

History of the Crusades. Episode 231. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXVIII. The End of the Sword Brothers.

Hello again. Last week we saw trouble brewing for the Sword Brothers. Forced to travel to Rome to defend themselves against allegations made by Baldwin of Alna, the Sword Brothers successfully defended the charges, but then faced a backlash from Pope Gregory IX, who decreed not only that Estonia be returned to the Danish Crown, but that the Sword Brothers owed King Valdemar II of Denmark a significant sum of money in compensation for removing Estonia from Danish hands. Pope Gregory also sent William of Modena, the Sword Brothers' defender, to Scandinavia, effectively removing him from Estonia for the moment.

So the Sword Brothers are in a bit of a pickle. Estonia was a vital source of income for the Order and now, not only had that source been taken away by Rome, the stipulation that the already financially stretched Order pay compensation to Denmark was a death blow. Although, it wasn't actually. No, the death blow for the Sword Brothers is about to arrive not from Rome, but from the Lithuanians.

Now, remember we saw last week that Master Volquin decided to invade Lithuania in an attempt to gain more land and income for his Order? Well, that turned out to be a really bad idea. Their first raid against the Lithuanians had been successful, but their next one wouldn't be. In the year 1236 a contingent of crusaders arrived in Riga and their leaders, the Counts of Duneburg and Haseldorf, were intent on bringing Christianity to the pagan Lithuanians. Master Volquin raised a force to join them, comprising around 100 Knights, 1200 fighting men, 1500 local fighters and 200 Russians from Pskov. They joined the 1,000 or so crusaders and marched southwards through Semigallia into Lithuania. Unfortunately for the crusaders and the Sword Brothers the expedition was a total disaster.

It started off pretty well, with the Latin Christians attacking a number of Lithuanian settlements and plundering their goods, but it seems that while the invaders were focused on pillage and destruction, the Lithuanian forces were gathering together, readying themselves for a major attack. As the crusaders and Sword Brothers were returning back to Semigallia they crossed a stream deep in the Lithuanian wood and, gulp, there were the Lithuanians.

The sight of the Lithuanian army seems to have totally spooked the crusaders and, despite desperate rallying by Master Volquin, they came up with all sorts of excuses why they shouldn't go on the attack. The bravery they had shown in destroying small Lithuanian settlements, and the boasts they had made in Riga about forcing Christianity onto the notoriously warlike Lithuanians, vanished when they actually came across the notoriously warlike Lithuanians on the battlefield. As a chronicler put it at the time, and I quote: "Few of

those who had been so bold in Riga now rushed into battle”. End quote. While the crusaders dithered and tried to argue with Master Volquin that “they would love to cross the stream and face the Lithuanians but their horses didn’t like the water, and there looked like there might be swamps in the woods and the horses wouldn’t like those either”, more and more Lithuanian fighting men arrived and joined the growing force mustering across the stream. Unable to convince the crusaders to fight, Master Volquin decided to set up camp, hoping that, perhaps the following day, the crusaders would find enough courage to face the Lithuanians.

But the next day was no better. With the crusaders refusing to fight Master Volquin had no choice but to order a retreat. I guess it’s not difficult to imagine what happened next. The retreat was meant to be orderly and well controlled, so as to limit the loss of Latin Christian lives, but the crusaders panicked and scattered in all directions. The Lithuanians mobilized and rode after the fleeing Christians. The Sword Brothers were able to hold off the Lithuanians for a short time, which allowed some crusaders to escape, but at great cost to the Order. Here is what the chronicler has to say about the disaster, and I quote: “The next day the Christians decided to ride away, but they had to fight the pagans. Their arms were weak in the swamp, and they were cut down like women.” End quote. Ouch.

The end result was a total disaster for the Sword Brothers as well as for the Livonian Crusade in general. Master Volquin was killed along with 48 Sword Brothers. The death toll for the combined crusader and local Christian fighting men was in the range of 2,000 dead. The big picture result was even worse. The Latin Christians were not only driven out of Lithuania, but neighboring Semigallia and Kurland as well, as, inspired by the victory of their pagan neighbors, the Semigallians and Kurs reverted to paganism and shook off their Christian occupiers.

But the most serious ramifications were reserved for the Sword Brothers themselves. Luckily for the Order a number of Sword Brothers were busy on garrison duty at the time of the battle, so after the dust had settled, the Order found itself Master-less and consisting of between 50 and 60 Knights and around 600 fighting men. This however was not nearly enough to ensure their survival as a military Order. They had been on the ropes before the Lithuanian disaster and now, with the removal of Estonia and the compensation payable to Denmark looming over their heads, there was only one option left on the table. They were going to have to merge with the Teutonic Order.

Now, you might remember that this had been attempted once before, but in the negotiations the Sword Brothers wanted all the advantages of a partnership with the powerful, wealthy Teutonic Order, but they weren’t willing to make any concessions themselves. So basically the Sword Brothers had proposed that the Teutonic Order help them to subdue Lithuania, and

garrison their castles, and conquer more territory, while allowing the Sword Brothers to remain an autonomous force and keep all the benefits arising from the Teutonic Order's assistance. With no benefits from this deal apparent to the Teutonic Order, other than the chance to travel to new lands and make new friends while conquering territory and generating income for the Sword Brothers, the Teutonic Order had rejected the Sword Brothers' proposal. Now however, things were different. Having lost all their negotiating power, and with the shock of their recent defeat, and the death of Master Volquin hanging over them, the Sword Brothers were forced to revisit the merger issue, from a very weak negotiating position. Did the Teutonic Order take full advantage of this? Oh yes, they did.

