

History of the Crusades. Episode 242. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXXIV. The Battle of Durbe.

Hello again. Last week we examined the lengthy period of strife in Prussia known as the First Prussian Insurrection, whereby a Polish Duke of Pomerelia, which lay adjacent to Prussia to the west, combined with local Prussians in an attempt to boot the Teutonic Knights from Prussia, and shut down once and for all the Prussian trading towns which were becoming increasingly wealthy. The Insurrection was ultimately unsuccessful and we ended last week's episode at the two years of peace which ran from 1257 to 1259, meaning that both of our Crusades, the Prussian and the Livonian, are now at the same point in their timelines.

Now, as we've mentioned before, these two years of peace were absolutely fabulous. Trade flourished, travelers could come and go as they pleased across the region without the need for armed escorts, and resources normally diverted into military coffers were being used to improve infrastructure and the like. Now, these two years were so good that everyone was kind of hoping that they would continue after the expiry of the formal truce. The Samogitians, along with everyone else, had benefited mightily from the increased trade and the lack of conflict, and perhaps if the Samogitians had had an influential leader along the same lines of Mindaugas of Lithuania, maybe Samogitia would have Christianized and become a peaceful nation, falling into line with other Christianized formerly pagan nations in the region.

But there was no King Mindaugas type figure waiting in the wings in Samogitia. Instead there were a bunch of tribal elders who were getting increasingly restless towards the end of the truce, and who yearned to be back in the field, raiding, plundering and doing what they did best. So, towards the end of the expiry period of the two year truce, the Samogitian elders threw a big party, and when the fighting men of Samogitia were sufficiently intoxicated, the elders took turns in making rousing speeches, urging the warriors to take up their weapons at the end of the truce, and honor their pagan gods by attacking some Christian converts. By the end of the evening the fighting men of Samogitia could think of nothing but the slaves, women, cattle, stores and horses which they were about to win, bringing booty for themselves and glory for their pagan gods. When the haze of alcohol cleared the elders formulated a plan. As soon as the truce expired, they would hit Kurland, and hit it hard.

Now, unfortunately for the Christians in the Baltic region, and for the Teutonic Order in particular, Livonia and Prussia are both about to enter some very trying times. As you have probably guessed the Samogitians are about to go back on the warpath, and their raid into Kurland will spark a pagan uprising which will eventually see Lithuania reject Christianity and will place Christianized Livonia at grave risk of being overrun by its pagan neighbors. Back in Prussia things won't be much better as, shortly after the expiry of the truce, local Prussian fighters will once again rise up and attempt to boot the Teutonic Order out of the region, in a conflict known as the Second Prussian Insurrection. So there will be a lot happening over the next few years, none of it good if you happen to be a Christian person living in the Baltic region, and the resources and the fighting capacity of the Teutonic Order will be stretched almost to breaking point.

So, with all this chaos and destruction about to be unleashed, where to begin? Well, we'll start in Livonia, with the Samogitian attacks on Kurland which commenced upon the expiration of the truce. Shortly after the truce expired a Samogitian raiding party ventured

into Kurland, to gain for themselves the booty they had been promised at the party thrown by the elders. Word was sent to Goldingen and Memel that the hopes of the Christians that the Samogitians may extend the truce and convert to Christianity had come to nothing, and that the Samogitians were back to their raiding, plundering, warlike ways. A large force of Teutonic Knights, Latin Christian fighters and Christianized Kurs gathered, and intercepted a Samogitian raiding force as it entered Kurland. The two forces clashed, and the resulting battle ended up in a devastating defeat for the Teutonic Order. A total of 33 Knights were killed by the Samogitians, and most of the Kurs, seeing the way the conflict was progressing, abandoned their German allies and fled the battlefield, with the few loyal Kurs who remained behind paying with their lives.

