

History of the Crusades. Episode 240. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXXIII. Albert Suerbeer.

Hello again. Last time we saw the Teutonic Order encounter two problems following their establishment of a land corridor between Livonia and Prussia. The first problem was the defiantly pagan Samogitians, who had thrown a spanner in the works by refusing to become Christian, despite the fact that their land was inside the corridor established by the Teutonic Order. Master Anno, the head of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, addressed this problem in last week's episode by leading a large army of crusaders and many other nationalities out of Livonia to crush the defiant Samogitians. The Samogitians were defeated, and were prevented from carrying out their usual raids into nearby Christian lands. But they weren't crushed, and are in fact regrouping as we speak.

But today we won't be dealing with the Samogitians. No, today we will be addressing the second problem faced by Master Anno, and that second problem wasn't a region of war-loving pagans, but a single Latin Christian man, a man called Albert Suerbeer, the new Archbishop of Riga. Albert Suerbeer arrived in Livonia with a plan, that plan being to make sure the ecclesiastical sector in Livonia was securely under his thumb, and then go after the Teutonic Order, and bring them down to size, and with any luck bring them under his thumb as well.

Now, forcing the various Church institutions in Livonia to bend to his will was not going to be easy. Many of them had become wealthy and powerful in their own right, and were used to making their own decisions while being answerable to no-one but themselves. For example, many churches and convents in Livonia had been gifted land and money from wealthy visiting crusaders, or by means of bequests in wills from wealthy parishioners. This meant that in many cases convents and churches were able to purchase land and property, and while this sounds like a great thing, to Albert Suerbeer it wasn't, because it meant that the Church no longer had the power to levy taxes over that property, meaning a loss in income for the church or convent, and, closer to home, a loss in income for the Archbishopric. So Albert dealt with this by forbidding his subjects to bequest land to the Church following their deaths, and he also issued edicts ensuring that he, as Archbishop of Riga, effectively had the final say over what property each Church institution could acquire, meaning that Albert's cooperation and oversight was required to enable each institution to function effectively and smoothly. He then insisted that Canons across Livonia adopt the Cistercian rule, which was quite restrictive and more amenable to central control.

Feeling that Livonia was now being brought to heel, Albert then turned his attentions to the Teutonic Order. Now, in his book "The Baltic Crusade" William Urban makes an interesting

point about Albert's ploy against the Teutonic Order at this early stage in his career. The point being: in attempting to force the Order's hand and assert his dominance over them, Albert really had nothing to lose. Should he succeed, Albert Suerbeer, Archbishop of Riga, would be the most powerful figure in the Baltic region, wielding authority over a powerful military order. In fact he would be one of the most powerful figures in the Church in all of Europe, not just in the Baltics. And if he failed, well that was no biggie. He could just regroup and try again later.

So how did Albert Suerbeer attempt to force the Teutonic Order to bend to his will? Well, it went a little something like this. Despite not really having the authority to do so, Albert started off by demanding that the Teutonic Order direct tithes and taxes gathered from the lands under control of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, in his direction. He also demanded a more personal indication of fealty, ordering officers from the Order who collected the tithes and taxes to send gifts in his direction, gifts such as clothing, food and livestock, as a sign of their submission, and their recognition of Albert as their new overlord. I guess no-one was surprised when the officers from the Teutonic Order refused to do any of this. But that was just fine with Albert because that meant that he could launch the next part of his plan.

The next part of the plan involved Albert doing everything humanly possible to annoy the Teutonic Order and disrupt the smooth running of their business in Livonia. He interfered with crusaders coming over from Lubeck, he demanded that taxes be paid by the Order on property they held, and he even went so far as to send a bill to the Order for expenses he had incurred when attacking the Order before he became Archbishop. So was any of this successful? Not really.

Master Anno stood firm against the attacks, and in fact most of the prominent citizens of Riga took the Order's side in the dispute. Albert did have one small victory though. When Master Anno was away on Church business he handed the reins of power over to a commander within the Teutonic Order, and in the year 1255 Albert managed to convince the commander to sign a treaty favorably allocating land in a particular region to the Archbishop. Albert even managed to convince the commander to sign the treaty without consulting anyone else within the Teutonic Order. But this was only a small victory, and Albert was soon going to regret that he had kicked the hornet's nest which was the Teutonic Order in Livonia. Why? Well, because the Order took their quarrel with Albert to Rome.

