

Episode 261

The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part 2. Vytenis versus Heinrich von Plotzke.

Hello again. Last week we visited Prussia, which had transformed itself into a modern, thriving part of Latin Christendom. In contrast, poor Livonia was beset by conflicts, both from without and within, and a grand plan was developed which would see Livonia secured, and would see the Teutonic Order bring all of its possessions in the Baltic region under control. This grand plan involved defeating and subduing the Samogitians, and securing the lower reaches of the Nemunas River, which ran through Samogitia on its way to the Baltic Sea.

Once the lower reaches of the river were secured, then an attack could be made on Samogitia's neighbor and ally, Lithuania, meaning that all the pagans in the region would be defeated and subdued, and Livonia and Prussia could live happily ever after. However, as we discussed in last week's episode, this plan was much easier said than done. Still, in last week's episode, we saw the Prussian branch of the Teutonic Order make a start on their plan to subdue Samogitia and Lithuania, with numerous battles taking place between the Teutonic order and the Lithuanians along the lower reaches of the Nemunas river.

This weeks we'll see those attacks expand, and extend into the heart of Lithuania, pitting two worthy foes against each other, those foes being Heinrich von Plotzke of the Teutonic Order and the current Grand Duke of Lithuania, Vytenis.

Now, before we set these two men and their armies against each other, let's just zoom down and take a closer look at them.

We met Vytenis of Lithuania briefly in last week's episode. He was a respected and seasoned warrior who had united the Lithuanian warlords, following a period of civil unrest which arose after the death of Mindaugas. Proving himself to be an astute statesman as well as an astute warrior, Vytenis had also managed to form alliances with a number of other parties in the Baltic region, most notable of course, with the citizens of Riga in Livonia. He also managed to remain resolutely pagan while making enough soothing noises about converting to Christianity to appease his Christian allies, while also hosting Franciscan friars at his court and in the towns of Vilnius and Trakai. His battle tactics were legendary and were much admired even by his enemies. In his book "The Teutonic Knights", William Urban describes how Vytenis would often send multiple forces out of Lithuania under multiple commanders, His enemies would never be too sure about which was the real army and which were only diversions. They would be forced to choose an army to confront, often discovering later that they had chosen the wrong one, and that the main Lithuanian attack had fallen elsewhere. William Urban sums up the character and attributes of Vytenis in the following manner, and I quote.

"He could not have ruled Lithuania without unflinching courage and a willingness to match wits and brutality with the worst of his enemies and the best of his friends. In barbaric splendor and simplicity he was a model pagan king, a worthy match for the Crusaders". End quote.

OK. In the corner opposite the Lithuanian leader Vytenis we have Heinrich von Plotzke of the Prussian Chapter of the Teutonic Order. Now, you might remember Heinrich von

Plotzke from Episode 255, the final episode on the Prussian Crusade, which saw Master Heinrich von Plotzke drive the Brandenburg dukes out of Danzig (or Gdansk) in 1308 and seize the city for the Teutonic Order. Master Heinrich von Plotzke then went on to secure the entire region of Pomerelia for the Order. Now, during the course of these events, which happened around three years before our current time, Heinrich von Plotzke was the Master of Prussia. However, to the best of my knowledge, by the year 1311, the place on the timeline on which we currently stand, Heinrich von Plotzke is no longer Master. From what I can gather, he ceased being Master two years ago, in 1309. So, what is his title now? Well, I'm not sure that he has a formal title. You might think that he may be Marshall of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, but he isn't Marshall in the current year on our timeline, and won't be formally appointed to the position of Marshall until the year 1312. So, in the opposite corner to Grand Duke Vytenis of Lithuania, we have Heinrich von Plotzke, former Master and future Marshall of the Teutonic Order in Prussia.

Now, the clash between these men, or more accurately, the clashes between these two men will be epic and far-ranging, with both of them distinguishing themselves on the battlefield. In fact, the book "Lithuania Rising" describes Heinrich von Plotzke as being the greatest of Teutonic commanders, so we are set for some well matched battles.