Not surprisingly this loss rocked the confidence and the morale of the Christian fighters. Also not surprisingly the opposite happened to the Samogitians. As news of their overwhelming victory against the Teutonic Knights made its way across Samogitia, fighting men from across the region made their way to the borderlands, keen to join their victorious pagan countrymen in the next battle against their Christian neighbors. They didn't have to wait long. The Samogitians formed themselves into a large army and made plans to once again move across the border into Kurland. The Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, Burchard von Hornhusen, sent messengers across the region, calling on Christian fighting men to gather in Riga to go to the assistance of the Kurs. Everyone except the Archbishop Albert of Riga answered the call, and a large army set out from Riga to march to Goldingen.

Now, as we all know, Goldingen is a stronghold built by the Teutonic Order in the middle of Kurland, so it was an ideal base from which the Order could monitor the activities of the Samogitian raiders. The large army camped outside the castle at Goldingen, and when word came in that some Samogitians had been seen near Memel, the army broke camp and moved southwards towards Memel. Christian scouts were sent ahead to try to locate the Samogitian army. When they reported that they had discovered a large and very well armed Samogitian fighting force, Master Burchard called a war council, and ended up deciding to split the Christian army into two parts: one would remain where they were and the other would ride out to confront the Samogitians. Unfortunately for the Christians though, the Samogitians also had scouts, and they observed half the Christian army leaving camp and heading towards Samogitia. The scouts reported back to the Samogitian elders who called a war council, and they made the decision to scatter and disband their army. The Samogitian warriors were ordered to leave and return to their homes as quickly as possible, which left the Christian forces wandering through the Samogitian wilderness, desperate to find an army which was no longer there. In the end, Master Burchard was forced to order both sections of the army to pack up and return to Livonia, without having scored any hits whatsoever against the Samogitians.

Now, the neighboring Semigallians had been observing these events with interest. They had seen the Samogitian pagans defeat one Christian army, and then the army the Christians had sent to seek revenge from the defiant pagans had returned empty handed. Anti-German sentiment began to grow in Semigallian political circles, which was not helped by an emergency tax which the Teutonic Order levied against the Semigallians, to help pay for the campaign against the Samogitians. The Semigallian elders met to discuss the situation, and made the bold decision to abandon Christianity and return to paganism. Not wishing to unduly antagonize the Teutonic Order however, they voted to remain neutral in the war between the Order and Samogitia, and they also allowed all the Teutonic Knights currently in Semigallia to leave peacefully.

Despite the Semigallian attempt at neutrality, the Teutonic Order decided that they couldn't just sit back and watch while the Semigallians embraced paganism once again, so Master Burchard set about raising a large army, with the aim of using it to subdue the Semigallians, and to build two new castles in Semigallia at Doblen and Karshowen, to prevent this sort of thing from happening again. Unfortunately for Master Burchard the attempt by the Order to defeat the Semigallians militarily was unsuccessful, so he was forced to be content with just building the castles, which proved to be quite a challenge in a land which was now hostile to the Christian cause. The Samogitians decided to come to the assistance of their newly-pagan-again neighbors by attempting to destroy the new castles, a ploy which was ultimately unsuccessful.

The creation of the two castles by the Teutonic Order got the Samogitians thinking, however. Clearly having a castle under your control in a hostile land was a really good idea. It provided a base from which you could subdue the surrounding region, and if you built it competently enough it was very difficult to destroy, as the Samogitians had just discovered. So, the Samogitians thought, why don't we build our own castle. So they did. They built one, in fact, just next door to the castle the Order had just built at Karshowen. So now the Samogitians have a castle inside Semigallia which they can use as a base for troops to attack Christian fighters stationed at Karshowen, effectively neutralizing the Order's attempts to crush the now pagan Semigallians. This of course didn't go down too well with the Teutonic Order, and Master Burchard decided that he needed to throw everything he had into efforts to defeat the Samogitians, so he came up with a new strategy.

