

History of the Crusades. Episode 296. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict I. The Gotland War.

Hello again. Last week we concluded our episodes on the Livonian Crusade, showing how dysfunction and conflict inside Livonia prevented the Teutonic Order from gaining the upper hand in the region, and prevented the Livonian chapter of the Order from contributing in any significant way to the recent crusades to Lithuania and Samogitia. So now, effectively, we have reached the end of both the Samogitian Crusade and the Livonian Crusade, and the Teutonic Order is currently sitting back in a comfy chair beside its fireside, pouring itself an ale, and congratulating itself on having conquered the Baltic region.

Yet here we are, beginning a new series in our episodes on the Baltic Crusades. So if you think that the confidence of the Teutonic Order is misplaced and that it shouldn't get too comfortable in its chair by the fireside, you would be right. Before we get started on the series of conflicts between King Jogaila of Poland, Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania and the Teutonic Order, though, we are going to sidetrack ourselves into a nice civil war that's about to get off on the island of Gotland.

Remember Gotland? For many years, it was a vital staging post for the Baltic Crusades, with crusaders heading to Livonia by departing from Lubeck sailing to Gotland for supplies, then heading on to Riga. By the middle of the 13th century, though, the popularity of Gotland as a stopover point on the journey to Riga was beginning to wane, as ports along the Baltic coastline increased in importance, and as the merchants operating out of Gotland found they could sell their wares more easily in these new towns, which would eventually form part of the Hanseatic League.

The final curtain for Gotland as a trading port and crusader stopping-point came in the year 1361 when the Danish King Valdemar IV attacked the island and pretty much destroyed its main town, the town of Visby. Once Visby was out of action, the regional powers lost interest in the island of Gotland and instead turned their attention towards the emerging ports springing up all around the Baltic Sea.

So, while the regional powers were looking in the other direction, the pirates moved in. Gotland was really an ideal place for pirates. Plenty of shipping sailed past the island, and the pirates could just lie in wait until a fully laden merchant ship sailed past. The pirates would then give chase, attack the merchant ship, relieve it of its cargo and retreat back to the safety of Gotland. These pirates were a nuisance, but piracy rose to dangerous new levels late in the 1300's due to a war which broke out between Queen Margaret of Denmark and her nephew Albrecht of Mecklenburg.

Albrecht was crowned as the King of Sweden in 1364, but not everyone was happy about this, and an eight year long civil war ended up being waged inside Sweden, between Albrecht's supporters and those who opposed him, with those who opposed him being backed by some powerful players, including the King of Norway. The King of Norway happened to be married to the youngest daughter of King Valdemar IV of Denmark, Margaret.

To cut a very long and very interesting story short, Margaret will end up becoming the Queen of Denmark, and after her husband's death she also became the ruler of Norway and will later to add Sweden to her collection. She was an extraordinarily competent ruler

and earned herself the nickname "The Lady King". Anyway, at the point in Lady King Margaret's life which interests us, she is currently the Queen of Denmark and Norway and is at war with her nephew, the King of Sweden.

Now, conflict between Denmark, Norway and Sweden presented the pirates of the Baltic region with an unprecedented opportunity to take their trade and legalize it. How? Well, because one easy way in which the warring parties could score a hit against their opponent was to take out their merchant ships, and who better to use for this task than pirates? So, the many pirates in the Baltic region moved from being pirates, men who attacked merchant ships outside the law, to privateers, men who attacked merchant ships legally, with the sanction and permission of either Denmark, Norway or Sweden.

In fact, William Urban states in his book "The Livonian Crusade", that some privateers signed up to both sides of the conflict. So, while privateers working for Queen Margaret would attack Swedish ships and leave the Norwegian and Danish merchant ships alone, and while the privateers who worked for King Albrecht would attack only Danish and Norwegian ships, leaving the Swedish ones to sail past, some privateers attacked Danish, Norwegian and Swedish ships, having been permitted by both monarchs to do so on their behalf. Anyway, this arrangement, whereby pirates could attack merchant ships legally, make a fortune, and not get into trouble for it, led to an explosion in the number of privateers operating in the region, with privateer bases being established on the coastlines of Finland and Sweden, enabling the privateers to work the trade across the Baltic Sea.

