

History of the Crusades Episode 268 The Baltic Crusades The Samogitian Crusade part 5 1328 to 1330.

Hello again. Last week we saw Lithuania simultaneously reject conversion to Christianity and rise as a major power in the region. Strengthened by its new ties to Russia and Poland, Lithuania is ready and willing to support its fellow pagans, the Samogitians, against the Teutonic Order and its ally, the Holy Roman Empire. We also saw the appointment last week of the new Grand Master, Grand Master Orseln, who had extensive military experience on the Samogitian battlefield, and had firmed up the Order's ties to the Holy Roman Empire in order to reinvigorate the Crusade against the Samogitians.

Grand Master Orseln commenced his campaign against the pagans by attacking Lithuania's chief ally, Poland. King Wladislaw of Poland was attempting to assert royal authority over his Piast relatives in Masovia, so the Grand Master decided to assist Masovia to resist being under the Polish King's thumb.

The Grand Master moved men into Masovia's main towns, and ejected the Polish royal forces from those towns. Satisfied that he had made his point the Grand Master then proposed a truce with the Kingdom of Poland. King Wladislaw accepted the truce, but if Grand Master Orseln was under the impression that he had dealt with the Polish problem, and resolved it to his satisfaction, he was sorely mistaken. As William Urban points out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", the Grand Master's attacks on Polish interests in Masovia was actually just the first salvo in what would end up being a very long war, and King Wladislaw used the truce to reform his forces and to plan his next move against the Order.

Grand Master Orseln, oblivious to the fact that he had just kicked off a major conflict with the Kingdom of Poland, turned his back on Masovia and all issues Polish, and focused instead on Samogitia. The first move he made was to order the Knights from the Livonian Chapter of the Order, who had been stationed at Memel, to pack up and head back to Livonia, while moving knights from the Prussian branch of the order in to replace them. Memel was a strategically vital stronghold which would be of prime importance in the Order's battles against the Samogitians, and Grand Master Orseln believed that attacks from Memel could be better coordinated if it was garrisoned with men from the Prussian branch of the Order.

At the same time as he was changing the guard at Memel, he ordered an ambitious assault on Samogitia's chief ally, Lithuania. He marched a contingent of knights to Gardinas, which you might remember is on the upper reaches of the Nemunas River, and managed to successfully ambush a number of Lithuanian fighters who were defending the town. William Urban reports that the men from the Teutonic Order then burned an area 30 miles wide. So intimidated were some Lithuanian people by this act that they surrendered, gathered their families and possessions, moved to Prussia, converted to Christianity, and served in the Prussian armed forces.

But not everything was coming up roses for Grand Master Orseln. Around this time, Christmemel, the Latin Christian stronghold which have been built along the lower reaches of the Nemunas river, collapsed. The general assumption is that an earthquake or earth-slide caused the foundations of the stronghold to de-stabilize, and the whole building was reduced to a pile of rubble. Rebuilding a stronghold wasn't something the Grand Master currently had time for, so he ordered a ceremony to take place around the collapsed structure, then set fire to whatever was left, and abandoned the site.

Around about this time a new major player is entering the Baltic Crusade arena, that man being King John of Bohemia. Now, King John of Bohemia was a competent ruler and a competent warrior who was aged in his 30s and was looking for adventure. He set up his vassals in Bohemia to look after administrative affairs on the home front, then grabbed his sword, donned his armour and set off looking for conquests. His original plan was to lead a crusade to the Holy Land but, having done some preliminary research on the issue, he decided that to take that path was likely to lead in failure. So he decided instead to pursue a crusade closer to home, a crusade which was more likely to be successful, a crusade in fact, to Samogitia. In the winter of 1328 to 1329 King John led an impressively large and quite multinational force to Prussia, to meet up with the Teutonic forces. Contained within King John's army were his new vessels, the Silesians, who had recently defected from the kingdom of Poland and declared their relations to Bohemia; along with some Piast princes who had also rejected King Wadlislaw of Poland and had declared themselves allied to the Teutonic Order; a bunch of Germans; and, interestingly, quite a few Englishman. By the time this force reached Prussia, and joined the troops mustered by the Teutonic Order, the combined army was so massive that everyone thought it had a solid chance of defeating the Samogitians once and for all.

