

History of the Crusades. Episode 198. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part IV. The Sword Brothers.

Hello again. Last week we saw a continuing lack of success in the task set by the German Christians to convert the pagans of Livonia. Now, by this time, everyone is pretty much on the same page when it comes to the question of how to convert the pagans. Converting them by preaching to them or via missionary work just hasn't succeeded, so everyone is pretty clear that the only way the Livonians are going to be brought into the Christian Church is by force, at the point of a sword. Trouble is, that hasn't really been working either. Bishop Berthold's Crusade went awry when his horse took fright and galloped him into enemy lines, whereupon he was killed, and his successor, Bishop Albert, although managing not to get killed or saved by any horses, has also failed to oversee the mass conversion of Livonia, despite his best efforts.

Bishop Albert has been going back and forth from Latin Christendom to Livonia, doing the well-sailed route from Livonia to Gottland to Lubeck, ducking and weaving around the violence in Saxony caused by the civil war and the invading Danes, before gathering together some Saxon crusaders, and heading back to Livonia. However, following their season of crusading, these Saxons have been heading home after failing to achieve the wholesale conversion of the pagans. When we left off last week, the century had just ticked over, and Bishop Albert had started the new thirteenth century by moving his base from Uxkull to a place the pagans called Riga, a handy site near the mouth of the Daugava River. Now, the indefatigable Bishop Albert will head back to Saxony from Riga every single year from now until 1224 to seek out support for his tiny Bishopric.

The establishment of a Christian base at Riga seems to have prompted a wave of white flag waving from the locals. Our chronicler Henry of Livonia reports that in the year 1201 the Kuronians sent messages to Riga to make peace with the Christians, as did, perhaps to everyone's surprise, the war-loving Lithuanians. However, the Lithuanians soon blotted their copybook, as they heard that invaders were headed towards Lithuania, so they left Riga in haste to join the fighting. However, some departing Lithuanians came across two Christians fishing and, for reasons which are unclear, stole their clothes. The naked Christian fishermen then raced to Riga to report the crime, and as a result the Lithuanians who had remained in Riga were seized and detained in chains, until the fishermen's clothing was returned.

Now during the following year, so 1202, while Bishop Albert made his annual trek back to Saxony, Brother Theodoric stayed behind in Riga and did some thinking. Bishop Albert had already decided that they should establish a Cistercian monastery at the mouth of the River Daugava, which would assist in the defense of the river and the new Christian town of Riga, and would also provide a handy resting place for pilgrims. But Brother Theodoric knew that more than this was going to be needed if the goal of the total Christianization of Livonia was ever going to be achieved. Basically, the problem facing the Christian clergymen in Livonia was the same as that faced by the Latin Christians during the Middle Eastern Crusades. Crusades only provided you with a bunch of temporary fighters who, just when they were getting the hang of local conditions and the fighting techniques of the local people, would pack up and head back home, and to Brother Theodoric, the solution to these problems was the same as the solution found in the Holy Land.

What they needed was a permanent standing Christian Army. What they needed was to establish a new military Order. Now the obvious question that a person would have,

listening to Brother Theodoric discuss his idea in the newly constructed church in Riga: Why establish a new order? Why not just import some fighters from one of the existing Orders? Only four years earlier, for instance, the Hospitallers had established a stronghold at Stargard in Pomerania, near the Prussian border. Why not invite the Hospitallers, the Templars, or the Teutonic Knights to come and set up an outpost in Livonia? Well, in his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban points out that once Bishop Albert had heard, and approved of, Brother Theodoric's plan, he probably felt uneasy about inviting one of the powerful and wealthy established orders into his domain. An Order established by Bishop Albert, and answerable to Bishop Albert, would be much easier to control. So in this way, a brand new military Order was created: The Militia of Christ of Livonia, which was known as the Sword Brethren, the Sword Bearers, or the Sword Brothers. The Sword Brothers was its most popular nickname, and that's what I'll be calling it from here on in.

The formal establishment of the Sword Brothers was approved by Pope Innocent, and he gave it a rule based on that used by the Order of the Temple. To distinguish themselves from the other Orders, the Sword Brothers wore a white mantle similar to that of the Templars, but on their left shoulders the mantle displayed the symbols of the Order, a red sword and a red cross. Now, although they had a fabulous name, the Sword Brothers were a bit of a rabble from the get go. They were comprised of people from a wide mix of social classes ranging from those of noble stock, some of whom had committed crimes in Saxony and had decided to flee to Livonia to escape punishment, to members of Bishop Albert's extended family, and some of Brother Theodoric's friends from his old Cistercian monastery back in Saxony.

