

History of the Crusades. Episode 256. The Livonian Crusade Part 39. The Merchants of Riga.

Hello again. Last week we brought one of our crusades to an end, as we saw the Master of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, Master Heinrich, acquire Polish Pomerelia. That action brought the timeline for the Prussian Crusade up to the year 1309. So now we need to bring events in Livonia up to speed.

Last time we checked in on Livonia was back in Episode 254, In the 1280's, Master Williken had ordered the construction of Heiligenberg castle in Samogitia. Despite the best efforts of the Samogitians to destroy the isolated Latin Christian outpost, which was located in the heart of Samogitia, the castle remained standing, and as a result, the Samogitians destroyed their nearby stronghold of Terwerten, and were forced to adjust to life with a Latin Christian stronghold inside their territory.

Now, not long after the destruction of Terwerten, the garrison of the castle at Heiligenberg became aware that the Semigallians had dispatched a large raiding party in the direction of Riga. The garrison ordered an urgent message to be forwarded to Riga to warn them of the impending attack. The message reached Riga in time and the Marshall of the Teutonic Order in Riga summoned an army of 550 men, comprising of Teutonic Knights, citizens of Riga, some Letts, and a small group of crusaders.

They rode out of Riga and waited for the Semigallians to arrive. They waited and they waited. They became bored and started to compete with each other, galloping and jumping their horses, racing each other on foot, and wrestling. By the end of the day, the Semigallians still hadn't showed up, so the army returned to Riga. Darkness descended and the Order's forces were told to spend the night in a compound inside Riga, known as the Brothers' Stables. Watchmen were ordered to patrol the various approaches to Riga, while the army would rest inside the stables which were left open, the idea being that if the Semigallians made it into Riga the army would wake up, their weapons and horses at the ready, and would be all set to fight in the quickest possible time.

Unfortunately, though, the watchman didn't see the Semigallians approach Riga until it was too late. The Semigallians actually managed not only to make it into the city, but they found the Marshal's army sleeping inside the stables. A servant, who apparently was the only person still awake, yelled "The enemy!", and everyone scrambled into action. The shock of waking to find a bunch of Semigallians inside the stables was too much for the local Lett and Livonian fighters, who fled the scene. The Semigallians won the fight. By the end of the night, five Teutonic Knights lay dead, with ten more wounded. The Latin Christians withdrew from the stables and the Semigallians burned the structure to the ground.

Twelve days after this setback, Master Williken had a meeting in Riga with the commanders of the Livonian Order, together with some visiting representatives of the Teutonic Order from Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire. As the meeting was taking place, a report came in that the Semigallians had returned: a Semigallian raiding party had attacked a settlement at Uxkull on the banks of the Daugava river. Since just about all of the military commanders from across Livonia, Prussia, and even the Holy Roman Empire all handily happened to be in Riga, Master Williken invited them to accompany him on a trip up the Daugava to drive the pagans out of Uxkull. The commanders readily agreed

and an army was quickly gathered, comprising 60 visiting crusaders, citizens from Riga, and a native militia, and the 500 strong force rode out of Riga and headed towards Uxkull.

When they arrived at Uxkull, however, the Semigallians were nowhere to be seen. All that was left of the settlement of Uxkull was a bunch of burning buildings. So the Master's army decided to set off in pursuit. Three days later, the Latin Christians still hadn't managed to catch up with the Semigallians. They made camp in a forest near a stream and fell into an exhausted sleep. The Order's army may not have found the Semigallians, but the Semigallians ended up finding the Order's army. The commander of the Semigallian forces sent some of his men on to Semigallia with the booty they had scored from Uxkull, while the rest of the army prepared to fight the Latin Christians.

Dawn broke and Master Williken realized they had finally located the Semigallians, by means of the Semigallians discovering their campsite. Everyone formed into battle lines under their various banners. Well everyone except the native militia, the Letts and Livonians, who decided that things weren't looking good, and fled into the nearby forest, leaving their horses and equipment behind. The two forces clashed and the Semigallians ended up totally overpowering the Latin Christian forces. Contemporary records of the battle don't provide much detail as to exactly how the Semigallians were able to score such a comprehensive victory, other than to say that many of the Knights were fighting on foot for some reason, and that while those Knights were engaged in hand to hand fighting, some Semigallians managed to overrun the camp and seize all the horses.

