

History of the Crusades. Episode 279. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XII. A Failed Conversion.

Now, before we get to this week's episode, I have a correction to make from two episodes ago. Back in Episode 277 I mentioned that the Henry Bolingbroke who attempted to go crusading to Lithuania, was the Henry Bolingbroke who ended up becoming King Henry IV. Well, it turns out that that was entirely incorrect. The Henry Bolingbroke who tried to go on Crusade is actually the grandfather of the Henry Bolingbroke who became King Henry IV. Just to make things even more confusing, the Henry Bolingbroke who became King Henry IV did actually join the Baltic Crusades, but not until much later on our timeline. A big shout out and thank you goes to Mark Suters, who has been doing a fine job transcribing episodes on the Baltic Crusades, for pointing this out, which goes to show that having a transcriber who also fact checks is a very fine thing. So thanks, Mark.

Okay, so last week we saw relations between the Teutonic Order and the Kingdom of Poland deteriorate following the Order's seizure of the Mazovian town of Dobrin. Pope Innocent VI and his former student, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV of Bohemia, did their best to remedy the situation, but nothing they did prevented the relationship between the two regional powers from becoming rather troubled. We left last week's episode with the news that the Archbishop of Prague had been appointed to travel to Vilnius in Lithuania to negotiate the conversion of the two Lithuanian leaders Kestutis and Algirdas to Christianity. Now, before we go ahead and follow the Archbishop on his bid to bring Christianity to the Lithuanian pagans, we should pause for a moment to discuss Livonia.

Now some of you may have noticed that we haven't mentioned Livonia since Episode 274, our last episode on the Estonian Insurrection. Well, there's a reason for that, the reason being that really nothing is happening in Livonia or Estonia at the moment. Okay, well, that's not entirely correct, of course, things are happening, lots of things are happening, but nothing which needs concern us. The Lithuanians and the Russians are leaving Livonia and Estonia alone while they concentrate on the bigger prizes available in Poland and Prussia, so the Livonians are really just keeping to themselves, establishing an administrative framework over in the new possession Estonia, and are recovering from the ravages of the plague, so nothing of relevance to the Baltic Crusades. So we will leave Estonia and Livonia in a holding pattern for the time being, and return to the region when the Crusading spotlight shines down upon it once again.

Now back to the mission to convert the Lithuanians. As we mentioned in last week's episode, the Archbishop of Prague, along with his distinguished entourage, made their way to Konigsberg in Prussia in October of 1358. They left Prussia to make the trek to Vilnius, and

everyone back in Prussia sat back and waited with bated breath for the Archbishop's return, with the best case scenario being that Kestutis and Algirdas would accompany the Archbishop to Prussia in December, so that the Order could play host to a spectacular Christmas baptism ceremony for the two pagan rulers. So they sat back and waited eagerly, only to see a despondent and dejected-looking Archbishop trudge back into Konigsberg in the cold winter weather.

Apparently, the negotiations had gone rather badly. The Lithuanians had started the talks by demanding that huge portions of Latin Christian territory in Prussia, Samogitia, and Livonia be handed over to Lithuania, and they then made the rather bold demand that the Teutonic Order transfer its headquarters from Prussia to the Russian steppes. Shockingly, the Order wouldn't be provided with any territory of its own in Russia. They would just be there to provide muscle for the Lithuanians against the Tartar rulers. Lithuania would still retain all of its Russian territory.

Here's a description provided by William Urban in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" of the offer made by the Lithuanians. The description is interesting as it shows how the Lithuanian leaders viewed the geography of the region. Instead of adopting the names for the regions allocated by the Latin Christians, they tended to refer to the different regions outside Lithuania by their proximity to various rivers, lakes and seas. Okay, here's the Lithuanians describing what territory they want, and I quote. "First from Mazovia to the source of the Alle River, thence down the Alle to the place where it flows into the Pregel and goes on to the sea; from there to the Salt Sea, to the place where the Daugava flows into the sea, then up the Daugava to the place where there is a river flowing out of Lake Labon into the Daugava, and up that river to the place where it goes into Russia. And they demanded that the Order remove itself to the wilderness between the Tartars and the Russians, to defend them from the attacks by the Tartars, although they would not have any territory of their own amongst the Russians, but all of Russia would belong to the Lithuanians alone. And, they said, If you can accomplish these conditions, we will submit to the Emperor." End quote.

