

History of the Crusades. Episode 195. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part I. Latin Christian Expansion.

Hello again. Now, before we get started, remember that this podcast is powered by Patreon. Should you wish to ensure the ongoing existence of this podcast, head over to "crusadespod.com" and click on the Patreon link. For a contribution of one dollar per month, you will gain access to a free episode every fortnight. This week we started a new, rather lengthy series on Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War. Yes, I know it's not strictly Crusades related, but what's not to like about a peasant girl with no military experience taking command and turning the tide of the Hundred Years War? And it features the Inquisition, so there's that. The series focuses on Joan's military exploits, and the trials and tribulations of the Hundred Years War. So if you want to join myself and Joan for a romp through the Hundred Years War, head over to "crusadespod.com", click on the Patreon link, and sign up right away. Woohoo!

Well, right, back to the Baltic Crusades. Last week we took a look at the Christianization of Poland, and this week we will be commencing our examination of the Livonian Crusade. Now, following the Wendish Crusade and subsequent secular military campaigns against the Wends, and following the earlier Christianization of Poland, Latin Christianity in the southern Baltic region now extends over the River Elbe, with the lands of the Wends now officially Christianized. The Holy Roman Empire, due to its subjugation of the Wends, now technically borders Christian Poland, but between Poland and the Orthodox Russians to the east lie the lands of the pagans. From west to east along the shores of the Baltic Sea live the Prussians, the Lithuanians, the Kuronians, the Letts, the Livonians, and the Estonians. Do the Latin Christians wished to see these pagans converted to Christianity? You bet they do.

After the Wendish Crusade of 1147, Henry the Lion in particular was keen to establish new settlements, and to expand Saxon territory and the reach of the Saxon people out of the Holy Roman Empire and into these new lands. Clearly, a priority was not just to move new settlers over the River Elbe into the new region they had conquered for the Empire, but to establish trading ports and settlements on the Baltic coastline, which could be used as a stepping stone to push further into pagan lands. There were clearly new regions to explore, new trading opportunities to open up, and new pagans to convert. The Saxons just needed to establish an outpost in the Wendish lands from which they could make a new push into pagan territory. And this was how the city of Lubeck was born.

Following the Wendish Crusade of 1147, one of Henry the Lion's vassals, the Count of Holstein, a man called Adolf II of Schauenburg, decided to establish a trading settlement on the Baltic coast. He had already invited numerous peasants, from as far away as Holland and Flanders, to settle in his expanded county of Holstein. Holstein was a territory in the northernmost part of Saxony, underneath the Danish peninsula. The ambitious Adolf II saw the Wendish Crusade as an opportunity for expansion, means to push his borders into previously pagan lands, so he needed as many Christian peasants as he could muster to populate this new part of his territory. In addition to increasing the Christian population of his new eastern lands, Adolf II wished to establish a settlement which could act as a trading post, and a base for him to explore opportunities around the Baltic Sea.

In the end, he decided to locate his new town at the meeting place of two rivers, inland from the Baltic coast. Locating the town inland and not directly on the coast made it less exposed, while the Baltic Sea itself was easily accessed by sailing down the river, making

it ideally placed to use as a trading port. A couple of centuries earlier, five kilometers downstream, Emperor Otto I had founded a town for the same purpose. It had been called Lubeck, but it proved difficult to defend and despite enjoying some success as a trading port, it was destroyed and abandoned back in 1138. To reduce the chance of this happening again, Adolf II decided to locate his new settlement on an island in the river. The island was around twenty kilometers from the Baltic coastline, so pirates would need to negotiate their way upstream for some distance in order to attack the town. But the river itself was deep enough for merchant ships to be able to sail upriver to the island. In a nod to the nearby failed Christian settlement, Adolf II decided to call his new town Lubeck, and it was successful from just about the get-go. So successful, in fact, that, according to Philippe Dollinger in his book "The German Hansa", Henry the Lion was jealous of it and decided to establish a rival trading centre nearby, which he named Lowenstadt or "Lionstown". Unfortunately for Henry, Lowenstadt proved to be located on a much less favorable sight than Lubeck, and it eventually disappeared.

Once Henry the Lion realized that Lowenstadt was dead in the water, he began supporting Lubeck, and from that time onwards the town prospered and grew. Inhabitants from the region around the old Lubeck and the failed Lowenstadt moved there, as did merchants, settlers, and traders seeking to take advantage of new trade routes in the Baltic. Henry the Lion transferred the nearby Bishopric of Oldenburg to Lubeck, and work started on the construction of both a church and a cathedral on the island. Henry also exempted the town from the dues ordinarily payable in Saxony, and granted protection to the Russian and Scandinavian merchants who started sailing upriver to trade their wares in the large market square, which was surrounded by a cloth hall, shops, and a town hall. A castle was built to protect the new establishment, and in a nutshell, Lubeck exploded in popularity. Philippe Dollinger describes Lubeck's success in his book "The German Hansa" as follows, and I quote, "Less than a century after its foundation, its predominance was manifest. It was the most populous and thriving city of northern Europe. Its ships sailed the Baltic and the North Sea, its merchants traded in Russia, Scandinavia and England. In medieval urban history there is hardly another example of a success so sudden and so brilliant." End quote

