

History of the Crusades. Episode 250. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXXVII. The Early 1270's.

Hello again. Last week we saw the end of the Second Prussian Insurrection, a pagan uprising which started after the Order's defeat at the Battle of Durbe, and ended fifteen or so years later in 1274. This week we are returning to Livonia.

Last time we checked in on Livonia was back in Episode 246. Master Otto had managed to put an end to Russian invasions into Estonia, and had also managed to put an end to Archbishop Albert Suerbeer, who he ordered imprisoned after the Archbishop's failed attempt to conspire to overthrow the Teutonic Order in Livonia. With the Russian threat over for now, and with Archbishop Albert sitting powerless in his residence in Riga, meekly doing the Order's bidding, we shall now return back to Livonia.

Now, I guess it won't surprise anyone to learn that Master Otto, having dealt with the Russians and with Riga's Archbishop, turned his attentions back to the pagans. In the year 1269 he began recruiting and planning for a massive invasion into Semigallia. In early 1270, when the winter freeze made it easier to travel over the frozen ice, he assembled a large force in Riga, and they headed off towards Semigallia.

They had no sooner started their march however when word came in that Livonia itself was under attack. Word of the mobilization of the Latin Christian army must have reached the pagans, who attacked Livonia on two fronts simultaneously, with the Samogitians gathering at the border preparing to invade, and the Lithuanians traveling over the ice to the north and attacking the island of Oesel. With his plan to invade Semigallia now shelved for the moment, Master Otto decided to deal with the Lithuanians first. He called on reinforcements from his Danish vassals in Estonia, and from the Archbishopric of Dorpat, then moved his army northwards, intending to confront the Lithuanians as they returned from Oesel, laden down with booty.

Now, this campaign wasn't a terribly pleasant one to be part of. Master Otto didn't know where in Livonia or Kurland the Lithuanians intended to march back onto land, so the only way to intercept the pagans was for the Order to march its army across the frozen Gulf of Riga, and meet the Lithuanians close to Oesel as they rode across the ice. Most, if not all, of the men and horses of the army marching under Master Otto suffered mightily from the cold and exposure as they moved across the vast frozen expanse of the Gulf. Finally, they spotted the Lithuanians returning from their raid on Oesel. The Lithuanians, who had a number of sleds which were being pulled by horses, uncoupled the sleds from the horses and lashed them together, forming a sort of "sleddy" defensive barrier. The Lithuanian army moved into

position behind the sleds, and waited to see what would happen next.

Master Otto convened a quick war council, and it was decided that the Latin Christian army would move into battle formation, and would charge the stationary Lithuanian forces. What occurred then was a spectacular Battle On The Ice. The Gulf of Riga must have been covered with a really thick layer of ice, as the ice held under a cavalry charge by the heavy warhorses of the knights of the Order's army. However, the center of the charge broke as it descended upon the sled barrier erected by the Lithuanians. The warhorses became entangled in the sleds, and were surrounded by the Lithuanians who swarmed out from behind their barrier to attack the faltering chargers. The forces to either side of the center, the men under the command of the Bishop of Dorpat, who were fighting to the left, and the Danish vassals on the right, were engaged heavily with the Lithuanians themselves, and were unable to come to the assistance of the men of the Order who were fighting in the center. As a consequence the Order suffered heavy losses, with one of the 53 men from the Teutonic Order who were killed that day being Master Otto himself. Here's what the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle has to say about the battle, and I quote "One could see a disorderly tumult of the two armies, Christian and heathen. The battle was hard fought, and the blood flowed onto the ice from either side. It was a fight in which many noblemen were struck down. Slain in defeat was good Master Otto and 52 good Brothers. They spilled their blood for God. Also many outstanding chivalrous warriors on both sides fell. Part of the natives fell, may God save their souls", end quote.

