

History of the Crusades. Episode 228. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXV. Baldwin of Alna.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Teutonic Order move across most of western Prussia, conquering, Christianizing, and imposing a system of rule over both Prussians and immigrants under their new Charter of Kulm. We also saw Bishop Christian fare not quite as well, as he was taken prisoner by some newly converted Prussians to the north of the country, and is currently being held at an unknown location. So now it's time to head back to Livonia for a few episodes.

When we left Livonia, in January 1227, back in Episode 218, the rebellious pirates of Oesel had just been Christianized, and King Valdemar II of Denmark had suffered a shock military defeat at the Battle of Bornhoved, effectively ending decades of Danish hegemony in Estonia. You might remember also that the Papal legate William of Modena, had effectively placed Livonia and Estonia under Papal control, imposing a raft of rules under which the region was to be governed. Bishop Albert was still plugging away, traveling back to the Holy Roman Empire each year via Gottland and Lubeck, trying to get crusade volunteers to travel to Livonia and Estonia to assist himself, the Bishop of Oesel, and the Bishop of Semigallia to rule over and control their Bishoprics. The Sword Brothers were slightly less reliant on crusade volunteers, relying on their own manpower, limited though it was, to rule their portions of the region.

Now, of course, when we left Livonia and Estonia back in 1227, the Prussian Crusade was just about to start. If you think the launching by the Teutonic Knights of a crusade into Prussia was going to have a negative impact on crusader numbers traveling to Livonia and Estonia, you would be right. There was also another Crusade at this time, which we alluded to briefly in the previous episodes, against a bunch of pesky German peasants.

Archbishop Gerhard had been attempting, without success, to extract taxes from peasants in the Diocese of Bremen. These particular peasants had been enticed to move into a swampy, slightly unpleasant region with the lure of reduced taxes. Now Archbishop Gerhard was attempting to remove these tax concessions, and the peasants were not happy. They expelled the tax collectors sent by the Archbishop and let him know that they were militarizing themselves. If Archbishop Gerhard persisted in his effort to roll back the tax benefits, they would mobilize a peasant army against him. Now we should remember that Archbishop Gerhard was a "zur Lippe". He was the son of the famous warrior and first Bishop of Semigallia, Bernard zur Lippe, and he wasn't the sort of man to be pushed around by a bunch of peasants. So in the year 1228 he raised a sizable army, placed it under the command of his brother, Herman, Count of Lippe and ordered it off to teach the peasants a lesson. In a shocking development however, on Christmas Eve in the year 1229 the Archbishop's army was resoundingly defeated by the peasant army, and amongst the many casualties was Count Herman, who was killed in action.

A furious Archbishop Gerhard then decided to raise the stakes. He convened a synod, and declared the acts of the peasants to be acts of heresy. He then lobbied Rome and managed to obtain a crusading Bull against the tax dodging rebels, and for the next few years the noble families of the northern parts of the Holy Roman Empire were occupied with this Crusade against the rebellious peasants, meaning, of course, that they weren't interested in crusading in Livonia.

In addition to Archbishop Gerhard's Crusade against the peasants in Bremen and the Prussian Crusade, there were also various expeditions to the Holy Land to contend with. So with a bunch of Crusade all going of at once, this meant the crusading recruits to Livonia and Estonia were well down in numbers than in previous years.

Now, unfortunately, there's not a great deal of information available about what happened in Livonia in the years immediately following the year 1227. Henry of Livonia has now finished his chronicle, and the sources available are pretty sketchy. We do know however, that there was a major rebellion by the Danish settlers in Estonia in the summer of 1227, and that due to a lack of crusader volunteers, the Sword brothers had to be called on to assist in putting down the rebellion, with the result that some regions in Estonia, including the region around Reval, were probably handed over to the Sword Brothers to include in the regions they were administering.

Now the Sword Brothers at this stage were governing around 130,000 native Letts, Livonians and Estonians, and extracting taxes from them. This was quite a feat, because in his book "The Baltic Crusades", William Urban points out that there were probably only 110 or so Knights in the Order at that time. Those 110 Knights were kept very busy, garrisoning the six castles and numerous smaller outposts which dotted the region controlled by the Sword Brothers. They were supported by 400 to 500 sergeants and warriors who were not sufficiently connected or quite noble enough to qualify as Knights, but who were still skilled fighters and horsemen. There were also around 700 mercenary troops paid for by the Order and around 5,000 native troops attached to the Order. Still, these numbers weren't all that considerable when you took into account the vast area which the Order was required to govern, and the number of people it was required to tax and keep in line.

