

History of the Crusades. Episode 207. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XIII. The Estonian Problem.

Hello again. Last week we saw Bishop Albert head to Rome, where Pope Innocent made the momentous decision that the troubled and still vacant position of Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen should cease to have authority over the Bishop of Riga. Instead, Bishop Albert's powers were increased to enable him to, among other things, found new Bishoprics and monasteries in the Baltic region. But while Bishop Albert was celebrating his newfound powers, Christian Livonia came under the combined attack of its pagan and Russian neighbors. The pagans withdrew as winter set in but, fearing a renewed attack in the spring, the Christians of Riga negotiated an alliance with the Russian Principalities of Polotsk and Pskov.

Now, if you are thinking that the spring of the year 1211 is going to be full of action on the Livonian front, you would be exactly right. The first major event, one which occurred before Bishop Albert had even arrived back from the Holy Roman Empire, saw the Livonian, German, and Lett alliance take the initiative, and attack a settlement deep inside Estonia. The settlement, they decided to wave their swords at was a fort the Germans called Fellin, and which today is the town of Viljandi in southern Estonia. As the Germans approached the fort, they sent the Letts and Livonians on raiding missions, attacking neighboring settlements, acquiring hostages, and securing food and grain. The Germans then marched the hostages to the fort and declared that they would hand them over unharmed if the Estonians inside Fellin converted to Christianity.

In a move which surprised no-one, the Estonians refused, so the battle began. The hostages were killed, and the Germans, joined now by the Russians, set the stage for some Imperial-style siege warfare, assembling catapult machines, and constructing a siege tower with which to attack the fort. The battle raged for five days. Unfortunately for the Estonians, although they were fierce and valiant fighters, they had never seen catapult machines or siege towers, and their fortifications just weren't constructed to withstand stones hurled from the catapult machines. They did their best to defend the fort, attempting to set fire to the German siege tower, and throwing logs and stones at the attackers, managing to kill one of the Sword Brothers who was struck by a stone. By the fifth day, however, water supplies inside the fort were running low, the bodies of Estonian defenders were piling up, and according to Henry of Livonia, nearly every Estonian still alive inside Fellin was wounded. Accordingly, the Estonians surrendered. The Germans asked them whether they still resisted the Christian faith or whether they were willing to convert. Henry of Livonia describes the response of the Estonians as follows, and I quote, "We acknowledge your God to be greater than our gods. By overcoming us, he has inclined our hearts to worship him. We beg, therefore, that you spare us and mercifully imposed the yoke of Christianity upon us, as you have upon the Livonians and Letts." End quote.

Priests were sent into Fellin and, according to Henry of Livonia, they sprinkled the houses, the fort and all the people of Fellin with holy water. However, so much blood had been spilt inside Fellin that the priests decided that the actual baptism of the Estonians would have to wait for another day, and the army withdrew back to Livonia.

Now, in his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban points out that, although this was a significant victory, the Germans failed to take full advantage of it. The fort at Fellin controlled an entire county, a portion of southern Estonia which the Germans called Sakalia and which the Estonians called Sakala. It seems that the Estonians at Fellin

surrendered some hostages to the Germans, and accepted the presence of German priests, but the Germans failed to garrison the fort with their own men. The result of the Battle of Fellin, therefore, was that the Estonians of Fellin pledged to convert to Christianity, but the rest of Estonia remained defiantly pagan, and in fact, just as Bishop Albert was sailing home from his annual recruitment drive, the Estonians made a push into Christian Livonia, besieging Treiden, the town where Theodoric had once been saved by a horse and the hometown of the chief Livonian Christian convert, I've-Been-To-Rome Caupo.

Now, Bishop Albert and his Crusade volunteers sailed into the Gulf of Riga, while the Estonians were still besieging Treiden. Clearly, Treiden falling to the Estonians would be a major blow to Christian Livonia, so the travelers had barely disembarked from their ships when they headed straight to Treiden. As we mentioned in last week's episode, chaotic politics back in the Holy Roman Empire meant that three bishops had accompanied Bishop Albert to the less political, they hoped, soothing surrounds of Livonia, along with a noble man, Count Helmold of Plesse and a famous warrior, Bernard zu Lippe, along with a healthy contingent of Crusade volunteers. All these men were off-loaded at Riga, and with no time to even undertake an orientation tour of Riga, they donned their weapons, saddled up their horses, gathered their troops and some local Livonians, and headed to Treiden.

