

History of the Crusades. Episode 212. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XVIII The Danish Conquest of Estonia.

Hello again. Last time we saw Bishop Albert out-played, out-maneuvered and out-classed by King Valdemar II of Denmark who, via some deft behind the scenes wrangling, managed to force Bishop Albert to cede Estonia and Livonia to Denmark. With Danish eyes now all turning to the riches, land and plunder to be had in Estonia, German concerns would now be taking a back seat.

Now, as we mentioned last week, in February 1219, Prince Henry of Mecklenburg was involved in a successful attack on the Estonian settlement of Reval, and his success seems to have opened the floodgates to involvement in the Livonian Crusade by noblemen from the northern reaches of the Holy Roman Empire. The next recruitment drive saw a Who's Who of the upper echelons of the noble classes in Saxony and the surrounding regions put up their hands to travel to Estonia. Amongst the prestigious Crusaders were the Duke of Saxony, Albrecht of Anhalt, numerous counts, and the King of Denmark himself, who decided to take a reasonably sized Danish army to Estonia. Tagging along with the Danish army was the Archbishop of Lundt, the Bishops of Schleswig and Roeskild, and the Prince of Rugen.

Now, as these mostly Danish forces, numbering in total probably a few thousand men, traveled towards Estonia, there are two matters that need to be brought to everyone's attention. The first is that the Danes seem at the moment to be under the mistaken impression that Estonia has been subdued, and with native resistance now gone they wrongly believed that all they need to do is march into Estonia and claim it for Denmark. The second thing we need to note is that Bishop Theodoric, the Bishop of Estonia, seems to have split with Bishop Albert and is now travelling with the Danish army on its way to Reval.

Now, the Danish army, with its high level participants, arrived at Reval, which I mentioned last week is now called Tallinn and is the capital city of Estonia, and immediately began work demolishing the fort which the Estonians had built on the site, and then started work constructing a new, impressive Danish castle, a new, impressive castle from which the Danes could rule their newly secured land, the land of Estonia. Trouble was, no one had informed the Estonians that their land was now subject to Danish rule, and they were mightily surprised to see this vast army, for the fancy tents housing fancy people, busily ordering the construction of a massive castle in Reval.

So two large Estonian tribes, one from the region around Reval and one from the region around Harrien, decided that they needed to find out what was going on. They gathered their forces, consisting of a combined total of one or two thousand men, but kept these forces out of sight of the Danes. Then the Elders of the two tribes made their way up to the Danish camp at Reval. Henry of Livonia reports that the Elders made deceptive and peaceful overtures towards the Danes, who baptized them, gave them gifts, and sent them back to their people with big smiles and welcoming hugs.

However, three days later the combined Estonian armies launched an attack on Reval, taking the Danes completely by surprise. They attacked simultaneously in five separate places, with their aim being to find the King of Denmark, and kill him. Unfortunately, the Estonian information about what King Valdemar looked like, and which tent housed the Danish monarch, seemed to have been a little confused. The Estonians located the tent

which they believed housed King Valdemar and triumphantly killed its occupant. However, it wasn't King Valdemar's tent at all. It was Bishop Theodoric's.

With the Bishop of Estonia, Theodoric, the man who had been saved by a horse two decades earlier and had gone on to play a major role in the creation and expansion of Christian Livonia, now deceased, a lengthy hand-to-hand battle now commenced. At first, the Estonians had the upper hand. The surprised Danes were fleeing for their lives, with the Estonians hot on their heels, when the Prince of Rugan came to their rescue with his Slavic troops. With the Estonian attack now slowed, the engagement of the Slavic forces gave the Danes and Germans time to regroup. They re-joined the battle and turned the tide against the Estonians. Henry of Livonia reports that over one thousand Estonians were killed, with the rest of the pagan fighting men fleeing the slaughter.