Now, as the fighters from the Teutonic Order were suffering a major defeat around the sled barrier, the forces of the Bishop and the Danish Estonians pushed back the Lithuanians to either side of the center, but both of these forces, instead of coming to the aid of the Order, decided to pursue the fleeing Lithuanians across the ice. In his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban reports that eventually these forces stopped chasing the pagans and regrouped, finally coming to the aid of the struggling Latin Christian forces fighting around the sled barrier, which meant that the infantry forces fighting under the Order's command were saved from being massacred. But the time night fell, the losses were 600 Latin Christian dead, along with 1600 pagans, but the Lithuanians had the upper hand.

The Bishop took command and ordered the Latin Christians to retreat, which they did, heading back across the ice to Riga. The Lithuanians were then able to untangle their sleds, reattach them to their horses, and head back home themselves, successfully bringing with them all their booty from Oesel, along with heaps of weapons and armor they had stripped from the dead Latin Christians. William Urban notes that the victory scored by the Lithuanians raised the prestige of their army significantly, and resulted in a wave of new recruits joining the army.

Now, following Master Otto's death, the position of Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia was filled by Master Otto's deputy, Vice-Master Andreas of Westphalia as an interim measure, until a new permanent master could be appointed by Grand Master Anno. A few months into his role as temporary Master, Vice-Master Andreas decided that the Teutonic Knights could do with a morale-boosting victory. So, in the summer of 1270, when word came in that a group of Lithuanian raiders were rampaging through Livonian territory, Vice-Master Andreas spotted an opportunity.

Hastily gathering together a small force of knights, Vice-Master Andreas and his small army set off in hot pursuit of the Lithuanians, keen to intercept them before they disappeared back into the Lithuanian forests. In fact, hot pursuit was the correct term to use here, in more ways than one. Charging around the Livonian borderlands in full armor in the middle of summer ended up being an exhausting way to spend your time, so Vice-Master Andreas paused for a while to let his fighters rest, probably also allowing them to remove their suits of armor. I guess you know what's going to happen next. Yes, the Lithuanians sprung out of a nearby forest and surprised the Latin Christian fighters as they were resting, managing to kill twenty of them, including Vice-Master Andreas. As a morale-booster, it's pretty clear that Vice-Master Andreas' plan was a complete flop.

Unsurprisingly, since his two predecessors had both been recently been killed in battle, the new Master for Livonia, Walther of Nortecken, was much more cautious when it came to fighting the pagans. It wasn't until 1271, when he had gathered together a large army, that he set out on his first campaign against the pagans, choosing to attack a Semigallian stronghold, a castle called Terwerten, which the Semigallians had constructed near Mitau. The campaign was well planned and well supported, and was a resounding success, with the Knights from the Order successfully storming and taking the Semigallian stronghold, following a short siege. Buoyed by this success, Master Walther made preparations to push deeper into Semigallia, to Mesoten, the former seat of the Bishop of Semigallia. Around Easter in the year 1271 he sent a number of ships upriver to Mesoten, and to his surprise the Semigallians at Mesoten promptly surrendered without putting up a fight. He sailed his troops a little further upriver to another Semigallian stronghold, and that too surrendered without a fuss. The Semigallians who had capitulated at Terwerten, Mesoten and in the surrounding areas all agreed to pay taxes and tithes, and also agreed not to take up arms against the Order.

While this was all well and good, we should remember that the vast majority of Semigallia was still under pagan control, as was Samogitia and most of Kurland. So, while Master Walther had made some inroads into the pagan problem, there was still much work left to be done. But, this work won't be done by Master Walther. The cold climate and the tough living

conditions took a great toll on Master Walther's health, and in the year 1273 he returned to the Holy Roman Empire and asked to be relieved of his duties. His resignation was accepted and a new Master, Ernst of Rassburg, was appointed. Grand Master Anno died shortly after seeing Master Ernst appointed, and a new Grand Master was eventually chosen, Grand Master Hartmann, who had a minor connection to the Baltic Crusades, as he had been present when the Sword Brothers merged with the Teutonic Order.

