

History of the Crusades. Episode 239. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXXII. Samogitian Defiance.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Teutonic Order succeed in their push southwards out of Livonia, so the Kurs and the Semigallians are now under the control of the Order, and in a surprise move, Lithuania has also agreed to be Christianized, with their leader, Mindaugas being crowned as a King. Only Samogitia is now holding out as a pagan stronghold.

This was all bad news for the Archbishop of Prussia, Albert Suerbeer, whose greatest desire was to see the Teutonic Order fail. The conflict between the Order and the Archbishop escalated, and was resolved by a Church court at Lyon, with one of the results of the hearing being that Albert Suerbeer was moved sideways out of the role of Archbishop of Prussia, and into the role of Archbishop of Riga. When we left Last week's episode, Albert Suerbeer was busy at his base in Lubeck preparing to travel to Livonia to take up his new position, and the Teutonic Order was busy building an impressive castle in a handy strategic location at Memel.

Now, Memel was located adjacent to a lagoon at the mouth of the Memel River on the Baltic coastline, to the north of Prussian Samland and to the south of Kurland, so it was in Samogitia. It really was a very handy location for a Teutonic stronghold. If a fleet of ships landed at Memel they were only one day's ride from the southernmost Latin Christian castle in Kurland. Head south from Memel and in a day or so you would reach Prussian Samland, a region only tentatively under the Order's control, and subject to frequent rebellions. And of course, Memel was also located in Samogitia, the only region in the Order's push south from Livonia that had stayed defiantly pagan.

Oddly the Samogitians didn't seem at all phased by the establishment of the castle, but as William Urban reports in his book "The Baltic Crusade", the people of Samland immediately recognized the threat it posed and moved to counter it.

Now, we saw last week that the Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, Master Andreas, had retired back to the Holy Roman Empire due to ill health, and had been replaced by Master Eberhard. Well, Master Eberhard has now also become unwell and has asked to be relieved of his duties, so in the year 1253, shortly after the castle at Memel was completed, he was replaced by Anno of Sangerhausen. Master Anno was now going to have to deal with a full scale invasion by the Samlanders. The Samlanders decided to launch a two-pronged attack on Memel. The first wave involved the launching of an assault via the sea, while in the second phase a land army would march to the castle and besiege it. The naval attack was launched and it went well. So many ships entered the river around the castle that the river was

effectively blocked by them, and you could cross from one side of the river to the other by walking across all the vessels. Then the impressive land army arrived.

Now the Teutonic Knights inside the castle must have been getting pretty concerned at this point, but they shouldn't have been. Why? Well because the army of Samlanders inexplicably faltered. The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle puts the army's failings down to a lack of sleep by some members, who had presumably marched northwards from Samland without resting so they could arrive at Memel shortly after their navy. Here's what the Chronicle has to say, and I quote: "The heathen army from Samland arrived. They all assembled and took up spear and shield, and stood anxiously ready to attack. They pressed against and onto the castle, and those had to pay for it with the lives they brought there. None had expected that, but it happened to many and thereafter they did not come so near. After they had lost those people they were angry that they had ever considered the attack because that had happened to their people, and now they lay dead. Immediately the Elders ordered then to burn the dead and send them hence with all their weapons, so that they could make expeditions and attacks in the hereafter also." End quote.

So the massive attack by the Samlanders on the castle at Memel was repelled. Not only was it repelled, but a significant amount of sleepy Samland fighting men had been killed, so Master Anno decided that now would be a good time to send an army from Livonia to Memel, and use it to attack deep into Samland to teach those pesky rebellious Samlanders a lesson. A contingent of crusaders had just arrived in Riga and they joined a large army which traveled to Memel, then overland into Samland. Then they encountered some problems. Samland was heavily forested, not with little puny trees but with massive giant trees, which the Samlanders could chop down and use as defensive structures. The heavy forest was also not conducive to the Knights or their horses, and the army quickly found itself facing ambushes and heavy losses. But they needn't have worried, as another large army was currently moving into Samland from Prussia. King Ottokar of Bohemia had sent a large crusading army to Prussia, and the Order had made good use of it, pushing north through Samland and conquering all the way to the southern banks of the Memel River, just near the castle built by the Livonian Chapter of the Order.