Really, whatever happened it was a total disaster, and a total embarrassment for what was meant to be the cream of the Order's fighting forces. Master Williken was one of the many who lay dead on the battlefield, along with 31 Teutonic Knights. As the Semigallians were clearing the battlefield after their victory, and stripping the dead of armor and valuables, one wounded Knight managed to overpower a Semigallian horseman, took his horse, and fled back to Riga. But he was the only Knight to survive; all the others were either killed or taken prisoner.

Now, I shouldn't need to tell you what a disaster this was for the Teutonic Order. Not only had a large number of Knights been killed - in one battle in March of 1287, the entire command structure of the Order, not only in Livonia, but many from Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire, had been wiped out. The Grand Master was forced to send new recruits and Knights from the Holy Roman Empire to Livonia to fill the depleted ranks of the Order, and a new Master of the Order for Livonia was elected, a man called Cuno of Hazigenstein. Now, apparently Cuno was not all keen to become the Master of Livonia, but orders were orders, so Cuno found himself becoming Master Cuno despite his misgivings.

Early in the year 1288 Master Cuno and a bunch of replacement Knights from the Holy Roman Empire sailed to Memel, and made their way overland to Goldigen, then on to Riga, where they were met with open arms, much relief, and celebratory festivities. The new German recruits were then dispatched to various strongholds across the region, and Master Cuno embarked on a tour of his new domain. By the end of 1288 winter had set in, and it was time for the new Master to flex his military muscles.

The Order's isolated outpost of Heiligenberg had been under attack by the Semigallians for some time. While the pagans realized they could not attack the castle directly, they could secure the surrounding area and prevent supplies from reaching the castle. As a result, food, clothing and equipment at Heiligenberg were all running dangerously low, so

Master Cuno decided to lead an army into Semigallia, bringing supplies to restock the castle. The mission was a success. In fact, it was more successful than Master Cuno realized. The large Latin Christian army moved through Semigallia without encountering much resistance. They restocked Heiligenberg, then went on to attack a nearby Semigallian settlement. The fact that the castle, which was in their territory, had been so easily resupplied, seemed to have demoralized the Semigallians. As William Urban states in his book "The Baltic Crusade", and I quote: "Worn down by the constant raids from Heiligenberg, the Semigallians could not survive much longer. Many had been killed and the harvest had been so disrupted that many were starving. Having strength for one more great effort, the Semigallians sent for the Samogitians, asking for their aid against the Christians." End quote.

The Samogitians agreed to come to the assistance of the Semigallians, and in the spring of 1289 a large raiding party of Semigallians and Samogitians invaded Livonia and attacked lands belonging to the Archbishop. Master Cuno sent an urgent message out across Livonia, calling on all fighting men to come to the defense of Livonia. While men from as far away as Kurland answered the call, no one from Estonia volunteered. So, in the end, Master Cuno's army only consisted of three and a half thousand men, a number much, much smaller than the vast pagan army.

To try to overcome the disadvantage posed by his small force, Master Cuno came up with a novel idea. Keen to avoid directly opposing the large pagan army, Master Cuno reasoned that, since most of the fighting men of Semigallia and Samogitia seemed to be in the army, maybe the Latin Christians ought to take the pagans by surprise, and attack Semigallia. Master Cuno reasoned that Semigallia must be virtually undefended, and he was right. The Livonia army attacked Doblen and another Semigallian castle, and the raids, which were assisted by the garrison at Heiligenberg Castle, were highly effective. The Latin Christians attacked not only the Semigallian strongholds, but local farms and villages, forcing pagans from their ancestral lands, burning crops and buildings, and scoring much booty.

The Latin Christians kept up the pressure, attacking pagan strongholds and villages until, by the year 1290, the Semigallians had had enough. They sent a delegation to the castle at Mittau, informing the commander of the garrison that the Semigallians wanted peace, and were ready to talk terms. Master Cuno had by this time moved back to the Holy Roman Empire, and had resigned as Master, but the new Master, Master Holt, accepted the Semigallians' surrender.