The army set off crossing frozen rivers, marshes, and swamps until it reached its first target: a Samogitian stronghold. Not surprisingly, given the overwhelming size of the army

approaching it, the garrison of the stronghold surrendered without even putting up a fight. Grand Master Orseln and was all for uplifting the Samogitians from their stronghold, relocating them to Prussia, forcibly Christianising them, and then destroying the stronghold, but the benevolent King John of Bohemia intervened, convincing the Grand Master to let the Samogitians remain where they were, if they all accepted baptism. Priests then went to work and baptised 6,000 Samogitian men, women and children. The army left the newly Christianised Samogitians in their stronghold and moved on.

As soon as the army was out of sight however, the Samogitians washed themselves clean of their baptisms, and reverted back to paganism. The massive Latin Christian army was intending to conquer and Christianise all of Samogitia, and they may well have been able to do so. However, no sooner had they moved on from their first conquest when word came in that King Wladislaw of Poland had invaded Prussia, and was attacking Kulm. This was actually quite a smart move by King Wladislaw. The Prussian army was so massive due to the very fact that just about every fighting man in Prussia was in it. As such the strongholds back in pressure were very poorly garrisoned, making it easy for the King of Poland to roll up and quickly defeat them.

The messenger who brought the news to the Grand Master had taken five days to ride from Prussia to Samogitia, and when he had left Kulm the whole city seemed to be on fire, with its few defenders unable to push back against the Polish invaders. The Grand Master ordered his forces to head to Kulm as quickly as possible, but by the time they arrived there the Polish army had already withdrawn, leaving a smouldering and traumatised Kulm in its wake. The Grand Master and King John held a war council, and sensibly reached the conclusion that they couldn't turn around and head back to Samogitia while King Wladislaw remained undefeated, as the King of Poland would likely take the opportunity to attack Prussian holdings once again. So they formulated a new plan.

Step one of the new plan was to attack Poland. Only after that step was completed could they move to step two, which was to go on crusade to Samogitia. Step one was quickly activated, and the combined forces of the Teutonic Order in Prussia and the Bohemians invaded Kujavia and Masovia. The armies ravaged both regions, and King John of Bohemia made it known that he considered himself to possess a hereditary right to the Polish Crown, so a lot was at stake here. A truce was eventually negotiated between the warring parties, however King John and the Grand Master kept the northern parts of Mazovia and Kujavia which they had conquered, and they divided the region between them.

The conflict between the Kingdom of Poland, the Kingdom of Bohemia and the Prussian Chapter of the Teutonic Order was far from over though. It will in fact keep simmering away for the next few years, interspersed with some bouts of peace caused by Papal intervention. Papal legates dispatched to the region by Pope John will, in fact, assist the parties to negotiate truces in the years 1330, 1332 and 1334. Grand Master Orseln will use these periods of peace to resume his crusade against the Samogitians.

In the winter of the year 1330 he led a group of crusaders to Samogitia, but they didn't attack any Samogitian strongholds. Instead the Invasion by the crusaders appeared to be a diversion, which distracted the pagans while a force from Ragnit headed into Lithuania and attacked the city of Vilnius. The garrison at Vilnius was completely taken by surprise, which enabled the Latin Christians to attack and burn some outer suburbs of the city, before withdrawing back to Ragnit.

Now, around about this time, peace came to Livonia. We will discuss how this came about in next week's episode, but for the purposes of this episode all you need to know is that peace in Livonia meant that the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Knights was now free to join their Prussian brethren in the crusade against the Samogitians, and it also meant that Lithuania was now free to join its ally Poland, and support it in its wars against King John of Bohemia and Grand Master Orseln.

