

History of the Crusades. Episode 220. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part II. Poland.

Hello again. Last week we took a look at pre-Christian Prussia. This week we will take a look at Poland prior to the Prussian Crusade. We last discussed Poland back in Episode 194. In that episode, we saw the rise of the Piast dynasty, in particular Prince Mieszko I, who accepted Christianity from the Bohemians. Mieszko's son and successor, Boleslaw the Brave, cemented Christian rule in Poland, and when the monk Adalbertus was killed by pagans in Prussia, Boleslaw arranged for his body to be brought back to the city of Gniezno, where it was buried at the cathedral with full honors. In the year 999, Adalbertus was recognized as a Saint, and Pope Sylvester elevated Gniezno to the status of an Archbishopric, and recognized Poland as an independent Christianized state. A subsequent visit by the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III to Gniezno then resulted in Boleslaw being recognized as a King by the Holy Roman Empire.

Now, all that occurred around the year 1025, and that's where we left Poland in Episode 194. So the question we need answering is: what has happened in Poland in the two hundred or so years since that time? Well, as you can imagine, quite a lot has taken place. The Piast dynasty, you might be interested to know, is still in power. But the form of feudalism which evolved in Poland under its Piast rulers, and the form of Christianity, which evolved were both uniquely Polish. By the time one hundred years or so of Piast rule had passed, Poland was divided into four duchies: Little Poland, which included Krakow (which I will now be pronouncing using the Polish pronunciation "Crackof"); Sandomierz; Silesia; Greater Poland; and Mazovia. Each of these duchies was ruled by a duke.

Now, these dukes were fiercely independent and powerful. In fact, the word "duke" itself may be misleading when describing these rulers. In his book "God's Playground - A History of Poland", Norman Davies points out that the word "duke" arose from the fact that the rulers of these four regions were called "dux", which was spelt D.U.X. in Latin documents which were created in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But Norman Davies has pointed out that the translation of "dux" into "duke" inaccurately implies a form of subordination to a feudal superior, which may not in fact have existed. The Holy Roman Empire apparently liked to view the Polish dukes as true feudal dukes, but Norman Davies states that a more accurate designation for the dukes may have been "war leader". I'll keep calling them "dukes", as that has been the accepted translation for many years. But keep in mind the fact that these aren't true feudal dukes, but are more akin to a supreme military leader of the territory they govern.

Now, each of these dukes tended to clash with other dukes, and with the foreign territory which bordered each duchy. The dukes formed marriage alliances with some of these foreign entities, which in turn influenced the way they governed their territories. There was an overall King, who was also customarily the Duke of Krakow, but really, the king had little sway over the duchies, and generally, each duchy was expected to look after itself militarily, which again just tended to emphasize the independence and power of the separate dukes. So, as a result, a totally unique form of feudalism formed, with probably the closest comparison being the Kingdom of France prior to its consolidation by Philip Augustus, when the King of France himself only directly controlled a tiny portion of the kingdom around Paris, with powerful counts and dukes controlling much bigger, much more prosperous, and much more powerful territories than their king, with the king exercising only loose if any control over these regions.

Likewise, the form of Christianity which developed over this two hundred year period was uniquely Polish. In the same way that the Holy Roman Empire liked to think of Poland's feudal system as being similar to its own, apparently the Germans also believed that Poland enjoyed the same type of Latin Christianity as that practiced in the Empire. But in reality, it wasn't. As you might remember, Prince Mieszko accepted Christianity from the Bohemians, not from the Germans, and as a result, until the end of the eleventh century, the Slavonic liturgy existed alongside the Latin Christian Church, and Norman Davies points out that much of the religious vocabulary of the Polish language can be traced back to Czech and Slavic words, and not from German or Latin ones. So a special kind of Polish Christianity developed, with Poland itself being more under the wing of Rome than under the wing of its large and powerful Latin Christian neighbor, the Holy Roman Empire.

