

History of the Crusades. Episode 221. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part III. Bishop Christian.

Hello again. Last week, we took a look at early attempts by Poland to turn their Prussian neighbors into Christians. There was a Polish Crusade into Prussia in the year 1147 and another two expeditions during the following fifty years, but neither made much of an impact, with the Prussians reverting back to paganism as soon as the armies withdrew. The early years of the thirteenth century saw a reduction in the number of military expeditions to Prussia, and instead Cistercian missionaries did their best to convert the pagans. When we left last week's episode in the year 1210, the Cistercian Order, which had never really viewed missionary work as one of their core functions, had just recalled all their missionaries from Prussia.

Now, it appears that Pope Innocent disagreed with the decision of the Cistercians to recall their monks from Prussia, because shortly after the decision was made Pope Innocent appointed the Archbishop of Gniezno as his legate, and instructed him to protect the missionary work which was currently taking place in Prussia. In a Papal bull in the year 1212 Pope Innocent went further. He announced that he was appointing two Cistercian monks, one called Christian and one called Philip, to preach to the Prussians with a view to converting them to Christianity. This indication of direct Papal interest in the Christianization of Prussia seems to have done the trick.

The leaders of the Cistercian Order made arrangements to establish a Cistercian convent in Prussia, and the monk Christian, who had been selected by Pope Innocent to preach to the Prussians, was appointed as the abbot of this new Prussian Christian outpost. Now, since Christian has now become an abbot, you might be wondering about the fate of the other Papal appointee, the Cistercian monk Philip. Unfortunately, Philip's fate was much less rosy. Perhaps indicative of the fact that some Prussians were not at all keen to convert to the religion of their Latin Christian neighbors, Philip was actually killed by some angry pagan Prussians. So Abbott Christian was now the sole Papally appointed Cistercian missionary. And it seems that he did quite a good job. In his book "Poland, Holy War and the Piast Monarchy", Darius von Guttner-Sporzynski reports that by the year 1216, an entire Prussian tribe called the Pomesans were considered to have been successfully Christianized. To top of his success, also in the 1216, Abbott Christian traveled to Rome with two Prussian tribal Elders, who were personally baptized by Pope Innocent. And then, drum roll please, Pope Innocent officially appointed Abbott Christian as the first Bishop of Prussia.

Now this, in fact, is all rather interesting. Here we see Pope Innocent, taking an active and quite pointed interest in the Christianization of Prussia. Unlike the Christianization of Livonia and Estonia, which is just pattering along by itself, Pope Innocent has encouraged and nurtured the Cistercian incursions into Prussia, almost like it was a pet project of his. And Pope Innocent is not the only man of power who has his eye on Prussia. No, our old friend King Valdemar II of Denmark offered to assist the Cistercians in their Prussian mission, and in the year 1210, a full decade before he embarked on his first expedition to Estonia, King Valdemar actually sent an army to Prussia. Unfortunately, not much at all is known about this Danish expedition, but it can't have been too successful, as it doesn't seem to have resulted in any permanent Danish presence in Prussia. It probably served more as an indication of King Valdemar's ambitions to extend Danish territory into the pagan areas around the Baltic Sea.

Now, of course, Pope Innocent won't get to see how his pet project, the bringing of Christianity to pagan Prussia, panned out, because he died unexpectedly in the year 1216, shortly after he elevated Abbott Christian to the position of Bishop of Prussia. Despite the absence of his chief backer, Bishop Christian carried on, preaching to the pagans of Prussia, and attempting to get them to accept baptism, in pretty much the same way as Bishop Albert had done in the early days of the Livonian Crusade. However, Bishop Christian seemed to encounter more resistance than that faced by Bishop Albert. While he was attempting to convince the Prussians to abandon their pagan religious rites, and cease the practice of leaving female babies to die, and marrying more than one wife, it all became too much for the Prussians, and they drove Bishop Christian and his retinue out of Prussia by force.

