

History of the Crusades. Episode 192. The Baltic Crusades. The Wendish Crusade Part III.  
In The Shadow Of The Crusade.

Hello again. Last week we embarked on the first military campaign of this series, which was not exactly a resounding success for the Crusaders, with the Wendish leader Nyklot managing to maintain his lands and his stronghold, in return for the conversion to Christianity of the garrison at Dobin, while the forces led by the Papal Legate marched way off course to the east to attack a town which turned out to be Christian. With even the most optimistic Crusader having to concede that the garrison would be likely to abandon their new religion and return to their pagan ways as soon as the Crusaders marched back over the Elbe, it's difficult to see how the venture ended up achieving anything at all for the Crusaders. So did they throw their hands into the air and declare that they would leave the Baltic region un-Christianized and never again stray out of western Christendom into pagan territory? No. No they didn't. Otherwise, this would be a very short series.

From a non-crusading point of view, the campaign had borne some fruit. Some fighters had managed to score themselves some loot and some slaves have been freed. The Saxon incursion into pagan lands made the Saxon settlers already on the Slavic side of the River Elbe feel more secure, and the Wendish leader Nyklot had been negotiated with, and had agreed to become an ally of the Saxons. But, of course, the main goal of the campaign had been spiritual, and the mass conversion of pagans and the establishment of permanent Christian Churches in Slavic lands, which had been the outcome desired by the Church, had not occurred.

So that led Bernard of Clairvaux and other Church leaders to ponder the question: was military force the best method to spread the Word of Christ? The answer, after much pondering, was a resounding "Yes". Missionaries had been venturing into the Baltic region, on and off, for hundreds of years, and the run-down, derelict, and abandoned church buildings which appeared every now and again in the landscape served as evidence that this approach just didn't work. Why didn't it work? Well, because, according to the Church, the enemies of darkness, the devils and dark spirits, needed to be physically vanquished before the hearts of the pagans could be truly free to convert to Christianity. To Bernard of Clairvaux and other Church figures, the idols and groves in which the pagans worshipped were inhabited by demons, and dark demonic figures flew over the pagan armies and assisted them in battle. In his book "The Northern Crusades", Eric Christiansen points out that in the mind of Bernard of Clairvaux, it was pointless to crusade against the Muslims of the Middle East while leaving the pagans in the Baltic region to worship their heathen idols. The Devil had to be defeated in all lands across the Earth before God could prevail. Eric Christiansen states that Bernard of Clairvaux concluded that the battle for the North was a prelude to the "last days" referred to in the Bible. So the pagan demons had to be destroyed by force by the armies of God before the Northern People could finally, once and for all, be free to convert to Christianity. So the answer was not to cease Crusading and to go back to the old idea of conversion by teaching and the example of missionaries. No, it was pretty clear that Crusading was the only way forward. To Bernard of Clairvaux, the answer was simple: they were just going to need to be more persistent.

Unfortunately for Bernard, he didn't get to see this persistence payoff because he died in 1153. But he left quite a legacy, and his influence spread, particularly in the region around the Baltic Sea. Bernard had been a Cistercian, and his influence helped propel the Cistercian Order onto the world stage. The Cistercian Order itself had been established only recently. Back in the year 1098, a group of monks from a Benedictine monastery in

France became disillusioned with the direction being taken by the Benedictine order, and left to establish their own monastery. They managed to acquire a plot of marshy land in the village of Citeaux, near Dijon in eastern France, and built an abby there. Keen to distinguish themselves from the black robed Benedictine monks they had left behind, they dressed in white robes and concentrated on making their abby as self sufficient as possible, while also doing charity work and following, to them, the true rule of Saint Benedict. It wasn't until Bernard of Clairvaux entered the monastery in the early 1110s however, that the Order began to gain a wider influence.

By the time of the commencement of the Wendish Crusade in 1147, the Cistercian Order had expanded across France, into the British Isles, across to Spain and Portugal, and even into Italy. In all these places, however, it encountered resistance from the older, more established religious orders. What the Cistercian Order really needed to do was to move into a region where there were no other orders, a place where they could start from scratch, building monasteries and living a monastic existence according to their own rules, without monks from the older, more established orders peering over their walls, sneering and pointing out their mistakes. What the Cistercian Order really needed to do was to move across the River Elbe into the pagan regions around the Baltic Sea.

And that's exactly what happened. Between the years 1150 and the year 1200, the Cistercian Order expanded into Sweden, Denmark, and into the Wendish lands across the River Elbe. Monasteries were established and were built, often on land gained by force and defended by force. The monasteries injected Western Christian culture, language and education into their new pagan surroundings, establishing a foothold for Christendom in the pagan wilderness. There were many influential Cistercian monks who ventured into Wendish territory at this time, but let's look closely at the exploits of just one of them, a Cistercian monk from Saxony, called Bern.