OK now, before we proceed to follow Master Ernst's career in Livonia, I think it's time we stepped back a little and took a look at the big picture. Now, as we've been seeing for a while now, things haven't been so great internally in the Kingdom of Denmark, the Holy Roman Empire, or in Poland. By the early 1270s a general "meh" sort of feeling had descended over these states, and whereas in previous generations the countries of northern central Europe had spawned ambitious, energized men who were keen to get things moving, and to expand out of their comfort zones, and to take up the cross on crusade, William Urban notes in his book "The Baltic Crusade" that things had really settled down to a sort of despondency and exhaustion around this time, so instead of crusading, or trying to further their interests by other means, the noble men of Denmark, Poland and the northern regions of the Holy Roman Empire just sort of sat around hoping that things would start to get better. This "meh" feeling deepened with the Crusade of King Louis IX in August 1270, when the pious French King led a large and eager force on crusade to Egypt with the aim of retaking Jerusalem, only to see the whole expedition face-planting after an epidemic of dysentery struck the Crusaders after they arrived in Tunisia, killing many Latin Christians, including King Louis. So, really, no-one could be bothered with the whole crusading caper in the early 1270s, and William Urban notes that this attitude resulted in the isolation of the Scandinavian kingdoms and the Baltic region from the rest of Europe continuing. In the unlikely event that anyone from central Europe was struck with the crusading spirit at this time, they tended to head to Prussia, and not to Livonia or Estonia, so Livonia was left pretty much to its own devices.

But, that didn't mean that Livonia was joining in the general stagnation occurring in central Europe. In fact, almost the opposite was occurring. While crusading was on the wane in central Europe, and while there was a general lack of anything exciting happening, there was one spark of activity which stood out in the gloom. Trade in the cities on the Baltic Sea was booming. Lubeck was continuing to grow in power and influence, and it was fostering trading towns across the Baltic region, towns such as Danzig (or Gdansk), Kulm and Elbing all fell under Lubeck's wing, as did the towns of Riga, Dorpat and Reval in Livonia and Estonia. It was like a boat on a rising tide. As Lubeck rose it pulled a bunch of other boats, in the form of trading towns in Prussia, Livonia and Estonia, up with it. There was one city, however, which didn't rise with the other boats. Having enjoyed dizzying success as a crusader supply outpost and stepping stone to Riga, the city of Visby started to fade out of view at this time, as

many merchants bypassed Gottland entirely, traveling straight along the Baltic coastline to trading centers in Prussia, Livonia and Estonia.

Trade in Livonia was boosted, inadvertently perhaps, by the actions of the Teutonic Order at this time. Following the death of Archbishop Albert Suerbeer, the Order wasn't too keen on anything which enhanced the power of the Bishops in their territories. Instead, they showered favors on the merchants, hoping to keep the Bishops and Archbishops in check by empowering the mercantile classes. William Urban states that, following the demise of Archbishop Albert, the Teutonic Order encouraged the independence of citizens within its domains, particularly the citizens of Riga, helping them to stand up against the Bishops and granting them various immunities and trading privileges. While this did have the effect of empowering the merchants, and weakening the authority of the Church in the region, with many Bishops of Livonia in fact deciding to reside in the Holy Roman Empire instead of in their Bishopsrics, it may have been too successful a plan, as the merchant classes will become so wealthy and powerful in Riga that they will eventually come to threaten the dominance of the Teutonic Order itself.

So, in a nutshell, Riga at this point in time is booming as a trading center, as are other trading cities around the Baltic coastline. But crusading, as a way of getting central Europeans to travel to Livonia to assist in battles against the pagans, is on the decline, meaning that the Latin Christians of Livonia are being forced to provide most of the manpower for their military campaigns themselves. So, the new Master of Livonia, Master Ernst, is going to have to draw on local Latin Christian manpower as he battles to take on the Semigallians, the Samogitians and the Lithuanians. Join me next week, to see how Master Ernst fares, as he presides over the Teutonic Order in Livonia for the remainder of the 1270s. Until next week, bye for now.

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