

Episode 260

The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part 1. Setting The Scene.

Hello again. Last week we saw the civil war between the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic order and the citizens of Riga continue. We saw the new Archbishop of Riga, Archbishop Friedrich, take the side of the Rigans in the conflict, writing a stinging letter to Rome pointing out all the terrible wrongs perpetrated by the Teutonic Order. Archbishop Friedrich traveled to Avignon to follow up on the issues he raised in his letter but was informed by Pope Clement V that he would need to wait a couple of years before the matter could be heard.

Now, we've spent the past few episodes on the situation in Livonia, and now the timeline sits around the year 1309. But, you might ask, what has been happening in Prussia at this time. Well, all has been pretty much quiet on the Prussian front. We saw, back in Episode 255, that following the defeat of the Fifth Prussian Insurrection in 1295, peace came to Prussia. And with peace came a flood of new immigrants, mostly from the Holy Roman Empire. Now, these newcomers brought new farming techniques with them, meaning that the land the immigrants farmed tended to be more productive than the land farmed in the traditional manner by the native Prussians. Higher productivity of course equals greater profits, and we saw in Episode 255 that clear divisions were starting to form between the native Prussians and the new peasant arrivals. The Teutonic Order in Prussia observed this split and decided to address it by forcing the Prussians to diversify and rotate their crops, and to adopt the efficient three-field system which was all the rage in central Europe.

Now, for those who don't know, here's a quick primer on farming. If you have a large field and you plant it with the same crop each year, eventually that field will become less and less productive as the soil is leached of the nutrients required to grow the crop. Today that issue is largely addressed by the use of commercial fertilizers, but back in medieval times the problem was addressed by crop rotation. So, instead of sowing your field with the same crop year in, year out, you divided the field into three separate plots. On lot A you grew the grain that you always grew, on plot B you grew something entirely different, a different grain or vegetable, and plot C you left empty, allowing the soil to rest and recover. The next year you rotated the plots, so you would grow your staple plot in plot B, your additional crop in plot C, and leave plot A to rest. You kept rotating your plots year after year, and the yields didn't drop, as the soil was always given a chance to recover.

The immigrant farmers brought this system to Prussia, but the local Prussians weren't at all keen to adopt it. To address this problem, the Teutonic Order forced them to adopt it because, after all, higher yields meant higher taxes. Unfortunately, the Order decided to increase the land allotted to the Prussians to enable them to leave one third of their land fallow each year without losing income. This sounds good - everyone wants free land don't they - but in reality it meant shifting Prussians off their traditional lands and relocating them into larger villages. The Prussians objected strongly to this. William Urban points out, in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" that there were likely numerous religious and cultural reasons for the Prussians preferring their traditional lands and their traditional farming methods. And in the end, to keep the peace, the Teutonic Order allowed most of them to keep their small plots and pay less taxes. To compensate for this the Order welcomed the high-tax-paying productive farmers from the Holy Roman Empire with open arms.

With the newcomers came the cultural practices of central Europe, and Prussia quickly progressed from being a newly christianized backwater to being, essentially, part of central Europe. Unlike Livonia, which was still pretty isolated (the frozen Baltic Sea meant that sea passage to Riga was impossible for a goodly portion of the year, and the land route taken to get from Prussia to Livonia via Kurland was dangerous enough to make most travelers think twice about making the journey) Prussia was actually right next door to Poland, and only really a hop, skip and a jump away from the Holy Roman Empire.

Now, while we are covering the situation on the ground in Prussia in the early 1300s, we should take a quick look at how Christianity is faring in this region which was defiantly pagan not so long ago. Churches are now established throughout Prussia, but there aren't enough priests to fill them all, and most of the priests who are willing to come and settle in Prussia preferred to live amongst the German-speaking folk, making few attempts to acquire the ability to preach to the Prussians in their native language. As such, although the more obvious pagan practices such as polygamy and human sacrifice have been outlawed, and despite the fact that most Prussians obediently attend church, the old pagan practices still survive, although paganism has been driven underground, with worshipers only practicing their religion in private, or in gatherings deep in the safety of the forests. But, all in all, by the year 1309, in comparison to the train wreck which is Livonia at the current time, Prussia is steaming ahead as a model of how you successfully conquer a pagan region, and annex it to Latin Christendom. William Urban has this to say about Prussia at this point in time, and I quote.