Commencing around the year 1158, Bern's calling was to perform missionary work across the River Elbe into Wendish territory, into the same region that had been the subject of the Crusade over a decade earlier. The region, a large territory bordering the Baltic Sea, was now under the control, not of the Wendish leader Nyklot, but of his son, Pribislav. Bern met with Pribislav, and after their chat, Pribislav formed the view that he ought to take a different approach to that taken by his father. He wouldn't oppose the warriors of the church with force, instead, he would support the establishment of Christianity within his territory. And that's exactly what happened. Pribislav himself converted to Christianity in the year 1160. Shortly afterwards, Bern's patron Henry the Lion invaded Pribislav's lands, which seems a poor reward for his conversion, but instead of renouncing Christianity and reverting to the tactics of his father, that of expelling the Christians from the pagan lands and reveling in all things pagan, Pribislav stayed loyal to his new faith.

By means of shrewd diplomatic and political maneuvering, as well as the odd bit of fighting, Pribislav managed to ally himself once again with Henry the Lion, who installed him as the new Prince of Mecklenburg, ruling Wendish territory around the Baltic coastline from the stronghold of Mecklenburg, which was located between the modern day cities of Schwerin and Wismar in a region which is still known today as Mecklenburg-Schwerin in Germany.

Pribislav ended up being an asset to his new faith. He fought against the pagans of Rugen and did his best to convert other Wendish pagans to the Faith, a mission made easier by the fact that he was supported by the armies of the Duke of Saxony. And what happened

to Bern, the Cistercian monk? Well, the whole establishing a base in pagan lands caper worked out pretty well for him. At the time of his death in the year 1191, he was a very wealthy and very powerful man at the head of a rich, vast and still expanding diocese. In fact, the experience of Bern, a Christian moving into Wendish lands and establishing a base there to his political and financial benefit, and the Wendish Lord Pribislav, a Wendish ruler who allied himself with the Christians to his own benefit, was almost a template for the remainder of the Wendish Crusade experience.

So what was the remainder of the Wendish Crusade experience? Well, after the mixed results of the 1147 Crusade, the Church didn't formally call for another Crusade against the Wendish people. Instead two secular lords, the Duke of Saxony Henry the Lion and the King of Denmark, who at that time was King Valdemar, invaded Wendish lands, not officially under the banner of the church, but still mainly taking off where the Crusade of 1147 ended. As Eric Christiansen puts it, the wars waged by Henry the Lion and King Valdemar could be seen as an extension of the 1147 Crusade, as military campaigns fought in the shadow, if you like, of the officially sanctioned Crusade launched by Pope Eugenius in 1147. At the same time as these invasions were taking place, Christian missionaries, just like the Cistercian monk Bern, were establishing themselves and their religion deep in the Wendish heartland. Okay, so let's take a look at what happened.

For around a decade following the 1147 Crusade, Henry the Lion and his Saxon vassals who had established themselves in Wendish territory across the River Elbe seemed to be on pretty good terms with the Wendish leader Nyklot. Really, things were working out pretty well for both Henry and Nyklot. Henry was receiving tribute from Nyklot, and Nyklot, who no longer had to worry about fighting the Saxons, was free to divert his men and resources to attacking the Danes to the north.

Now these raids, which took place by sea, were devastatingly successful. The Wends took a leaf out of the Viking playbook and would land at a random spot on the Danish coastline, race in, capture peasants or any other Danish people they could find, get as much booty as they could carry, burn, pillage and destroy, and then pop back into their boats for the quick sail back to their homeland. The Danes just didn't seem to have an answer for this type of attack. The raids continued year after year until Danish coastal settlements were abandoned, as the coastal Danes moved inland to safety. In desperation the Danes attempted to fortify their coastal holdings, but nothing seemed to keep the raiders out.

As the years passed, as the coastal regions in Denmark were gradually abandoned, as the fertile land around the coastal towns lay fallow, and as the Wendish markets filled with Danish slaves and Danish booty, King Valdemar finally decided he had had enough. Realizing that fighting the Wends in the time-honored ways of medieval warfare just wasn't making an impact, he decided to have a go at the Viking-type raids used to devastating effect by the Wends.

This was how it worked. The Danish fighters would board a boat (there was even room for four war horses in the boat, so Hurray!) and would sail to the Baltic shores of the Wendish people. The fighters would disembark and attack the nearest unfortified settlement they could find. Fortified settlements weren't targeted as the equipment needed for a siege couldn't be transported on the boats, so unwall'd forts and villages were the focus. The aim of these raids was to destroy Wendish people, buildings, and property. Grain stores, cattle, food, and wood stored for the winter were particularly prized, and then the Danes would pop back into their boats and head back to Denmark. To reduce the number of

Wendish raids in Denmark, King Valdemar ordered patrol boats to sweep the coastline and attack any incoming Wendish ships. He also started work on building stone forts at key points along the coast, a project that would take many years to complete, but which was crucial for the long term protection of his realm.

