

History of the Crusades. Episode 281. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part LI. Border Raids.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusaders score a massive victory against the pagans when they managed to besiege then destroy the castle at Kaunas. However, as so often seemed to be the case, the Teutonic Order was unable to follow up on its victory by striking into the Lithuanian heartland. Firstly the lack of Crusaders was a problem, then the plague hit Lithuania with full force, causing the Latin Christians to switch their focus away from Lithuania, to neighboring Samogitia. Now, as we mentioned in last week's episode, we are finally able to turn the crusading spotlight back on Livonia at this time.

We last left Livonia way back in Episode 274, where we discussed the closing stages of the Great Estonian Insurrection. Since the ending of the Insurrection, the Teutonic Order in Livonia has been concentrating on matters close to home, bringing its new possession Estonia under its wing, and setting up administrative centers across the region. Whereas Prussia had seen a drop in the number of Crusaders traveling to its shores, due mainly to the plague and the resumption of the Hundred Years War, hardly any crusaders made the much larger trek to Livonia, which was fortunate really, because they weren't actually needed. The Lithuanians and the Russians were focusing all their energies on the Kingdom of Poland and Prussia, so Livonia and Estonia were just kind of left to their own devices.

That all changed, however, after a man called Arnold von Vietinghoff was elected Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia in the year 1360. Master Arnold had a military background, and had served as castellan at various castles, including Marienburg, Goldingen and Reval. It turned out to be rather fortunate that Master Arnold's skills lay in the military field rather than in diplomacy or administration, because in November of the year 1360 the Lithuanians turned their attentions once more to Livonia, invading Livonian territory and attacking and burning a number of churches.

Master Arnold did his best to push back against these assaults. He joined Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode on a number of campaigns in Samogitia and Lithuania, and was in fact present at the siege of Kaunas Castle. In the year 1363 Master Arnold began his own campaigns against the Lithuanians, using the massive fortress of Dunaberg Castle, which you might remember was way inland near Lithuania on the upper reaches of the Daugava River. He led a couple of successful raids from Dunaberg into Lithuania, attacking some Lithuanian strongholds to the south of the castle.

By the year 1364 fate seemed to be once again favoring the Teutonic Order. The plague died down in Lithuania and then seemed to leave the Baltic region entirely, so Grand Master

Winrich decided to utilize the momentum of the Livonian Knights by conducting a joint campaign in Lithuania. The idea was that Master Arnold would invade Lithuania from Dunaberg, while the Prussian Chapter of the Order would invade by means of the Nemunas River. Once both armies were inside Lithuania, Grand Master Winrich would hand some Crusade volunteers over to Master Arnold, then both armies would raid across Lithuania, without actually ever combining, but with Grand Master Winrich coordinating both forces, which required Master Arnold to regularly meet up with the Grand Master to receive his orders.

The expedition was a resounding success. In his book "The Livonian Crusade", William Urban reports that the campaign was a particularly noisy one, with the Latin Christians using drums, musical instruments, and chants to boost morale, and also to drown out the war cries of the pagan fighters, which otherwise could be rather intimidating. One of the reasons why the campaign was so successful was that the Grand Master managed to capture an informant early on. The informant's name was Hanke Paschenlach. Hanke had apparently been a member of the Livonian Marshal's team before deciding to defect to Team Pagan in Lithuania. Having been captured by his former comrades, he flipped again, telling the Grand Master a bunch of useful facts about the Lithuanian forces. The Grand Master then handed Hanke over to Master Arnold. Hanke offered to show Master Arnold where the Lithuanians were hiding their families and cattle, but Master Arnold decided that he would prefer to execute Hanke immediately, which he did.

After the successful campaign ended, Grand Master Winrich returned to Prussia, while Master Arnold returned to Livonia, where he died shortly thereafter. William Urban points out that crusading was really very taxing on your average person, with the cold weather, challenging terrain, the stress of battle, and the pretty average and hastily-prepared meals which the fighters survived on. For older men, like Master Arnold, the physical demands of crusading could easily morph into an illness which, combined with the extra demands of leadership, and effectively being on call 24-7, could easily develop into something quite serious or even fatal.

