

Episode 266

The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part 45. The Letters of Geminidas.

Hello again. Last week we brought the timeline in the Livonian Crusade up to the year 1323 with the dramatic resignation of Master Gerhard from the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic Knights, and his replacement by a man hand-picked by Grand Master Karl, Konrad Kesselhut, from Prussia, who was appointed as Vice Master. Meanwhile Archbishop Friedrich is still in Avignon, whistling and humming to himself as he keeps alive his dream of one day convincing the Pope to rain some hellfire down on the Livonia chapter of the Teutonic Order.

Those of you with a keen sense for dates will notice that we are also at the year 1323 in the Samogitian Crusade, with the Latin Christians reeling after devastating pagan successes against Christian interests in Samogitia, Kurland, Samland and Semogalia. Since we are all at the year 1323 this is going to be a combined episode, driving both the Livonian Crusade and the Samogitian crusade ahead along their timelines, under the heading of "The Livonian Crusade", as events are geographically closer to that crusade.

Now, one of the things affecting both Crusades at the moment, was the weather. The winters at this point in time were truly horrendous and the spring and summer seasons were lukewarm at best, meaning that harvests failed, people were cold and hungry and generally totally miserable. It may or may not have helped the people of eastern Europe to know that this was actually not just happening in their neck of the woods but was a global phenomenon, an event which some meteorologists have referred to as the beginning of the little Ice Age. Now interestingly, this prolonged and extended cold snap didn't affect the people of Livonia, Estonia, or Lithuania overly much. They were used to harsh winters, and they had clothes, crops and methods of survival which were designed to cope with very cold weather. The Latin Christians of Prussia, however, were quite badly affected. Prussia generally experienced milder weather than Livonia and many of the Latin Christians who lived in Prussia were acclimatized to the weather of Central Europe, so when hit by a succession of extremely cold winters in the early 1320s the Latin Christians across Prussia, Samogalia and Kurland proved themselves to be pretty useless, reluctant to venture outside, and trying in vain to use the agricultural methods, clothing, and survival techniques more suited to milder climates.

This enabled the pagans of the region to run rampant through Latin Christian holdings, not only in Samogitia, but across Samland, Kurland and Samogalia. The winter-hardened pagan fighters pretty much ran unchecked, while the Latin Christians and Crusaders shivered inside their castles, blowing on their fingertips, and sipping hot drinks. Now the Lithuanian leader Gediminas was basically calling all the shots at this time. In fact, Gedminas was a very busy man in the year 1323. Not only was he using the Lithuanian forces to attack Prussian holdings in Samland and Samogitia, he also led raids of fighting men from Pskov into Dorpat and Estonia. And just to make sure that boredom well and truly stayed away, he also declared war on Novgorod.

Vice Master Konrad Kesselhut of the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic Order immediately threw his support behind Novgorod. He gathered the Teutonic forces, the Order's vassals in Estonian and some native militia, and marched on Lithuania's chief ally, Pskov. Pskov, was an impressively well fortified city and was far from being an easy target. However

Konrad Kesselhut was keen to prove himself a worthy military commander on his first official campaign for the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic Knights, so, deciding not to risk an all-out assault on the citadel, which was all but impregnable, he instead ordered catapult machines to pummel the city walls. This strategy proved to be effective and eventually the Lithuanian and Russian defenders of the town were forced to withdraw inside their citadel, which allowed the Teutonic army to enter Pskov, and attack, pillage and destroy their way around the town. Despite going on this destructive rampage, the attackers found that they weren't able to penetrate the citadel, so Konrad Kesselhut called it a day, and withdrew back to Livonia.

The attack on Pskov didn't seem to slow Gediminas down at all. He continued raiding into Samogitia, concentrating his attacks on the Latin Christian stronghold of Memel. Then something very strange happened.

Across the Kingdom of Germany, in the year 1323, people of note began receiving letters from Gediminas. These letters, all of which were unsolicited, began popping up in all sorts of unlikely places, and they all basically said the same thing, that thing being "I Gediminas, King of the Lithuanians and quite a few Russians, would like to stop fighting all these Crusaders, and stop waging wars across Prussia, Livonia and all the lands in between. I want to make peace with the Latin Christians of Europe, and to that end I am willing to regard the Pope as my father."

Now, these letters caused quite a stir. They were copied and circulated and quite a few of them made their way to Avignon. Now, before we proceed further, I think I should point out that debate continues until this day as to whether or not these letters were actually genuinely from Gediminas. Historians over the centuries have spent countless hours and have used pots of ink arguing the point. Most historians seem to believe they were genuine, but some have forcefully argued that they were forgeries, likely written by none other than the probably bored and increasingly desperate Archbishop Friedrich. I'm in no position to make a finding either way - so just keep this debate in mind as we continue on our way.

As the content of the letters began to make itself known to the Teutonic Order, the Order made every effort it could to intercept and destroy the letters before they were widely circulated, because Gediminas went out of his way to state that the reason why he and the Lithuanian people had not accepted Christianity, and the reason why he and the Lithuanian people had been forced to make war on neighboring Prussian and Livonian assets, was because of the horrible Brothers from the Teutonic Order. The Lithuanians had no problem at all with the other Christians, the letter stated, like nice old Archbishop Friedrich, for instance, and the very decent Franciscan Friars. But really, those Teutonic order guys are something else, and the Papacy really needs to rein them in so we can all live peacefully and happily ever after. Best, Gediminas.

