

History of the Crusades. Episode 247. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part XV. Pagan Victories.

Hello again. Last week we saw two very competent Masters, Master Conrad and Master Otto, lead the fight-back by the Order in Livonia, with the end result being a resolution to both the Archbishop Albert problem and the Russian problem, although the pagan problem, in the form of the Lithuanians, Samigallians and Samogitians, remains to be dealt with. We covered five years of the Livonian Crusade in last week's episode, bringing the timeline to the end of the year 1268. So today we will revisit the Prussian Crusade and bring it a little further along the timeline.

We left Prussia back in Episode 245, towards the end of the year 1263. The Second Prussian Insurrection was in full swing, with the uprising which followed the Order's defeat at the Battle of Durbe spreading out from Samland and Natangia to cover the entire Prussian region. Now, somewhat surprisingly, at this time trade was still continuing up and down the Vistula River. The Order's priority was to protect this industry, so defenses were placed along strategic points on the banks of the river. At the same time the defenses at Thorn were strengthened. Its defensive walls were totally reconstructed, although at this stage they were still made from logs of wood packed with earth, and not stone.

The leader of the Prussians in Natangia, Herkus Monte, and the leader of the Bartian Prussians, a man called Diwan, were by this stage in the uprising, proving to be highly effective military commanders, and were controlling sizable armies which they were putting to good use against the Teutonic Order. If the Second Prussian Insurrection had been restricted to just the Teutonic Order and the insurrectionist Prussians, then the outcome would have proven to be an interesting contest. But outside influences will prove to be critical in determining the outcome of this conflict. King Mindaugas had reverted to paganism in 1261, and in the year 1262 his forces had invaded Masovia. Masovia at that time was being ruled by Duke Conrad's son, Duke Ziemowit. The Lithuanians took Duke Ziemowit as a prisoner, and according to at least one account, beheaded the Duke in front of his horrified twelve year old son, who will become Duke Conrad the Second of Masovia. This left the powerful Polish Duchy effectively leaderless, meaning the assistance it would normally have been able to provide to the Teutonic Order in Prussia was not forthcoming, and it was promptly invaded by the Sudovian Prussians.

Now, King Mindaugas, at this stage, is not far from being assassinated, and if you had asked the Piast Polish dukes and the Teutonic Order in Prussia at this time about the activities of King Mindaugas of Lithuania, they would have told you that his assassination really couldn't come quickly enough. Lithuania at this stage was raiding deep into Prussia, Masovia and

even Kujavia. The Polish Dukes, who had often sent men to Prussia to assist the Order, were forced to keep them close at hand, in an attempt to secure their own borders, and the knights from the Livonian Chapter of the Order were all of course being kept busy with their own pagan problems. Then, in the year 1263, King Mindaugas was assassinated by a Samogitian fighter, after facing a huge amount of internal family conflict and dissent amongst the Lithuanian warlords. Everyone across Prussia, Poland, Russia and Livonia breathed a sigh of relief at King Mindaugas' departure, but it didn't bring the resolution to the conflict which they were hoping for. As William Urban points out in his book "The Prussian Crusade", a comet was visible in the skies over Prussia from July to October of 1263, and it presaged a warning of dark days to come.

Around this time the Teutonic Order was pretty pleased to see Pope Urban IV become actively involved in spruiking crusades to the Baltic region. Why was Pope Urban showing so much interest in the Baltics? Well, because before his elevation to the Papacy he had served as a Papal legate to Prussia - for the years 1247 to 1249, in case anyone is wondering. So Pope Urban has personal knowledge of the situation in Prussia, and he has an active interest in recruiting crusaders to travel to Prussia to go to the assistance of the Latin Christians there, so he issued numerous Papal Bulls calling on crusaders to take up the Cross and journey to Prussia, and he awarded the title of Papal Legate to both the Bishop of Kulm and the Bishop of Pomesania, and extended the lands covered by both Bishoprics.

However, William Urban reports that Pope Urban's solid efforts in trying to convince the noblemen of central Europe to embark on a crusade to Prussia ultimately backfired, and in the end may have ended up doing more harm than good to Christianity in the Baltic region. Why? Well, to get around the problem of many men from the Kingdom of Denmark and the Holy Roman Empire not wanting to spend a long time away from their homes due to internal instability in their homelands, Pope Urban decreed that any crusader who went to the Baltic region on crusade, even for a really short time, would be awarded a full Crusading Indulgence, a privilege previously only awarded to crusaders who traveled to the Holy Land, or who remained in the Baltic region for over a year. While in the short term this boosted the number of men choosing to crusade in the Baltics, it reduced dramatically the number of men who stayed there for lengthy periods of time, so a revolving door of short-stay crusaders became the norm, an outcome which William Urban points out ultimately worked against the crusading cause in Prussia. Still, short stay crusaders at this point in time were better than no crusaders at all, and in Prussia they were desperately needed, a fact illustrated by the attack launched by Herkus Monte in the city of Kulm in late 1263.

Now, at this stage Master Helmrich was doing his best in extremely trying circumstances. Not only had the Second Prussian Insurrection spread out of Samland and Natangia across all of

Prussia, the Order was also in conflict with their neighbor and former ally, Duke Kasimir of Kuyavia, and were still struggling to keep Lithuanian invaders out of Prussian lands. And just to make matters worse, word came through that one of the most effective pagan military commanders, Herkus Monte, was heading towards Kulm, leading his warriors from Natangia on a Latin Christian enslaving, pillaging and killing rampage towards one of Prussia's most important Latin Christian cities. The pagan army was enslaving all the Latin Christians they came across who were slave-worthy, and were putting to the sword all those who were too old, too sick or too young to be useful slaves. The only good news arising from this terrible event was the fact that Herkus Monte was collecting so many new slaves that his army was moving more and more slowly by the day, as it became more and more laden with Latin Christian captives.