Anyway, after Master Arnold's passing Grand Master Winrich chose Wilhelm von Vrymersheim to be the new Master of Livonia, and Master Wilhelm was instructed to carry on with exactly the same policies and strategies as those initiated by Master Arnold, which is exactly what Master Wilhelm did. This meant in practice that Master Wilhelm ordered raids out of Dunaberg Castle into Lithuania, and he also instructed the castellans of castles in Kurland to lead raids into neighboring Samogitia.

It is around this time that a person who would later become a crusading folk hero, a man

called Robin Von Eltz, first enters the history books. The first mention of Robin's exploits is in the year 1367, when he was part of a raiding party operating to the south of Dunaberg Castle. Robin had been sent out with a few men to collect horse fodder, when he ran into a group of Lithuanian scouts. Instead of dropping his horse food and retreating, like any sensible person would have done, Robin drew his sword and charged straight at the Lithuanians, startling and scattering them. He ended up capturing eighteen of them. This is the sort of thing that Robin von Eltz will end up doing pretty regularly. He was like an invincible sort of Livonian superhero who will eventually rise through the ranks of the Teutonic Order to the position of Marshall, and then to the position of Master. Not only did he perform unlikely, insanely impossible feats of warrior awesomeness, he sort of became a human template. Suddenly, more and more fighters in the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic Order began to score heroic and seemingly impossible victories, as they attempted to emulate Robin von Eltz, until, according to William Urban, the entire Chapter of the Livonian Teutonic Knights began to gain the reputation of being a bunch of incredible shining Knights of general Crusading supremacy. Anyway, it's safe to say that this isn't the last we will be hearing of Robin von Eltz.

Now, at this time military resources in Livonia began to become more and more stretched. Having enjoyed a lengthy period of time when there was hardly any attacks from outsiders on Livonian and Estonian interests, now they seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. As Algirdas began to throw his weight around in Russia, and as the fighting in Russia intensified, the Teutonic Order found itself not only pushing back against Lithuanian raids into Livonia, but against raids into central Livonia and Estonia from the Russian Principalities. Algirdas himself even personally led a raid into Livonia. Having heard that garrisons of Livonian fighters had been summoned to duty elsewhere, he waited for reinforcements from central Lithuania, and once they had arrived he crossed the Daugava, and raided twenty miles into Livonia, totally unopposed. He scored himself a large amount of cattle and a long line of prisoners, which he escorted back out of Livonia.

Now, handily for us, we know rather a lot about this time in Livonia's history because a man called Hermann von Wartberge became secretary to Master Wilhelm, and Hermann von Wartberge provided detailed chronicles of the military campaigns which he observed while accompanying the Master on campaign. Thanks to Hermann von Wartberge we are able to note that both sides to the conflict at this time were engaging in similar tactics, which seemed to deviate from the traditional manner in which Latin Christian fighters engaged in warfare, and may have been an adaption of pagan fighting techniques.

The strategy was as follows. A group of Crusaders or Teutonic fighters would leave the safety of one of their castles in Livonia or Kurland and venture into enemy territory. They would establish a camp at which the fighters would be based, and to which the fighters would bring

their booty. The fighters would then split into small parties and go raiding. They would meet back at the camp at night to rest and to deposit their booty. The next day, the camp would move to a new location, and the exercise would be repeated, with some fighters allocated to camp-watching duty. This duty would be rotated, allowing the fighters to get some rest. The exercise would continue until local push-back against the invasion became forceful and coordinated.