OK, that's not exactly what Gediminas said. That's actually quite heavily paraphrased. So look, let's see exactly what one of the letters said. Warning: this is a very long quote but it is the text of a letter addressed to Pope John XXII, sent to him via an intermediary and allegedly from Gediminas. OK, here's what the letter said and I quote:

"To the most worthy father, Master John, Supreme Pontiff of the Roman throne, from Gediminas, King of the Lithuanians and many Russians. For a long time we have heard that all persons of the Christian Faith should be subject to your authority and paternal

supervision, and that the Catholic faith should be governed by the Roman Church. The fact is, as we inform your reverence in these letters, that our predecessor, King Mindaugas, was converted to the faith of Christ with all his realm, but because of the terrible injuries and innumerable affronts of the Master of the Brothers of the Teutonic Order, all left the faith, so that, unfortunately, even today we remain in the errors of our ancestors. When messages were sent to our predecessors by the Lord Archbishop of Riga to make peace, they killed them cruelly, even though sent by Master Isarnus, who Master Boniface ordered to make a peace and truce between us and the Brothers of the Teutonic Order, and who sent his letters to us. But as the messengers were returning to master Isarnus they killed some of them on the road, hanged others, and drowned the rest. Also our predecessor King Vytenis sent letters to the legate master Francis and the Archbishop Master Friedrich, asking them to send Friars of the Franciscan Order, assigning them to a place where a church had already been constructed. Hearing of this, the Prussian Brothers of the Teutonic Order sent an army and destroyed the said church by fire. Also they captured Archbishops and Bishops and clerics, as in the case of Master Johan who died of the curia in the reign of Master Boniface, and the Archbishop Master Friedrich, who was allegedly throwing out of his church, and a cleric Master Berthold, who they killed in his own house in the city of Riga. Also they made desert lands, as in Semogalia and other places. But they say they do it only to defend Christianity. Holy and Reverend Father, we do not war on Christians to destroy the Catholic Faith, but to resist injury to ourselves, as Christian kings and princes do, and it is known that we have given our friars of the Franciscan and Dominican Orders complete freedom to baptize, preach, and administer the Holy sacraments. Therefore, Holy Father, we have written to you so that you will know why our fathers have fallen into the errors of Paganism and Superstition. Moreover Holy Father, we plead zealously and sorrowfully that you attend to our condition, for we are ready to obey you in all things, like the other Christian Kings, and to receive the Catholic faith, although we will not endure in any way the aforementioned tortures of the said Master and Brothers.” End quote.

Right, so you can see why the Teutonic Order was trying to intercept these letters and destroy them, and you can also see why some historians have speculated that Archbishop Friedrich may have penned the letters himself, because in them, Gediminas basically says that the Crusades being waged by the Teutonic Order, the conflict in Livonia against the Rigans, and the Crusades against the Samogitians and Lithuanians, are the only factors preventing Gediminas, the leader of the Lithuanians, and all the Lithuanian people, from converting to Christianity.

This really was quite a big deal, and Pope John really couldn't just ignore the content of the letters, so he declared that a papal delegation would travel to Lithuania to meet with Gediminas, and to check out the general situation regarding Christianity in Lithuania. In the meanwhile, to ensure the safety of the members of the delegation, all attacks by Latin Christians on the Lithuanians were to cease immediately. A general truce was declared for both the Samogitian and Livonian crusades, and a papal delegation traveled to Riga. Then, accompanied by a few probably grumpy and grumbling Teutonic Knights, the delegation made its way inland all the way to the court of Gediminas in Lithuania.

Save for the Teutonic Knights, the members of the delegation were impressed by what they saw. Here's how William Urban describes the event in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", and I quote. "They later reported that the Grand Prince was surrounded by courtiers from Lithuania and Rus, that he allowed freedom of religion, and that he permitted a small group of Franciscans to conduct the Roman Mass. There was freedom

to talk, and no danger to the lives of the Christians. The visitors listened to Lithuanian complaints against the Teutonic Order, complaints that angered the Crusaders as much as they pleased their Rigan opponents. They then signed another truce, one which included the Grand Master in Prussia.” End quote.

Now, word of these unexpected turn of events eventually reached the said Grand Master, Grand Master Karl, and Grand Master Karl quickly gathered as much counteracting material as he could, including written testimonies from people asserting they had inside knowledge that this was all a ruse, and that Gediminas had no intention whatsoever of converting to Christianity. He also gathered evidence of atrocities committed by Lithuanians against Latin Christians. Deciding that this issue was of high enough importance to involve a personal visit to Avignon, Grand Master Karl couriered the documents to Pope John himself, securing a private meeting with Pope John into the bargain. However, it turned out to be a wasted trip. Despite doing his best to flip the Lithuanian narrative and paint the Teutonic Order as the good guys, and the Lithuanians as the duplicitous conniving bad guys, it didn't work.

To the Order's horror, in February of 1324, Pope John handed down a ruling, declaring the Teutonic Knights guilty of hindering missionaries, oppressing converts, burning churches, and acting unjustly. Having laid a stick into the Teutonic Order Pope John then dangled a carrot in front of Gediminas. He wrote to the Lithuanian leader telling him that he would welcome Gediminas' conversion to Christianity, and for him to expect a delegation to arrive in Lithuania in due course, to negotiate details of the conversion. Pope John hinted that, on the table as part of the negotiations to convert Lithuania to Christianity, were the official end of the Crusades being conducted by the Teutonic Order in the Baltic region, and the recognition by Latin Christendom of Gediminas as a king.

The delegation then left Avignon, bound for Lithuania. Included in the delegation were two French clerics, a bishop and an Abbott and, wait for it, Archbishop Friedrich, who has finally been given something to do and will finally be able to pop his head into his old home base at Riga, on his way to bringing Christianity to the Lithuanians. Woohoo!

So, how did the delegation fare? Will they succeed in Christianising the pagan Lithuanians? Will this spell the end to both the Livonian Crusade and the Samogitian Crusade? Well, you'll need to tune in next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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