

History of the Crusades. Episode 202. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part VIII. External Threats.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Livonians rise up in rebellion against the German Christians. The Russians from Polotsk had agreed to act as mediators between the Livonians and the Christians, but at the date and place set for the meeting the Livonians killed the only two Christians who had showed up. The Livonians then launched a full blown rebellion from their base in Holm. However, the Sword Brothers defeated the pagans of Holm and Treiden, and managed to enlist the Semigallians to help put down the remainder of the rebellion. The elders of the Livonian pagans, however, have now sent representatives up-river to Polotsk, to ask for Russian military assistance to eject the pesky Christians from Livonia once and for all. At the same time as the pagans are journeying up-river to request Russian military assistance, Bishop Albert is sailing back to Lubeck on his annual recruitment drive, no doubt hoping to return with enough crusaders to bring Livonia fully to heel.

With Bishop Albert having departed from Riga, the Livonians would have pointed out to the Russians that this would be an ideal time to attack the Christian settlements further down the Daugava, and Prince Vladimir of Polotsk agreed. He sent word not only across his vast Principality but to neighboring Russian territories, letting them know of the plan and inviting them to join. What was the plan? Well, to sail down the Daugava River, in force, and to boot those Latin Christians out of Livonia once and for all, sending them packing back to the Holy Roman Empire, and asserting Russian dominance back over Livonia.

Now, I guess I don't really need to point out to you how important for the region this conflict would be. It would determine whether Livonia answered to a Russian or a German overlord, and would see either Latin Christianity or Orthodox Christianity prevail. The outcome of the dispute would not only affect the future of the Baltic Crusades, but would have a significant impact on trade and commerce in the region. There was a lot at stake. So Prince Vladimir gathered together the fighting men of Polotsk, men from neighboring Russian territories, and the local pagan fighters, and according to our chronicler Henry of Livonia, traveled down the Daugava River, and I quote "in great strength", end quote. Opposing the Russian forces were the German fighters, including the Sword Brothers, their current pagan allies, the Semigallians, and the Christianized Livonians, led by "I've-been-to-Rome" Caupo.

As they were carried downstream on the Daugava, the first Latin Christian stronghold they came across was Uxkull (or Ikskile). This was when things started to get real for the Russians. They were quite familiar with the fighting techniques and technologies of the local pagans, but had no real experience of the technological advances in weaponry and defensive capabilities that had been taking place in Latin Christendom. The crossbow came as a surprise to them, as did the catapult machines which were now hurling rocks at their rafts and ships. The Russian tactic, when faced with their enemy bunkered down in a stronghold, was to burn the stronghold down, but this tactic proved useless at Ikskile, as the stronghold was made of stone. With Russian injuries from the German catapult machines mounting, they threw their hands into the air and sailed further down the river, no doubt looking for an easier German target to attack. They found Holm, and deciding that this would be a good place to start, they pulled in to the riverbank, disembarked from their vessels, and surrounded the settlement.

Now the Russian plan was this: they would besiege the settlement of Holm and set it on fire, forcing the Germans to surrender. While the Russians were occupied at Holm, they would send their pagan Livonian allies off on a recruitment drive, spreading word to pagans across the region to come to Riga to help the Russians and Livonians take the town. So as soon as they had surrounded Holm, the Russians put their plan into action. Teams of Russian men were sent into the forests to gather wood, which they intended to haul into place outside the fortifications. However, unfortunately for the Russians, they hadn't counted on the German catapult machines.

Now, at this stage, our Chronicler Henry of Livonia reports that there were less than twenty German fighters inside the fort at Holm. However the Germans had at their disposal a number of small catapult machines. They mounted them on the ramparts and began firing stones at the wood-hauling Russians, wounding many of them. Russian archers hit back, making life difficult for the Germans manning the catapult machines. So for the first few days of the siege, this was how time passed: Russians and pagans gathering wood, and firing arrows at any Germans who came into view; Germans manning the catapult machines, ducking arrows and trying to take out as many of the Russians and pagans who were swarming around their village as they could.

