

History of the Crusades. Episode 225. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part VII. Vogelsang.

Hello again. Last week we saw Grand Master Hermann von Salza counter Duke Konrad of Mazovia's formal invitation for the Teutonic Order to subdue Prussia in return for land around Kulm with a radical move. Instead of accepting or rejecting the formal offer, Hermann von Salza, in conjunction with Emperor Frederick II, came up with a document of his own. The Golden Bull of Rimini effectively authorized the Teutonic Order to conquer Prussia and then keep any land they conquered. In his book "Poland, A History", Adam Zamoyski likens the situation to Duke Konrad offering the Teutonic Order a lease on a house, and then the Teutonic Order producing a document authorizing them to purchase the property outright.

So the Golden Bull of Rimini means that from the outset, the Prussian Crusade is going to be quite a different venture from the Livonian Crusade. The Livonian Crusade was very much Bishop Albert's undertaking, with the Sword Brothers mostly, and you would have to say reluctantly, under Bishop Albert's control, but the opposite will be occurring in Prussia. The Prussian Crusade will be managed, financed and operated by the Teutonic Order, and not by Bishop Christian. In fact, in his book "The Prussian Crusade", William Urban states that the Teutonic Order even attempted to circumvent Bishop Christian and the Cistercian monks entirely.

Although the Knights of the Teutonic Order were effectively warrior monks, their principal mission in a Crusade was to protect missionaries who preached to the non-Christians, and to protect those who had converted to Christianity. The role of the order was not to make converts themselves. Hermann von Salza thought that perhaps it might be a good idea to circumvent the Bishop of Prussia and his Cistercian missionaries, and instead invite a new Order into Prussia to perform the work of preaching to and converting the pagans. So, to which Order did Hermann von Seltzer turned to undertake this task? Well, he chose the Dominicans.

Now, this was quite a savvy move. The Dominican Order, as we all know, was established in Toulouse around the year 1216, with a view to fighting heresy, and in the ten years since its establishment Dominican schools and primaries had been popping up all over Europe. By the year 1226, when the Golden Bull was issued, the Dominican Order had established itself in Paris, Bologna, Oxford and, dramatic pause, Poland. Now, the Inquisition against the Cathars won't really get into full swing until the year 1229, so in three years time, and that of course, will be occurring in southern France. In the meantime, would the Dominican friars of Poland like to accompany the Teutonic Knights to Prussia, to eliminate heresy by preaching to and converting the Prussian pagans? Yes, yes they would. According to William Urban, this move had the support of William of Modena, who was himself a fan of the Dominican order. So, with the Golden Bull setting out their rights, and the Dominican Order ready to convert the Prussians, the Prussian Crusade looked ready to begin.

So here we are in the year 1227, effectively back where we started six episodes ago. The Livonian Crusade is now being overseen by William of Modena, and all of Estonia and Livonia have now been effectively Christianized. So, as we swing our attention over to Prussia, is an enormous Crusade about to kick off under the leadership of the Teutonic Knights? Ah, no, actually. While I would like to tell you that a massive military campaign

was launched around this time, the truth is that that wasn't the case at all. Everyone was kind of busy elsewhere.

Hermann von Salza, mindful of the fact that Emperor Frederick, who had so generously produced the Golden Bull, had his eyes firmly on the Holy Land at this time, was busy laying the foundations for Frederick's Crusade to the Middle East, or at least he was trying to. Pope Honorius III died in March 1227 and was replaced by Pope Gregory IX. While Pope Honorius had been pretty understanding about Emperor Frederick's constant delays and excuses about why he couldn't set out on his crusade to the Holy Land, Pope Gregory was a different proposition entirely.

Pope Gregory started his papacy by putting some pretty firm pressure on Emperor Frederick to actually do what he had promised so many times to do, so Emperor Frederick traveled to Brindisi in Italy to prepare to launch his crusade, while Hermann von Salza traveled to the Holy Land to get things sorted from that end. As we all know from our episodes on the Middle Eastern crusades, Emperor Frederick will actually set sail for the Holy Land in 1227, but will be struck down by illness, forcing him to return to Brindisi, and a totally unimpressed Pope Gregory will excommunicate Emperor Frederick in September 1227. So amongst all this drama, I guess it won't surprise you to learn that launching a crusade into Prussia wasn't really something Hermann von Salza or Emperor Frederick had time for at the moment.

Duke Konrad of Mazovia was also having a busy year. There was drama aplenty in the Piast Dynasty in 1227. Duke Konrad's brother, the king of Poland, Leszek I, was assassinated in July 1227, leaving as his successor a one year old boy. Sensing an opportunity, Duke Konrad decided to send an army to Krakow, most probably not to claim the monarchy for himself, but to prevent one of the other dukes from seizing power. Unfortunately for Duke Konrad, Duke Henryk of Silesia had the same idea, so now the two armies are heading towards Krakow and it looks like the Duke of Silesia will get there first. So is Duke Konrad interested in supplying men and armaments for a crusade into Prussia at the moment? No, not really.