They laid out Albert's demands and mounted cogent arguments as to why the Archbishop was overstepping his authority. They concluded by requesting the Pope to order the Archbishop of Riga to cease and desist. In the end, Pope Alexander IV did much more than order Albert to cease his demands and desist from making them again. William Urban has a nice summary of the Pope's decision in his book "The Baltic Crusade", which I'll read out to

you, and I quote. "Pope Alexander IV granted far-reaching immunities which put the Order almost beyond Archiepiscopal control: the right to settle all disputes within the Order; the right to accept into membership former adherents of Frederick II, and nobles who had been accused of robbery, simony and assaults on clerics; the right to defend themselves against all attacks; freedom from all taxes, tolls and payments in support of Papal legates; and most important of all, immunity from excommunication without express Papal permission. Thus armed, and having been granted many special privileges, the Order ignored Albert Suerbeer's complaints, and when he brought economic pressure to bear upon them, the Master either procured or falsified a document which gave them permission to engage in commerce." End quote.

So Archbishop Albert's attempts to rein in the Teutonic Order have blown up spectacularly in his face. The two fighting parties retired to their respective corners of the ring, with the score being Albert Suerbeer Zero and the Teutonic Order One. Did Albert Suerbeer throw in the towel following the Pope's crushing decision? No, he did not. The bell rang for the next round and Albert leapt out of his corner and decided to pursue a different policy this time around.

Clearly he couldn't defeat the Order on legal or ecclesiastical grounds, so instead he did his best to undermine, disparage and besmirch the Order, spreading rumors about their immoral behavior, alleging the Teutonic Knights were dishonest and untrustworthy in their commercial dealings, that sort of thing. In summary, the Archbishop resorted to flinging as much mud as he could in the direction of the Teutonic Order, hoping that some of it would stick.

Did any of it stick? Not really. Albert Suerbeer made repeated complaints to Rome about the Order falsifying documents, about incest, about adultery, and about anything else Albert managed to come up with. The Order sent representatives to Rome to refute the allegations, and eventually the Papacy resorted to dismissing the Archbishop's allegations out of hand. However William Urban reports that the mud-slinging may have affected the Teutonic Order's reputation in the historical record, as some early historians drew on some of the salacious allegations made by Archbishop Albert at this time to paint a rather dark picture of the Order and its activities, a picture which may have not been entirely accurate.

Now not surprisingly, some of the mud being flung around by Archbishop Albert at this time landed on the Archbishop himself, and ironically some of the Bishops in Livonia moved their support away from their Archbishop and instead pledged their loyalty to Master Anno of the Teutonic Order.

Now Master Anno at this stage was doing a pretty impressive job of heading up the Livonian Chapter of the Order. He had beaten back the pagan Samogitians and had deflected the attacks of Albert Suerbeer, all while managing to keep sound administrative order, building

ties with the locals, and assisting the Latin Christians in the surrounding regions. And of course, the cherry on the top of the Master Anno achievement pie was his conversion to Christianity of Lithuania, via his alliance with King Mindaugas.

Now this impressive list of accomplishments didn't escape the notice of the power-brokers inside the Teutonic Order, and in the year 1256 when the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order announced his retirement, Master Anno was promoted into the position. So now Master Anno is Grand Master Anno, head of the entire Teutonic Order. That, of course, meant that the position of Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia became vacant, and the man chosen to become the new Master in Livonia was Burchard of Hornhusen, the commander of the castle at Konigsberg, in Samland.

Now, Burchard of Hornhusen is the sort of person who has movies made about him. Daring, brave, always the center of attention, and always looking for adventure, Burchard drew his sword and leapt into the position of Master with energy and enthusiasm. Now, Burchard, as we've just said, was commander of the castle at Konigsberg, and the quickest, safest and most boring way to travel from Konigsberg to Riga was by sea. But Burchard wasn't the sort of man who chose the quickest, safest and most boring way of doing things. No, Burchard decided he was going to make a grand entrance into Riga, and he was going to do so by traveling there via the lengthy, dangerous and definitely not boring overland route.