Unsurprisingly, this caused Bishop Christian to ponder whether it might be more effective to forcibly convert the Prussians at the point of a sword, so he wrote to Pope Honorius III, Pope Innocent's replacement, requesting military assistance. Pope Honorius wrote back in the year 1217, stating, and I quote "The converts of Prussia are suffering the attacks of the pagans, frustrating the new plantation in efforts to stamp out error, and on their advice, in paternal concern, we grant you the authority to designate with the Cross, Christians of the converted regions who want to give aid and fight against the barbarities of those pagans, and we grant it under the same conditions as given to those who take the Cross to go to the Holy Land". End quote.

If you think this sounds like Pope Honorius is authorizing a Crusade against the Prussians, you would be exactly right. Pope Honorius, in fact, wrote to the Archbishop of Gniezno and advised him that the Knights who had taken crusading vows and were preparing to go to the Holy Land, could now fulfill their vows closer to home, by crusading against their Prussian neighbors. And Pope Honorius wasn't finished yet. He called on crusaders and Christians from not just Poland, but from the large and powerful dioceses in the Holy Roman Empire, Mainz, Cologne and Salzburg, and even the Archbishop of Lund in Denmark to provide financial and military assistance to Bishop Christian for his upcoming Crusade.

Interestingly, Pope Honorius went out of his way to inform the Piast Dukes of Poland that they were not to use the Crusade as a basis for land grabs inside Prussia. Pope Honorius seems determined to ensure that Bishop Christian's Crusade will be controlled only by Bishop Christian, and that the powerful Polish Dukes, even if they provided men and military assistance for the mission, should not expect to gain territory inside Prussia as a result. According to Rome, this Crusade was about Christianization; it was about conversion; it was about empowering Bishop Christian to extend the reach of the Church across pagan lands. It was not about annexing parts of Prussia to Poland. To ensure that Bishop Christian was accorded the means to enforce this Papal policy, Pope Honorius decreed, and I quote "We have given our Bishop letters so that everyone who enters into his converted lands, or into the land of any baptized Prussian without his permission, will have ecclesiastical censure called down upon him." End quote.

So a crusade against the Prussians has been authorized. A call to arms has been issued across Poland and the Holy Roman Empire, and Pope Honorius has provided Bishop Christian with enough power to keep the land-hungry Polish Dukes in check. So, you might ask, "How did the resulting Crusade pan out?" Well, unfortunately for Bishop Christian, it was a spectacular failure. In fact, it was so unsuccessful that everyone decided it might be best not to mention it. In his book "The Prussian Crusade", William Urban states that it's

not even clear when this Crusade took place. It was probably either in the year 1219 or the year 1220, and it's just not mentioned by the chroniclers of the time. William Urban notes that there was a distinct lack of chroniclers at this time and in this region, but still the only real conclusion we can draw about the Prussian Crusade of 1219 or 1220 was that it was a total failure.

It seems that following the failure of this Crusade, Pope Honorius was concerned that secular muscle may try to subdue pagan Prussia where religious muscle had failed. So to prevent this from happening, in January 1225 he announced that all newly converted Prussians were now under the protection of Rome, and that the church itself claimed suzerainty over the lands of these new converts. At the same time, the Papal Legate William of Modena, was making similar claims over Livonia and Estonia on behalf of the Papacy, so the move by Pope Honorius to bring Prussia under the direct control of Rome may have been part of a broader agenda to extend Papal protection across all conquests in the Baltic region.

Despite the fact that Rome was now extending its reach into Prussia, there remained the vexing problem that most of Prussia was still pagan. With Bishop Christian's military expedition having achieved little or nothing in this regard, it was clear to everyone what needed to happen. They were going to need a bigger Crusade. So in the year 1221, Bishop Christian set out on an ambitious mission to find recruits for a massive new Crusade into Prussia.