Now, Master Burchard had been stationed in Samland in Prussia prior to becoming Master of the Order in Livonia, and he came up with a cunning plan. He decided to visit his old brothers-in-arms back in Prussia and see if they would be interested in mounting a joint military campaign along with their Livonian counterparts, gathering at Memel, which you may recall was on the Samogitian coast, then fighting their way through Samogitia to the new castle at Karshowen in Semigallia. It turns out that the Prussian Teutonic Knights were very interested in the idea of raiding into Samogitia and Semigallia with their old buddy, so huge armies gathered: one in Samland, comprised of brothers of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, a bunch of Samlanders and a contingent of crusaders recently arrived from the Holy Roman Empire; while in Livonia members of the Order in Livonia gathered, along with a bunch of warriors from Kurland and also some crusaders recently arrived from the Holy Roman Empire. The Prussian army set off from Samland, marching northwards towards Memel, while the Livonian army headed to Kurland then marched southwards down the coast to Memel.

Now, this combined army was pretty impressive. In his book "The Baltic Crusades" William Urban reports that there were around 150 Teutonic Knights in the fighting force, along with thousands of secular knights, crusaders and local fighters. They had no sooner joined forces at Memel when word came in of a large Samogitian raiding party wreaking havoc in southern Kurland, so the combined army gathered itself together and set off for Kurland, hoping to teach the pesky Samogitians a lesson. The army located the Samogitian fighters, around 4,000 of them, in the hills southwest of Goldingen, where they were returning from a successful raid into Kurland. So successful in fact that the Samogitians were weighed down with a goodly number of captives from Kurland, who they intended to use as slaves. A war council was convened by the Order and the Kurs requested that the captives from Kurland be released and set free following a Christian victory, but the other

native fighters represented within the council disagreed, arguing that the captives should be treated like any other war booty, and should be divided equally amongst the victorious parties inside the Christian army, to be released or used as slaves as they wished. The Kurs were then overruled in the war council, and this was to have disastrous consequences.

In June of the year 1260 the large combined Christian army arranged itself in battle formation in a field near the River Durbe, ready to battle the Samogitian raiders in a contest which would later become known as the Battle of Durbe. The battle was total disaster for the Christians. As soon as the fighting began to get fierce the fighters from Kurland decided to withdraw. Seeing their comrades from Kurland pack up and leave the battlefield, the Estonians decided that the day must be lost, and they withdrew as well. This broke the Christian battle formation, and as the Samogitians moved in to take advantage of the broken Christian lines panic took over and the entire Teutonic army began to run for their lives, all the while being pursued by the Samogitians.

When the dust finally settled, the extent of the Samogitian victory became apparent. Around 150 Teutonic Knights had been killed, with the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle reporting that only one Knight from the Teutonic Order survived the battle. Master Burchard was amongst those killed, along with the Marshall of the Prussian Teutonic forces. Here is how the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle describes the Battle of Durbe, and I quote. "In those hours there was a battle so bloody and hard that on both sides many fell dead. The disaster lasted long and it ended for the Christians as God had ordained. The heathens held the victory and the Brothers lost, their forces fleeing and weakened because of the low trick of turning and running. Among the dead lay 150 Brothers and so many of the other Christians that I cannot estimate the number. May God, who can count everything, repay them with eternal rewards." End quote.

If you are thinking that this major defeat spells bad news for the Latin Christians, you would be right. In fact the ramifications of the loss were massive and far-reaching, extending from Livonia all the way across the land corridor and into Prussia. Here's a nice summary of the effects of the Battle of Durbe from William Urban, and I quote: "The defeat nullified the gains of twenty years of warfare. Large parts of Semigallia and Kurland went over to the pagans, and fierce revolts broke out in Prussia and Livonia. It was to take fifteen years for the Teutonic Knights to recover the territories in Prussia and thirty years in Livonia". End quote.

Oh dear. Join me next week as we take a look at the fallout from the Battle of Durbe from the Livonian perspective. Until next week, bye for now.

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