According to William Urban in his book "The Baltic Crusade", the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Hermann von Salza, pulled a humiliating trick on the representatives from the Sword Brothers who were in Rome to negotiate terms with the Order, and apparently Pope Gregory was in on the trick, but the Sword Brothers weren't. The Knights from the Sword Brothers were summoned into the Pope's presence, and they knelt before him and pledged their loyalty to Rome. Pope Gregory then blessed them and forgave them their sins, and then attendants came out with the mantles the kneeling Knights were to wear. So, what was the joke? Well, the mantles were white with a black cross, signifying that the wearer was a member of the Teutonic Order. According to a chronicler a scuffle broke out when one of the Knights tried to grab his old Sword Brothers mantle back from the chamberlain, but the chamberlain held his grip and in the end the Knight was forced to back down. So there you have it. In a humiliating ceremony the Sword Brothers discovered that they were no longer Sword Brothers at all: they were now Teutonic Knights and all the lands, castles and wealth which belonged to the Sword Brothers in Livonia and the surrounding regions now belonged to the Teutonic Order. Pope Gregory certainly had the last laugh.

So now the lucky Teutonic Order is going to have to attempt to tackle the total headache which is the politics of Livonia and Estonia, a headache that has risen to migraine levels due to the fact that Pope Gregory had recently promised to hand Estonia back to the Danish Crown. Fortunately for the Teutonic Order, the Crusade in Prussia was on hold at the present time, due to a new outbreak of civil war in Poland and civil unrest in the Holy Roman Empire, so Hermann Balk decided to leave Prussia in its holding pattern and headed over to Livonia to assess the situation for himself

Now Hermann Balk's challenges in Livonia and Estonia were numerous, but there was one challenge looming large over all the others: the problem of Estonia. Pope Gregory had indicated that Estonia needed to be handed back to Denmark, but both the ex-Sword Brothers and the German settlers who had been granted land inside Estonia were dead against the idea. Hermann Balk knew that he needed the assistance of the ex-Sword

Brothers on the ground in Livonia and Estonia, but it's safe to say that they weren't exactly happy new recruits to the Teutonic Order. The manner in which they had been tricked into becoming Teutonic Knights instead of Sword Brothers, and the humiliation of the Teutonic Order moving into their territory, taking all their stuff, and telling them how the place should be run wasn't really encouraging them to become loyal proud members of the Teutonic Order. Hermann Balk was keen to earn the respect and loyalty of the ex-Sword Brothers, and the easiest way to do this was to grant them a win. And the win they would all most like to achieve would be for them to retain Estonia.

Retaining Estonia however would mean defying the orders of Pope Gregory and making an enemy of Valdemar II of Denmark into the bargain. Now, the Teutonic Order really didn't want to make an enemy of the Danish Crown. The Prussian Crusade was still a work in progress, and the last thing Hermann Balk wanted to do was to give King Valdemar an excuse to oppose the interests of the Order in Prussia, and start inserting Danish concerns into the land grab currently underway in Prussia. So to put it mildly, Hermann Balk was in a bit of a bind. The problem was brought to Pope Gregory's attention, and he took action by recalling William of Modena from his naughty corner in Scandinavia, and ordering him to fix the problem of the competing interests in Estonia. So William of Modena traveled to Denmark in 1236, then headed over to Estonia in 1237, then returned to Denmark via Prussia in 1238. After two years of careful research, mediation and negotiation however, William of Modena was no closer to finding a solution. So Pope Gregory decided to assist him to find a solution by writing him angry letters telling him to find a solution.

So William of Modena came up with a solution, and it was quite a novel one. Unable to reconcile the competing interests of the different parties in Estonia, he decided to divide Estonia between the different factions, then unite them all by sending them on a crusade to Novgorod. To that end, William of Modena, Hermann Balk and King Valdemar met in Zeeland in mid-1238 and signed a treaty which would bring an end to territorial disputes in Estonia. Under the terms of the treaty the regions of Reval, Harrien and Wierland in Estonia would be returned to Denmark, with the Teutonic Order retaining the region of Jerwan, which was meant to appease the ex-Sword Brothers, but probably didn't. The Teutonic Order was to take over the governing of Estonia, pending the arrival of Danish officials, a job which they managed to do pretty badly. So badly in fact that many of the German noblemen and vassals who had settled in Estonia refused to obey their directions, or the directions of the Bishop of Estonia.

And that's where William of Modena's brilliant plan to distract them all by a crusade to Novgorod came in. William's pitch to the unhappy parties in Estonia was this: "Forget all your petty quarrels, there's a bigger prize you could all be focusing on. Come and join me in a

crusade into Russia and seek your fortunes there. If you think Estonia is worth fighting for, just wait till you see the delights on store inside Russia. There will be land, there will be trading opportunities, and there might even be Mongols, and if the crusade succeeds, and we capture the Russian trading center of Novgorod, all your fortunes will be made and you'll forget about all your petty squabbles here in Estonia." Or, to put it another way, William of Modena said to the warring parties in Estonia, "Look. Over there on the horizon. Bright shiny things, bright shiny things. Go. Go go go."

So, since this is the second last episode before we take our annual summer break, let's pause for a moment and see where we are at. The two Crusades we have been following, the Livonian Crusade and the Prussian Crusade, have come together on the timeline. The Prussian Crusade is essentially on hold while the Teutonic Order, having absorbed the Sword Brothers into their ranks, now has a significant stake in the Livonian Crusade. Next week, in our final episode for a couple of months, we will take some time out from both the Prussian Crusade and the Livonian Crusade, by heading over to Russia for the one, the only, the weird and the wonderful Crusade to Novgorod. So pack your Russian phrase book, some warm clothes and woolly hats, and keep a good eye out for the Mongol hordes, as we head deep into the Russian Principalities, And yes, the Crusade to Novgorod includes the famous Battle on the Ice. Woohoo! Until next week, bye for now.

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