

History of the Crusades. Episode 236. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXIX. The Southern Push Part 1.

Hello again. Last week we took a look at the Mongol invasions, and saw the steppe warriors not only knock in the door of Latin Christian Europe, but bash it down completely, storming through Poland and occupying the Kingdom of Hungary, before withdrawing back to the steppes. The two episodes before the Mongol invasion were spent looking at events in Prussia, so now it's time we swung to the east to follow events which are taking place in the Livonian Crusade.

Now, the last time we visited the Livonian Crusade in any great detail was in our last episode for 2017, when we examined the failed Crusade to Novgorod. Now, the Crusade to Novgorod was one of those fork-in-the-road historical events. Had the Crusade been successful it would have radically altered the dynamics of the Livonian Crusade. In his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban speculates that success in the Crusade to Novgorod would have seen its participants rise in wealth and power, so the Danish vassals in Estonia would likely have returned to Estonia enriched by the vast quantities of Russian land they had conquered, and would have become even more rebellious than they had been before. Likewise, the former members of the Sword Brothers who had found themselves now members of the Teutonic Order, would likely have wielded new-found power within the Order, and the hierarchy of the Order would have had to find some way of accommodating them, and the new obligations which would have arisen due to the Russian conquests.

But of course, none of this happened. The Crusade was unsuccessful and the Sword Brothers pretty much vanish from the historical record at this point, with many of the more rebellious Sword Brothers being killed on the battlefield, leaving the few who remained alive after the Crusade to Novgorod to be fully absorbed into the ranks of the Teutonic Order without a fuss.

The new priority for the Teutonic Order, following the failed Crusade to Novgorod, was to concentrate on matters closer to home. Specifically, the Order was keen to connect their two fields of operation in the Baltic region. Prussia and Livonia at this stage were separated, inconveniently, by Lithuania, a large region which ran eastwards, then bordered the Russian Principality of Polotsk, and the region around Semigallia, which hugged the coastline of the Baltic Sea. Clearly, life would be much easier for the Teutonic Order and the Latin Christians in the region if enough of Semigallia and/or Lithuania could be conquered that a land corridor could be created, linking Prussia and Livonia across a safe Latin Christian passageway.

Now, before we proceed any further we should take a closer look at the geography and the

people of this region. The regions of Livonia, Lithuania and Prussia are pretty straight forward, but the region around Semigallia is a little more complicated. So, the Daugava River marks the southern border of Livonia. Venture southwards from the upper or inland reaches of the Daugava and you will find yourself in the land of the Lithuanians. But we are more interested in the area around the Baltic coastline, so if you cross the Daugava downstream, near the Baltic Sea, you will find yourself in Semigallia. Continue through Semigallia around the coastline and you hit Kurland. The coastline then swings to the south. If you go southwards from Kurland you will arrive in Samogitia, and if you keep traveling in a southerly direction from Samogitia you will eventually end up in Samland, which is part of Prussia.

Now, parts of Semigallia and Kurland have been raided and conquered by the Crusaders at various points in time over the years, as we've seen in our coverage of the Livonian Crusade to date, but Samogitia is completely, utterly, resolutely pagan. The people of Samogitia have the same warlike reputation as their eastern neighbors, the Lithuanians, and this entire region, the area surrounding Semigallia, Kurland and Samogitia, is covered with dense, heavy forests.

So it looks like the Teutonic Order have a challenge ahead of them. Their plan, unsurprisingly, was to secure Semigallia and Kurland, and then take on the fearsome Samogitians. Actually this was a really good plan, and the outcome will be wildly successful, with the Teutonic Order even managing to establish a Christian kingdom in Lithuania. The good times for the Crusaders will last around a decade, before a major pagan push-back and rebellion which commenced in the year 1259.

But before we take a look at the attempt by the Teutonic Knights to create their land corridor linking Prussia and Livonia, we are going to zoom out, and take a look at the political train wrecks taking place in Denmark and surrounding regions at this time, because they are going to have an impact on how things play out in the Baltic region, and it's difficult to understand events in the Baltic Crusade without having a running knowledge of the explosive internal politics of the countries in central and eastern Europe at this time.