They ended up traveling through the night, arriving at Treiden just as the day was dawning. The Estonians, of course, were shocked and dismayed to see such a large contingent of German fighters. They initiated an attack by throwing their spears at the Germans. However, once you've thrown a spear into enemy lines, there's no getting it back, and soon, you guessed it, the Estonians had exhausted their supplies of spears. The Germans then charged at the Estonians, with their swords drawn and hand-to-hand fighting began. Henry of Livonia showers a rare compliment on the Estonian pagans at this point, stating, and I quote "The pagans fought manfully" end quote. Just as the Estonians seemed to be gaining the upper hand though, the Knights charged into the battle on their horses. The sight of the armored horses seems to have spooked the Estonians, with many being slain as they stood frozen in shock at the sight of the horses, while many others fled. Then a wholesale slaughter of the Estonians began. As Henry of Livonia put it, and I quote, "The Germans pursued the Estonians so that few of them escaped, and the Germans even killed some of the Livonians as if they were Estonians" end quote.

With all their retreat routes back to Estonia cut off, the Estonians were hunted down and killed wherever they were found: on the road; in the fields; and in the forests. As William Urban states in his book "The Baltic Crusade", and I quote "The slaughter was so tremendous that it would be many years before a native force would again dare to meet the Christians in open battle" end quote. With the raiding Estonians having been thoroughly vanquished, the Christians headed back to Riga.

Now it's pretty safe to say at this point that Bishop Albert isn't getting much downtime. His annual treks back and forth between the Holy Roman Empire and Livonia mean that he just gets his head around the toxic politics in one part of the world, only to travel to another part where he finds that things have deteriorated during his absence, and he has to quickly get up to speed with the latest crisis and wrestle things back into shape. No sooner has he risen to the challenge and dealt with the situation than he has to leave to travel to his other destination, only to find that things there have deteriorated during his absence, and all his efforts are required to get up to speed with what has been happening and resolve all the issues. As soon as these issues are resolved, he travels again, only to find that things

have deteriorated during his absence again, etcetera, etcetera. So Bishop Albert, effectively, is in a constant state of crisis management, with his days spent in a revolving door of traveling, assessing the current situation, dealing with the latest crises, pulling things back into line, then traveling, assessing the current situation, dealing with the latest crises, pulling things back into line, then traveling, over and over and over again.

One advantage of this grueling schedule was that Bishop Albert was getting really good at rapidly assessing problems and finding fast, effective solutions to them. The defeat of the Estonians at Treiden and the earlier victory against the Estonians at Fellin had created a problem. The Sword Brothers had long been itching to advance into Estonia, and emboldened by these recent successes, Bishop Albert knew that he could hold them off no longer. Trouble was, Bishop Albert didn't really want to extend Livonian territory all the way into Estonia. If this occurred, it would bring Bishop Albert into direct conflict with the King of Denmark, King Valdemar. King Valdemar had been eyeing off Estonia for some years now, and expanding into Estonia would give the Danish King the excuse he needed to muscle in on Estonian territory, and bring Estonia, and perhaps Livonia as well, under Danish control. There was also the added problem of the Sword Brothers. Relations between the Sword Brothers and Bishop Albert was testy at the best of times, and if the Sword Brothers gained themselves land, conquests and wealth in Estonia, they would likely slip even further out of Bishop Albert's control.

The Estonian Problem was one which Bishop Albert needed to deal with quickly and effectively, and the solution he came up with was nothing less than masterful. The new powers Pope Innocent had recently awarded to Bishop Albert included the power to create new Bishoprics. Bishop Albert decided that it was time to put this new power to use. Bishop Albert waved his now supercharged wand, and zap! Just like that, he created a new Bishopric, the Bishopric of Estonia, and then zap! Elevated Abbott Theodoric to the position of Bishop of Estonia.