Even at its peak, there were never more than one hundred and twenty of the Sword Brothers, and Eric Christiansen, in his book "The Northern Crusades", describes them as a rough and ready lot who were not easy to control. In fact, the first Master of the Order was killed in 1209, when one of the Sword Brothers attacked him with an axe, and in addition to fighting on behalf of the Church, like the members of the other military orders, the Sword Brothers seemed to fill their spare time with committing crimes of different types. As Eric Christiansen pointed out, and I quote, "As time went by there was almost no crime of which they were not accused," end quote.

But an uncontrollable rabble of crime-loving warriors though they may have been, they still performed a vital function for the Christians of Livonia. They protected the Christian settlements during Brother Albert's annual recruitment drives back to Saxony, were involved in the building and establishment of monasteries in Livonia, and did their fair share of sword waving at the pagan Livonians. So in a nutshell, their role was an offensive one when Bishop Albert was in Livonia with his latest batch of recruits from Saxony, and a defensive one when Bishop Albert was away. The Sword Brothers would organize the volunteer crusaders and lead them on missions to convert the pagans, then, when the Crusaders had departed and Bishop Albert had left for Saxony, the Sword Brothers would batten down the hatches and protect the Christians of Livonia against any attacks by the pagans.

Now, by the end of the year 1203, Bishop Albert was getting a little concerned about the political situation back in the Holy Roman Empire, and the effect that it might have on the long term prospects of the Christian settlements in Livonia. King Valdemar of Denmark was strengthening his hold on the territory in northern Saxony which he had conquered for the Danish crown. At Christmas in the year 1203 he had held court at Lubeck, and had forced many northern Saxon overlords to submit to him and pay him homage. The rumor

was that the ambitious King of Denmark was aiming to claim not only northern Saxony for the Danish crown, but all the land along the southern coast of the Baltic Sea. If that came to pass, then Livonia would fall under Danish control.

But it appears that Bishop Albert may have been able to deflect Danish interests in the region. In his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban speculates that Bishop Albert was able to meet with King Valdemar around this time and came to an agreement. Possibly managing to convince the Danish King that the Crusade in Livonia didn't conflict with Denmark's territorial interests, Bishop Albert likely gained permission to continue his annual trips back and forth between Saxony and Livonia without interference from the Danish King. In a shrewd move, Bishop Albert also managed to resist taking sides in the Imperial civil war. Bishop Albert's neutrality in the civil war meant that Livonia wasn't at risk at becoming a pawn in the dispute, either between the two contenders for the Imperial crown, or in their separate conflicts with the Danish King.

On his way back to Livonia with a bedraggled bunch of Crusade volunteers, Bishop Albert was able to put his meeting with the Danish King to good use. The sixteen ships carrying the Crusaders were hit by a raging storm on their way from Lubeck to Gottland, and ended up making landfall in a Danish province. There, according to Henry of Livonia, they came upon a bunch of pirate pagans from Estonia who had sailed from Estonia to Denmark to launch attacks on local churches, something the Estonians and Kurs were known to do in both the Kingdom of Denmark and in Sweden. The Crusaders caught them carrying the bells from the church and other valuables to their ships. They retrieved these items and were intent on attacking the pagans themselves, when a quick-thinking Estonian told Bishop Albert that the Estonians had recently made peace with the Christians of Riga. Bishop Albert accepted this story and let them go. However, when the Crusaders landed in Gottland, they realized they had been tricked. A couple of days later, they spotted the Estonian ships, which had also pulled into Gottland on their way back to Estonia. They gave chase and captured two of the Estonian vessels, killing sixty pagans in the process. In a diplomatic coup, Bishop Albert was able to send the bells and church treasures back to the Archbishop of Lundt in Denmark, placing himself in the Danish King's good books, and proving that letting the German Christians continue their Crusade against the Livonians posed no threat to Danish interests and, in fact could be advantageous to the Danish people.