To celebrate the conquest the Order founded a city in Samland in the year 1256 which they named Konigsberg, which translated as "King's Mountain", and was so called in honor of King Ottokar of Bohemia and his crusaders. Konigsberg will eventually become one of the most important cities in Prussia, and will remain so until World War II, when it was extensively damaged. It became part of the Soviet Union after World War II, and today it is called Kaliningrad and is the administrative center of Kaliningrad Oblast, an outpost of the Russian Federation which is wedged between modern day Poland and Lithuania.

OK, so the Teutonic Order is busy establishing bases for themselves in the land corridor between Livonia and Prussia, from which they can subdue the region. So now we can turn to the burning question: what is their nemesis Albert Suerbeer up to? Well, in the year 1254 Bishop Nicholas of Riga died, which was the green light for Albert Suerbeer to travel to Livonia to take up his new position as Archbishop of Riga. Unfortunately for Albert, when he arrived at Riga, then traveled across Livonia, into Estonia and Kurland, visiting the Bishop of Osel and the Bishop of Kurland, he was disappointed by what he found. What did he find? Well, the whole region was pretty much under the thumb of the Teutonic Order. The Bishops had apparently developed the practice of deferring to the Order in all things military and otherwise, and the resources of all the regions, particularly that of Riga, had dwindled to the extent that the Church had barely any troops or defensive powers of its own. Albert Suerbeer decided that this wouldn't do at all, and he promptly boarded the next ship to Lubeck so that he could travel to Rome and speak to the Pope about this dreadful state of affairs.

By this time Master Dietrich, who had retired to the Holy Roman Empire in poor health, had recovered somewhat and was now Master of the Teutonic Order in Germany. He met with Albert and they thrashed out an agreement which stipulated that the Teutonic Order would honor its obligations to the bishops in the Baltic Region so long as this didn't negatively impact on the interests of the Order. The agreement was signed by Albert and Master Dietrich and was endorsed by Pope Innocent IV, who died shortly afterwards, to be replaced by Pope Alexander IV.

Now, not only has Europe been forced to contend with a change in the Papacy at this time, the bad times are continuing for Denmark and the Holy Roman Empire. In Denmark, King Christopher clashed mightily with the Archbishop of Lundt, so mightily in fact that another civil war broke out in the year 1256. King Christopher imprisoned the Archbishop and a number of other prominent Danish Church officials, and the Church responded by excommunicating the King. The war only ended when King Christopher died suddenly and unexpectedly in the year 1259. There were rumors that he had been poisoned while drinking from the Communion chalice during Mass, but that rumor was never substantiated. So the good news is that cranky old King Christopher of Denmark is about to be replaced with a brand new king. The bad news is that the new king, King Eric, is only ten years old, and really unable to steer Denmark out of its current crisis.

It's difficult to believe, but things were actually arguably even worse in the Holy Roman Empire at this time. The Emperor, William of Holland, was killed by a bunch of Frisian rebels in January 1256, when his horse fell through the ice of a frozen river, enabling him to be surrounded and killed. Oddly, the rebels took his body and hid it under the floorboards of a nearby house, where it stayed for the next 26 years, which you would think would be pretty

unpleasant for the occupants of the house, particularly in the early stages. William's son recovered his father's body in the year 1282, then proceeded to punish not only the occupants of the house but the Frisian people as a whole.

Now at the time of his father's death, William's son was only two years old, so two other contenders emerged for the position of Emperor: Alfonso X of Castile, who was supported by Saxony, Brandenburg and Tier, and, oddly, Richard Earl of Cornwall, the eldest son of everyone's favorite king, King John. With Richard's election being supported by Cologne, Mainz and Bohemia, we have no clear winner, so troubled times are ahead for the Empire, which will actually remain leaderless for the next couple of decades while the two men and the two factions fight it out over who should be Emperor.