So, in September of the Year 1330 Gediminas lead the Lithuanians on a raid into Masovia, supported by a new ally which King Wladislaw had called upon, his son-in-law King Charles Robert of Hungary. Now, while King Wladislaw was dealing with all sorts of military problems, he was about to be forced to deal with some family drama as well.

King Wladislaw's 19 year old son, Prince Casimir was eager to be involved in the military action, particularly since it would give him a chance to spend some time with his sister, the Queen of Hungary, who of course was married to King Charles Robert of Hungary. The Hungarian Royal Court was currently located at Wyszogrod castle, an impressively large structure located on the Danube River, a castle which was also the recent focus of attacks by the Teutonic Order. Prince Casimir rode to the castle with reinforcements, but was almost immediately distracted by one of the Royal ladies in waiting, a Croatian woman named Clara of Zac.

With his sister's approval, Prince Casimir began an affair with Clara. Unfortunately though, word of the affair made its way to Clara's father, who was apparently the vengeful type, because he not only went to the castle to make his feelings about the matter known, he physically attacked the royal family, wounding King Charles Robert, slicing four fingers off the Queen's hand, and trying unsuccessfully to kill the young Princes who were heirs to the Hungarian throne.

The whole incident caused a rather dramatic diplomatic headache between Poland and Hungary, at a time when King Wladislaw could least afford it. Prince Casimir was forced to leave Hungary, Clara's father was executed, and Clara and her family were forced into exile.

Family drama aside however, King Wladislaw still had use of the Hungarian forces, and he intended to use them to attack the Teutonic Knights. His plan was to invade Kulm, where the combined Polish and Hungarian army would meet up with Gediminas, then go on a rampage through Prussia. The plan started well with King Wladislaw managing to get his forces to Kulm undetected by the Grand Master, who had fallen for King Wladislaw's diversion, believing that the invaders were intending instead to attack Western Prussia.

However, the Lithuanians were nowhere to be seen. It turned out that the Grand Master had not found the Polish and Hungarian army, but a force of Teutonic Knights had managed to find the invading Lithuanians. Gediminas had sent some scouts ahead to see if they could locate the Polish forces and get them to come to their aid, but the forces couldn't be found and Gediminas was forced to retreat out of Prussia.

Without the Lithuanian forces king Wladislaw was unable to embark on his proposed rampage through Prussia, but he didn't want retreat back out of Prussia either, so he just sort of hung around Kulm. He hung around for so long in fact that his army began to run short of food. Grand Master Orseln knew the Polish and Hungarian troops were in Kulm, but he was reluctant to attack such a large force, so the Teutonic army just sort of hung around as well, watching the Polish forces hang around in Kulm. Eventually someone came up with the idea of a truce, and both men jumped at the opportunity. King Wladislaw agreed to withdraw his forces from Prussia, while Grand Master Orseln agreed to hand back territory he had conquered in Masovia and Kuyavia.

Shortly after the truce was signed however Grand Master Orseln was assassinated. The assassin was a Teutonic knight from Memel. The knight had been sanctioned for behaving

in violent and unpredictable ways at Memel, and had in fact threatened the castellan of Memel with a knife. He had travelled to Marienberg to meet with Grand Master Orseln to beg for a pardon, but the Grand Master had instead ordered the knight to return to Memel to serve his punishment, which was likely a lengthy term of imprisonment in irons. Not happy about this outcome the knight reacted in a violent and unpredictable way. He waited, concealed in a corridor inside Marienberg castle, and when Grand Master Orseln passed by, he killed him, scoring himself in the process a sentence of imprisonment for life.

So we are down a Grand Master, but the battles between the Teutonic Order, Poland and Lithuania roll-on. Next week, however, as you may remember, we will be heading back to Livonia to see peace finally descend on Riga. Join me next week to discover how this unlikely event came to pass. Until next week, bye for now.

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