In his book "The Prussian Crusade" William Urban notes that shortly after the Christianization of Poland, at the end of the tenth century, senior churchmen were allotted significant portions of land, and as a result the senior clerics in Poland became powerful individuals who wielded a great deal of power, wealth and influence. The most senior cleric was the Archbishop of Gniezno, but many other regional bishops also exercised considerable power, with many having a great number of knights they could call upon if they needed to. So it became important to ensure that the right men were placed into these high positions within the church. Interestingly, the Piast dukes were able to nominate bishops, apparently due to the fact that the Piast dynasty had supported Rome during the investiture controversy, meaning that the church, in fact, ended up playing a stabilizing role in Poland. In fact, William Urban speculates that, without the unity provided by the Roman Catholic Church, the Kingdom of Poland may well have disintegrated completely.

Now, we all know that the Papacy, during the two hundred years in which the Piast dynasty was developing, was promoting various crusades. Now, apparently there has been a general view that Poland wasn't too keen on participating in crusades to the Holy Land. In his book "Poland, Holy War and the Piast Monarchy", Darius von Guttner-Sporzynski states that this isn't entirely correct and that, although few Polish foot soldiers took up crusading, quite a few members of the Polish nobility did take up the cross and venture to the Middle East. However, far more interesting to the Christians of Poland was the issue of the Christianization of the pagans in their own region. And it was this type of local crusading which held their interest. Within a decade following the first Crusade, Darius von Guttner-Sporzynski reports that the Piasts embarked upon a military campaign to Christianize neighboring pagan Pomerania, a war which lasted around twenty six years. Darius von Guttner-Sporzynski then states that by the time of the Second Crusade, the Piast rulers had seized upon the idea of crusading as a handy way of extending Polish territory, as a means by which to subdue their pagan neighbors, and as a way to gain the respect of other Latin Christian kingdoms in Europe. Poland contributed men and arms to the Second Crusade, to the Crusade against the Wends, and also, importantly for us, sent expeditions into Prussia to deal with the pagans living there.

Now, as we've stated previously, the dukes of the Polish regions had to deal with the expansionist ambitions of their neighboring dukes and of the foreign territory located next to them. William Urban reports that the King of Bohemia regularly attempted to move into Krakow and Silesia, and the Duke of Brandenburg and the Archbishop of Magdeburg from the Holy Roman Empire often tried to muscle in on the western Polish regions. Meanwhile, the Russian prince of Galicia had his eye on Sandomierz, and the Prussians and Lithuanians would regularly raid into the Duke of Mazovia's territory. Not surprisingly, it is

the Duchy of Mazovia, the Polish region bordering Prussia to the east, which will become important to us.

Now, the Duchy of Mazovia and pagan Prussia were interesting neighbors. The Polish people and the pagan Prussians were completely different, both linguistically and ethnically. While the Polish people were Slavic, the Prussians were Balts, and were closer in kind to their neighbors, the Lithuanians, in the east. The language spoken in Prussia was unlike anything spoken in Poland, but was related to the languages spoken by the Lithuanians and Semigallians. A place with these differences, the fact that by the eleventh century the Polish people were Christian and the Prussians were pagan, and you have two vastly different people living side by side.

Archaeological evidence shows that there was no large scale military conflict between the Prussians and their Polish neighbors before the eleventh century, and this may have been due to the fact that the border regions between the two countries were, at that time, sparsely populated, and the marshy, broken terrain in Prussia made large scale military action difficult. However, by the eleventh century, Prussia itself was becoming more sophisticated, and had started to conduct raids into Poland and Russia, with the aim of obtaining booty and slaves. At the same time, Poland was becoming more populated and there was a desire to push into Prussia in order to gain more territory. So with crusading on the rise, with pagan Prussia proving itself a nuisance and with a desire by Poland to expand into Prussia and convert the pagans living there, I guess it won't surprise anyone to hear that, following the conclusion of the Wendish Crusade in 1147, Boleslaw IV of Poland decided to lead a Crusade into pagan Prussia.

