

History of the Crusades. Episode 230. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXVII. Trouble for the Sword Brothers.

Hello again. Last week we saw the extraordinary rise and fall of Baldwin of Alna. Determined to get his own back on the Sword Brothers, Baldwin had traveled to Italy to tell Pope Gregory IX of the terrible deeds committed by the religious Order established by the late Bishop Albert. As a result Pope Gregory send Baldwin back to Livonia to deal with the issue, giving him the sweeping powers of a full Papal Legate, as well as appointing him as the Bishop of Semigallia and the Bishop of Kurland. Baldwin did travel back to Livonia to deal with the issue and ended up effectively at war with the Sword Brothers, who overthrew their conciliatory Master in order to take up arms against the Papal Legate.

The Sword Brothers came out victorious in the military conflict which followed, forcing Baldwin to flee to the castle at Dunamunde. In the meanwhile, the Papal Legate William of Modena had been made aware of the situation, and had convinced Pope Gregory to terminate Baldwin's appointment. William of Modena then requested to be sent back to Livonia to sort everything out, and Pope Gregory granted his request. As you can imagine Baldwin did not go quietly back to his monastery and his former life as an unimportant, anonymous monk. Furious at being bested once again, he declared his enemies in Livonia to be heretics, and attempted, without success, to get the Inquisition to inquire into their activities. In the end, though, he was forced to admit defeat, and left Livonia to return to the Holy Roman Empire.

In his book "The Baltic Crusade" William Urban reports that Baldwin's only lasting legacy in Livonia was the downfall of the Cistercian Order. The Cistercians had stood by Baldwin's side during all of his confrontations, and had remained steadfastly loyal to him during his tumultuous time in Livonia. As a consequence their influence in the region fell with Baldwin's departure, and they were eventually replaced by the Dominicans. William of Modena finally arrived back in Livonia in the year 1234, having been delayed by requests that he try to settle the dispute between the Archbishop of Bremen and his rebellious peasants, before he left. As soon as he arrived he got straight to work. He annulled all the actions taken by Baldwin, and oversaw a redistribution of lands, giving a larger share to the Sword Brothers. William Urban points out that, in doing this, William of Modena wasn't surrendering any of the rights of the Papacy, although oddly, by settling the civil unrest in Livonia by restoring rights to the Sword Brothers, he put in place a sequence of events which would eventually result in the downfall and collapse of the Order.

Now, before we turn to the beginning of the demise of the Sword Brothers, we need to turn the clock back for a minute and head back to Saxony, because events have been unfolding there while we've been distracted by the Prussian Crusade, and by Baldwin of Alna's antics in Livonia. You'll be happy to know that these events concern our old friend King Valdemar the Second of Denmark. Remember him? Yes, old King Valdemar. King Thank-You-Very-Much-I'll-Take-Saxony Valdemar. King Thank-You-Very-Much-I'll-Take-Estonia Valdemar. Well, you can't keep a good King down, and despite his defeat at the Battle of Bornhoved, King Valdemar is once again pulling his chair up to the table to play his hand in the politics of Saxony and the politics of Estonia.

Now, his defeat at the Battle of Bornhoved saw Denmark expelled from Saxony, and King Valdemar wisely decided against another invasion of Saxony. No, this time he was going to use diplomacy and politics and not warfare to insert Denmark into a position of influence

inside the Holy Roman Empire. His priority was to establish Danish authority over the thriving port city of Lubeck, and his opening came with the marriage of a Danish Prince to the daughter of Adolf IV of Holstein. The marriage united the interests of Denmark and Holstein, and the two powers decided to blockade Lubeck by both land and sea. This, of course, affected both trade and the passage of crusaders to Riga, so William of Modena was called in to try and mediate the dispute.

