

Episode 262

The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part 3. Grand Master Karl von Trier.

Hello again. Last week we saw the opening battles in the Samogitian Crusade, battles fought not against the Samogitians but between the Prussian Chapter of the Teutonic Order under commander Heinrich von Plotzke, and the Lithuanians under their Grand Duke Vytenis. The goal of the Teutonic Order in the last episode was not to secure Samogitia but to target a Lithuanian town located in the upper reaches of the Nemunas River, the town of Gardinas. We saw at the end of last week's episode that, following the death of Grand Master Siegfried, a new Grand Master was appointed: Grand Master Karl von Trier. And Grand Master Karl's focus will see the Order cease its attacks on Gardinas, and instead revert to the original plan to secure Samogitia as the first step towards eventually subduing Lithuania.

Firstly, though, we should ask ourselves, who was this new player on the scene, Grand Master Karl? Well, William Urban points out that Grand Master Karl was only 46 years old when appointed to the position of Grand Master, and, handily, for dealing with a French Pope, he was fluent in both French and Latin. Shortly after he arrived in Prussia to take up his position he did a quick tour of the Order's holdings in Prussia, then devised a new strategy for the Order's military campaigns. Determining that Livonia was the Order's priority, not Lithuania, he suspended the attacks on Gardinas, and instead stipulated that securing Samogitia and re-establishing the land corridor between Prussia and Livonia was the Order's new primary goal.

To that end, in April of 1313 the Grand Master sent a fleet of ships loaded with supplies from Konigsberg to the entrance of the Nemunas River, and sent ground forces overland to Ragnit. Unfortunately, the sea crossing from Konigsberg, along the coastline towards the river mouth, was filled with much drama and danger with the result that 4 Teutonic knights, 400 soldiers, and a good deal of supplies and a load of building materials were all lost at sea. The ships which made it to the Nemunas River, however, sailed 30 miles up the river, disembarked, then started work on a castle made from logs and rammed earth, that the Grand Master intended to use as a base for his raids into the Samogitian heartland. He named the castle "Christmemel"

While the building of Christmemel castle was underway, Heinrich von Plotzke took a force further up river to attack some small Samogitian strongholds, while simultaneously the castellan from Ragnit castle sailed upriver intending to attack the Samogitian stronghold of Welun, which was located on the banks of the river. The castellan's ship was an impressive warship but it was a little difficult to control. When they approached Welun castle the ship was hit by an unexpected gust of wind which drove the vessel onto the shore. The noise of the unexpected landing and the chaos on board as the men tried to get the ship back under control totally destroyed any chance of the army disembarking from the ship unseen. So instead of attacking the castle the men from Ragnit were forced to fend off attacks on their ship by the Samogitians as they struggled to get it back off the river bank and back into deeper water. They eventually succeeded and hastily turned the warship around and sailed back downstream to Ragnit.

The appearance of the warship so far up the Nemunas River was a huge concern to the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytenis. Realizing that the warship had the potential to be able to transport armies to any Samogitian stronghold on the lower reaches of the river, he drew

himself up a new list of priorities. On top of that list of priorities was to take an army to Ragnit with the goal of finding and destroying the warship. Vytenis quickly mustered 100 cavalymen and ordered them to ride to Ragnit as fast as possible. He also launched around 100 small boats from the upper reaches of the Nemunas River. Each boat contained six Lithuanian fighters who were ordered to scoot downriver as quickly as possible to Ragnit. The first part of the plan went really well. The little boats rocketed down the river so quickly that the Latin Christian scouts, who spotted them as they shot past, had no chance to ride to Ragnit to warn of their coming, so the little boats all safely reached Ragnit without having been intercepted.

The second part of the plan also worked well. To their delight the Lithuanians discovered the warship moored in the middle of the river near Ragnit along with only four archers on board to protect it. Then the plan went totally sideways. The warship was huge and the Lithuanians found that it was impossible to climb up the sides of the ship. Those who attempted to do so were immediately targeted by the archers. Things would have been even more grim if the Lithuanian cavalymen hadn't turned up at Ragnit just in time to divert the Latin Christians from sending reinforcements over to the warship.

The Lithuanians scratched their heads for a while, sailing around the huge ship in their tiny boats, wondering what to do, when someone had the bright idea of slicing through the ship's mooring rope. The rope was cut and the ship, freed from its anchor, drifted downstream, followed by the cheering Lithuanians in their 100 little boats. Eventually the ship ran aground where it was promptly set on fire and destroyed by the Lithuanians. Woohoo!

It seemed like the Lithuanians were on a winning streak. When Heinrich von Plotzke led a large army into Lithuania in 1314 he discovered, to his horror, that the huge underground bunker of supplies he had stored inside Lithuania in anticipation of this particular military campaign, had been discovered by the Lithuanians and had been destroyed. The bunker must have been pretty impressive. It was fully stocked with food and other supplies and even contained 500 fresh horses. It had been guarded by a small contingent of Prussian soldiers, but the castellan of Gardinas castle had discovered the supply post, killed the guards, stolen the horses, and had destroyed the rest of the supplies. Then he ordered his men to retreat from the plundered bunker.

When Heinrich von Plotzke discovered the empty supply post he must have had one of those sick-it-the-pit-of-your-stomach feelings. Two realizations must have made themselves clear to him pretty quickly. The first being he now had no way to feed his large and hungry army and no fresh horses to supply them with. Secondly it meant that the Lithuanians were probably waiting nearby ready to ambush Heinrich von Plotzke and his forces. The Marshall of the Prussian forces decided that his men were too hungry to put up any real resistance to an attack. So the only way forward was to retreat back to Prussia, taking a tortuous 500 mile long route which would ensure his men made it out of Lithuania without encountering any Lithuanians.

