

History of the Crusades. Episode 254. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part 20. A Fuzzy End.

Hello again. Last week we saw a succession of "Master Konrad"s proceed to lead the Teutonic Order in Prussia. We started out with Konrad von Thierberg, who was replaced by Konrad von Feuchtwangen, who served as Master of both Prussia and Livonia, and then we ended with our final Master Konrad, who had served as Marshall before being raised to the position of Master of Prussia. So the current Master situation in the Baltic region is as follows. We have a new Master for Livonia, Master Willekin, who will work under the direction of the Master for Prussia. The Master for Prussia is Master Konrad as we have just seen, and there's also a new Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Grand Master Burchard. Now, unlike the new Grand Master, who had no firsthand knowledge of the Baltic Crusades, Master Konrad was all over the situation in Prussia, so he was able to hit the ground running. The first item on his to-do list was to kick start negotiations with Duke Mestwin about the region around Mewe, a Pomerelian town on the Pomerelian side of the Vistula, a short distance down river from Marienwerder.

Now, we saw in last week's episode that Duke Mestwin sought to head off a possible takeover by the Order by directing in his will for his lands to pass to Great Poland after his death, which was likely to result in Pomerelia being Duke-less, on account of the fact that Duke Mestwin had no male heirs, and had just taken a vow of chastity. Duke Mestwin's uncles, both of whom appeared to loathe their nephew with a passion, had small but important holdings of land in Pomerelia. Interestingly, both of those uncles also had no sons, and both uncles had directed their lands, in their wills, to pass to the Teutonic Order, a move which no doubt was designed to irritate Duke Mestwin to the max. Now, one of Duke Mestwin's uncles, uncle Sambor, was in possession of Mewe. Uncle Sambor, in a move probably designed to irritate his nephew even further decided, in his old age, to join the Teutonic Order, but due to his advanced age he wasn't much use to anyone. So, despite becoming a member of the Order, he moved to Kuyavia to spend the final years of his life with his daughter.

When those final years had expired, the terms of uncle Sambor's will kicked in, and enabled the Order to annex Mewe to Prussia, meaning that the Order now had a firm foothold on the Pomerelian side of the Vistula. Unsurprisingly Duke Mestwin decided to contest the will, arguing that his uncle was in no position to bequeath Mewe to the Order because it had already been offered to the church. Specifically to the cloister at Oliva. Duke Mestwin then lobbied Rome to have Mewe handed over to the local bishop, and his position was supported, unsurprisingly, by the leader of Great Poland, who was to inherit Pomerelia after Duke Mestwin's death, and wasn't too keen on the idea of the Teutonic Order gaining a foothold inside his future lands.

In the year 1282, a papal legate, Bishop Philip of Firmano, arrived in the region to try to resolve the dispute. Bishop Philip heard the arguments offered by both sides and came down on the side of the Order, declaring the will to be valid and declaring Mewe to be a valid Teutonic possession. The papal legate had no sooner rubbed his hands together in satisfaction and returned victorious to Rome, when Duke Mestwin declared that the ruling was incorrect, and petitioned Rome to have it reversed. Into this mess strode the new Master Konrad. He commenced negotiations with Duke Mestwin and managed to secure an outcome which everyone could live with. Mewe would remain a possession of the Order, but to mollify Duke Mestwin, Master Konrad agreed to forgo other rights, possessions, and privileges granted to the Order under the terms of uncle Sambor's will.

To dissuade Duke Mestwin from attempting to annex Mewe by force, Master Konrad then ordered the castle at nearby Marienwerder to be strengthened and expanded.

Not satisfied with settling the dispute between the Order and Duke Mestwin, Master Konrad then went on to conquer Sudovia. In the summer of 1283 he led a large army into Sudovia and managed to pretty much subdue the whole region without much resistance at all. The famous Sudovian warlord Scumand and was now quite elderly, and it seems that everyone inside Sudovia, from Scumand to the local clan leaders, all the way down to the common folk, had had enough of the constant fighting and were willing to put down their swords. There was only one real pocket of resistance, a Sudovian stronghold which refused to surrender, so Master Konrad and his army besieged the fortress, and eventually its garrison were forced to capitulate.