The merchants, however, decided to take matters into their own hands. They managed to get Duke Albrecht of Saxony to force Count Adolf of Holstein to terminate the land blockade, and then, somewhat surprisingly, the merchants themselves managed to force the Danish navy away from Lubeck. Deciding that they might as well see what else they could do while things were going so well for them, they then liberated a few trading cities nearby on the Baltic coastline, and this collection of merchant dominated trading cities signed treaties with each other, minted their own coins, formed trading alliances, and formed the basis for the future foundation of the Hanseatic League, an incredibly powerful and influential commercial federation which would dominate trade in the Baltic region for the next few centuries.

Having lost his hold over Lubeck, King Valdemar then decided to turn his attention to the other conquest from his glory days, Estonia. Now, by this time William of Modena had been in Livonia for around a year, and was struggling to get everything back under control. The Sword Brothers, never popular at the best of times, had made some new enemies during the Baldwin of Alna debacle, and were attempting, without success, to improve their standing among some of the powerful local families and groups in Livonia. As usual the Sword Brothers were short of money and short of recruits. King Valdemar requested that Estonia be returned to Denmark, but the Sword Brothers refused. To the Order, land meant income, and every single coin of income was vital for a military organization stretched to breaking point across its vast territories. Without a steady inflow of new recruits and without a steady inflow of new crusaders to bolster their ranks, the only way forward for the Order that Master Volquin could see was to use the men it held to conquer more land in order to gain more income.

Now, just as an aside here, last time we checked in with Master Volquin, he had been arrested and detained by the Sword Brothers for promoting a policy of conciliation with Baldwin of Alna. After Baldwin's demise however, the Order restored him to position of Master, which is why he is calling the shots now, just in case you were wondering.

So, as the newly restored Master Volquin cast his eye around looking for a region to invade, he didn't have many good options. All of Livonia and Estonia was now in Christian hands, and neighboring Semigallia and Kurland had also been taken. So really, the only valid target Master Volquin could identify for his expansionist activities was one which no-one had dared to take on before. Yes, that's right, Master Volquin decided that the Sword Brothers should invade and attempt to conquer Lithuania.

Now, for an Order which was depleted of men and struggling financially, the Sword Brothers actually did pretty well in their first battle with the Lithuanians. With their numbers bolstered by ranks of Christianized Estonians, Letts and Livonians, Master Volquin led the Sword Brothers on a successful campaign into Lithuania in the year 1235, concentrating his effort on attacking a Lithuanian stronghold near the southern borders of Livonia. The Lithuanians came out in force to defend their territory, but the Sword Brothers were victorious, with a chronicler reporting that 2,000 Lithuanians fell on the battlefield. So, in

their first battle against the pagan Lithuanians the Sword Brothers emerged victorious. Woohoo! But where did that leave them?

Well it soon dawned on Master Volquin that this great victory may not have achieved much for the Order at all. Winning a single battle against the warlike, aggressive Lithuanians didn't mean that they would now roll over and cede their lands to the Order. No, Lithuania would have to be conquered slowly, piece by piece, with the Lithuanians putting up stiff resistance every step of the way. It dawned on Master Volquin that conquering Lithuania was going to take years, and the Order just didn't have the resources for such a lengthy and difficult campaign. If they were going to survive they needed money and land now, not years into the future, so Master Volquin was going to have to come up with another plan.

The situation the Sword Brothers were in was really quite desperate by this stage. There was every chance that King Valdemar might turn his attention to invading and reconquering Estonia, and with Pope Gregory not exactly a fan of the Order, he could also make life difficult for them.

Master Volquin had been following the progress of the Prussian Crusade, and had no doubt watched enviously as the Teutonic Knights had moved across Prussia: conquering the land, Christianizing the pagans, and establishing themselves firmly at the top of the pecking order in Prussia, ensuring that the merchants, the new immigrants and even the Church stayed in their rightful places, firmly under the rule of the Teutonic Order.

Then Master Volquin had a light-bulb moment. What if the word Brothers formed an alliance with the Teutonic Order? They would then have the resources and the backing of the powerful Teutonic Knights, which would give them the opportunity to repeat the success of the Teutonic Order across Lithuania, as well as in Estonia and Livonia. The money problems, their conflict with Pope Gregory, and their lack of manpower would all cease to be an issue, and the Sword Brothers could rise to their rightful place at the top of the pecking order in the region. It sounded like a good plan, and Master Volquin decided to put it into action. An approach was made to the Teutonic Order on behalf of the Sword Brothers. William Urban speculates that Master Volquin's son, who was born, incidentally, before Master Volkwin entered service as a Sword Brother, who was also, helpfully, a member of the Teutonic Order, may have been involved in the negotiations.