“Thus it was that by 1310 Prussia was no longer the rural isolated backward land which had existed eight decades before. It had become a western style state, with numerous small cities, proud castles, and international trade, and undoubted, if modest, prosperity. A visitor who knew how it had been before, and now proceeded from Thorn to Kolm, Marienverder, Marienberg, Elbing and up the coast to Konigsberg, could not help being impressed. The nobles, both the native knights and the immigrant Germans and Poles were well-to-do. The farmers benefited from peace and order, the burgers were thriving behind their stout walls. Responsible for this were the wise policies of the Teutonic Knights. Prussia has one law, one centralized government and one currency. It was free from civil strife and foreign invasion, still had vacant lands that attracted settlers and investments, and it was ruled by men of skill and vision”. End quote.

By the end of the year 1309, Grand Master Siegfried von Feuchtwangen had transferred the headquarters of the entire Teutonic Order from Venice to Marienberg in Prussia, which was another confirmation of just how far Prussia had progressed in its efforts to emulate European Latin Christendom. But of course, the Grand Master, looking out over Prussia, was concerned about matters to the east. Livonia needed to be brought into line, and needed to reach the same point in its development as Prussia. To do this, Livonia needed to sort out its internal problems and get the Lithuanians to back out of Livonian affairs. It also needed to re-establish the land corridor with Prussia.

Kurland and Samogalia were under the Christian thumb, but to get from Prussia to Kurland or Samogalia, you had to pass through Samogitia. The Samogitians were not showing any sign whatsoever of wishing to raise the white flag and convert to Christianity, and they were being assisted in their defiance by their close allies the Lithuanians. So, basically, the Grand Master, had he been considering the situation from his headquarters in Prussia, would have arrived at two inevitable conclusions.

The first conclusion was that to get Livonia up to speed and on the same prosperous page as Prussia, Livonia's borders needed to be secured and the land corridor between Prussia and Livonia needed to be cleared of pagans. The second conclusion was, in order to achieve this objective, Samogitia needed to be defeated and converted to Christianity, along with their chief ally, and the chief meddler in Livonian affairs, Lithuania. Really, the Samogitian problem and the Lithuania problem were one and the same, and couldn't be separated. So much so that, remember how I said we would be proceeding with episodes on the Samogitian Crusade, the Lithuanian Crusade and the Livonian Crusade, well I'm scrapping that before we even get properly underway. Trying to separate the Samogitian Crusade and the Lithuanian Crusade is just too tricky, so I will be rolling those Crusades into one, under the heading of the Samogitian Crusade. So, moving forward, we will be covering the events in the Baltic region under two separate headings: the Livonian Crusade and the Samogitian Crusade.

Now, Lithuania at this point in time was in a really handy position. It was located in the high country a couple of hundred kilometers inland from the coast, next to Russia. Basically, if you were a giant, you could stand in the high country inside Lithuania, with Russia at your back, and gaze down towards the Baltic coastline; down to your right would be Livonia; right in front of you would be Samogitia; to your left would be Prussia; and to your far left would be Poland. Now, Lithuania was blessed with rivers, plenty of rivers. And these rivers of course all ran down from Lithuania towards the coast. In fact, these rivers all ran through the different regions. So, you could pop in a boat in Lithuania and, depending on which river system you chose, without too much drama you would find yourself sailing merrily downstream into Livonia, Samogitia, Prussia or even Poland. This was one reason why raiders from Lithuania were able to penetrate so easily into these territories. Of course, to do the reverse, and attack Lithuania by entering Lithuania via one of its rivers, wasn't as easy as you would be forced to make your way upstream the whole way.