William Urban points out that the Order's biggest problem was its lack of money. They had attempted, with mixed success, to make improvements which would increase the wealth of the land under their control. They built mills, and attempted to increase crop yields, but they really didn't have the manpower to devote enough resources to this activity. It was a chicken-and-egg sort of problem. If the Sword Brothers could make their lands yield more money, they could hire more mercenaries, which in turn would mean that the Order could devote more time to land improvements, which would then increase the wealth of the Order and provide more money to hire even more mercenaries. But without the initial funds available to hire mercenaries to kick start this venture, the Sword Brothers were left spread very thinly across their lands and were forced to devote their time and resources not to agricultural improvements, but to the day to day grind of settling disputes, collecting taxes, enforcing order, and defending their lands. As a consequence, at the same time as the Prussian Crusade was progressing over to the west, the Sword Brothers found themselves stretched very thinly across their lands, and were simultaneously facing a serious lack of income to improve their situation.

In contrast, there was one sector of society in Livonia, which was awash with funds. The merchants of Livonia were thriving. The city of Riga itself was booming. Increasingly seen as a gateway to lucrative markets in Russia, by the time the Prussian Crusade was underway, the population of Riga numbered around 3,000 people, and merchants, traders and artisans started expanding out of Livonia's main town, settling in remoter regions inside Livonia and Estonia, seeking the protection to be found in castles and other fortifications manned by the Latin Christians, always looking for new markets, easier ways to access neighboring Russia, and seeking bigger profits.

While the merchants appeared to be thriving, the Bishops and men of the Church, like the Sword Brothers, seemed to be struggling. The reduction in the number of crusade volunteers flowing into Livonia and Estonia hit the Bishops hard, and like the Sword Brothers they were forced to administer their lands without the manpower and the resources which they desperately needed.

A year or so after the commencement of the Prussian Crusade, Bishop Albert fell seriously ill, and he died in January 1229. William Urban points out that Bishop Albert's death came as a massive blow to the regions of Estonia and Livonia. Almost single-handedly, he had overseen the Christianization of the region, and his tireless annual journey back to the Holy Roman Empire to collect crusaders, decade after decade, had provided the manpower needed to achieve Bishop Albert's vision of a Christianized Livonia and Estonia.

Really, Bishop Albert was irreplaceable, and if you think that Livonia and Estonia are going to struggle without his hand to guide them, you would be right. A cleric named Nicholas from Magdeburg was elected as Bishop Albert's successor, but this appeared to some people to be an unsubtle nod to the Archbishop of Magdeburg, and, worried that the Archbishop of Magdeburg was trying to dominate the Bishopric of Riga, the Archbishop of Bremen selected his own candidate, a man called Albert Suerbeer. With neither candidate able to break the deadlock, both men requested Pope Gregory IX determine which of them ought to be the Bishop of Riga.

Pope Gregory, though, had other things on his mind, most prominently his spat with Emperor Frederick II, so he hand-balled the issue over to William of Modena to sort out. William of Modena, however, had just completed his year-long fact finding and conversion mission in Prussia, and was traveling through Poland on his way back to Rome, when the message reached him. Not wanting to deviate all the way back to Riga to investigate the competing claims of the two candidates, he hand-balled the matter to Cardinal Otto, a Papal Legate who was currently in the Holy Roman Empire. Cardinal Otto, however, had business to attend to in Germany which couldn't wait, so he hand-balled the matter to a monk in a nearby monastery.

Apparently, Otto was close to a Cistercian monastery in a place called Alna when the Papal message reached him, so he asked the Abbot of the monastery to recommend a capable monk to help him. The Abbot named a monk called Baldwin, and Otto promptly empowered Baldwin of Alna to act as a Vice Legate. Baldwin then made his way to Gottland and then onto Riga.