Master Helmrich, who happened to be in Kulm at the time, decided to cut the Prussian army off before it reached Kulm. He readied an army of Teutonic Knights and rode into battle. Herkus Monte was aware of the approach of the Teutonic forces, and staged an extremely clever counter punch. When the warhorses of the Order charged into the Prussian forces, the Natangians splintered and scattered in many directions. Herkus Monte had expected this to occur, but he wasn't with the main army. Along with a select number of fighters, he was watching the event unfold whilst concealed in a nearby forest. When he spied the main body of the Teutonic Order abandon their battle formations and run after the Natangians, leaving Master Helmrich with only a handful of knights clustered around his banner, Herkus Monte struck. He led his crack warriors out of their hiding place and attacked the men around the banner, killing both Master Helmrich and the head of the Teutonic military arm, Marshall Dietrich. He then cut down as many other Latin Christians as he could, taking full advantage of the fact that the Latin Christians were racing around in an undisciplined way, trying to net themselves some pagans, and were also now leaderless.

When the battle had played itself out a total of forty Teutonic Knights lay dead. In his book "The Prussian Crusade", William Urban points out that this loss was even worse than in sounds, as the knights that were killed were all seasoned experienced warriors, effectively the cream of the Teutonic fighting force, who were given the honor of fighting alongside the Master. The Order was forced to replace these experienced, skilled men with new, unseasoned recruits, and was also forced to replace the fallen Master, sending Ludwig von Baldersheim to Prussia at the end of 1263, to be the new Master.

Now, Master Ludwig, when he arrived, was faced with numerous challenges, the main one being, of course, the Prussian uprising. Motivated to even greater heights than before by the recent victory of Herkus Monte, the Prussian attacks on Latin Christians and Latin Christian interests became even more emboldened at this time, with a number of pagan raiding parties

even managing to attack the outlying settlements of Kulm, taking women and children into slavery and killing the men. As a sign of just how desperate things had become for the Teutonic Order at this time, when a Lithuanian warlord who had taken advantage of King Mindaugas' death to raise a large army, led his forces into Masovia and Pomesania and Kulm, he encountered little or no resistance from the Teutonic Order. Instead the Bishop of Kulm, Bishop Heidenreich, led the defense of his city, eventually managing to capture a Lithuanian chief, who was then exchanged in return for a promise by the Lithuanians to withdraw from Kulm. The Lithuanians, however, interpreted the term "withdraw from Kulm" rather loosely. They hid in a swamp near the outskirts of Kulm for two weeks, and once the citizens of the city felt safe enough to leave its walls to harvest their grain, the Lithuanians attacked them, killing many men and taking others as slaves.

Now, attacks on Latin Christian cities were occurring all over Prussia, not just in Kulm. Marienwerder fell to the native Prussians around this time, and it must have been very difficult for Master Ludwig and his depleted and exhausted knights to know where best to concentrate their efforts. Really, things were woefully bad for the Latin Christians of Prussia at this time, but there was one tiny silver lining in the otherwise thunderous Prussian cloud: Lithuanian warlords fell to infighting around this time, as they struggled to fill the power vacuum left by the assassination of King Mindaugas, and this kept the Lithuanians from invading Prussia for the next couple of years. However the lack of Lithuanian invaders didn't provide the Teutonic Order with much respite. Just as Herkus Monte was exhibiting impressive skills as a military commander, another native Prussian commander was rising to prominence in the region of Sudovia.

Actually, before we turn to examine this new leader, there's a snippet of information about Herkus Monte that I should share with you before going any further. Now, when Herkus was a young child, he was taken as a hostage to Magdeburg in the Holy Roman Empire where he attended a monastery school for ten years before returning to Natangia in Prussia. As a result, Herkus spoke flawless German. In his book "The Prussian Crusade", William Urban reports that around this time Herkus Monte began using this part of his skill set to trick crusaders who were visiting from the Holy Roman Empire. If he came across groups of crusaders hidden in the forests following one of the regular Latin Christian defeats by the Prussians, Herkus would conceal himself and shout out in flawless German that the pagans had fled and that it was safe for them to come out of their hiding places now. Of course, once they did so the Prussians would set upon them. Apparent Herkus used this tactic so often that it became well known amongst the Latin Christians.

OK, enough of Herkus. Joining him at the pinnacle of Prussian military commander stardom was a Sudovian named Scumand. Apparently Scumand was both feared and, strangely, widely admired by the knights of the Teutonic Order, both for his abilities and his fairness in

battle. In the year 1265, Scumand led the Sudovians into the region surrounding Kulm. He split his forces into two. One was sent to attack Thorn, and one was sent to attack Kulm. This seems to have been just too much for the Teutonic Order, with William Urban reporting that the Sudovian army faced no significant resistance until it began to withdraw from the region, weighed down and slowed by booty and the spoils of war, including a long line of Latin Christian captives along with cattle and horses.

So, I guess I don't need to tell you that the Second Prussian Insurrection is going really really well for the Prussians and really really badly for the Teutonic Order. Join me next week though, as we see the Latin Christians slowly but surely start to claw back their losses in Prussia. Until next week, bye for now.

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