

History of the Crusades. Episode 237. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXX. The Southern Push Part 2.

Hello again. Last week we started off by noting that the Teutonic Order wished to establish a land link between their territory in Livonia and their territory in Prussia, which pretty much entailed conquering the lands currently located between Prussia and Livonia, which were: Semigallia, Kurland and Samogitia. However we got sidetracked by other goings on in the surrounding regions. We saw King Valdemar II's son, King Eric, struggle to make Denmark great again. We saw Pope Innocent IV appoint Albert Suerbeer to the position of Archbishop of Prussia. We saw William of Modena be rewarded for his years of service as the Church's Mister Fix-it, as he rose to the position of Cardinal-Bishop of Sabina, and we saw Dietrich von Gruningen replace Hermann Balk as the Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia. Right, so now we are all set to examine the push south by the Teutonic Order in Livonia through the lands of the pagans.

The new Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, Dietrich von Gruningen, had done a pretty good job of both motivating the members of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, and of establishing ties between the Order and members of the local Church hierarchy. As a result the Bishops of Riga, Osel and Dorpat voiced their support for the push south by the Order, and provided both men and financial assistance. Due to this support by the local Church hierarchy, a fairly impressive force of Christians, including Letts and Livonians, mustered alongside Knights from the Teutonic Order in Riga. Guides who were familiar with the region of the Kurs were chosen, and the army crossed the Daugava and headed to Kurland.

Here is an account of what happened next, as set out in the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, and I quote: "The army that rode in such good order into Kurland was long and wide, and everything was well under control. Many large detachments were sent out here and there, and brought in large amounts of booty. But I will condense my account. They distressed many, and whoever did not escape, died. The Kurs groaned, and they understood that if they wished to live peacefully, they would have to surrender to the Master. Their Elders took council, came to an agreement on that, and sent messengers to the army." End quote. So in summary, the Christian army slashed and burned its way across Kurland, killing pagans and stealing their stuff until the Elders decided to surrender on behalf of their people.

Now, the Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, Dietrich, wisely decided not to burden the conquered Kurs with huge amounts of taxes. Instead he decided to build a massive castle at a place the Germans named Goldingen, and which today is called Kuldiga. Today, Kuldiga is located in western Latvia, but back in the 1240s Goldingen was pretty much in the middle of the land of the Kurs, and it provided an extremely handy base from which the Teutonic Order

could assert their authority, not just over Kurland but into neighboring Semigallia and Samogitia. The aim of the Teutonic Order was to conquer the Kurs with little or no mercy, but then to treat them reasonably, so they wouldn't have cause to rise up against their new overlords.

Not all the Kurs were happy about this however, and they began to send word to their neighbors to see if anyone was keen to come to their assistance, and help them to eject the Germans from their lands. It turns out that: Yes, there was someone who was willing to assist them to eject the Germans from their lands, and that someone was a Lithuanian warlord named Mindaugas. Now, Mindaugas was an extremely interesting person, but unfortunately we don't know an awful lot about him.

Pagan Lithuania at this stage was divided into around twenty clans, each of which had an Elder. Like Prussia, all Lithuanians shared a common language and culture. The twenty or so clans were themselves split into two separate groups: the lowlanders and the highlanders. A skilled warrior from one of the highland clans made a name for himself defeating the Sword Brothers in their disastrous incursion into Lithuania back in the year 1236, and that skilled warrior was Mindaugas. By the time the Kurs signaled for help, around ten years later, Mindaugas had risen in prominence and now used the title of "Grand Prince". He had united all the highland clans by ruthlessly crushing anyone who opposed him, and by leading those who pledged loyalty to him on raiding missions into Livonia and the neighboring Russian principality, missions which generated large amounts of booty and plunder for his loyal followers. With Mindaugas controlling a goodly portion of Lithuania, and a goodly portion of Lithuania's legendary warriors, the Kurs figured that he was probably the only person they could call upon who had the ability to take on and defeat the Teutonic Knights and their fortified castles.

Mindaugas agreed to lend a hand, and led a Lithuanian army to the southernmost Latin Christian castle in Kurland, the fortress at Ambotan, and besieged it. Unbeknownst to Mindaugas a watchman had managed to flee from Ambotan prior to the siege, and had raced to Goldingen to raise the alarm. As a result a contingent of Teutonic Knights accompanied by around 500 local Kur warriors were making their way to Ambotan to lift the siege. Mindaugas was unaware that this relief force was on its way, and his army was caught totally by surprise when it arrived at Ambotan. Mindaugas had ordered the Lithuanians to build a number of siege engines, and they were busy pummeling the castle walls when they were attacked from behind by the relief force. The Lithuanians tended to fight better in the woodlands, while the Latin Christians held the advantage on open ground. Unfortunately for Mindaugas his men were attacked on the open ground, were trapped against the castle walls, and on top of this were also taken totally by surprise. So he was resoundingly defeated, and when Mindaugas withdrew into the nearby woods, 500 of his fighters lay dead outside the castle walls.

The lesson Mindaugas learned from his defeat was to fight the Latin Christians on the pagan-preferred terms, instead of in traditional Latin Christian ways. So, no more besieging castles, or fighting on open ground. No, the Lithuanians went back to the tactics which had served them so well in the past, of luring small groups of Latin Christian fighters into the forests where they could be defeated, of watching and waiting for the right moment to strike, of ambushes, and of skirmishes. As a result of this change in strategy, what occurred between the Lithuanians and the Teutonic Order was an extended border war, as the Lithuanians patrolled the regions where their lands neared the regions occupied by the Latin Christians, and made frequent raids across the border into Livonia and Kurland. The lives of the Teutonic Knights in this region were made miserable, as they were forced to be constantly vigilant and on the continual lookout for the Lithuanians. According to the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, and I quote, "Often they suffered. Whenever they were near a castle each one had to everything just right, or he died because of his negligence. They suffered many hardships. They kept watch, fasted, and seldom rested. Their misery was great." End quote.