Now, when the Archbishop and his team sat down to work out which Latin Christian regions were covered by this demand, they realized with horror that the Lithuanians were asking for most of Eastern Prussia, including Samland and Sudovia, along with Semigallia, Kurland and a huge chunk of southeastern Livonia. On top of this, the demand that the Teutonic Order remove itself from Prussia and transplant itself to the front line of the battleground between the Russian principalities controlled by Lithuania and those under rule by the Tartar Khans would, in William Urban's view, have been a suicidal move for the military order. So the offer was completely out of the question. Apparently, when the delegation attempted to talk the Lithuanians down from their demands to a more palatable position, the Lithuanians laughed

at them. Then they became insulting, leaving the Archbishop and his retinue of the view that perhaps the whole offer to convert had been a sham, just an opportunity to have a bit of fun with the Latin Christians, and see if they could entice them to journey all the way to Vilnius, and take them for a bit of a ride.

Once the disappointing outcome had been processed back in Königsberg, one thing became clear. The goal of converting the pagan Lithuanians to Latin Christianity via peaceful means was now seen as an unrealistic outcome to pursue. First the Teutonic Order, then the Holy Roman Emperor, then the Pope, all came to the same conclusion. The only way forward now was to force the Lithuanians to turn their backs on paganism by way of military might. So as far as the Lithuanians were concerned, it was out with negotiation and in with Crusading.

And actually this was really good news for the Teutonic Order. As William Urban points out, had the Lithuanians made genuine efforts to negotiate their conversion to Christianity, and had that outcome actually been achieved, this would likely have had a devastating effect on the long term interests of the Teutonic Order. The whole existence of the Order in the Baltic region was justified by their need to fight and convert pagans. If there were no pagans to convert, where would that leave the Teutonic Order? Instead of having to grapple with a possible threat to their continued existence in the region, the conduct of the Lithuanians meant that their peaceful conversion was now permanently off the table, and this breathed new life into the Baltic Crusades.

So, back we venture out onto the Crusade battlegrounds, although for the moment at least, the Kingdom of Poland will be sitting on the sidelines. King Casimir has decided to make peace with the Lithuanians, and to ensure that his peace treaty will endure. He has offered the hand in marriage of one of his grandsons, Casimir of Stettin, to one of Algirdas' daughters. The couple were married in the year 1360, with everyone hoping that young Casimir may eventually inherit the Polish throne, uniting the Polish and Lithuanian ruling families once again. (You may remember that King Casimir's first wife, Anna, was the daughter of the Lithuanian ruler Gediminas.) Unfortunately, this wasn't to be, as Algirdas' daughter died in the year 1368, eight years into the marriage.

Anyway, everyone other than Poland was now about to throw themselves enthusiastically back into the Baltic Crusades. Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode announced that the next goal of the Teutonic order was to establish some permanently-garrisoned bases along the banks of the Nemunas River in Samogitia. This would mean that the crusading strategy of recent times, of venturing forth from Prussia into Samogitia, raiding for a short time, then retreating back to Prussia, would be abandoned in favour of establishing a number of permanent Latin Christian military bases in the heart of Samogitia.

This meant that castles would need to be built. The Grand Master personally supervised the commencement of the construction of a castle that he unimaginatively named Neuhaus, or "New castle", just across the Nemunas River from Tilsit, where the Order had previously built a structure. Construction of Neuhaus commenced in the year 1360. At the same time, the newly appointed Marshal of the Teutonic Order, a man called Henning Schindekopf, was ordered to supervise the construction of a castle on the Samogitian coastline, just to the north of where the Nemunas River emptied into the Baltic Sea. This castle was to be called Windenberg. Now, for Marshall Henning, this part of Samogitia was like a home-away-from-home. He had spent most of his career prior to being appointed Marshall as the castellan of Ragnit Castle, Ragnit being not far up-river from the new Neuhaus Castle, and to the south east of Windenberg Castle. While everyone was in a castle-building mood, the Grand Master ordered a further two castles to be built along the route from Samogitia to Kurland.