To ensure that this new promising town was kept safe from the Wends. Henry the Lion granted a delineated territory to the now-Christian son of the Wendish leader Niklot, Pribislav. Pribislav's lands commenced to the east of Lubeck and encompassed the lands his father had fought to hold. Duke Henry named the new territory Mecklenburg, and it became a Duchy in 1348. Pribislav's descendents became Dukes, and they ended up ruling Mecklenburg until the twentieth century, the year 1918, to be exact, which is pretty impressive.

So now, post Wendish Crusade, what do we have? Well, the boundaries of Christendom have been pushed eastwards. The region around the new settlement of Lubeck is now firmly located within the Holy Roman Empire, and the northernmost part of the lands of the Wends have also been Christianized under the Wendish leader Pribislav. The new trading town of Lubeck was now perfectly poised to open up sea trade within the Baltic region, offering the first opportunity for goods from the Baltic to be transported by ship into Lubeck, and from Lubeck they could be funneled into central Europe, and from there into all corners of Latin Christendom. Really, this was a staggeringly promising new commercial opportunity, and traders and fortune seekers from across the Holy Roman Empire poured into Lubeck to take advantage of it. Boat builders established themselves in Lubeck and quickly found themselves swamped with orders, and Lubeck's new

inhabitants found themselves sailing their new boats up the river and out into the Baltic Sea, choosing at first to trade with nearby Gotland, an island off the Scandinavian peninsula, and with the Orthodox Christians in Russia, which could be reached by sailing eastwards through the Baltic Sea and along the Gulf of Finland to the Russian coast, and from there inland to the Russian trading city of Novgorod.

Now it must have occurred to these German merchants, as they sailed past the coastline on their way to Russia, that there was an awful lot of land between the Latin Christian port of Lubeck and the neighboring Christian Kingdom of Poland, and the Orthodox Christian Russian lands to the east. All these lands however, were filled with pagans. Violent pagans who may not want to trade or open up their lands to Latin Christian commerce. Of course, a great way to make these places more amenable to Latin Christian commerce would be if they were converted to Christianity. Making deals with nice, civilized Christians would be so much safer and more reliable than trying to trade with a bunch of savage wild pagans. Now I know this is a gross simplification, and commerce versus conversion in the Baltic region is like the egg and chicken situation. Did the Latin Christians move into pagan territory to convert the locals in order to open up the region to trade? Or did trade just follow as a natural progression, once enough Christians had been settled and converted in pagan lands? Well, like the chicken and egg riddle, there's no conclusive answer. In the Baltic region, trade and conversion seem as intertwined as eggs and chickens.

Now, one of the pagan regions past which the merchant ships would have sailed on their way to Novgorod would have been the region covered today by the middle Baltic state Latvia. You may remember from our first episode on the Baltic Crusades that modern day Latvia is located around the Gulf of Riga, in between Estonia and Lithuania. Well, back in the 1180s, around twenty years after the establishment of the town of Lubeck, the region was occupied by groups of people known as the Livonians, the Letts and the Kuronians. As with other Baltic people, the Livonians, Letts and Kuronians tended to live in groups, interacting predominantly with people who spoke their own language while trading and raiding both within and outside those groups.

Now, the Gulf of Riga encompasses the shoreline of this region in a large protected circular bay of coast and nestled deep inside this bay is the entrance to a navigable river, now called the Daugava River. If we followed this river all the way in land to its source, you would find yourself in Russia. Now, a navigable river deep within a protected bay must have posed a tempting prospect for central European merchant traders. From the 1150s onwards, German traders would regularly make stops at various places around the Gulf of Riga to trade with the Letts, Livonians, and Kuronians, some of them even sailing up the Daugava River to trade further inland. Of course, these intrepid merchants and explorers shared stories of their adventures when they arrived back in the Holy Roman Empire, and it wasn't long before German settlers moved into the region to set up permanent trading posts around the Gulf of Riga and on the shores of the Daugava River. And it wasn't long before Christian missionaries decided it might be a good idea to join the German settlers in a bid to convert the pagans living there.

Enter onto the stage, Bishop Meinhard. Now, before we take a closer look at Bishop Meinhard, I need to take some time first to introduce you to our chronicler for this Crusade. Now, I know you've all been tossing and turning at night losing sleep, wondering if there's going to be a "Peter the" for the Baltic Crusades. We had a "Peter the Hermit" in the Middle Eastern Crusades, and "Peter the Monk" for the Crusade against the Cathars, so the burning question is, will there be a "Peter the" for the Baltic Crusades? Well, as much

as I would love to report that the chronicler I'm about to introduce to you is called Peter, the sad fact is that he isn't, his name is Henry. But let's not hold this against him. You never know, perhaps another Peter will pop up before we end this series. I live in hope..