Now, we saw in last week's episode that in the year 1311, the Teutonic Order raided up the Nemunas River to attack the Lithuanians, who had used the river as a gateway to conduct raid into Samland and Natangia. Later that same year in fact, the Teutonic Knights led a daring raid deep into the heart of Lithuania, to a town called Gardinas. In case any of you are following along on Google Earth, Gardinas today is in Belarus, and is called Grodno. Back in the early 1300s, Lithuanian Gardinas was a town located in the upper reaches of the Nemunas River. The six knights who led the raid on Gardinas had a terrible time leading their army of 400 Natangians to the town. Apparently they got lost on more than one occasion as they tried to navigate around impassable swamps, and in fact were lost for two whole days at one stage, before thankfully, for them at least, stumbling out of the swamps and tangled forest, into Gardinas.

Now, apparently Vytenis had heard rumors that the Teutonic Order was intending to target Gardinas, so he had all the routes into the town well guarded. However he didn't count on the knights making their way to the city through the swamps. So while the Lithuanian warriors were methodically patrolling the roads leading to the town, unbeknownst to them, the Order's army was already in the town, destroying property, burning houses and stores, taking captives, looting, pillaging and killing. As soon as they were done destroying the town they melted back into the wilderness and made their way back down to Prussia.

The attack on Gardinas was a total embarrassment for Vytenis. He prided himself on being the protector of Lithuania, and the audacious assault by the Teutonic Knights left him absolutely furious and seeking revenge. So, it came as no surprise to anyone when, a few months later, Vytenis led an army of Lithuanian warriors on a raid deep into Prussia. So deep into Prussia in fact that he almost made it all the way to the Baltic coast. According to chronicles at the time, the Lithuanian army was huge, and it raided almost unchecked through Ermland, the region located between the towns of Konigsberg and Elbing. The chronicler reported that the Lithuanians stopped outside the castle at Braunsberg near the coast, to yell insults at a bishop who had positioned himself on the ramparts of the castle. In fact Vytenis' army seemed to take a special interest in Christian targets. Vytenis even, on occasions, detoured to make sure that every church in this army's path was entered, desecrated and then destroyed. Apparently, at one stage, he managed to capture 1200

local Christians. He had them bound and secured, and later that evening taunted them, asking them, and I quote “Where is your god now? Why does he not help you as our gods helps us now and at other times?” End quote.

Now, clearly, with his forces deep inside Prussian territory, Vytenis was vulnerable to an attack by the Latin Christians. The current commander of the military arm of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, Heinrich von Plotzke, knew that this was an opportunity that may not present itself again in a hurry, so he scrambled to muster a large army, intending to block the Lithuanian army as it retreated from its current position, trapping it inside Prussian territory. He managed to gather an army consisting of 80 knights and thousands of militiamen, and they rode out to confront the Lithuanians. Vytenis saw them approaching and ordered his army to move into their battle positions on a hill behind a large natural shield of hedges and trees. It was a tricky position from the Latin Christian point of view. The hedges and trees formed a natural sort of a wall, and to attack the pagan army head on meant the Latin Christians would need to charge up the hill, which may not end well. So Heinrich von Plotzke decided to investigate the situation more thoroughly.

He selected a celebrated Teutonic knight and ordered him, along with a small contingent of men, to lead an attack against the Lithuanians. The knight did as he was ordered but was forced to retreat soon after making contact with the pagan army. Between 40 and 60 of his men had been killed by the Lithuanians, but the Teutonic knight was able to provide a detailed description to Heinrich of the exact location and size of the enemy forces.

Armed with this vital piece of intelligence, Heinrich ordered the Latin Christian forces into battle formation and then attacked. The battle which followed was understandably chaotic. Both armies consisted of thousands of men who were suddenly engaged in hand-to-hand fighting and to add to the chaos a bunch of Latin Christian women who had been taken captive by the Lithuanians, managed to free themselves, and in the words of William Urban, and I quote, “caused confusion in the rear” end quote.