The terms of the surrender were quite harsh. Taking a leaf out of the Prussian pagan management handbook, the terms forced the Semigallians to relocate away from their strongholds, to places where the Latin Christians could keep a close eye on them and monitor their activities. As a sign of their good faith, the Semigallians also agreed to the destruction of one of their premier strongholds as part of the agreement. So, in a surprising development, the Semigallians have raised the white flag and have accepted Latin Christian rule. So the only task left is for the order to defeat Samogitia, to complete the land corridor between Prussia and Livonia.

While the order was looking out towards Samogitia, however, it should have had its eyes on matters much closer to home. The city of Riga had continued to grow in wealth, power and influence. The merchants of Riga had big plans for their town, and had invited a range of people to settle there, to encourage trading ties. So Russians and even Lithuanians

were invited to move to Riga to add to its growing mercantile powers. The city enjoyed strong ties with Lubeck and the other trading towns along the Baltic Coast, and was becoming rather independent.

In the year 1292, the citizens of Riga decided that their city needed a new wall, and without any assistance whatsoever from the Teutonic Order, they managed to commission and build a massive 24-foot high stone wall around the entire town, while also financing the construction of a number of stone buildings inside the city. In fact, the citizens of Riga weren't just involved in building defenses for their town and encouraging merchants from far and wide to settle there. They also began dealing directly with Lubeck, and even the Russian City of Novgorod, formulating policies which would advance the interests of the merchants of Riga, but not necessarily the interests of the Teutonic Order.

The Teutonic Order was getting a little put out by this. Feeling sidelined as the merchants threw their weight around and formulated foreign policies without even consulting the military Order, the Livonian Chapter of the Order decided that it might be time to bring the merchants of Riga to heel. The situation became more urgent when John of Schwerin became the new Archbishop of Riga in the year 1295. John of Schwerin was a descendant of both Henry the Black and Gunselin of Schwerin, and his appointment to the position of Archbishop of Riga set alarm bells ringing for the Order.

The spark which ignited the fire off conflict between the Order and its premiere town in Livonia came during 1296. Spring floods had threatened the city of Riga, and a visiting crusader came up with a plan to create a huge bulwark up-river of Riga, to prevent large ice floes from coming down the Daugava, blocking the river and flooding Riga. In order to construct the bulwark, a bridge first needed to be built. The bridge was built, a strong, impressive, expensive bridge, which the Teutonic Order objected to on the basis that it gave the citizens of Riga significant advantages over the passage of not just ice, but river traffic down the Daugava. So, the Master of the Order, without so much as consulting the citizens of Riga, ordered the Knights of the Order to demolish the bridge. Which they did.

The citizens sent a delegation to the Master requesting permission to rebuild the bridge and in response, the Master revoked all the privileges the merchants had enjoyed in lands under the Order's control, and arrested a number of merchants, holding them hostage. The merchants then threatened to appeal to Rome, but before this could occur, the crisis was averted by the intervention of Dominican and Franciscan friars.

However, the truce arranged by the friars was only short, and before it had even expired, fighting broke out in the streets of Riga, with the citizens of Riga attacking Teutonic Knights, who responded by burning down the houses of local merchants. Archbishop John attempted to intervene, but the Teutonic Order went on a merchant-destroying rampage. They destroyed warehouses, farms, buildings and possessions of the merchants and citizens of Riga, killing merchants, citizens and even visiting crusaders who tried to oppose them. Archbishop John withdrew to his castle at Treiden, and the Teutonic Order promptly laid siege to the castle. They overran the castle's defenses, took the Archbishop prisoner and held him in a Teutonic castle for 33 days on restricted rations of bread and water. During the period of the Archbishop's captivity they seized property belonging to the Archbishopric, and forced the Archbishops vassals to renounce their allegiance to the Archbishop, and to instead swear homage to the Order.

Word of these extraordinary events reached Rome and Pope Boniface VIII was not happy. He summoned the Grand Master and the Livonian Master to Rome to explain themselves. But by this time, the horse had already bolted. In desperation, the citizens of Riga had turned to Lithuania for assistance, and had also formed an alliance with the King of Denmark. Pope Boniface eventually managed to broker a truce between the parties, but the damage had already been done. The Rigans held fast to their Lithuanian alliance and this will set the stage for decades of conflict between the Teutonic Order and the citizens of Riga.

Join me next week, as we see the conflict between the Teutonic Order and the merchants of Riga descend into a state of civil war. Until next week, bye for now.

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