Anyway, Henry of Livonia is a very interesting man. Described by William Urban as, and I quote, "one of the finest chroniclers of the Middle Ages" end quote, Henry was most likely from Saxony and was probably born around the year 1188. He received a solid German education, probably at a monastery school, and became fluent in Latin. He traveled to Livonia around the year 1205 as a priest and remained there for the rest of his life. He spent the years 1225 and 1226 writing his chronicle, which sets out his personal experiences of living in Livonia and the experiences of other people to whom he spoke. He stated, and I quote, "Nothing has been put in this account except what we have seen almost entirely with our own eyes. What we have not seen with our own eyes, we have learned from those who saw it and were there." End quote.

Henry starts his chronicle by describing Bishop Meinhard, the hardy man of the cloth, from a monastery in Segeberg. Segeberg was just to the west of Lubeck, and was one of the many new German towns springing up in the new region of Holstein across the River Elbe, in the formerly pagan Wendish lands. Did living in newly converted Latin Christian territory make Bishop Meinhard keen to extend the boundaries of Latin Christendom even further? Well, we don't know his motivations, but what we do know is that in the year 1180, Bishop Meinhard, who was at that time just a humble Augustinian friar, traveled to Livonia with a band of German merchants, wishing to preach to the local Livonian pagans and establish a Christian church in the region. He achieved both these goals. He built a small church in the village of Uxkull, which is now Ikskile, on the banks of the River Daugava. Now, things were going well for Meinhard. He spent his days preaching, using his new church as his base, and even managed to baptize a couple of locals.

But it wasn't all fun and games. Many of the local people were suspicious of Meinhard's motives. Many of the neighboring Lett people had been visited by Orthodox missionaries from Russia. This activity had been backed up by Russian swords, and eventually the Letts found themselves paying tribute to some Russian Lord far away in the distant Russian lands to the east. The Livonian tribes who were living around the river Daugava didn't want this to happen to them, and they were understandably cautious about throwing their lot in with this new German priest. The second, probably more serious, problem facing Meinhard was that he quickly became caught up in inter-tribal warfare. The Lithuanians who controlled the neighboring region would regularly conduct raids into Livonian territory, destroying Livonian livestock and property and taking Livonian people captive. During his first winter in his new church, Meinhard was forced to flee into the forests with the Livonian villagers, watching helplessly while the Lithuanians went on a rampage. Of course, to Meinhard the solution was a simple one. Of course, the Lithuanians were sending raiding parties to the village on a regular basis. The village wasn't fortified, so there was nothing to stop anyone really, just smashing their way through the village, taking possessions, setting fire to houses and taking captives back to Lithuania as slaves.

What you need to do, said Meinhard to his captive audience of pagans, is to fortify your village. A properly fortified village would be impervious to attack. You wouldn't have to drop everything and run into the forest the next time the Lithuanians came calling. You could stand and fight, protected by the defenses you had built around your village. Not surprisingly, the villagers were pretty interested in this proposal. Meinhard's plan was quite

ambitious. To prevent the Lithuanians setting fire to any wooden structures which would be constructed, Meinhardt proposed building not one, but two fortifications in the village, made out of stone.

This, of course, was to be an expensive and time consuming undertaking. A team of stonemasons would have to be imported all the way from Gotland to construct the forts, and much labour, effort, and money was going to be needed to bring the plan to fruition. So Meinhard made the villagers an offer they couldn't refuse. He would finance the building of the two forts and hire mercenaries to protect the villagers from the Lithuanians while the forts were being built. All the villagers had to do in return was to promise on oath that they would be baptized once the forts were completed. Of course, being baptized would oblige the villages to pay tithes to the church, so Meinhard's side of the deal wasn't quite as generous as it might first appear. But the villagers took their oaths and Meinhard, with some assistance from his backers in Holstein, arranged for the forts to be constructed.

However, when it came time for the villagers to be baptized and pay their tithes, which would enable the stonemasons, workmen and mercenaries to be paid, the villagers changed their minds. Those who had been baptized before the fort was completed decided to revert back to paganism, while the oath-takers decided not to become Christians after all. This blow was possibly softened by the fact that Meinhard had recently been made a bishop, but still, no one likes to build forts for nothing. And to rub salt into his wounds, the pagans then attempted to sacrifice one of Bishop Meinhard's Christian Brothers, who had been assisting him in his missionary work, to their gods. Luckily, the sacrifice was interrupted and his life was spared.

So you would have to say that the Christian incursion into Livonia has gotten off to a rocky start. Will things improve for the Christians? Join me next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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