And really, if you were an adventurous type living in the Baltic region with few prospects and a dislike of farming, why not choose adventure on the high seas as a privateer as a career choice? It was just as much fun as piracy, with the added bonus of being legal. In the year 1394, forces loyal to Albrecht captured the island of Gotland and allowed a bunch of privateers loyal to Sweden to establish themselves on the island. The following year, however, the war was effectively over, with a temporary truce being negotiated, an agreement which would become permanent three years later.

The privateers and pirates though, were keen to continue their activities, and luckily for the privateers, the noblemen from both sides of the conflict were not as keen as their leaders to lay down their weapons. Noblemen from Sweden in particular, who now found themselves on the losing side of the Civil War, decided it would be in their interests to keep fighting. The stronghold in the town of Stockholm was currently under siege, and some Swedish nobleman, who had been supporters of Albrecht, decided to arrange for food to be delivered to the men of the garrison to discourage them from surrendering, and who better to carry out this task than some suddenly unemployed privateers? So the nobleman paid the privateers to deliver provisions of food and drink, also known as victuals, to Stockholm.

The privateers decided that they could make more profits if they just stole the victuals they were meant to deliver, rather than purchasing the provisions, so they raided settlements along the Baltic coastline for grain and cattle, which they then delivered to Sweden. These men became known as the Victuals Brethren, which is an excellent name for a bunch of privateers, and incidentally would also make a good band name. The Victuals Brethren enjoyed considerable success in their ventures and eventually decided to diversify, offering their services to anyone who was able to pay the required fee. A large force of the Victuals Brethren were based in Gotland, and they started making a whole bunch of

powerful enemies by attacking Russian vessels sailing to Reval, and by disrupting merchant shipping in the Baltic, to the extent that the powerful Hanseatic League decided that something needed to be done.

In a meeting of the Hanseatic League, Danish, Prussian and Wendish representatives agreed to work together to send a fleet to Gotland to sort out the pirates once and for all. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban describes how the fleet departed from Danzig and arrived at Visby in Gotland, but the pirates had seen them coming and had managed to slip away unnoticed before the Danzig fleet arrived. However, in a terrible twist of fate, a small fleet of Danish ships had just arrived in Visby, was spotted by the Danzig pirate-hunters, and were mistaken for pirates. The Danish ships were attacked mercilessly, with no one believing the crew's claims that they weren't pirates, privateers, or members of the Victuals Brethren, they were just innocent sailors caught in the middle of a terrible mix-up. In the end, 74 Danish sailors were tossed into the freezing waters off the island of Gotland, and were left to drown, while their ships were confiscated.

Once the mistake was discovered, the Danzig fleet were forced to put on their best diplomatic hats and apologize profusely to Lady King Margaret of Denmark. Luckily for them, Gotland and the issues faced by the Hanseatic League were far from Queen Margaret's mind at that moment, because Albrecht's son, Eric of Mecklenburg, who had been attempting to step into his father's shoes and become the next King of Sweden, had just died unexpectedly of the plague, leaving Margaret with a clear path forward to claim the Swedish crown. So the spotlight swung away from the island of Gotland, and while no one was looking, the Victuals Brethren actually took over the whole island, claiming it for themselves.

Now, one of the many power-players around the Baltic region who was not a fan of the Victuals Brethren was Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen. The despised Bishop Dietrich of Dorpat had, at one stage, engaged the services of the Brethren and at one point members of the Brethren had actually sailed into the Vistula River and had captured fourteen ships right under the nose of the Teutonic Order, which was both embarrassing and bad for business. So when the Grand Master was approached by representatives from the Hanseatic League from Prussia and Danzig for assistance in attacking the island of Gotland, he was all ears, and after thinking the matter through the Grand Master gave the campaign the green light.