Talking about local push-back, the pagans who were the target of these raids also followed a set of strategies. As soon as a Crusader raiding party was detected in their area, they would gather all their valuables and go and hide in local forests or swamps. Then someone would be sent to spread the word of the location of the raiders, so an army could be mustered to attack them. This, of course, was the reason why the Crusaders had to keep moving their camp. As soon as a sizable band of fighting men could be gathered, the pagans would begin night raids of the Crusader camp, and would issue challenges to fighters on guard duty at the camp. If the Crusaders stayed for too long in one region, an army would descend on them, intent on destroying the invading Crusaders and capturing the booty they had stolen.

These raiding tactics occurred all along the border lands of the pagan regions. Sometimes they were hugely successful. In his book "The Livonian Crusade", William Urban reports that a large raiding party, consisting of over 1,000 Knights from castles across Kurland, managed to capture 3,000 pagan prisoners and kill 600 pagan fighters, while only suffering the loss of three men, on a two-day winter raid. On a one-day raid into Samogitia, the castellan of Goldingen Castle took over 300 prisoners and more than 400 head of cattle and horses.

Lithuanian fighters conducted similar raids into Livonia, but William Urban reports that, for the Lithuanians, Prussia remained the main threat and the main target, with Livonia only considered to be a minor afterthought. In fact, the Grand Master seemed to think along similar lines. Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode enjoyed numerous military successes against the Lithuanians for the rest of the 1360's, culminating in a significant victory for the Teutonic Order in the Battle of Rudau, which we will learn all about next week.

Between military successes there seemed to be long periods of negotiation, and the occasional truce would be called between the Teutonic Order and the pagans. However the Grand Master was always careful to limit these truces to fighters and Crusaders from Prussia. This left the Livonian Chapter of the Order free to raid into Lithuania if the circumstances called for it, and it also left them free to battle Algirdas' Russian vassals across Livonia's eastern border. In the year 1370 however, Master Wilhelm signed a peace treaty with the ruler of Pskov. This left the Livonian Knights free to concentrate on raiding into Lithuania, although a peace treaty currently in place between Prussia and Lithuania also

meant that the Lithuanians were free to concentrate on raids coming from Livonia, instead of up the Nemunas River, so Master Wilhelm proceeded cautiously.

In the year 1371, Master Wilhelm had a stroke of luck. He headed up a very successful four-day raid into Lithuania which netted the Order so much booty that the Master was able to undertake extensive refurbishment of the fortifications in Riga and Reval with the proceeds. Then, however, Master Wilhelm became seriously ill, so he handed command over to his Marshall, Marshall Andreas. His illness meant that the Master was unable to participate in a rare Crusade, but he didn't miss out on much because the weather was bad and the Crusaders ran out of fodder for their horses, so they were forced to return to Prussia.

Then in October of 1372, Master Wilhelm was forced out of his sickbed, because he was required to attend a Grand Chapter meeting of the Order in Prussia. He made it safely to Prussia, but his journey home was rather eventful. The Master and a small armed escort were heading up the Prussian coast towards Kurland when the castellan of Memel Castle warned the Master that a force of over 400 Lithuanians had been spotted waiting to ambush the Master as he passed through the small area of Samogitia which separated Prussia from Kurland. The Master wisely decided to wait while extra escorts from Memel and another nearby stronghold were sent to bolster his party. Then the larger group cautiously made its way out of Prussia into Samogitia. Everything went okay, until a group of scouts who were leading the Master's party discovered the Lithuanians and were ambushed by them as they crossed a small river. The Lithuanians killed ten of the Latin Christians, and the Master's party stayed on the southern side of the river, while the Lithuanians shouted out insults from the opposite side. In the end the Latin Christians decided to charge straight into the group of pagans. They crossed the river and their charge scattered the Lithuanians, meaning that they could continue northwards into the relative safety of Kurland. Master Wilhelm ended up making it back to Livonia in one piece, but as William Urban points out, the incident made it clear to the Master how dangerous the overland route between Prussia and Livonia had become.

And we will leave the Master of Livonia to recover his health and ponder how best to secure his borders, as next week we returned to the Samogitian Crusade, to see how Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode has been faring against the Lithuanians. Until next week, bye for now.

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