Now, Sudovia had been a thorn in the side of the Teutonic Order for many years, and Master Konrad wasn't about to let the people of Sudovia off lightly. Despite their submission, they were Christianized and transferred to other parts of Prussia. Even Scumand was given lands in the region around Balga, and was afforded a Christian burial when he died a few years later. And what happened to Sudovia itself? Well, it was just kind of quarantined and set aside as an area of wilderness, free of people. As William Urban states in his book "The Prussian Crusade" and I quote "Sudovia was left unpopulated. The people disappeared from history and the country became a deserted land, part of the great wilderness that separated Prussia, Masovia and Northern Volhynia from Lithuania." End quote.

Now, with Sudovia emptied off Sudovians, and with the remainder of Prussia pretty much under Latin Christian control, we now come to a sort of fuzzy end to the Prussian Crusade. What do I mean by the words "a fuzzy end" here? Well, some scholars argue that the Prussian Act of the play which is the Baltic Crusades finishes at this point, while others argued that it continued past this point in time, which incidentally is the year 1283, to the year 1308, while yet more scholars claim that the Crusade continued right up to the Battle of Tannenberg, in the year 1410. Now, I'm not going to enter into this argument other than to say things that do seem to change around about this time. In fact, if the Baltic Crusades was a stage play, we'd probably call an intermission around about now. The lights would come on, jaunty music would start to play, and everyone would get out of their seats, yawn, stretch their legs, and head over to the bar. But I'm not going to declare this to be a definite end of the Prussian Crusade. It's just a fuzzy end. Yes, the emphasis from here on will be on crusading against the Samogitians, and on containing the rising power of Lithuania, but it certainly was not clear to the people at the time that the Prussian Crusade had come to an end. And it's not even clear with the benefit of 700 years of hindsight that the Crusade has truly ended.

While it's obvious that the Knights of the Teutonic Order didn't give each other high fives in 1283, then throw their swords onto the ground and head off to the local drinking house to celebrate the end of the Prussian Crusade, it is clear that things did kind of change course at this time. The boundaries of Prussia are now pretty much settled, and the eyes of the Knights of the Teutonic Order now extend beyond the boundaries of Prussia, to securing the land corridor towards Livonia, and containing the Lithuanians. But if the Prussian Crusade is over, no one has told the local Prussians, and there will be a further two Insurrections inside Prussia. So, with a Prussian Crusade possibly coming to a fuzzy sort of an end, the question we now need to ask, of course, is "What has been happening in Livonia?"

Back in episode 253, we saw Willekin of Endorp appointed as the new Master of Livonia, serving under the direction of the Master of the Order in Prussia. Master Willekin continued to do his best to keep the Lithuanians from raiding into Livonia, and to subdue the Semigallians. But he was limited in what he could achieve by a severe lack of manpower. Not only were crusaders staying home, and not journeying to the Baltics, the power of the Archbishop of Riga at this time was so pitiful that the Teutonic Order was forced to provide men from its own ranks to garrison castles which belonged to the Archbishop. So in less than two decades, the pendulum of the power of the Archbishop of Riga had swung all the way from Archbishop Albert Suerbeer plotting to overthrow the Teutonic Order and become the supreme power in Livonia, to the current Archbishop of Riga, who deferred to the Order in everything, had few resources, and was forced to go cap in hand to the Teutonic Order to ask it to provide troops to garrison his own castles.

While the power of the Archbishop of Riga had reached a new low point, the power of Lubeck was reaching new heights. In fact, Lubeck was becoming so powerful that it began to throw its weight around, and in the 1280s it became actively involved in the politics of the region. The King of Norway had foolishly attempted to restrict the power of Lubeck and its fellow trading cities in regards to trade with Norway. Lubeck managed to successfully arrange a blockade of the entire Kingdom of Norway, sparking a serious famine and forcing the King to backtrack entirely. Instead of reducing Lubeck's influence on its shores, the King of Norway found himself handing funds over to the merchants, to compensate for the trade they had lost. Then he proceeded to grant extensive privileges to Lubeck and to the other Hanseatic towns, providing them with almost exclusive access to Norwegian markets.