Now, this is actually really rather unusual. The Teutonic Order had never really possessed a fleet of ships and had always based their campaigns around territorial conquests on land, and not at sea. They did possess some transport vessels, but the Order had never really viewed itself as a naval power. Now, however, the Grand Master has just given the go-ahead to a campaign involving sailing to Gotland and attacking a bunch of experienced sailors, the pirates and privateers of Gotland. In his book "The Livonian Crusade", William Urban points out that the Grand Master was only really able to seriously consider attacking Gotland because of the Treaty of Sallinwerder, which he had signed with Vytautas. The treaty meant that the Order didn't have to worry about taking a large contingent of knights out of Prussia and leaving the country vulnerable to attack. After the Treaty was signed, Vytautas turned his attention away from Prussia to the Russian Principalities, and the Grand Master turned his attention to the island of Gotland.

The Grand Master managed to gather 84 ships, which he loaded with 4,000 men and horses, and they sailed for Gotland, arriving there on March the 21st 1398. Despite some

truly awful weather, consisting of freezing rain, the Order's troops prepared to besiege the town of Visby. As William Urban points out in his book "The Livonian Crusade", and I quote "The army knew much more about attacking fortresses than the pirates did about defending them, so the Prussians took Visby quickly" end quote. And this is a really good point. The pirates were experts in seamanship and in attacking shipping on the high seas. They had absolutely no experience in the defensive techniques used in siege warfare. Likewise, the Teutonic forces had heaps of experience in siege warfare, but had they been forced to attack the pirates while still at sea, the outcome may well have been rather different. Anyway, Visby fell, and the Victuals Brethren fled the island in their ships, finding other places around the Baltic Sea in which to ply their trade. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Order", William Urban reports that some of the Victuals Brethren joined the legendary pirate Klaus Stortebeker, who plied the shipping routes around the North Sea, and who apparently could drink a four-litre mug of beer in one gulp. Yes, just so you don't have to rewind to hear that again, that's a four-litre mug of beer, which he could down in one go, without stopping.

Anyway, the Grand Master left a small force of men on Gotland to guard it and to prevent the pirates from returning, then the rest of the fleet sailed back to Prussia. The Grand Master seemed unable to decide what to do with Gotland after that. Lady King Margaret was tapping her foot impatiently, expecting the Grand Master to hand the island over to her, but the Grand Master held onto it, perhaps wanting to keep it close to his chest as a future card to play in the complicated politics of the region.

But Queen Margaret was having none of that. By the year 1403 she had run out of patience, and decided to take Gotland from the Order by force. She sent the Grand Master an ultimatum, demanding that he hand the island over to her by the 12th of November, or she would mobilize her forces. As it was so late in the season, the Grand Master and his advisers decided that the Queen must be bluffing, as surely there was no way that the Danes were going to be able to undertake a large scale naval campaign just before winter set in on the Baltic Sea. So he reduced the garrison on Gotland down to a winter skeleton crew, and ignored Queen Margaret.

However, the day after the deadline passed, Queen Margaret launched her fleet, sailed to Gotland, and attacked the strongholds there. The small garrison was able to drive the Danish attackers away, so Margaret had to be content with tracking down some of the scattered Victuals Brethren and paying them to return to Gotland to harass the occupying Teutonic Knights.

So there you go. A rare naval campaign by the Teutonic Order, involving pirates and the Victuals Brethren. That was definitely worth spending an episode on. Join me next week as we leave Gotland and turn our attention back to Prussia, Poland, and Lithuania, continuing our new series on the Lithuanian conflict. Until next week, bye for now.

This podcast is powered by Patreon. If you can spare \$1 per month and would like to support this podcast, go to [patreon.com](https://patreon.com) and search for "History of the Crusades", or go to our website, [crusadespod.com](https://crusadespod.com), and click on the Patreon link. Your \$1 contribution will mean you get access to an extra episode every fortnight on topics related to the Crusades, and it means that you are powering the History of the Crusades podcast. Thank you to all who have signed up so far.

End