Now, this Crusade isn't very well known but is described in Darius von Guttner-Sporzynski's book "Poland, Holy War and the Piast Monarchy". A German chronicle reports that Boleslaw IV, and I quote, "With a boundless army went against the cruelest barbarian Prussians and remained there a long time" end quote. A twelve century Polish source, *The Chronica Polonorum*, also mentions the expedition and describes it in terms of a Crusade. If this characterization is correct, then Boleslaw IV's invasion of Prussia in 1147 was the very first Crusade against the Prussians. While the campaign didn't receive explicit endorsement from Rome via a Papal Bull, Darius von Guttner-Sporzynski suggests that the campaign was inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux's preaching against paganism.

Unfortunately, not a lot is known about the expedition. It seems that Boleslaw IV led his Christian army into Prussia towards the end of the year 1147, when the winter weather made the invasion easier by freezing over the many marshes, swamps and rivers, which usually provided an impediment to invading armies. The expedition seems to have resulted in a number of forced conversions of the pagan Prussians to the Christian faith, but the converts all pretty much reverted back to paganism as soon as the Christian army withdrew. However, according to the *Chronica Polonorum*, the Prussians did keep up their promise to pay tribute to Poland, so Boleslaw IV overlooked the fact that they had lapsed back into paganism and didn't re-invade to forcibly reconvert them, much to the disappointment and disgust of the author of the *Chronica Polonorum*, who was in fact Bishop Wincentius of Krakow. Bishop Wincentius of Krakow described a further two military campaigns by the Polish rulers against their Prussian neighbors in the years 1166 and 1192, both of these being similar in nature and in result to the original Crusade of 1147.

Following the expedition of 1192, there was a decline in military action by the Piast rulers against the Prussians. Why? Well, there was a period of instability for the Piast dynasty at this time. The Piast Dukes of Greater Poland, Silesia and Mazovia all made separate moves to challenge the current monarch, who was a child. This further undermined the strength of central rule, and encouraged the independence and power of the individual Duchies. An additional result of these power plays was that no one was really interested in invading Prussia, particularly not the child monarch, who was forced to spend his time protecting his seat of power in Krakow from his ambitious relatives. So while there were military incursions into Prussia after 1192, they were small local affairs, which weren't authorized by the Church and couldn't be described as Crusades.

However, in the absence of military force, a new method of converting the pagan Prussians sprang into action. Christian missionaries at this time were traveling from central Europe into Estonia, Livonia, far afield into the land of the Finns to the north, and into Prussia. In many cases, the Christian missionaries were supported by small military forces. In Prussia, it was the Cistercian Order, which took on the role of traveling to Prussia to preach to the pagans. Now, unfortunately, few records exist of this missionary activity in Prussia. In his book "Poland, Holy War and the Piast Monarchy", Darius von Guttner-Sporzynski points to the fact that the Cistercian missionaries wished their conversion of the pagans to be a peaceful affair, and so were reluctant to engage the services of military support teams. This meant that fewer written records of the events were created, with the result that, unlike the early days of the Livonian Crusade, not much is known about these early missions to Prussia.

However, we do know that they were extensive enough to come to the notice of Pope Innocent III, who in the year 1206 wrote a letter encouraging missionary activity in Prussia, and asking the Polish clergy to support the activities of the missionaries. Pope Innocent then authorized the Cistercian Abbot of Lekno to preach the Christian faith in Prussia, along with monks from the Cistercian Order. As a result, the profile of Cistercian expeditions to Prussia was raised, and the Order received a significant financial donation from the Archbishop of Gniezno, to support their work. However, this seems to have made the Cistercian Order itself a little uncomfortable as, according to Darius von Guttner-Sporzynski, missionary activity was never meant to be the focus of the Cistercian Order. So in the year 1210, the general chapter of the Cistercian Order recalled the monks from Prussia and ordered them back to their convents. Then they formally reprimanded the Abbot of Lekno.

So the missionaries have now left Prussia. Will that be the end of it? Will Rome decide to leave Prussia in its defiantly pagan state? No, of course not. Join me next week as we continue to examine attempts to convert the pagans of Prussia in the lead up to the Prussian Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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