This event, not surprisingly, made power brokers in the region sit up and take notice of the rising influence of the trading towns. The King of Sweden moved to ally himself with the Hanseatic towns, then moved southwards into Danish territory, and also occupied Gotland, with the result that Gotland's decline as a maritime power accelerated rapidly, with the customs depots and inspectors who were previously based at Visby relocating to, you guessed it, Lubeck. So in summary, the 1280s saw the power of the Archbishop of Riga wane further, and the power of the merchants of the Lubeck aligned city of Riga increase markedly.

Then, in the mid 1280s, Master Willekin decided that he was going to take a shot at subduing Semigallia. In the summer of 1285 he shipped stores of supplies to Mitau, and during the winter of 1285-1286, he led a large army of men from Livonia and Estonia to Mitau, loaded the supplies onto sleds, then marched the army and the supplies to Terwerten. Now, Terwerten was still in the hands of the Semigallians. Master Willekin had decided against trying to retake Terwerten. Instead, he planned to build another Teutonic stronghold nearby, and use that castle to attack both Terwerten and the Semigallians in the surrounding countryside. He selected a large hill not far from Terwerten, and an impressive log and rammed earth fortress was constructed on the hill. Master Willekin named his castle "Holy Mountain", or in German, "Heiligenberg". Master Willekin transferred the supplies over to the castle, ordered catapult machines to be constructed on its walls, and garrisoned it with 300 men. Then Master Willekin took his army and headed back to Riga.

Now, it's safe to say that the men left behind at Heiligenberg must have been a little nervous. The castle was totally isolated, it was located deep inside Semigallia, far away

from any immediate assistance should they come under attack. And come under attack they did. When Master Willekin had first entered Semigallia at the head of his army, the Semigallians had sent word to the Samogitians, and had asked for their assistance. Well, the Samogitian army has just arrived on the scene too late to confront Master Willekin, but in plenty of time to attack the Order's new, isolated outpost, Heiligenberg Castle. The Latin Christian garrison initially rode out to confront the Samogitians, but they were driven back inside their castle. Using the two catapult machines to great effect, the garrison managed to keep the pagan army away from the stronghold.

The leaders of the Semigallian and Samogitian armies held a war council, and decided to use their combined forces to besiege Heiligenberg, while simultaneously building a siege tower, which they could then use to attack and scale the walls. So the siege began, and work started on building the siege tower. The garrison of Heiligenberg observed the commencement of the building of the pagan siege tower, and started a flurry of activity of their own, deciding to dig an extra ditch around the castle to block the passage of the pagan tower, build extra bulwarks, and strengthen the current fortifications. For the next ten days, both sides raced to get their works completed first. William Urban describes this activity in his book "The Baltic Crusade", as a competition between the engineers on both sides, each racing to get the most effective work completed by their armies as quickly as possible.

On the eleventh day, the pagans completed their siege tower. They pushed it over to the base of the castle wall, and the assault began. Thousands of pagan fighters moved with their tower, then missiles began to hurl in their direction from the Latin Christian catapult machines. Many pagans were injured by the flying rocks, but eventually the tower reached the wall, where it was promptly destroyed by stones hurled from the machines. Volleys of arrows rained down on the pagans from archers stationed high on the battlement walls, and the pagans were forced to withdraw, having suffered significant losses and having failed completely to scale the castle walls. Realizing that Heiligenberg Castle was now here to stay, three days after the failed attack the Semigallians destroyed their own nearby stronghold of Terwerten, and withdrew to a fortress a safer distance from Heiligenberg.

And that's where we will leave things for this week. Now since this is a sort of an intermission episode, I guess you are wondering where we go from here? More specifically, what will be in the second half of the Baltic Crusades? Well, next week, we will tie up the loose ends from the end of the Prussian Crusade and from this segment of the Livonian Crusade. Then we will be starting episodes on the Lithuanian Crusade and the Samogitian Crusade and we'll be following conflicts in and around Livonia, in episodes which will continue under the banner of the Livonian Crusade. Happy intermission everyone. Now go and get a drink and stretch your legs, and join me next week for the start of the second half of the Baltic Crusades. Until next week, bye for now.

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