Henry of Livonia reports that the Germans weren't getting much downtime. Apparently, in addition to the twenty or so German fighters, there were a number of Livonians trapped inside Holm by the siege, and the Germans were worried about betrayal. Consequently, they were constantly keeping one eye on the Russians outside Holm and one eye on the Livonians inside Holm, meaning neither eye could get much sleep. Henry of Livonia describes the German defenders of Holm in this way, and I quote, "There were few Germans, scarcely even twenty, and since they feared betrayal by the Livonians, many of whom were in the fort with them, they sat armed, night and day, high on the ramparts, guarding the fort both from friends within and enemies without," end quote. But things weren't all easy sailing for the Russians either. They were forced to keep one eye on Holm and one eye on Riga, concerned that reinforcements may be sent up-river to assist in the defense of Holm, or even worse, that shiploads of crusaders may arrive from the Holy Roman Empire. So, with neither side getting much rest, the siege continued.

Then one of the Russians came up with a cunning plan. They were surrounded by wood. Why didn't they construct a catapult machine of their own and hurl some rocks back at the Germans? That seemed like a splendid idea, and the Russians got straight to work. Trouble was, they really didn't have any experience in the construction and operation of catapult machines, and the results were less than successful. I'll let Henry of Livonia explain what happened, and I quote: "The Russians made a little machine like that of the Germans, but not knowing the art of throwing rocks, they hurled them backwards and wounded many of their own men." End quote. Oops.

Okay, so the siege is now entering its second week, and every day that passes is increasing Prince Vladimir's stress levels. His plan was to quickly take Holm, then move to the main event, Riga. However over a week has passed and they were still no closer to taking Holm. Every day that passed provided extra opportunities for the Christians of Riga to shore up the defenses of their town, and to plan some sort of retaliation against the Russians. In a nutshell, every day that passed reduced the likelihood of a quick and decisive Russian victory in Livonia.

On day eleven of the siege of Holm, Prince Valdimir received the news that he had been dreading. Pagan scouts had been racing back and forth from Holm to Riga, reporting on German activity around the city. They had already advised that the roads and fields around Riga had been booby-trapped: lots of nasty little three pronged iron bolts had been concealed in places where Russian horses might tread on them, and already many pagan horses, and pagan people apparently, had fallen victim to these barbs. Henry of Livonia reports that some pagan Livonians had collected a couple of these bolts and had shown them to Prince of Vladimir, stating that, and I quote, "These hooks had everywhere gravely pierced both their horses' feet and their own sides and posteriors" end quote. Ouch.

With Prince Vladimir already concerned about the damage his army may sustain from these barbs, and goodness only knows what else the Germans had up their sleeves, some pagan scouts from Treiden then reported that they had seen ships on the horizon. This was the last straw for Prince Vladimir. Approaching ships could only mean one thing: more Germans and more reinforcements for Riga. So he decided to call it a day. He withdrew from Holm, taking his dead and wounded men with the rest of his army, back up the Daugava to Polotsk. So this is clearly a major milestone in the Latin Christian conquest of Livonia. In retreating back up the Daugava, Prince Vladimir has effectively ceded sovereignty over Livonia to the Germans.

So the big question now is: Is Livonia now a Crusader state, a German conquest free from other sovereign claims? Well, almost. There's only one other major power now interested in claiming sovereignty over Livonia, and that major power is Denmark. King Valdemar of Denmark was clearly an ambitious man and, not content with pushing the boundaries of his kingdom down into Saxony, he had made no secret of the fact that he would really like to conquer the entire southern coast of the Baltic Sea, if at all possible. In the year 1206 he took the first step towards achieving this goal.

