

Episode 264

The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part 4. Samogitian Focus.

Hello again. Last week we saw the dispute between the Rigans and the Teutonic Order fall down a legal pit hole, with attempts to deal with the dispute winding up in a frustrating quagmire of delays, appeals and legal confusion. The end result of all of this hooah is that the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic Order is still in Livonia and is rebuilding and strengthening the fortress at Dunamunde, while Archbishop Friedrich of Riga is spending an extended period in Avignon trying fruitlessly to get the Pope to reconsider the matter while amusing himself by collecting beautiful objects and entertaining members of his friendship circle. So while things are in a holding pattern in Riga we are heading back to the Samogitian Crusade.

You might remember last time we checked in on the Samogitian Crusade two episodes ago, the field of conflict changed from the Lithuanian town of Gardinas on the upper reaches of the Nemunas River to the Samogitian strongholds on the lower reaches of the river, with the new Grand Master Karl von Trier declaring that the Order's priority should be to secure the land corridor from Prussia to Livonia by first subduing Samogitia. We also saw the legendary Lithuanian warlord Vytenis die of unexplained causes.

Vytenis' successor Gediminas did a pretty impressive job, not only of uniting the Lithuanian warlords under his rule, but also of forming new alliances which could assist him in his battles against the Teutonic Order. Across parts of Russia the grip on power of the Mongol Tartar rulers appeared to be weakening, and there were plenty of Russians looking for military support from outsiders to offer them protection as they rose up against the Tartar Khans. Most Russians viewed Lithuania as their traditional enemy and not a possible ally, so they first approached Poland, Hungary and even the Teutonic Order for help. However none of these Latin Christian powers had enough resources to send a large military force to Russia. So in desperation some Russians approached Gediminas to see whether Lithuania would be able to come to their aid.

And it turned out that, yes, Lithuania was willing to come to their aid. As William Urban points out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" this arrangement suited everyone, even the ruling Khans. It suited the Russians as Lithuania was in close proximity to their country, unlike the distant central European Latin Christians. And also unlike the distant central European Latin Christians, Lithuania's leader Gediminas was tolerant of the Russian Orthodox religion. The Tartar Khans were happy to turn a blind eye over Lithuania muscling in on some Russian territories as their objective was to keep more powerful states, such as the Kingdom of Poland, out of Russian affairs, and they found it easier to rule a divided and fractured Russia and Lithuanian-backed rulers coming to power in some of the Russian principalities which neighbored Lithuania fulfilled this aim.

Above all this arrangement suited Gediminas. It meant that he had a pool of Russian manpower to draw upon if need be in his battles against the Teutonic Order, and it allowed Lithuanian influence to spread eastwards into the Russian Principalities. In fact, after a while Gediminas began signing his letters with the title "Gediminas, King of the Lithuanians and many Russians." As word spread that Lithuania was a reliable and successful substitute for the brutal rule of the Khans, more and more Russians sought out Gediminas' protection. William Urban reports that at one stage Gediminas had installed his brothers as

rulers of Kiev and Polotsk, had his brother in law as the ruler of Pskov, and had Lithuanian connections as far away as Moscow and Galicia.

Gediminas also reaffirmed his ties with the merchants of Riga - keen to attract traders and artisans to Lithuania who were familiar with the latest European military technology which Lithuania was hoping to acquire. At this stage Gediminas had continued Vytenis' tradition of keeping a group of Franciscan friars at his court, and those friars were always helpful in convincing Lithuania's Latin Christian allies that Gediminas was, any day now, about to convert to Christianity. And while that day never seemed to come, news of its imminent approach was enough to soothe most Latin Christian concerns about allying themselves to a pagan enemy of Christianity.

While Gediminas of Lithuania was busy extending his influence across western Russia, the Teutonic Order in Prussia was busy shooting itself in the foot. In asserting that subduing Samogitia ought to be the priority of the Prussian chapter of the Order, Grand Master Karl von Trier appeared to be rapidly losing support amongst some of his own knights, who were worried that too much focus was being given to Samogitia, and not enough was being done to reestablish the Order's presence in the Holy Land. In the end it was all too much for Grand Master Karl, who decided to throw in the towel and return to Trier, where he had been offered the position of the head of a convent there, a position which sounded much more rewarding and much less taxing than being the Grand Master of a military Order.

Ex-Grand Master Karl had no sooner packed his bags and hit the road back to his place of birth when calls started coming in urging his reinstatement. Members of the Teutonic Order in Germany heard about the terrible manner in which the Prussian branch of the Order had treated the Grand Master and they demanded that his resignation be reversed. In the end that's exactly what happened. Grand Master Karl managed to remove some men in the command structure in Prussia who had agitated against him, then the Grand Master declared that he needed to attend to matters back in Europe and would be leaving Prussia to its own devices for the time being.

In case anyone is wondering, it looks like Heinrich von Plotzke wasn't one of the men plotting the Grand Master's downfall, as he remained in the position of Marshall after the Grand Master's reinstatement. And you might ask, what was the issue in Europe which demanded the Grand Master's urgent and immediate attention? Well, it concerned the charges leveled against the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic Order by the citizens of Riga, and Grand Master Karl found himself on the road to Avignon in France to answer a Papal summons to respond to the allegations made by Archbishop Friedrich, who had been present in Avignon now for a number of years, patiently waiting for the issue to work its way up the Papal to-do list.

