

History of the Crusades. Episode 229. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXVI. Overreach.

Hello again. Last week we saw two contenders emerge for the position of Bishop of Riga, following Bishop Albert's death. Someone needed to travel to Livonia to assess the support for each candidate from the various interest groups in Livonia, and that someone really should have been William of Modena, the Papal legate with extensive knowledge of the region. But William of Modena was heading back to Rome following a year-long stint in Prussia, so he hand-balled the matter to Cardinal Otto, who then hand-balled the matter to a random monk from a random monastery.

That random monk, Baldwin of Alna, traveled to Livonia but soon began to get caught up in the tangled web of the toxic politics of the region, and instead of just assessing the suitability of the candidates for bishop, Baldwin of Alna started acting like a full blown Papal Legate, even going so far as to enact a treaty with the local Kurs, declaring their land to be under Papal protection, a move which angered the Sword Brothers, who were just about to move in and conquer the land of the Kurs with a view to keeping it for themselves. In the end, Baldwin of Alna so angered the Sword Brothers and their ally in this dispute, the merchants, that he was forced to flee to the castle at Dunamunde. He tried to deflect from the matter by recommending that the candidate Nicholas of Magdeburg be chosen as the new Bishop. To his horror, however, once Nicholas became Bishop of Riga, he sided with the Sword Brothers on this issue.

Unable or unwilling to let the matter rest there, Baldwin decided to go and have a word to Pope Gregory about the whole debacle. This issue must really have got under Baldwin's skin, because he traveled back to the Holy Roman Empire via Gotland, traveled the length of Germany, and then made a winter crossing of the Alps in January 1232, finally managing to secure an audience with Pope Gregory in a town just north of Rome.

Now, I can just imagine Baldwin, who had a bit of a temper as it was, getting angrier and angrier with each step of his arduous journey. He had plenty of time during his lengthy journey to dwell on how he had been wronged by the Sword Brothers, and I imagine he sustained himself along the way rehearsing in his mind exactly what he was going to say to the Pope, and calculating precisely how much trouble he was going to bring down on the heads of Bishop Albert's military Order.

The Sword Brothers, having been made aware of Baldwin's intentions, also hastily sent a representative to Rome, to argue their case should Baldwin manage to obtain an audience with the pope.

Now, Pope Gregory did agree to meet with Baldwin, and Baldwin unleashed all his pent up, well rehearsed fury about the Sword Brothers. He laid out in graphic detail the travesties committed by the Sword Brothers while Baldwin was in Livonia, and then pointed out to Pope Gregory the fact that the Sword Brothers followed the Templar rule, and so ought to be subject directly to Rome. However, unlike the Templar Knights, they had managed to escape direct Papal supervision. Baldwin must have made a compelling case and must have impressed Pope Gregory mightily with his arguments, as Pope Gregory apparently agreed to every single point Baldwin made, and refused to even meet with a representative from the Sword Brothers, who had traveled so far to present the Order's view.

Then, astonishingly, he sent Baldwin back to Livonia to sort out the pesky Sword Brothers once and for all. To enable Baldwin to fulfill this task, and listen up because this is quite something, he elevated him to the position of a full Papal Legate. But wait, there's more. Not only did Pope Gregory elevate Baldwin, the random monk from a random monastery, to the position of Papal Legate which even by itself gave him extraordinary powers, he then, and this is quite frankly incredible, named Baldwin as the new Bishop of Semigallia, and then named him as the new Bishop of Kurland.

Here's what William Urban has to say about Baldwin's sudden rise to power, taken from his book "The Baltic Crusade", and I quote. "He, that is, Pope Gregory, named him not only a Papal Legate but Bishop of Semigallia and Kurland. He gave him full disposition of all disputed lands in Livonia and Estonia, as well as all vacant Bishoprics, and the administration of Wierland, Jerwan and Wick, which the Sword Brothers held, and he empowered him in all questions pertaining to war and peace, levees of troops, and ecclesiastical penalties. Finally, he confirmed all of Baldwin's previous dispositions. In short, he armed his new Legate with every legal weapon known to the Church." End quote.

So in the same way as Clark Kent turned into Superman, Pope Gregory has turned the mild mannered, or maybe not so mild mannered, random monk Baldwin into a full blown superhero, Papal Legate, and Bishop with astonishing powers, although not, disappointingly, the power to don a cape and fly around. But if he could have, I have no doubt that Pope Gregory would have done that as well.

The horrified representatives from the Sword Brothers and the citizens of Riga who had traveled all the way to Italy, only to be dismissed by Pope Gregory without being able to present their case, could only look on in horror, their jaws dropping as the extent of Baldwin's new powers were revealed to them. After they had recovered from the shock, they realized that the very existence of the Sword Brothers was now under threat. They needed to act quickly to find as many powerful allies as they could, and work out a way to block or delay the storm of brimstone and hellfire that Baldwin was intending to bring down upon them. So instead of heading straight back to Livonia, the representatives from the Sword Brothers decided to pay a visit to their most powerful ally, Duke Albrecht of Saxony, and let him know what had taken place. The meeting must have gone well, because not long afterwards the Emperor declared that the territory of the Sword Brothers in Livonia and Estonia was now under his protection, setting up yet another showdown between Emperor and Pope.

Baldwin too was doing his best to strengthen his hand. While it was true that, in the same way as Clark Kent went into a telephone booth, spun around a couple of times and emerged as Superman, Baldwin had stepped into Pope Gregory's presence and emerged with a staggering bunch of new powers, Super-Baldwin didn't possess the degree of invincibility as that enjoyed by Superman. Baldwin knew enough about the toxic politics in Livonia and Estonia, and had made enough enemies during his time there, that he probably realized that his new powers may not be sufficient on their own to enable him to influence the powerful players on the ground. So, to put it another way, Baldwin needed military backup to be able to enforce his new powers, and protect himself. Or, to put it yet another way, Baldwin needed an army.