With victory secured, the Danes returned to building their castle. As soon as it was complete, King Valdemar appointed his personal chaplain as the new Bishop of Estonia, and then sail back to Denmark, leaving the Danish Bishops and a fighting force of Danish troops behind for the winter, with instructions to baptize the local Estonians and hold Estonia for Denmark. In his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban reports that Bishop Theodoric's death marked a turning point in this Crusade. No Germans were now needed in Estonia. The senior clerics in Estonia and the men holding the land for the Church were now Danish.

Back in Livonia, Bishop Albert was busy doing what he did best: assessing the situation on the ground and resolving all the outstanding problems as quickly and effectively as he could, before he had to depart on his next recruitment drive. He had been approached by the Semigallians for assistance in their wars against the Lithuanians, and seeing a way to advance Christian interests, Bishop Albert had given the go ahead. In fact, William Urban notes that Bishop Albert had likely planned this move while he was still on his recruitment drive the previous season. William Urban notes that while he was at the court of the Danish King, Bishop Albert had appointed the head of the monastery at the mouth of the Daugava, Bernard zur Lippe, as the first Bishop of Semigallia.

So while the Danish forces were intending to head to Estonia and Bishop Theodoric was intending to accompany them, it seems likely that Bishop Albert's plans went ahead in the opposite direction, down south to the borderlands between Semigallian and Lithuanian territory. His ultimate plan was to secure the Semigallian stronghold at Mesoten, which would act as a protective outpost against any attacks from the south on Riga. In return for being baptized and submitting to Christian rule, the Semigallians of Mesoten welcomed the prospect of German forces occupying their town, despite the fact that it most likely meant war, not only with Lithuania but with other pagan Semigallian tribes.

It sounded like a great plan, but no sooner had German crusaders started the march south to Mesoten when word came in that the Russians of Pskov had invaded the land of the Letts to the north. So plans to march south were hurriedly abandoned, and the Sword Brothers, crusaders and German fighters all instead marched north, to confront the Russian invaders. But by the time the Germans arrived, the fighting was over. The Letts had already driven the Russians out of their territory, and were in the process of planning revenge attacks inside Russia itself. So the Germans marched further north into Estonia.

Now, at the moment, although the Danish King believes he has conquered Estonia, only the territory in the north of the region, around Reval, is actually under direct Danish control.

So the Germans decided that while they were there, they might as well attempt to conquer the independent Estonian tribes in southern Estonia. Now, by this time, there were only a handful of pagan Estonian tribes left. As usual, the German method of conversion didn't seem to involve an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the pagans, but instead to terrorize them into accepting forced conversion. And so began the Christianization of the last remaining pagan tribes in southern Estonia.

The Germans, along with their Livonian, Lett, and even Estonian allies, went on a destructive rampage. In every pagan settlement they came across, all the males were slaughtered, and the women and children taken captive and enslaved. Their homes were destroyed, along with any other buildings. Anything of value was taken, while everything else was destroyed. Livestock which couldn't be taken were driven away from their enclosures and set free. In his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban reports that thousands of Estonian pagan men were killed during these raids, but the devastatingly harsh approach ended up achieving the desired result. The Elders of the remaining Estonian tribes surrendered, and to save their people from being slaughtered and enslaved, all remaining pagan tribes pledged to accept baptism and conversion.

So by the end of this campaign of terror and subjugation, the situation in Estonia was as follows. All of mainland Estonia has now been Christianized. The northern part of Estonia, around Reval, was being directly occupied by the Danes, and the remainder of Estonia was technically under the control of the Archbishop of Lundt and the new Bishop of Estonia, now being called the Bishop of Reval, on behalf of their King Valdemar II of Denmark. So officially, Estonia now joins Livonia as a newly Christianized land.

But in a blow for Bishop Albert, while the Germans and their allies have been busy converting Estonians for the Danish crown, the people of Mesoten in Semigallia have had a change of heart. Possibly swayed by the arguments of their fellow pagan Semigallians, and quite possibly by the stories of German atrocities coming out of Estonia, they abandoned their new religion, and reconverted back to paganism, and Bishop Albert's plans to create a handy Christian buffer zone to the south of Riga vanished in a puff of pagan smoke.