So with everyone busy elsewhere, the Prussian Crusade ended up starting with a whimper, not a bang. A tiny force of seven Knights, yes you heard that correctly, seven Knights under the leadership of Konrad von Landsberg, a knight from Saxony who was apparently familiar with Polish Duchies and customs, gathered themselves together in 1227, and in the spring of 1228 they arrived at the border regions of Prussia. Now the seven Knights chosen by Konrad von Landsberg to accompany him on this crusade were, in all likelihood, young inexperienced Knights from various convents across the Holy Roman Empire. Any knight who was experienced or otherwise valuable had already been claimed by Hermann von Salza for Emperor Frederick's Crusade to the Holy Land, so the seven Knights, were likely to be new recruits, untried in battle, although William Urban speculates that the group may have included an experienced warrior or two who was too old or had too many injuries to join the Grand Master in the Holy Land.

Now, when I said the crusade only consisted of seven Knights under the command of Konrad von Landsburg, I guess that might be a bit misleading. If you think that only eight people are setting out on this Crusade, well, that's actually wrong. By the time you factored in, the squires and sergeants needed to serve each Knight and the servants needed to cook, wash clothes, and keep the horses, armor and other equipment in order, as well as the priests and doctors needed by every respectable religious Order, more than one

hundred men accompanied Konrad to Prussia. Still, a force of that size can't conquer Prussia. In fact, it can't even conquer a little bit of Prussia, and Konrad was fully aware of this fact. So instead of invading Prussia with his seven Knights and attacking the settlement of Kulm, Konrad instead, led his tiny force to a castle on the south bank of the Vistula River, and occupied it.

Now this castle had been built by the Duke of Mazovia, and it looked out over the river into the Prussian region of Kulm. The stronghold of Kulm itself was a short distance, further up river. So basically, this castle was the last Latin Christian bastion before you crossed the river into pagan Prussia. In case anyone is following on Google Earth or other maps, the castle today would overlook not pagan lands, but the Polish city of Torun. When they had settled into the castle, they decided it needed a name, so they called it Vogelsang, or "Bird song". Now, before you turn all sentimental and start envisioning a beautiful castle in Polish woodlands, surrounded by happy contented birds, all calling out harmoniously to each other, communicating in song about how great it is to be a bird in this gorgeous part of the world, well it wasn't like that. According to a German chronicler, here's the reason why the Knights called the castle birdsong. It was because and I quote, "there sang many a wounded man not, as the nightingale sings, but with the sorrowful song that the swan sings as he is killed." End quote. So, just so we're all clear, the Teutonic Knights called the castle "Birdsong" after the cries of wounded men who sounded like birds being killed. So irony: by naming the castle Vogelsang, the Knights were being ironic.

Anyway, after the knights and their retinue had settled in and made themselves at home, they sent raiding parties over the river into Prussia to find pagans, attempt to convert them to Christianity, and if they refused, to burn their villages and destroy their crops. Now, oddly, around this time the Knights had a visitor. You won't guess who it was, so I'll tell you. It was William of Modena. Yes, fresh from placing the Papal stamp over the regions of Livonia and Estonia, William decided to call into Prussia on his way back to the Holy Roman Empire. His first port of call on his journey home was the court of King Valdemar II in Denmark, where he discussed issues arising from the Crusade in Estonia with the Danish King. The Papal legate then popped onto a ship and sailed to Prussia, to check out the pagan situation there. Astonishingly, although not an awful lot is known about William of Modena's visit to Prussia, it seems that he stayed there for over a year, arriving in late 1228 or early 1229 and leaving in January 1230.

So what did William of Modena do for a year in pagan Prussia? Well, we've seen from his exploits in Livonia and Estonia that he was the sort of man who was happy to get his hands dirty, so to speak. His way of familiarizing himself with the situation in Livonia and Estonia was not to remain in Riga, hearing reports from Latin Christians about the locals. No, he personally traveled across the region, listening to tribal elders, meeting the locals and seeing and assessing the situation on the ground for himself. It looks like he was intent on doing the same in Prussia. Since William sailed to Prussia from Denmark, it's likely that he landed in the north, and then gradually made his way south until he arrived at Vogelsang Castle. There are reports that he made efforts to learn the Prussian language, and even translated a grammar book in Prussian so that the Prussians could learn to read. Apparently, he did manage to make some converts, mostly in the regions well to the north of Kulm.

William's method of conversion, talking to and educating the pagans, was in stark contrast to the Teutonic method of conversion which the Knights of Vogelsang Castle were busy undertaking. During the period in which William of Modena was making friends and

peacefully preaching to the north, the Knights were making regular sorties out over the river, getting to know the local region and terrain, rounding up pagans, trying to get them to convert, and if they failed to do so, then destroying their homes and anything of value and making them sing the Vogelsang of loss and despair. All the while, the Knights were closely observing the military tactics of the pagans, and attempting to learn their language and customs. If you think that this sounds like the Knights of Vogelsang Castle are laying the groundwork for increased future involvement by the Teutonic Order into Prussia, you would be right.

By the year 1230 things had quietened down considerably in the Holy Land. In a diplomatic move that weirded everyone out, Emperor Frederick II had managed to take Jerusalem in the year 1229 without a shot being fired, and a ten year peace treaty was currently in place. This meant, of course, that fewer Teutonic Knights were now needed in the Holy Land, and some could be spared for an expedition into Prussia. Join me next week as the pace of the Prussian Crusade picks up a notch, as the Grand Master sends a small army to Vogelsang. Until next week, bye for now.

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