The tide of the border war eventually turned in the crusaders' favor, not because of their military prowess, but because of the Semigallians. Now, the Semigallians at this time saw their main rivals not as the Latin Christians, but as the Lithuanians, and especially the Samogitians. Around the year 1245, they saw an opportunity to strike a major blow to their traditional rivals the Samogitians. A delegation of Semigallians approached the Teutonic Order for assistance, which was granted. With the extra resources provided by the Order the Semigallians sent a small force deep into Samogitian territory. Without being detected the men managed to capture Lengewin, a Samogitian warlord, and the man who oversaw all the Samogitian military activities. They took him prisoner and marched him back to the Teutonic Knights, where they offered to swap him in exchange for being given back their lands. The Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia Dietrich, readily agreed to these terms. He took the warlord into his custody and extended Latin Christian protection over Semigallian lands. This marked the beginning of an alliance between the Semigallians and the Teutonic Order. The Semigallians converted to Christianity, and the combined forces of the Order and the Semigallians pushed the Lithuanians back to where they belonged.

Now, the story of Lengewin's time of captivity inside a Teutonic castle is rather interesting. Apparently he had talents not only as a military commander, but as a teller of future events. He had a small selection of bones which he used as an oracle, something which greatly interested the Teutonic Knights, many of whom were quite superstitious. Using his bones, Lengewin foretold that his brother would be killed by a Christian raiding party. When this event later actually took place the Knights were mightily impressed, and Lengewin rose in their estimation. Perhaps his skills at these dark arts clouded the Christians' judgment

because, astonishingly, they let Lengewin go. He was ransomed back to the Samogitians for 500 coins, and immediately upon his release resumed his previous position, overseeing the military activities of the Samogitians.

His first move was to head up a raiding party which ventured deep into Livonia, making it all the way to the castle at Wenden, to the north of Riga. Lengewin managed to defeat the commander of the castle and 500 Latin Christians who were protecting both the castle and the town. Nine Knights were killed, and Lengewin carried the decapitated head of the commander of the castle at Wenden all the way back to Samogitia, where he used it in a pagan ceremony to honor his recently-deceased brother.

So the attempt by the Teutonic Knights to conquer Kurland, Semigallia and Samogitia, to establish a land link between Prussia and Livonia, by the year 1247 has reached a sort of a stalemate. Kurland has largely been conquered, and the region of Semigallia had agreed to be Christianized, forming an alliance with the Teutonic Order. Samogitia, however, was still defiantly pagan and was being assisted in its push-back against the Latin Christians by the Lithuanians, more specifically by the talented and ruthless Lithuanian warlord Mindaugas.

It was around this time that Master Dietrich left Livonia to take up a new post elsewhere, and was eventually replaced by the new Master of Livonia for the Teutonic Order, Andreas of Steierland. Now, interestingly, on his way back to central Europe, Master Dietrich decided to pay a visit to the Archbishop of Prussia, Albert Suerbeer, who you might remember had decided to base himself at Lubeck after having been regaled with tales about how dangerous it was in Prussia, those tales primarily coming from the Knights of the Teutonic Order, who had a vested interest in keeping Albert Suerbeer as far away as possible from Prussia, so as to maintain their hold on power there.

Now, Archbishop Albert has been sitting in Lubeck and has been utterly consumed by two things. The first obsession Albert seemed to have was a conviction that the Teutonic Order was his enemy, and that he needed to do everything he could to bring the Order to its knees. His second obsession was an almost overwhelming ambition to propel himself as quickly as he could up the many ladders offered by the Church. Albert wasn't holding back. He wanted to dominate Church affairs in as many arenas as possible, and ultimately he saw himself rising to the position of Pope.

Being based in Lubeck, not Prussia, was working out quite well for Archbishop Albert. From Lubeck he could keep an eye on the comings and goings of the Knights of the Teutonic Order, and he could also pull some strings behind the scenes in the Danish civil war, and in the conflict between the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy. In the year 1247 the position of

Bishop of Lubeck became vacant, and Archbishop Albert side-stepped neatly into the position, enriching his coffers with money which had been put aside to assist poor crusaders to make the journey to the Baltic region.

To Archbishop Albert's horror, the year 1249 marked a change in policy by the Church, in relation to the Teutonic Order. Pope Innocent IV decided to attempt to reach out to the Order and bring them closer to the Church, and to that end he appointed a new Papal legate for Prussia. Archbishop Albert viewed the legate as a threat, and he vowed to excommunicate anyone who dealt with the legate.

If the year 1249 was a bad one for Archbishop Albert, then the year 1250 was shaping up to be even worse. Why? Well, because in the year 1250 the new Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, Master Andreas, will preside over a diplomatic coup of massive proportions, a move which will see, wait for it, Lithuania submit to the dominance of the Teutonic Order.

The good news for the Teutonic Order was that this meant that their aim of joining Prussia and Livonia with a Christian friendly land bridge had now been achieved. The bad news was that it set the stage for a collision course between the Order and the powerful, angry and ambitious Archbishop of Prussia. Join me next week as we examine exactly how Master Andreas managed to pull off his massive diplomatic coup, and we get into the ring for a showdown between the Teutonic Knights and Albert Suerbeer the Archbishop of Prussia. Until next week, bye for now.

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