We've already seen that Poland was in a bad way, what with the civil war and the Mongol invasions, and Hungary was also facing tough times, again with the Mongols as its main cause of trouble. But Poland and Hungary weren't the only countries doing it tough on the European stage at this point in time, a perfect example of this being Denmark.

Now, King Valdemar II had four sons, so an heir and plenty of spares, and all of them seemed to be competent, ambitious men. When King Valdemar died his eldest son Eric was crowned King on 1241. Eric's dream for Denmark was for it to rise in prominence and extend its borders into the northern reaches of Holy Roman Empire, like it had at the peak of his father's

reign. As a first step to achieve this dream Eric needed to absorb Holstein into the Danish Kingdom. Trouble was, King Valdemar's next eldest son Abel was currently governing Holstein on behalf of his nephews. Eric's brother Abel was actually doing pretty well for himself. He was the Duke of Schleswig, and had married Matilda of Holstein, setting the foundations for a strong bond between the regions of Schleswig and Holstein, a bond which would actually exist right up until the era of Bismarck. Abel was forming diplomatic ties with other regions inside the Empire, and was building a nice power-base for himself, a power-base which his elder brother Eric needed to acquire to fulfill his ambitions for Denmark. But Abel refused to surrender any of his lands to his older brother, and instead spread his net of alliances, so he could mount a strong military response should his brother invade his lands.

Now, to complicate things further, King Eric was also friends with the new Pope, Pope Innocent IV. They had met at university, and now Eric's pious church-y friend from his university days had become Pope. Was Eric going to milk this relationship for all it was worth? Yes, he was. He obtained special permission from Pope Innocent to levy taxes on Church lands, taxes he would need to fund the military campaigns he was going to launch quite a few of in order for him to make Denmark great again. No-one likes new taxes and King Eric found himself becoming more and more unpopular with his subjects. As a result a rift between Eric and the Danish Church opened, and steadily grew wider. Then Abel, aided by the Count of Holstein, the Archbishop of Bremen, and the citizens of Lubeck, raided into Danish territory, taking the town of Ripon. King Eric came to take the town back, and it swapped back and forth a couple of times between the two sides. Then the brothers called a truce. The following year, the year 1248, Eric paid his brother back by raiding into both Schleswig and Holstein. Things were going pretty well for Eric until Abel's allies came to his assistance. The Archbishop of Bremen threw his forces behind Abel, and then the dispute looked like spilling out into a regional war when the King of Norway also declared for Abel. Things were looking like they could get out of hand, so Pope Innocent attempted to call William of Modena in to settle the dispute, but he was currently on Papal business in Sweden, so Archbishop Gerhard of Bremen managed to broker a peace deal, part of which involved everyone going on crusade to Livonia.

King Eric spied an opportunity, and immediately declared that he would take the Cross and go crusading to Livonia. But he needed money to fund his expedition, so the lucky people of Denmark were informed that a whole new round of taxes would be levied. This time not only Church lands would be taxed but secular land as well, with noblemen and peasants alike having to dig into their pockets to enable their King to launch his Crusade. Peasant riots started breaking out, and Eric earned himself the nickname Eric Ploughpenny. But he stuck to his guns, and his troops were sent far and wide across Denmark to fill the Royal coffers. King Eric launched his Crusade to much fanfare in May 1249. He sailed to Livonia but returned a

mere two months later, having accomplished precisely nothing. Rumors began circulating that the whole point of the Crusade had been to raise taxes, and those rumors may well have been correct.

Now, at the same time as the people of Denmark are becoming more and more unhappy with their new King, Pope Innocent decided to assert Papal authority in Prussia. It seemed to Pope Innocent that the Teutonic Knights were getting a little too powerful for their own good. In his view, the Order hadn't come down enough in favor of the Papacy in the dispute between Rome and the Holy Roman Empire. With the Church's authority in Prussia diluted by the establishment of the four Bishoprics, Pope Innocent decided to install an Archbishop inside Prussia, with the idea that the Archbishop of Prussia would wield enough authority to bring the Teutonic Knights into line. Who is Pope Innocent going to choose to be the new Archbishop of Prussia? Well I'll give you a clue: it's someone we've met before, but it's not William of Modena.