So, Grand Master Karl, who you might remember was handily fluent in French as well as Latin, turned his back on Prussia and headed towards Avignon, leaving Heinrich von Plotzke to oversee the day to day running of the crusade against Samogitia. Happily for Heinrich von Plotzke, crusaders regularly made the journey to Prussia, keen to venture into the wilds of Samogitia to attack pagans, despite the absence of the Grand Master and his Table of Honor. Although, as William Urban pints out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", the regular influx of regular crusaders may have caused the Teutonic Order in Prussia to become overconfident, and take risks they wouldn't have taken without the additional manpower provided by the crusaders.

Over-reach by Heinrich von Plotzke reached its peak in July of 1320 when the Marshall led 40 Teutonic knights and a large force of militia up the Nemunas River and past Vilnius into the very center of Lithuania, destroying property, pillaging villagers and taking captives. The Lithuanian defenders first cut off all the possible lines of retreat open to the Latin Christians, felling large trees to block roads and doing everything they could think of which would slow or block their return to Prussia. Then they set up an ambush.

Heinrich von Plotzke was aware of the dangers of an ambush and to try to prevent one from taking place he force the captives taken by his army and the cattle stolen by the army to march at the head of the large force, hoping that they would be the first to fall victim should any ambush be sprung. The Lithuanians were aware of this, however. Sensibly the Lithuanians concealed themselves on either side of a narrow passageway which the Latin Christian army was intending to negotiate, and simply waited for the prisoners and the cattle to pass by. Then they struck.

The Prussian army appears to have been totally taken by surprise. Many of the militiamen who were fighting on foot fled into the forest, but the knights astride their heavy warhorses did not have that option. Hemmed in by the thick forest and with nowhere else to go they were forced to stand and fight. William Urban reports that the battle which followed lasted for hours. The knights, weighed down by their heavy armor soon became tired and so did their horses, and one by one they were defeated. By the end of the day 29 knights lay dead in the Lithuanian forest, including Heinrich von Plotzke.

The years after Heinrich von Plotzke's death saw a more conservative approach to crusading. Crusaders still arrived in small groups but no-one ventured deep into the heart of Lithuania any more. Instead smaller expeditions were sent into Samogitia, and particular to the region surrounding the lower reaches of the Nemunas river, became more common.

It wasn't until the year 1322 that a large enough force of crusaders arrived for a more ambitious military campaign to be attempted. In fact, the crusaders who traveled to Prussia in February of that year were from all over the place. There were a large number, of course, from the Holy Roman Empire, including Rhinelanders, Swabians, Austrians and Bohemians, but also a number of Polish crusaders, predominantly from Silesia. The crusaders gathered in Konigsberg, and along with knights from the Teutonic Order and a sizable militia force from Kulm they set out on crusade, heading for the lower reaches of the Nemunas River in Samogitia. Now this was a sizable army. A chronicler at the time mentioned that it numbered 20,000 men all up, but that's likely to be an exaggeration. Still the army was large enough and well equipped enough to deal a devastating blow to the Samogitians. The crusader army swept through the lower reaches of the Nemunas River, destroying just about every pagan stronghold along the river banks, and laying waste to any sites of pagan worship they came across.

Having dealt effectively with the southern parts of Samogitia they then ventured into central Samogitia, again pretty much destroying everything before them. Villagers were burnt, strongholds were attacked and destroyed, and vast numbers of Samogitian pagans found themselves either killed or captured by the Latin Christians. As William Urban notes in his book "The Samogitian Crusaade", and I quote, "At one blow Master Friedrich von Vildenberg had destroyed the major settlements and brought Samogitia to the verge of surrender." End quote.

Buoyed by this success, another impressively large group of crusaders gathered at Konigsberg in February of 1323, exactly a year after the first expedition. However, the weather intervened: a late winter freeze set in; the Baltic Sea froze; the temperatures plummeted, and Master Friedrich decided it was too cold to risk leaving the warmth of the castle. So he entertained the crusaders in style at Konigsberg, and when the weather failed to improve the crusaders left Prussia a few weeks later, returning to their homes with no booty, no pagans converted or killed, and absolutely no tales of glory on the battlefield.

The Samogitians however were not afraid of the cold, and decided to take advantage of the fact that the crusaders had left Prussia by attacking Memel in March 1323. Memel, you might remember, is on the Samogalian coastline and, with the sea routes all closed due to the ice and the Latin Christians unwilling to leave the warmth of their firesides, isolated Latin Christian strongholds such as Memel were particularly vulnerable. The Samogitians managed to successfully capture the city of Memel, although the inner keep of the castle managed to repel the attackers. With their confidence boosted by having dealt the Latin Christians this devastating blow, in late summer of 1323 the Samogitians attacked Samland in Prussia, then headed north into Kurland, attacking a major settlement and managing to overrun a monastery where young men were training for the priesthood, killing seven monks and 60 trainee priests.

Tax records kept by the Teutonic Order at this time indicated that the raids by the Samogitians from winter through summer in the year 1323 resulted in 20,000 Latin Christian deaths. William Urban points out that, while there is a general tendency for chroniclers to exaggerate numbers, the records kept by the Order were usually fairly accurate, so historians generally agree that it's not out of the question that 20,000 Latin Christians across Prussia, Semogalia and Kurland did actually lose their lives at the hands of the pagan Samogitians. So, while the crusade against the Samogitians is in full swing, the Samogitians themselves are far from defeated.

Now, you might have noticed that we have steamed ahead to the year 1323. That means that, you guessed it, we will be heading back to Livonia next week, or more accurately, heading to the halls of the Papal Seat in Avignon to see how the seemingly endless legal disputes between the Rigans and the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic Order are progressing. Until next week, bye for now.

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