At the entrance of the Gulf of Riga lies a large island which the Germans called Oesel and which today is called Saremaa. The island covers around 1,000 square miles and whereas today it is a picturesque Estonian tourist hot-spot, back in medieval times it served as a base for notorious gangs of Estonian pirates. These pirates had been menacing not only the ships coming and going from Riga, but Christian coastal settlements all around the Baltic Sea. People as far away as Sweden and Denmark had been raided by these pirates, so for the past three years, King Valdemar has been formulating a cunning plan which will serve the dual purpose of eliminating the threat from the Estonian pirates to the people of Denmark, and providing a launching pad for his wider ambitions in the Gulf of Riga. What was this cunning plan? Well, he was going to lead an army to Oesel, take over the island, eliminate the pirates, and Christianize the place. Then he would head over to Riga to see what was taking place in the German settlement.

Now I guess I don't have to point out to you how big a deal this was. Since the establishment of Christian settlements in Livonia, no rulers from the Holy Roman Empire had made the journey to Riga, or any of the other outposts established by their countrymen. The Duke of Saxony hasn't traveled to Livonia, and the Holy Roman Emperor definitely hasn't. In addition, none of the senior clergy from the Holy Roman Empire have made the journey either. The most senior churchman present in Livonia has always been its Bishop. Yet here is the King of Denmark, in person making a well planned, well financed and well organized trip to the Gulf of Riga, accompanied by an army and the most senior clergyman in Denmark, the Archbishop of Lundt. Hot on the heels of the attack

by the Russians of Polotsk on the Christians in Riga, this was shaping up as another major threat to the continual existence of the German presence in Livonia.

So how did the Danish expedition pan out? Well, unfortunately for King Valdemar things didn't go as he had hoped. In January 1206, Pope Innocent granted permission to the Archbishop of Lundt to establish a Bishopric in Livonia, so the plan was to Christianize the pagans on the island of Oesel and presumably establish a Danish Church there. The Danish King and the Danish Archbishop made their way successfully to Oesel, and built a stronghold near a harbor. Henry of Livonia then tells us what happened next, and I quote, "After the king had built a fort, he could find no one who, in the face of the attacks of the pagans, dared remain there. Accordingly, the King burned the fort, and with the whole army, returned to his own land." End quote. So basically, the Estonian pagans on the island of Oesel were not the type of people who, faced with an invasion by Danish Christians, would throw their hands into the air, convert to Christianity and accept rule by their new overlords. No, the pagans of Estonia made it pretty clear to the Danish King and his army that they would violently and persistently oppose any Danish presence on their island, so much so that the Danish King was prepared to chalk the attempt by his his army to gain a foothold in the region up as a complete failure, and to retreat back to Denmark without having gained anything from the venture.

But Bishop Albert and the German Christians in Riga shouldn't breathe a sigh of relief just yet. Yes, the Danish ships have departed from Oesel and are heading back home, well all except two of them. Because in a surprise move, the Archbishop of Lundt decided to sail to Riga, along with the royal chancellor, the Bishop of Schleswig. On two ships, laden with supplies which presumably they had brought with them in anticipation of establishing a permanent settlement on Oesel, along with all the men in their retinue, they pulled into the River Daugava, disembarked at the monastery at the mouth of the river, and were received with open arms by the local Christians. Bishop Albert himself was away in Saxony at this time, and perhaps the German Christians who were in Livonia were less concerned about the political ramifications of this visit and just happy to see new faces and fresh supplies.

Anyway, the Archbishop actually wintered in Riga. He spent the entire winter season in Livonia, instructing the Christians in theology, conducting Bible-reading sessions, and advising the clergy on how to oversee the spiritual development of the newly converted local Livonians. Even if the German Christians of Livonia welcomed the Danish Archbishop into their midst, and enjoyed his theological instruction and guidance over the long, cold winter months, no doubt Bishop Albert wasn't so thrilled when he discovered what had occurred.

Join me next week as Bishop Albert returns to Saxony in the year 1207, to do some high level diplomatic wrangling to try and outmaneuver Danish attempts to establish a base in Livonia. Until next week, bye for now.

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