Heinrich von Plotzke was in fact correct. The 500 mile long detour did mean that they avoided any Lithuanian fighting men. But making a 500 mile long journey on tired horses with no food is never a good idea, and towards the end of the trek many men were forced to eat their horses, or to scavenge fruits and plants in the forest. A lot of men ended up dying of starvation before they made it back to Prussia. As William Urban points out the

castellan of the castle at Gardinas, by emptying out the supply depot, nearly managed to destroy an entire Prussian army without even firing a shot.

In August of 1315 the Samogitian led an attack on Ragnit castle. However, finding the keep of the castle all but impregnable, they contented themselves with setting fire to nearby crops and farm buildings before withdrawing. Six weeks later Vytenis launched an impressive attack on Christmemel Castle. Bringing with him two catapult machines and a contingent of Russian archers, Vytenis' plan was to pile enormous amounts of wood all around the castle, then set fire to it, the plan being that the smoke would force an evacuation, or that the heat caused by the fire would crack and weaken the castle walls. The Lithuanian forces surrounded the castle, besieged it, then busied themselves cutting wood and collecting anything else which was flammable.

As soon as Grand Master Karl heard about the siege he began gathering his forces. Worried about how long it would take before his large army was ready to mobilize, he sent an advance party of ten knights and 150 soldiers ahead on ships. Vytenis was able to keep the ships from reaching the castle. However on the 17th day of the siege his scouts advised him that the Grand Master's army was approaching.

Vytenis sprang into action. He ordered the stockpiles of wood and other flammable material to be carried to the moat. Thousands of Lithuanians complied, running in with armfuls of wood while the Russian archers did their best to keep the crossbowmen from Christmemel away from the walls. However, Christmemel had been designed to protect its archers. Well concealed behind the castle's crenelations, the crossbowmen fired repeatedly at the wood-laden Lithuanians, mowing down so many of them that Vytenis ordered the attack to be stopped. He set fire to the Lithuanian catapult machines, then retreated.

Unfortunately Vytenis vanishes from history at this point. He is never heard of again in the Crusader accounts, and the next time the Latin Christians face off against the Lithuanians there is a new leader in place, a man called Gediminas. William Urban reports that early histories of the region stated that Vytenis died after having been struck by lightning, but later historians have all but dismissed this account. So the great Lithuanian leader and warrior Vytenis, departs the scene at this stage of our narrative due to causes unknown.

Back at Christmemel, Grand Master Karl found himself inside Samogitia with a very large army. Deciding to make the most of this opportunity he dismissed most of his men, ordering them to return to Prussia, but retained 6,000 of them ordering them on a night march further up the Nemunas River to the stronghold of Welun.

Apparently, although the Latin Christians had the element of surprise on their side and managed to approach the castle totally unseen, 6,000 men was deemed an insufficient force to mount an assault on the stronghold itself. So, much like the recent Samogitian attack on Ragnit castle the Prussians didn't attempt to breach the castle walls but instead laid waste to anything and everything around the castle, destroying crops, farm, houses and food stores before retreating.

In fact, William Urban reports that attacks by the Latin Christians on Welun castle became a regular event, with the castle, or more accurately the land and buildings surrounding the castle, being targeted at least once a year. Welun was central to the Samogitian control of the lower reaches of the Nemunas River, and to achieve their goal of controlling the river

the Teutonic Order needed to see the castle either destroyed or abandoned. Destroying the castle would have been a major undertaking, but regular raids designed to destroy crops which were needed to supply the garrison with food meant that the Lithuanians were forced to step in and resupply the castle themselves to prevent it being abandoned by the Samogitians. The Latin Christians hoped that, if they were thorough in their efforts to ensure the Lithuanians were required, season after season, to go to the expense and inconvenience of re-supplying the Samogitian castle, then maybe the Lithuanians would tire of this and the castle would be abandoned.

Now, around this time, in the years 1315 to 1316, Grand Master Karl traveled to the Rhineland to try and recruit some more crusaders. His attempts were successful, but it seems that these crusaders were a new type of crusader, people who were looking to travel to Prussia and then on to Samogitia less out of spiritual obligation and more out of the desire for a sort of adventure holiday. Even Grand Master Karl seemed to realize this, and may have marketed the crusades accordingly. In his book "The Samogitian Crusade" William Urban reports that along with venturing out of civilized Prussia into the wilds of the Samogitian forests and killing as many pagan Samogitians as they could lay their hands on, a highlight of each crusader expedition was the lavish ceremony which awaited the crusaders when they returned to Prussia. Any squires who performed valiant and brave deeds on the Samogitian battlefield were ceremoniously dubbed as knights by the most prominent nobleman present. To take the spectacle to new levels, Grand Master Karl created the Table of Honour, modeled on the Round Table of the Legends of King Arthur, and any man who performed particularly well against the Samogitians was invited to dine at the table alongside the Grand Master.

I guess it's not surprising that crusading to Samogitia became quite popular after this, with crusaders visiting ever more frequently, the squires all itching to prove themselves on the battlefield and return as fully fledged knights, and the fighting men all hoping to distinguish themselves enough to score an invitation to a coveted position on the table of honor.

We will leave Prussia, Samogitia and Lithuania there for a while, with the Prussians and crusaders attacking Samogitian strongholds along the lower reaches of the Nemunas River, with the new Lithuanian leader Gediminas consolidating his rule and getting ready to make some surprise moves. Next week we return to Livonia where enough years have passed that Pope Clement is finally in a position to hear Archbishop Friedrich's complaints against the knights of the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Order.

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