William of Modena would likely have made a brilliant Archbishop of Prussia, but he was seen to be too close to the Teutonic Order, and as Rome was looking for someone who could assert authority against the Teutonic Knights, William of Modena was overlooked. But don't be too concerned, because William of Modena does get a promotion. He is elevated to the position of Cardinal-Bishop of Sabina in the year 1244. Now, while we should all be very happy for him and celebrate the fact that his years of tireless and exemplary service have been recognized, if you take the broader view, this is not actually a good thing. William of Modena's skills in settling disputes and soothing tensions, and his extensive knowledge of the politics and dynamics of eastern Europe will be sorely missed. In fact William of Modena's departure as Papal Legate will see Church policy swing away from the conciliatory, persuasive stance taken by William, towards dominance, intimidation and coercion.

Anyway, back to the Archbishop of Prussia. The man chosen for the position was Albert Suerbeer. Now, you might remember that Albert Suerbeer was one of the candidates nominated to replace Bishop Albert as Bishop of Riga, but, after his investigations, Baldwin of Alba had recommended Albert's opponent for the position. All was not lost for Albert, however, as he was promoted to the position of Archbishop of Armagh in Ireland. This may have been good for Albert Suerbeer, but it was not so good for the people of Ireland.

Albert's new Archbishopric was full of people who were not exactly wealthy, but that didn't stop Albert taxing them heavily, reducing his poverty-stricken subjects to new levels of hardship and struggle. By the year 1245, when Albert left Ireland to attend the Council of Lyon, the people of Ireland made it very clear that he would not be welcome back. Around the same time Pope Innocent happened to be searching for the new Archbishop of Prussia and Albert, being a German cleric who was adept at filling Church coffers regardless of the cost to

his constituents, was appointed to the position in the year 1246.

Now this, of course, was bad news for the Teutonic Order. A savvy and powerful Archbishop of Prussia could reactivate the claims of Bishop Christian to land in Prussia, and any move by the Archbishop to increase the power of the Church in Prussia was likely to come at the expense of the position of the Teutonic Order. So from the outset they went into damage control mode, managing to convince the new Archbishop that Prussia was much too unsafe for an eminent person such as himself, with the result that the new Archbishop of Prussia decided to base himself at Lubeck, and commute to his new Archbishopric instead of residing there.

Right, so we now have a rough idea of what has been taking place in eastern Europe in the early 1240s. Now, we've one final thing to consider before we start to consider the push southwards from Livonia into the land of the Semigallians and the Kurs, and that is the situation in Livonia itself. Now, last time we checked in, Hermann Balk was the Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia. Unfortunately for Hermann Balk though, he had taken King Valdemar of Denmark's side in regards to a territorial dispute between the Order and the Kingdom of Denmark in Estonia, effectively handing Estonia back to Denmark in 1238. This upset the ex-Sword Brothers and the local Teutonic Knights so much that they refused to obey his orders. With his authority in Livonia dwindling, Hermann Balk made his way to Italy, to speak to the Pope and Hermann von Salza about how best to resolve the problem. However, the Pope was busy with other matters and Hermann von Salza died shortly after meeting with Hermann Balk, and without having given him any advice about how best to proceed. With no real idea about what to do, Hermann Balk remained in Italy, while back in Livonia his deputy, a man called Dietrich von Gruningen, took over command of the Livonian Branch of the Teutonic Order. And he did a great job. Everybody loved Dietrich von Gruningen, and it came as no surprise to anyone when Dietrich von Gruningen was officially named Master of Livonia in 1348. The unfortunate Hermann Balk died in Germany the following year, without having returned to Livonia.

Right, so now the background is all settled. We know what's going on, and there's a new Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia. So we're all set to examine the southern push by the Teutonic Knights from Livonia into the pagan lands separating Livonia and Prussia. But we've run out of time, so join me next week as the crusaders attempt to establish a land corridor between Livonia and Prussia. Until next week, bye for now.

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