Vytenis saw the writing on the wall and managed to escape in the confusion. The day belonged to the Latin Christians. Reports at the time stated that the victorious Prussian army seized 2800 horses from the battlefield, along with thousands of swords and spears. They also liberated the prisoners taken by the Lithuanians and rescued the booty which had been stolen by the pagan army. However it wasn't a complete victory. Vytenis had managed to escape, along with many other Lithuanian fighters, with the Latin Christians remaining on the battlefield to collect the spoils of war instead of pursuing the fleeing Lithuanians. In celebration Heinrich von Plotzke founded a nunnery at Thorn, as you do.

Vytenis managed to locate what was left of the Lithuanian forces and cleverly ordered the army to lay low and hidden inside Prussia until he could work out a way to get them safely back to Lithuania, without being detected, and without having to engage the Teutonic Order in more fighting.

His opportunity to put this exit strategy into practice came when he spied a young, enthusiastic castellan gathering a small army intending to lead it into Lithuania to attack the pagans. Vytenis and his men fell into line behind this small army and marched with them into Lithuania. Once they were safely in Lithuanian territory, Vytenis revealed himself to the surprised castellan, and told him to stop being so silly and to take his tiny army back to Prussia, as it would be easily crushed by the Lithuanians if he was daft enough to continue with his ill-considered expedition.

So, in their first major clash Heinrich von Plotzke has prevailed, although Vytenis remains in the ring, ready to fight another round.

The next round occurred soon after the first. One of the Lithuanians captured on the battlefield happened to be a man of some importance, the castellan of the castle in the Lithuania town of Gardinas, a man who also served as Vytenis' chamberlain, managing the Grand Duke's household. Heinrich extracted an agreement from the man that the Latin Christians would release him in return for the man effectively turning Gardinas over to the Teutonic forces. The plan was that Heinrich would immediately release the chamberlain who would rush to catch up with Vytenis' army, explaining his delay on having been lost in the Prussian forests. The man would then make his way to Gardinas, where he would await the arrival of the Prussian army, which he would then presumably let into the city. However, in a move which should have surprised no-one the chamberlain told Vytenis of the plan as soon as he caught up with the Lithuanian army and Vytenis raced to set an ambush to capture the Latin Christian army as it made its way to Gardinas.

Heinrich von Plotzke must have suspected that something like this could occur, as his scouts managed to capture an elderly Lithuanian man as they made their approach to Gardinas, and under torture the man admitted that the Lithuanian forces were waiting concealed next to a nearby river crossing. Their plan was to wait until half the Prussian army had crossed the river, effectively splitting it in two, before attacking it. Heinrich von Plotzke released the old man and retreated back into Prussia without falling into the Lithuanian trap.

Around a month later Heinrich von Plotzke made his next move. He gathered a huge army consisting of 140 Teutonic Knights, 2,000 foot soldiers, and a large force of local militia men, and rode into Lithuanian territory. Their intended target, once again, was the town of Gardinas, which they intended to approach, not via the roads but by traversing a number of lakes, rivers and swamps in small boats, then using a nearby forest to approach the town unseen.

This was actually a really good plan. Vytenis at this time was relaxing and so were most of his men, so he had only stationed a handful of scouts in the forests outside the town. The Latin Christian army killed all of the scouts except for one, and from the remaining scout they learned that the Lithuanians had no idea that the massive Teutonic army was outside one of their key towns. Deciding not to attack the town itself after all, Heinrich von Plotzke instead ordered his men to raid the unprotected settlements around Gardinas, which they did very effectively, taking 700 Lithuanians captive, and killing goodness knows how many others. As a chronicler at the time stated of the Lithuanians laying dead on the wake of the Latin Christian attack, and I quote "only God knows the number" end quote.

Now, unsurprisingly, these exploits raised Heinrich von Plotzke to legendary status back in Prussia, and when the Grand Master Siegfried von Feuchtfangen died, everyone expected Heinrich to step neatly into the position. He didn't though. It's not clear why he wasn't elected, but William Urban speculates that it may have been due to some question marks over his seizure of Danzig years earlier. Regardless, a man called Karl von Trier was raised to the position of Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, and Heinrich was provided with a consolation prize, officially becoming Marshall of the Teutonic forces.

Join me next week as Grand Master Karl steps into his leadership position, and continues the order's battles against Lithuania. Until next week, bye for now.

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