Bishop Albert arrived in Livonia with his crusaders with no further incidents, and he decided that his next move would be to send Brother Theodoric to Rome with a local Livonian elder called Caupo. Caupo had, it seems, been swayed to the Christian cause, which was very good news for the Christians, as Caupo actually ruled over nearly half of the Livonian people. This would be Brother Theodoric's third visit to Rome, but of course it would be Caupo's first, and William Urban points out in his book "The Baltic Crusade" that one goal of the trip was probably to impress Caupo with the might, wealth and prestige of the Roman Church. If that was the aim, it seems to have been achieved. After their long, long journey, the two men found themselves at their destination, and Pope Innocent seems to have gone out of his way to lay down the red carpet for his visitors from faraway Livonia. He gifted Caupo with one hundred pieces of gold and gave Theodoric something probably even more precious, a Bible personally copied out by the hand of Pope Gregory. He also asked heaps of gracious questions about Livonia and the people who lived there. This all seems to have had the desired effect. According to William Urban, Caupo remained a committed Christian from that time on, even if the same couldn't be said about the Livonians he ruled over.

Meanwhile, back in Livonia, Bishop Albert was doing his best to get the Sword Brothers organized into a cohesive fighting force. While the Master of the Sword Brothers was directly accountable to Bishop Albert, the Order itself was independent and was under direct Papal control, a situation which Bishop Albert just had to make the best of. As soon as a Knight joined the Sword Brothers, he was given a horse, armor, weapons, clothing, and a sergeant to assist him. Priests were also welcomed into the Order, and while they generally resided in castles and monasteries, they acted as spiritual advisers to the Sword Brothers, hearing their confessions and offering them guidance. At the bottom of the Sword Brothers Order lay the servants, consisting of soldiers who acted as sergeants assisting the Knights, cooks, smiths, and all the other lowly workers needed to keep the Sword Brothers housed, fed and clothed. They were marked as members of the Order by a symbol of a Sword which was present on their clothing.

Now, at this stage in its history, Riga was located in frontier country, and being stationed there, particularly during the winter months, was not for the faint-hearted. Merchant ships would regularly come and go from Livonia during the warmer months, but during the winter the Christian residents of Livonia were pretty much on their own, trying to stay warm, hoping their food supplies would last, and trying to beat off the local pagans who would launch raids, hoping to steal the Christians' winter supplies or their cattle. Once winter set in, you couldn't really decide that you had had enough and head back to Lubeck, because firstly there were no ships to carry you, and even if you could find someone crazy enough to sail through the freezing weather and the winter storms, pirates from Estonia would regularly attack any ship plying the Gulf of Riga, or in the Baltic Sea in general, and any ships reckless enough not to sail in the company of other vessels would present a very tempting target indeed.

So as the years passed, the hardy and probably violent souls who comprised the Sword Brothers moved from protecting the Christian settlements along the Daugava River, to taking on the pagans. According to William Urban, they did this by playing various tribes off against each other. Weaker tribes would seek the assistance of the Brothers to attack stronger tribes, and one by one, the tribes began to be defeated.

The first armed combat between the Sword Brothers and the pagans occurred in the year 1205. Our chronicler, Henry of Livonia, describes how an army of 2,000 Lithuanians rode along the banks of the Daugava River and arrived at Riga. Representatives from the city went out to greet the leader of the Lithuanian armed forces, and offered him a drink before the Lithuanians retreated. The Lithuanians, however, were secretly intent on destroying the city. The leader of the Semgalls approached the Christians and warned them that the Lithuanians intended to destroy Riga. The Semgalls offered to combine forces with the Sword Brothers to defeat the Lithuanians. The Christians agreed, and they awaited the return of Lithuanian army. The local Livonian people were told of the plan and were advised to welcome the Lithuanians as if they were going to make peace with them. Scouts alerted the Sword Brothers and Semgalls of the return of the Lithuanians, and a handful of German Knights attacked the Lithuanians, who had presumably let their guard down believing that they wouldn't be opposed. The sun glinting off the armor of the mounted Sword Brothers seems to have spooked the Lithuanians. Henry of Livonia describes what happened next, and I quote, "God sent such fear into the Lithuanians, and they were so dazzled by the brightness of the German arms, that they turned away on all sides. The leader of the Semgalls, perceiving that the Lithuanians were so terrified through the mercy of God, exhorted his men bravely to go into battle with them. Thus the army was

assembled, and the Lithuanians were dispersed on all sides of the road like sheep. About 1200 of them were cut down by the sword." End quote.

Unsurprisingly, this victory acted as a huge confidence booster for the Sword Brothers and raised their prestige amongst the Livonians, the Sword Brothers proving to everyone that they could more than hold their own amongst the most feared and warlike of all the pagans, the Lithuanians. Well, you might think that after a rocky start, things might start looking up for the Christians of Livonia from now on, and you would be right. Join me next week as we venture further into the new century in Livonia. Until next week, bye for now.

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