their settlements didn't tend to encroach into woodland, with chroniclers from the Teutonic Order observing the reluctance of Prussians to cut down trees or clear tree stumps to create farmland. Many lakes and waterways were also considered sacred, with the remains of deposited offerings being uncovered within them. Large carved stones bearing a range of different markings have also been discovered, particularly in eastern Prussia, although Alexander Pluskowski admits that their function remains unknown. Some of these stones are in the form of large granite boulders with faces carved into them, some which look like women and others which look more like men. Again, unfortunately, their origins and their function remain unknown.

Now the image of Prussians looking after trees and worshipping in sacred groves and rivers may conjure up the idea that pagan Prussians were peace loving, hand holding versions of modern day hippies. But no. As we have already stated, their culture was decidedly militaristic and not at all peace loving. Warriors were celebrated, as were victories won by battle or at the point of a sword. As seen from the remains of funeral pyres, the afterlife was a place reserved for warriors. The only role women or slaves played in the afterlife was to care for the fallen warrior. Slaves also played a big role in Prussian society, although as William Urban points out in his book "The Prussian Crusade", most of these slaves were female. Male slaves, with their propensity to escape or fight, were seen as being more trouble than they were worth, and were often taken to slave markets to be sold on. So the female slaves were used to perform domestic chores and work the land.

The family groupings which formed the basis of Prussian society controlled land which shifted and changed according to the military skills of family members. Basically, each family controlled as much land as they could defend. A stronghold generally formed the centre for communal family activities, and smaller forts would be constructed where required. Each family would field its own army, regulate its own activities, and provide food and shelter for its family members.

Of course, the most revered and respected members of each family group were its warriors, and as we have stated, the warriors who possessed a horse, weapons, and rudimentary armor were, in effect, the nobility of the society. Their armour generally didn't consist of anything more than a helmet or chain mail coat. William Urban points out that heavy armour just wasn't suited to the swampy, rough, wooded environment, and even had heavy armor been available it probably wouldn't have been used.

Interestingly, despite the fact that Prussia had an extensive coastline, William Urban points out that there is no indication that Prussians were involved in piracy. The Estonians and Curonians at this time were actively involved in sea-raiding, but it seems that the Prussians were not. They did, though, use the sea for fishing and to collect amber, which was often washed ashore after storms.

Okay, so I hope that's given you some idea of the pagan Prussians, and their way of life. Now, of course there were some interactions between the Prussians and their neighbours, the Lithuanians and the people of Poland. William Urban states that historically there had been numerous successful Viking raids into Prussia, and that the success of those raids may have resulted in the Prussians viewing all outsiders with suspicion and aggression.

Most post-Viking interactions between the Prussians and their neighbors involved military action, with much of the aggression being on the side of the Prussians, who would conduct raids into neighboring lands looking for slaves and booty.

As we saw back in Episode 194, the first Christian missionaries to venture into Prussian territory met a martyr's death, most notably Adelbert of Prague. But by the twelfth century, there was a more concerted push by Poland to convert the Prussians to Christianity. This push was sparked by the crusading movement, and to fully understand the Prussian Crusade, we will need to rewind the clock and take a look at earlier attempts by Poland to bring Christianity to their Prussian neighbors.

So next time we will discuss attempts by the Polish Piast dynasty to use military force to convert the pagan Prussians, with the first attempt taking place shortly after the end of the Wendish Crusade, in the year 1147. Until next week, bye for now.

End