But it all came to nothing. The Teutonic Order sent two Knights to Livonia to obtain information about the proposal, and the report they produced from this fact finding mission was not favorable. Why? Well, because while it was pretty clear what benefits would flow to the Sword Brothers from the deal, the benefits which would flow to the Teutonic Order were less apparent. Basically the Sword Brothers wished to make use of the wealth, prestige and manpower of the Teutonic Order to acquire more land and consolidate their holdings in Livonia, Estonia and Lithuania. However, they weren't willing to give the Teutonic Order any land inside Estonia, Livonia or Lithuania, and the Sword Brothers also wished to maintain their autonomy: they weren't prepared to be absorbed into the larger and more prestigious Teutonic Order in exchange for their assistance in the Baltic region. So there was little, if any, benefit to be gained by the Teutonic Order from this plan, so they rejected it.

This blow to the Sword Brothers was followed by some bad news from Rome. Apparently Baldwin of Alna was failing to embrace his new status as an ordinary monk from an ordinary monastery in the Holy Roman Empire, and had written to Pope Gregory detailing

a list of charges against the Sword Brothers, charges which included the serious allegations of heresy, disobedience to the Church, and rebellion. As a result of these allegations Pope Gregory sent word to the Sword Brothers that they were to send representatives to Rome to defend the charges. Fortunately for the Sword Brothers, William of Modena, who had never been a fan of Baldwin of Alna, volunteer to accompany members of the Order to Rome to present their case to Pope Gregory, in the winter of 1235-1236.

And it's safe to say that William Of Modena did a pretty good job defending the Sword Brothers against the charges made against them. In fact he did such a good job that he managed to totally destroy Baldwin's standing and reputation in the process. In the words of William Urban in his book "The Baltic Crusade" and I quote, "William of Modena defended the Order so forcefully that Baldwin of Alna retired in disgrace to the Latin Kingdom of Constantinople, where he died a minor bishop." End quote. But if the Sword Brothers are sitting in Pope Gregory's presence smirking at the outcome of the hearing, they need to remove the smug looks from their faces. Why? Well, because it seems that Pope Gregory wasn't all that happy with the outcome of the hearing he had convened, and both William of Modena and the representatives of the Sword Brothers are about to find out that bad things can happen when you get on the wrong side of the Bishop of Rome.

Pope Gregory promptly ordered William of Modena to go to Scandinavia, with orders to preach the Crusade to Livonia there, and then gave him a lengthy list of things he was to do while he was in Scandinavia, including adjudicating quarrels between various disputing parties inside the Scandinavian Kingdoms. The list was long enough to ensure that William of Modena would be kept away from Livonia and Estonia for quite some time.

And now to the Sword Brothers. What treats did Pope Gregory have in store for the rebellious, disobedient military Oder which he clearly despised? Well, it was a doozie. He decreed that the entire region of Estonia be returned to the Kingdom of Denmark. Yes, the territories in Estonia, which provided an essential source of income for the struggling Order, now belonged to King Valdemar II of Denmark. But wait, there's more. Pope Gregory then decreed that King Valdemar was entitled to compensation for the fact that Estonia had been removed from Danish hands, and who was liable to pay this compensation to the Danish Crown? The Sword Brothers, of course. Oh dear.

Strangely, though, this ended up not being a problem at all for the Sword Brothers. Why? Well, because they are about to be wiped out completely, not by Pope Gregory, but by the Lithuanians, and by the time King Valdemar rocks up to take possession of Estonia, the Sword Brothers will simply have ceased to exist.

So, join me next week as we examine the demise of the Sword Brothers and the return of King Valdemar to the Estonian stage. Until next week, bye for now.

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