The plan the Teutonic Order came up with in the early 1300s to conquer the remaining pagan regions, protect Livonia, and establish the land corridor, was to push into Samogitia from their castles across Samogalia and Kurland. They would raid across Samogitia, attacking settlements, destroying strongholds, and destroying crops until the Samogitians were weakened sufficiently to surrender. The Order would then occupy Samogitia, and proceed inland to Lithuania, up the Nemunas River. Now, Samogitia needed to be conquered first, as they had strongholds along the Nemunas river, which protected it from attack. Today, the Nemunas River has its origins in Belarus. It flows through Lithuania, then heads down towards the sea. Its final 100 or so kilometres form the border between modern day Lithuania and the Russian territory of Kaliningrad Oblast. All up, the river is some 900 km long. Back in the 14th century the river originated in Lithuania, then flowed along the border between Lithuania and the Russian Principality of Polotsk, before running through the heart of Lithuania, then down through Samogitia and finally through territory controlled by the Latin Christians. Ragnat castle, in fact, lay along the banks of the Nemunas River, to the north of Samland. Then the river finally emptied into the Baltic Sea.

So the good news is that the lower reaches of the river are in safe territory, and the further good news is that the next section of the river, the part which flowed through Samogitia was easily navigable. However, the further you went upstream the trickier the river became if you were trying to use it to transport a Crusader army into the heart of Lithuania. Here is William Urban's view on the difficulties posed by using the river as an entry point into Lithuania, and I quote.

“It was not entirely suitable for military expeditions. As one went upstream, sandbars and logjams made navigation ever more difficult until one passed the juncture of the Neris river that led to Vilnius. Upstream, unpassable rapids required more portages than military forces could afford. Even on the lower river the channel twisted between bluffs and amongst islands in ways that permitted defenders to build obstructions which could slow down the progress of any hostile fleet. Here and there, Samogitian forts protected the obstacles.”
End quote.

OK, so the Nemunas River is a bit tricky to traverse. But still we have a plan for the Samogitian / Lithuanian Crusade: subdue Samogitia, then head up the Nemunas River into Lithuania, and defeat that as well, bringing Christianity to the entire Baltic region, and establishing a land corridor between Prussia and Livonia. Woohoo! Well, it may sound easy, but it won't be. In fact, the Samogitian Crusade will last around 100 years. Yes, you heard that right. One hundred years.

Right, well with 100 years of battles, conflict and crusading ahead of us, we'd better get started.

Now, the Grand Duke of Lithuania at this time is a man called Vytenis. He has emerged as the leader of Lithuania following the civil unrest which had erupted following the death of Mindaugas, and in fact, Vytenis will rule Lithuania for twenty years before dying unexpectedly from an unknown cause in the year 1315. We've seen from recent episodes how Vytenis has also been busy forming alliances with local Latin Christians, namely the citizens of Riga, to advance his goal of defeating the Teutonic Order. In February of 1311, Vytenis used the Nemunas River to raid into Samland and Natangia, a raid which was highly successful and netted him 500 captives. Master Friedrich of Prussia viewed this as an excellent opportunity to strike back at the Lithuanians, and to make a start on his plan to secure the lower part of the Nemunas River where it ran through Samogitia. So he gathered an army and rode out from Konigsberg in pursuit of the Lithuanian raiders. The Teutonic army managed to sneak up on the Lithuanians while they were celebrating their victory with an impressive feast, and were occupied divvying up the booty and prisoners they had captured. The Lithuanians were taken totally by surprise, and the Teutonic Order scored a comprehensive and much-celebrated victory. However, Vytenis himself escaped and the next few years will see almost constant warfare between the Prussian branch of the Teutonic Order, who fought to drive out the Lithuanians from the lower reaches of the Nemunas River, and Grand Duke Vytenis, who fought to maintain a presence along the river.

Join me next week as the two greatest military commanders of the age are pitted against each other: Grand Duke Vytenis of Lithuania in one corner of the ring, and Heinrich von Plotzke of the Prussian Chapter of the Teutonic Order in the other corner. Until next week, bye for now.

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