Now, you have to feel a little sorry for Baldwin at this time. He's just a monk, he's far from home, and he has totally been thrown in the deep end. He arrived in Riga to find a fractured, deeply divided society. As usual, the men of the Church, the Sword Brothers, the merchants and the locals were all suspicious of each other, and were all jostling for position, each wanting to influence Baldwin to improve the lot of their particular group. To make things worse, they had also lost the steady and guiding hand of Bishop Albert. They were leaderless, anxious and quarrelsome, and now Rome, in its wisdom, had sent a lowly monk to Riga, to sort things out. If anyone is getting the idea that things aren't going to go all that well for Baldwin of Alna, you would be right.

Now, thankfully for Baldwin, he does seem to have been an assertive sort of person who didn't take kindly to being pushed around, and he has been given quite extensive powers

as a Vice Legate. However, he's just a monk from the Holy Roman Empire. He has no idea about Livonia or Estonia, or the background to the tension which seems to be building in Riga. And his assertiveness often came across as arrogance. Unsurprisingly I guess, given the stressful situation he found himself in, the unfamiliar people and terrain, and his total lack of experience in this sort of caper, Baldwin tended to cover any uncertainties or inadequacies he may have felt by making rash, hasty decisions, which he then stuck to obstinately, yelling at anyone who was foolish enough to point out flaws or misunderstandings in his decisions.

Now, Baldwin of Alna's main brief seemed to be to assess the situation on the ground in Livonia and the surrounding regions, then make a recommendation based on those observations as to which candidate should be elevated to the position of Bishop of Riga. But as Baldwin delved deeper and deeper into the complex and acrimonious web of politics in the region, he started acting more like a true Papal Legate. That is, he started imposing what he believed to be the will of Rome onto the various groups in the region, and this started to set alarm bells ringing.

For instance, there was the incident in Semigallia and the land of the Kurs. What was the incident in Semigallia and the land of the Kurs? Well, there was an uprising by the Semigallian people, who successfully attacked and burned a number of Crusaders strongholds, including the castle at Dunamunde. Due to a lack of crusade volunteers, the Bishop of Semigallia was forced to call on the Sword Brothers for assistance. In return for their assistance, the Sword Brothers demanded that much of Semigallia be handed over to them. The Bishop of Semigallia refused this request and then left for the Holy Roman Empire, probably to try to drum up the crusade volunteers he required. The Sword Brothers and the Bishopric of Riga then took full advantage of his absence, by claiming all of Semigallia for themselves. The land of the Kurs was located next to Semigallia and while they were winning so splendidly at conquering, the Sword Brothers then turned their attentions to this region. Baldwin decided at this point that enough was enough. He promised the Kurs grain in return for their conversion to Christianity, grain which was desperately needed due to a recent failed harvest. He then declared the Kurs to be subjects of the Pope, and the land of the Kurs to be under direct Papal protection.

The furious Sword Brothers then allied themselves to the powerful and wealthy merchant classes, who Baldwin had also effectively locked out of the land of the Kurs, and together they looked for allies and a way to bring down Baldwin of Alna. With their extensive ties to Saxony and their friends in high places, the merchants managed to win the support of Duke Albrecht of Saxony. Baldwin attempted to counter this move by unexpectedly making his recommendation about the person who should be chosen as Bishop, sending a letter to Cardinal Otto recommending that Nicholas be confirmed as Bishop of Riga. Then Baldwin, sensing the rising tide of public displeasure in Riga, fled to Semigallia, and took refuge at Dunamunde, where a new stone castle had just been built. Cardinal Otto, in the meanwhile, accepted Baldwin's decision and forwarded his recommendation to Rome, where Pope Gregory IX raised Nicholas to the position of Bishop of Riga. Nicholas made his way to his new Bishopric, and one of his first acts as Bishop was to nullify Baldwin's alliance with the Kurs, sending, instead, an army into the region to force the natives into submission.

Now totally powerless, Baldwin made a fateful decision. Instead of heading back to his monastery and returning to his peaceful life as a lowly monk, Baldwin decided he needed to set the record straight. Baldwin decided he needed to go to Rome to personally inform

Pope Gregory about just exactly what was going on in Livonia. Join me next week as Baldwin does exactly that, a move which will have massive ramifications for the future of the Crusade in Livonia. Until next week, bye for now.

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