So Baldwin spent the next year raising an army, something which would have been quite a challenge considering he had no resources and no powerful backers. But by the summer of 1233 (at the same time, incidentally, as the main Prussian Crusade was getting

underway) Baldwin loaded his army onto ships and sailed for Riga. Now, if you think we are in for an interesting showdown, you would be right. Everyone knew that despite all his fancy titles and letters of authority from the Pope himself, Baldwin's main aim in Livonia and Estonia was to serve it up to the Sword Brothers. In his mind, they needed to either submit to him completely and unequivocally, or be eliminated.

The Sword Brothers were aware of this, and of the precarious position they were in. Their rough-shod manner of conducting themselves had won them little support on the ground over the years, and they couldn't afford to lose any land. Even the smallest loss of territory would see them facing severe financial difficulties, so the Sword Brothers knew that once Baldwin arrived with his army, they would be in a fight for their very existence. Baldwin's army consisted of around 1,100 men, which was roughly equivalent to the total number of men within the Order of the Sword Brothers. Importantly though, with all his new titles and Bishoprics, Baldwin was overlord of more than double the land administered by the Sword Brothers, so if the Sword Brothers just sat back and did nothing, Baldwin's wealth and influence, and critically his army, would likely continue to grow, and over time, his victory over the Order would be assured. So really the Sword Brothers at this point were in all sorts of trouble, and their options were limited.

So how did it all pan out? Well, after arriving in Riga, Baldwin waived his letters of authority at the citizens, and the Cistercians, the Bishops and the men of the Church in the region all recognized his authority and fell into line behind him. Baldwin then moved his army in to take and garrison castles in key strategic locations, but wisely chose to only attack those strongholds, which had been taken wrongly from the Bishoprics he now possessed. Once he had secured key castles in Semigallia and Reval, he then raised the ante. He started to move his troops into possessions held by the Sword Brothers.

Now, apparently inside the city of Reval was a small fortified building, which acted as the regional headquarters of the Sword Brothers. William of Modena himself had formally handed the building to the Sword Brothers back in 1227, and had authorized them to use the building as the base from which they could govern the region around Reval, on the Papal Legate's behalf. As a sign of his growing strength, Baldwin rode up to the building, ordered the Sword Brothers inside it to surrender, and demanded that the building be handed over to him.

This put Master Volkwin, the Master of the Sword Brothers, in a difficult position. If he surrendered the building to Baldwin, that would effectively mean relinquishing the Order's claim over the region around Reval, something which would cripple them financially and would indicate that the Order was effectively under Baldwin's thumb. But on the other hand, he really wasn't prepared to take up arms against a man who was the Papal Legate and also Bishop of just about everywhere. While Master Volkwin was wringing his hands and trying to decide what best to do, Baldwin moved 400 troops into position inside the castle at Reval, and then demanded that the matter of the possession of the building used by the Sword Brothers be determined by means of arbitration. Really, Master Volkwin had been totally outmaneuvered here. Capitalising on the Order's reluctance to start a war, Baldwin stacked the arbiters court with his supporters and his men, so when Master Volkwin predictably chose to have the dispute ruled over by the court, all he could do was sit back and watch everything go Baldwin's way. Unsurprisingly, the court ruled conclusively in favor of Baldwin.

But it wasn't all over for the Sword Brothers. I guess it won't shock you to discover that many of the Order's men opposed Master Volkwin's strategy of conciliation and arbitration, and instead wanted to wage all out war against Baldwin. Master Volkwin had kept these men in check for a time, but now their time had come. A warmongering faction within the Order had Master Volkwin arrested and detained, and then elevated one of their own to the position of Master.

And then they went to war. Their first target was the castle of Reval, which they attacked and managed to take in August or September of the year 1233. They killed all of Baldwin's warriors they came across, a number amounting to several hundred men. They then extracted oaths of obedience from the Elders of the Estonian tribes around Reval, after showing them the bodies of Baldwin's men, all of which had been stripped of their armor, their valuables, and their dignity, and had been piled in a big heap, an indication of the Sword Brothers' dominance and lack of mercy. Having secured Reval, the Sword Brothers then went on an attacking rampage through Estonia and Livonia, seizing key castles under the control of the Papal Legate, taking Papal land, and punishing those who had supported Baldwin, mostly by forcing them to pay fines, which went to fill the nearly-empty coffers of the Order.

What did Baldwin do? Well, he did what he always did when things got too hot in the Livonian kitchen, he fled to Dunamunde Castle and locked himself inside. Determined to make a comeback, Baldwin sent letters out from Dunamunde, offering concessions to the merchant classes and seeking new allies in the Holy Roman Empire. But it was all for nothing, because the next letter to arrive at Dunamunde was not one pledging support to Baldwin from a powerful new backer. No, it was from Pope Gregory, and it contained the termination of Baldwin's appointment as Legate. Yes, in a shock move, word had reached William of Modena of Baldwin's activities, and William had informed the Pope that his latest creation was running amok in Livonia and causing chaos. William of Modena requested to be sent back to the region as Legate, and Pope Gregory, realizing that Super-Baldwin may be using his powers for evil and not good, granted his request.

So, in a puff of Papal smoke, Super-Baldwin lost all his powers and reverted back to plain old Baldwin of Alna, a random monk from nowheresville monastery. So Baldwin is out and William of Modena is in. Can William of Modena put the wheels back on the Livonian and Estonian wagons? Join me next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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