With the four castles all complete, a large crusading force mustered, and made its way up-river to the pagan fortress of Welun. The Crusaders then scored a spectacular victory, with the fortress and pagan settlement of Welun being so thoroughly beaten and subdued that, according to William Urban, it was barely heard of in chronicles after that time.

The next bit of crusading excitement occurred in the year 1361. Some English crusaders, led by a man called Thomas Spencer, were stationed in Samogitia and had settled in to stay for a year or so, and a bunch of crusaders from Saxony in the Holy Roman Empire were making their way back to Prussia after a successful season of crusading. The Saxon crusaders were under the leadership of Duke Albrecht of Saxony. As the Saxons were re- entering Prussia, they were approached by some Teutonic Knights with the news that an army of Lithuanians, led by both the Lithuanian leaders, Kestutis and Algirdas, had been spotted entering the region of Galindia, which was located to the north of Mazovia and to the west of Sudovia. The Teutonic Knights suggested that the Saxon crusaders and the English crusaders both make their way southwards towards Galindia, then attempt to intercept the Lithuanians before they retreated back to Lithuania. The Crusaders happily agreed, and they raced southwards. It turned out that they not only managed to locate the Lithuanians, they managed to completely surprise them, attacking a group of Lithuanians who were busy pillaging a local settlement. The Crusaders managed to kill 130 Lithuanians, while only suffering 14 casualties themselves. The Crusaders then spread out, intending to find and attack the rest of the Lithuanians and their leaders. Algirdas fled the area, managing to outdistance the Crusaders, whose horses were tired from their long trek to the battlefield. Kestutis, though, was captured by the Crusaders, while Kestutis' son Patrick, lost his horse but managed to escape on foot. The triumphant Crusaders hauled Kestutis off to Marienburg, where, as an extra bonus they

arrived on Palm Sunday, giving everyone except Kestutis the impression that the capture of the Lithuanian leader was a divine gift.

Kestutis was then taken to a room inside the castle. As a chronicler at the time reported, and I quote, "they put him into a certain room, watched by two Knights during the day, but none by night" end quote. Turns out they should have had someone watching him by night as well, because in November of 1361, Kestutis staged an extremely impressive escape from captivity. He had made contact with a Lithuanian who worked inside the castle. The Lithuanian had converted to Christianity, but Kestutis managed to convince the man to release him from his cell late one night, or probably more accurately, very early one morning. This next bit is rather impressive. The cell Kestutis had been housed in was located in the basement of the castle. Presumably the access point out of the basement was guarded, so Kestutis climbed inside the basement fireplace and shimmied up the inside of the chimney to the next floor. Emerging from the (thankfully unlit) fireplace, he cleaned himself up, then managed to find a Teutonic Knight's cloak, which he draped across himself, then he made his way confidently through the castle without being recognized or stopped by anyone. He found his way to the stables, where the Grand Master's horse had been groomed and saddled, ready to take the Grand Master on an early morning ride. Kestutis mounted the horse and rode it out of Marienburg Castle through the main gate, again without being stopped by anyone. By the time the sun had risen, Kestutis had managed to hide himself in a nearby swamp, where he stayed for most of the day, as the frantic men from Marienburg Castle searched all the roads leading to Lithuania. Kestutis then outwitted his captors for a final time by heading not towards Lithuania but in the other direction, towards Mazovia. His sister lived in Mazovia, and she was able to assist him to make his way safely back to Lithuania.

Well, that's as impressive an example of an escape as you'll find anywhere. I'm certainly impressed, as were, apparently, many Latin Christians, and the reputation of the Lithuanian leaders as creative, bold improvisers in military matters grew further. In fact, after this event, Kestutis became a bit of a folk hero, and tales of his exploits were told and re-told around fireplaces, not just in Lithuania but across Poland and Prussia as well. Some of the tales included how Kestutis had kidnapped a beautiful Samogitian girl in his younger days, then later married her. Stories were also told about his interactions with the Crusaders and how he had managed to slip out of their grasp time and time again during his military career. In short, Kestutis ended up becoming a sort of a pagan version of the semi-legendary figure we have encountered before, Martin von Golan.

Well, Kestutis is going to need all the legendary prowess he can muster, because the Crusade against the Samogitians and the Crusade against the Lithuanians is about to reach a whole new level. Join me next week as a huge Crusader force invades Samogitia in the year

1362. Until next week, bye for now.

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