But King Valdemar was not content with merely driving the Wends back from his shore and nipping at their heels with his coastal raids. No, he wanted to vanquish those pesky pagans once and for all, but to do this he needed help. So he decided to pay the Duke of Saxony to come to his assistance. As a result, in the year 1158, much to the shock of the Wends I imagine, Henry the Lion crossed the River Elbe and took up arms against the man who had been his vassal for the past ten years, the Wendish leader Nyklot. The raid of 1158 failed to make much of an impression, but a later raid, which occurred in the year 1160, was much more effective from the Saxon and Danish point of view. The Wendish towns of Mecklenburg and Rostock, deep in the Wendish heartland, were taken by the Christians, and Nyklot himself was killed. Nyklot's sons were forced out of their father's lands, and Nyklot's territory was divided up amongst the bishops and nobleman in Henry's army. Giving a nod to the Crusade that had gone before, pagan idols and places of worship were destroyed by their new Christian occupiers.

However, the good times weren't to last for the Saxons. The Wends revolted, and a mere four years later, one of Nyklot's sons, Pribislav, was able to declare that he had regained possession of his father's lands.

For the Saxons and the Danes, this clearly wouldn't do, so the two rulers, Henry and Valdemar, came up with a plan. Henry would cross the River Elbe with an army and march to the Wendish stronghold Demmin, while Valdemar would order the Danish army to invade by sea to the north, forcing Pribislav to fight on two fronts. The plan was successful to start with. Pribislav was driven out and the Saxons reclaimed their former conquests, while the Danes actually colonized a port on the Baltic Sea, setting up a Danish settlement in Wendish territory. But it wasn't to last. Once again, the Wends rose up in revolt, and once again the Saxons and Danes were driven out.

Then Henry and Valdemar negotiated a treaty between themselves. The next time they raided and conquered Wendish lands, they would split the territory up between them. This treaty seemed to favor the Danes, as just about all conquered territory to date had been claimed by the Saxons. But ironically, the next piece of territory to fall out of Wendish hands was the island of Rugen, which you might remember was located across from Denmark in the Baltic Sea. Henry the Lion proceeded to claim half the island in accordance with the terms of the treaty, but the Danish King refused to give it to him. So what did Henry do? Well, he encouraged the Wends to fight the Danes on his behalf, which they did successfully, until King Valdemar paid Henry to back down in the year 1171.

This successful alliance between the Wends and the Saxons seems to have encouraged Henry to alter his strategy. Instead of conquering the Wends, then either driving them from their territory or installing Saxon rulers to subdue the Wendish people, he decided to restore Pribislav, who had by now converted to Christianity, to his father's lands. The Wendish people, it has to be said, were less likely to revolt if ruled by one of their own, and Pribislav was free to govern as he wished, so long as he paid the required amount of tribute to his Saxon overlord and provided men for military service when requested. This seemed to work pretty well, so well in fact, that the Danes set up a similar system on the

island of Rugen, installing a local man as ruler on the proviso that he paid tribute to Denmark. Christian priests, bishops and missionaries were also given leave to set up churches and monasteries in these newly subdued territories.

It turned out that Henry the Lion may have been better served by concentrating less on the Wends and focusing more on matters closer to home, because in the year 1180, Frederick Barbarossa the Holy Roman Emperor, took his rivalry with Henry to a whole new level, by stripping Henry of his lands and then invading Saxony with the Imperial army. Henry was forced to leave Germany and went to Normandy, where he remained in exile until 1185. He returned to Germany in 1185, only to be exiled once again three years later. By that time, however, the Wendish Crusade was officially over. The Wendish people had been subdued and Christianity was free to flourish in the land of the Wends.

However, despite the fact that there were Christian overtones to much of the action (King Valdemar, for instance, appears to have used the symbol of the Knights Hospitaller on his war banner), the overall feel to the invasions post 1147 was that of a secular military campaign rather than that of a genuine Crusade. As we stated previously, Eric Christiansen in his book "The Northern Crusades" viewed the events which occurred between the years 1147 and 1185 as being in the shadow of the 1147 Crusade. He states further, and I quote, "The war on the Wends was, in one sense, a competition between Duke and King for reliable Slav vassals, and in this competition, the destruction of pagan regimes was merely a preliminary to the building up of more amenable political structures." End quote.

But don't panic. Crusading against the pagans of the North hasn't vanished as a concept, far from it. In the year 1171 or 1172, historians aren't clear exactly which one, the Papacy issued a new Papal Bull entitled "Non Parum Animus Noster", which called for another Crusade in the Baltic region. But before we get started on another Baltic Crusade, we will be taking some time out to do some more background. Next week we will examine a military order which we haven't spent much time on to date in this podcast, but which will be playing a vital role in the Baltic Crusades, the Teutonic Knights. In the following week, we will be taking a more detailed look at a subject which I glossed over in last week's episode, the Christianization of Poland. Both these background episodes should place us on firmer ground as we venture forth into our next Baltic Crusade. So join me next week as we take a closer look at the Knights of the Teutonic Order. Until next week, bye for now.

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