Now, although things were far from ideal in the Kingdom of Denmark and the Holy Roman Empire at this time, this was of little concern to the Teutonic Order. No, the Order had concerns of their own at this time, and for them the two thunderclouds looming on the horizon didn't take the form of leadership crises within the Kingdom of Denmark and the Holy Roman Empire. No, for the Order, the two looming problems were the Samogitians and Albert Suerbeer. We'll deal with the Samogitians first.

Now, the Samogitians, at this stage, were alone and were fighting everyone. The only defiantly pagan people still living in the region, they were now taking on the Teutonic Order and all other Latin Christian fighters, the Kurs, the Semigallians, and the Lithuanians under their newly Christianized King Mindaugas. So who were their allies. Well, they didn't have any. With their backs to the wall, or more accurately with their backs to the Baltic Sea, they stood their ground and not only took on anyone who entered their territory, but they regularly raided into neighboring Kurland as well. Not surprisingly one of their main targets was the castle at Memel, which had rudely been built by the Teutonic Order on Samogitian land.

While Memel was a target which could be adequately defended, the Kurs could not. The borders between Kurland and Samogitia were lengthy and fluid, and could not be adequately patrolled by the Kurs or their Latin Christian defenders. As a consequence Samogitian raiding parties, mostly consisting of small groups of fighters, but occasionally comprising larger armies, would pick a random spot on the border and go raiding across into Kurland, burning villages, destroying crops and firewood, carrying off women, children and men alike to be sold as slaves, and killing anyone who resisted them.

The situation became increasingly intolerable for the Kurs and in the end Master Anno was forced to act. In the year 1255 he gathered a sizable army of crusaders, Livonians, Letts, Estonians and fighters from the Teutonic Order, and headed into Samogitia to teach those

pesky pagans a lesson, on the way collecting more fighters from Kurland, Semigallia and Lithuania. Now, if you are thinking that this is a very diverse army, you would be right. This was not just a homogeneous force of Latin Christian fighters with everyone speaking the same language, sharing the same culture, and having the same fighting techniques. No, this army consisted of some Latin Christian fighters – Teutonic Knights, crusaders and other Latin Christians from the region - but it also consisted of a diverse bunch of newly Christianized former pagans as well as native allies of the Latin Christians who had been Christianized many decades ago.

Let's just run through again the components of the army which was headed towards Samogitia. As well as Latin Christian fighters it contained Letts, Livonians, Estonians, Kurs, Semigallians, and Lithuanians. So, how do you command such an army? Do you muddle everyone together and hope that everyone understands everyone else enough to form a coherent fighting group? No actually you don't do that. The Teutonic Order took an interesting approach to the diverse fighting force they commanded, and they stuck with this approach for many years. So what was that approach? Well, everyone remained in their own ethnic groups, and each group was given its own banner, so everyone knew where everyone else was. The fighters were told to stay with in their own groups and fight under their own banner. The Teutonic Order assigned a guide to each leader of each of the groups, a guide who could presumably speak the language of the particular group to which they were assigned, and could relay orders accurately, and pass messages back to central command. The army marched in formation, everyone keeping their banners in sight, and the commanders under each banner followed the orders relayed to them by the guides.

It actually worked really well, and the raid into Samogitia in 1255 was an example of that. The army remained disciplined and well ordered during the whole campaign, and so many Samogitian villages were raided, pillaged and burned, so many man, women and children captured as slaves, and so many cattle taken, that many in the army made their fortunes. The army spent nine days inside Samogitian lands before withdrawing back to Livonia. The Samogitians suffered from this defeat, and it did curtail their ability to attack Memel and raid into Kurland, but they were not defeated and they did not decide to throw their hands up in the air, surrender and accept Christianity.

In fact, in a relatively short period of time the Samogitians will rally and go on the attack, forcing Master Anno to focus once again on the Samogitian threat, when he should be keeping his eye on what will prove to be a much more serious problem, a problem taking the form not of a bunch war-loving pagans, but of a single Christian man, that man being, of course, Albert Suerbeer. Join me next week as Albert Suerbeer climbs into the ring to take on the Teutonic Order. Until next week, bye for now.

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