So with mainland Estonia now converted and under the Danish wing, Bishop Albert's focus for his next winter campaign will be, you guessed it, Semigallia. Now, Bishop Albert decided to raid Semigallia in winter for a good reason. The region was full of rivers, swamps and marshland, which would have made it all but impossible to conquer in a traditional summer campaign, so winter was an obvious season to invade. The rivers, swamps and marshes would be frozen solid, and would provide no impediment to a large marching army. So winter campaign it was.

In February of the year 1220, Bishop Albert gathered together his usual mix of fighters from Riga, volunteer Crusaders, Sword Brothers, converted Livonian and Lett fighters, and forces led by Duke Albrecht of Saxony, and the 4,000 strong army marched southwards into Semigallian territory. Their target, unsurprisingly, was the fort of Mesoten, which had converted then de-converted the year before. The Germans surrounded the stronghold and let loose the full force of modern Latin Christian weaponry, attacking with lances, arrows and rocks hurled from their catapult machines. It was the rocks from the catapult machines which dismayed the pagan defenders the most. Like most other pagan fortresses, the stronghold at Mesoten was not constructed to withstand a sustained bombardment by rocks hurled from a catapult machine.

Here is Henry of Livonia describing the reaction of the defenders of Mesoten to a catapult attack by the Duke of Saxony's men, and I quote. "The larger machine was put up, and great rocks were cast at the fort. The men in the fort, seeing the size of the rocks, conceived a great terror. The Duke took charge of the machine, shot the first stone and crushed the enemy's balcony and the men in it. He shot a second one and dislodged the planks and logs of the rampart. He discharged a third one, pierced and shattered three large logs in the rampart and struck some men. After seeing this, the people in the fort fled from the ramparts and sought safer places, but since they had no refuge, they asked for quarter so they could come down and make their plea to the Bishop. They were told that they must give up the fort and everything in it in order to keep their lives. These terms displeased them. They returned to the fort and the fight waxed fiercer than before." End quote.

The defenders of Mesoten fought on, despite the fact that their fort was disintegrating around them under bombardment from the catapult machines, and despite the fact that many of them were injured. Realizing that these men just weren't going to surrender, fully armored Knights then attempted to climb the damaged ramparts to enter the fort, but again their attack was repelled. They then decided to smoke them out. Gathering piles of wood from the surrounding forests, the attackers built massive bonfires around the fort and lit them, hoping to force the defenders out or destroy the fort by fire. It didn't really work. I guess it's difficult to burn a fort down in the depths of a Baltic winter.

But by the next morning, the exhausted, wounded men of Mesoten had had enough, and they sent word to the Germans that they were willing to surrender. As the defenders were coming out of the fort however, a neighboring tribe of Semigallians launched a surprise attack on the Germans. Now, by this time only a handful of men from inside the fort had actually come out of the fort and surrendered. As soon as the surprise attack occurred, however, the terms of surrender were declared null and void. As most of the German army lined up to face the new attack, a group of Germans slew the men from Mesoten who had placed themselves in the hands of the Crusaders as part of their surrender. The Semigallians who had mounted the surprise attack quickly realised that they were outnumbered, and hastily withdrew.

The men inside the fort at Mesoten, having seen their brothers in arms who had placed themselves in German hands slaughtered, decided to fight to the death. And that's what happened. Once the siege was over and the defenders of Mesoten were all dead, the Germans destroyed the fort and started work on building a new German castle on the site. But this was to be no ordinary castle. No, this was to be the administrative center of Bishop Bernard's new diocese, a base from which he could Christianize the Semigallian region.

So, it sounds like the regions of Livonia, Estonia and now Semigallia are all under the Christian thumb, but not quite. While mainland Estonia has been officially Christianized, the Estonian pirates of Oesel are having none of it. They are still pagan and are still resisting. Join me next week as the pirates from Oesel do their best to drive Christianity out of Estonia. Until next week, bye for now.

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