This really was the stuff of administrative genius. Theodoric had strong ties to the Sword Brothers. It was Theodoric, after all, who had originally come up with the idea of creating the Order, and unlike Bishop Albert, the Sword Brothers seemed to view Theodoric with both affection and respect. If anyone could rein in the ambitions of the Order and keep the Brothers in check as they rampaged across Estonia, it would be Theodoric. It would be Theodoric too who would have to deal with the Danish King, and separating the territory into two separate entities, Estonia and Livonia, meant that taking one now didn't necessarily involve taking the other. Putting this another way, if King Valdemar decided to invade Estonia and had achieved some military successes there, and had Estonia been part of Livonia, it wouldn't be much of a jump to push further eastwards into Livonia and take that as well. But now Livonia and Estonia are two completely separate entities, and Livonia, at least, is under the direct protection of the Holy Roman Empire. So even if King Valdemar took Estonia, he would definitely be wanting to stop and think twice before attacking the additional territory, the territory of Livonia. So as I said, this was masterful.

But I hear you ask, "Wasn't Theodoric the Abbot of the monastery that was at the mouth of the Daugava?" Well, yes, yes he was. The position of Abbott is now vacant and up for grabs. The monastery is effectively protecting Riga. It oversees the ships coming and going from the Gulf of Riga into the mouth of the Daugava, so it's pretty important to place an effective and trustworthy person into this position. Again, Bishop Albert's appointment was shrewd and savvy. Remember the famous warrior who had accompanied Bishop Albert to Livonia on this trip? Bernard zu Lippe? Well, in addition to being a talented

military man, Bernard zu Lippe was also, handily, a member of the Cistercian Order. So Bishop Albert waved his magic wand once again and zap! Hello to the new head of the monastery, Abbot Bernard. In elevating Bernard to the position of Abbot, he had not only ensured that the seasoned warrior now had to stay permanently in Livonia, it meant that a man with extensive military experience was kept out of the Sword Brothers, and was instead given a strategically important monastery to run.

And Bishop Albert wasn't finished yet. He spent the rest of his season in Livonia tidying up various administrative matters, renegotiating the collection of tithes from the local Letts and Livonians, and providing guarantees to the visiting merchants and traders from Gottland. Then Bishop Albert brushed his hands together, stretched, and popped back on a ship for his annual trek to Lubeck. Interestingly, the three bishops that Bishop Albert had brought with him from the Holy Roman Empire elected to stay in Livonia, administering Bishop Albert's territory on his behalf during his absence. The Knights, Crusaders and Sword Brothers left behind then made preparations to mount a major expedition into Estonia.

Now, William Urban points out in his book "The Baltic Crusade" that it was at this time that the fighting men in Livonia came up with a novel idea. Back in Saxony, and in most of Europe most probably, the accepted practice had been to cease campaigning during the winter months. Winters in Saxony were wet, cold and muddy affairs. It didn't snow very often, but it rained a lot, making life in a military camp terribly uncomfortable, roads muddy and sometimes impassable, and fighting more difficult and unpleasant than in the summer months. The Saxon Crusaders had transferred this practice to Livonia. Now, however, someone had a light bulb moment. Winters in Livonia were completely different to winters in Saxony. They were much, much colder and much longer. Snow permanently blanketed the ground, while rivers, streams and swamps froze solid, and the days were often crisp and clear. Rivers and swamps would be much easier to cross in winter, and the enemy would be much easier to spot. The run-and-hide-in-the-forest tactics of the pagans would be much less successful if they stood out like beacons against the snowy backdrop.

So a decision was made. In the winter of 1211 to 1212, the Crusaders, Sword Brothers, and Livonian fighters would undertake their first winter campaign to try and subdue the territory recently awarded to Theodoric, the new Bishop of Estonia. Join me next week as we rug up and join four thousand warriors on their winter campaign to Estonia. Until next week, bye for now.

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