Now, before we join Bishop Christian in his efforts to recruit for this Crusade, we need to catch up with some background. Now, we of course know that Bishop Albert has been pretty successful in conquering and converting Livonia, and that even the feisty pagans of Estonia are now coming under the Christian thumb. Bishop Christian would also have been aware of this and would no doubt have been wondering why he couldn't just do a Bishop Albert, and gradually force Prussia into submission. He even had an advantage over Bishop Albert: Prussia was right next door to Poland. An expedition to Prussia didn't involve the logistical challenge of loading everyone and their equipment onto boats, then sailing to Gottland, then on to Riga through treacherous seas, and then into pagan lands. No, an expedition to Prussia meant just marching over into neighboring lands.

So why had the recent Crusade into pressure been such a failure? Well, William Urban points out that the Letts and Livonians, Bishop Albert's first converts, were in some ways a soft target. They were less warlike than their Estonian and Lithuanian neighbors. And once a goodly portion of Letts and Livonians were converted, they were able to join in with efforts to convert the Estonians and other tribes in the region. William Urban points out that this just wasn't the case in Prussia. The Prussian tribes were less ethnically divided than the people in the Livonian and Estonian regions, and like the Lithuanians, they had developed the reputation of being fierce fighters. In fact, William Urban reports that the failed Crusade of 1219 or 1220 had actually set the Latin Christians at a distinct disadvantage. The Prussians, seeing how they had easily defeated the best that Christian Poland could throw at them, became emboldened, and raids across the border lands from Prussia into Poland increased markedly, with the Prussian pagans now confident of their ability to defeat the cream of Latin Christian fighting men.

So you would think that raids into Poland by the Prussians would encourage Polish fighters to join Bishop Christian's Crusade. Well, yes and no. Bishop Christian decided to recruit from right across Poland and not just in the Duchy which bordered Prussia. After

the setback of 1219 or 1220, he knew that he was going to need all the men he could muster to prevent a similar failed Crusade. So he traveled even into the southern Polish Duchies to try and from up support for his cause. I guess the fact that Poland as a whole was suffering from floods, failed crops, and even plagues at this time didn't help, but there was another factor that was preventing recruitment from these regions. The Mongols were coming.

In the year 1224 the Russians suffered a massive defeat by Mongol invaders at the Battle of Kalka River. Now, although no Polish Princes were directly involved in the battle, the defeat set alarm bells ringing. The Mongols not only defeated a huge Russian army, they gathered together the noble Russian prisoners they had captured, and instead of offering them up for ransom, like they had promised to do, they murdered them in a spectacular fashion. The Russian Dukes were smothered to death under boards laid out for the Mongol victory feast. Following their victory and their feast, the Mongols retreated back to the steppes, but everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before they struck again, and as a result the political landscape shifted radically. With the ruling Russian families having been wiped out, there was an opportunity to move in and score some Russian territory before the Mongols returned, and not only the southern Polish Dukes, but even Duke Konrad of Mazovia, the Duchy which bordered Prussia, started turning their attentions towards Russian territories to the south.

The end result of all of this for Bishop Christian was that he was really struggling to gain recruits for his Crusade. To even get a toehold into Prussia he needed to conquer at least a small region inside Prussia. The area around the Prussian settlement of Kulm, which is now Chelmno in Poland, was the place he had in mind. Taking his cue from the Crusades into Livonia and Estonia, Bishop Christian knew that his best bet would be to lead his crusaders to Kulm, conquer it, build a nice strong fortification, garrison it with Latin Christians, and use this as a base for further incursions into Prussia. Kulm was located on the Vistula River, and because it was close to the border-lands off two Polish Duchies, the Duchy of Pomerelia and the Duchy of Mazovia it was a handy place to start. In fact, Bishop Christian had at one stage managed to convert quite a few Prussians in the region of Kulm and had even managed to base himself there for a while without the need for military protection.

So the first step on the long path to the Christianization of Prussia was to take Kulm and establish a Latin Christian stronghold there. However, to achieve this first step Bishop Christian was going to need an army, and as we have seen, just at the moment, if he recruited solely in Poland gathering together a large army was going to be a difficult task. Join me next week as Bishop Christian explores the possibility of looking outside Poland for the military recruits he needs to invade Prussia and take the settlement of Kulm. Until next week, bye for now.

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