Now, you might remember that one of the purposes of establishing a land corridor between Prussia and Riga was to enable crusaders and other Latin Christians to travel overland between the two regions. Unfortunately though, this hadn't really occurred, because not only was the entire region covered by thick forests, the kind of forests which could conceal pagan fighters who could ambush travelers and kill them; traveling from Konigsberg or Memel to Riga entailed traveling through Samogitia, unless you were willing to detour and swing way inland to more friendly Lithuania and enter Livonia that way.

But this didn't deter Master Burchard. In the spring of 1257 he gathered a small fighting force and headed north from Konigsberg to Memel. The group then headed north into Kurland, then inland through enemy territory in Samogitia, before emerging unscathed into Semigallia, and then on to Riga, proving once and for all that it was actually possible to use the land corridor between Prussia and Livonia as, well, a land corridor. He was welcomed outside the city with gifts of wine and mead, and was then escorted in a parade through the city to his new post as Master of the Order in Livonia. Master Burchard got straight to work, doing the usual things which you would expect a new Master to do. He met with local dignitaries and power-brokers, reaffirming alliances, and putting faces to names; he exchanged gifts with King Mindaugas, and the two men made mutual promises of aid; then, possibly getting bored by all this normal,

ordinary stuff, Master Burchard declared war on Samogitia.

A group of pagan Samogitian warriors had managed to besiege the castle at Memel, a castle which, of course, was of vital strategic importance to the Order. So Master Burchard gathered 40 Teutonic Knights and 500 fighters from Kurland, and marched them all down to Memel to teach those pesky pagans a lesson. Trouble was the pesky pagans held the advantage. They had a great number of fighters on the ground, enough to effectively besiege the Latin Christian stronghold. And they knew the ground. They were familiar with the local region and the terrain, with an intimacy which wasn't shared by Master Burchard, the Knights traveling with him, or the fighters from Kurland. So the fighting force led by Master Burchard was ambushed as they approached Memel. Finding themselves surrounded and heavily outnumbered, the Latin Christians fought valiantly, but in the end, twelve Knights were killed and Master Burchard himself was severely injured. Somehow the survivors made it into the castle, and they rested at Memel until Master Burchard had recovered enough from his injuries to travel. He managed to limp back to Riga in due course, and if you think being a whisker away from being killed in battle is going to slow Master Burchard down, then you don't know Master Burchard.

Happy news awaited Master Burchard at Riga, in the form of the fact that a large crusading force from Holstein had just arrived, and the crusaders were itching to head down to Memel and have a crack at the Samogitians. Master Burchard was all set to clean off his sword and ride back to Memel when, to everyone's shock, a peace envoy from Samogitia arrived in Riga, wishing to come to terms with the Order.

A council made up of local dignitaries, including Archbishop Albert and the Bishops of Livonia, was convened to consider making some sort of peace treaty with the pagans. Everyone was keen for the Samogitians to convert to Christianity like the Lithuanians had done, but apparently that was out of the question. In the end the council agreed to offer a two year peace treaty to the pagans. The Samogitians agreed, and there was much rejoicing and merriment. The Christians wanted the pagans to join in the general rejoicing and merriment, but the pagans were keen to leave the odd Christian folk to their weird ways, and head back home. So they shook hands with Master Burchard, which sealed the agreement, and headed back to Samogitia.

Here's a description of the event from the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, and I quote. "They made a peace treaty with the Samogitians which was to last two years, that's true. The treaty was confirmed in the proper manner. The Bishops came, as you have heard, from far away. There were many men who rejoiced for peace. They came to the city, but the heathens wanted to only return home again, as strange people do even today. They gave their hand to

the Master and were satisfied according to the custom of the land, for whoever gives his hand to another, even if in a third land, has made an honorable peace.” End quote.

So, two years ahead of peace in the Baltic region. Woohoo! Join me next week as we examine the two beautiful years of peace, which lasted from 1257 to 1259, before once again descending back into our usual state of warfare, chaos and epic personality clashes. Until next week, bye for now.

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