

History of the Crusades. Episode 277. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part X. Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode.

Hello again, and we're back. Welcome to another year of podcasting. If you stretch your mind all the way back to the end of last year, you might remember that in the early 1350s just about everyone in the Baltic region was having a bad time. The Teutonic Order had scored a major victory in the Battle on the Strebe, but had been unable to follow up on their success due to the double blow of the illness, resignation and death of Grand Master Heinrich Dusmer, and the coming of the plague. The plague appears not to have affected Lithuania as badly as neighboring Prussia, but the rulers of Lithuania, Algirdas and his brother Kestutis, were still trying to come to terms with their first major military defeat at the hands of the Teutonic Order. Right, that's where we're at. Let's get back to crusading.

Now, the first thing that's going to need to happen is that a new Grand Master needs to be appointed. Everyone pretty much knew who the next Grand Master would be, because waiting in the wings was a man who seemed to have been born to take up the position. A rising star in the Teutonic ranks, he had been elevated to positions of command within the Order from a young age. By the time he was 29, he had been appointed to the position of castellan of the convent at Danzig, considered to be one of the most prestigious roles within the Order. He then became Marshall of the Order and spent five years being mentored by Grand Master Heinrich Dusmer. So who is this obvious choice for Grand Master? It's none other than Winrich von Kniprode, who, you might remember, led the Teutonic forces to victory on the River Strebe in the last episode. Winrich von Kniprode was appointed Grand Master of the Teutonic Order on January 1352 at the age of forty, which is an unusually young age to hold such a lofty position. But Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode was definitely more than capable of fulfilling the role, and will end up being one of the more competent and popular of the Grand Masters.

So we are blessed at the moment to have a number of extremely competent, capable and savvy leaders in Eastern Europe. To recap, Grand Duke Algirdas of Lithuania is ruling Lithuania and vast parts of Russia, along with his co-ruler, his brother Kestutis. King Casimir III, also known as Casimir the Great, is ruling Poland, and Casimir's cousin, who will come to be known to history as Louis the Great, is currently doing very good job of ruling Hungary.

So, you are probably thinking, with a bunch of very capable, ambitious men ruling this part of the world, there must be a lot of action happening, right? Wrong. There is a bit of action happening. Lithuania, having not been hit us hard by the plague as other regions, is active, and Algirdas and Kestutis are leading small raids into Poland and Prussia.

Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode really, really wants to take the fight to the Lithuanians. He has come to the totally accurate view that pagan Lithuania holds the key to success in the Baltic Crusades, and for the dominance of the Teutonic Order in the region. So he really needs to either defeat the Lithuanians completely in battle, and annex Lithuania and the Lithuanian occupied parts of Prussia to the lands already conquered by the Order, or he needs to convince Algirdas and Kestutis to convert to Christianity, which would lead to wholesale conversions of the Lithuanian pagans to the Latin Christian religion. The latter one of these options looks highly unlikely to come to pass, so Grand Master Winrich really needs to defeat the Lithuanians militarily.

To defeat the Lithuanians militarily, he really needs the assistance of large groups of crusaders, but large groups of crusaders are in short supply in Europe at the moment, due to the plague. In fact, even crusaders who had managed to dodge the effects of the plague had trouble fulfilling their crusading vows, as we will see with the fine example of an Englishman named Henry of Derby.

Now, Henry of Derby was an English nobleman who was a cousin of the English king Edward III. He had been actively involved in the Hundred Years War, and had decided, during a period of peace in the war, to fulfill vows he had made to go on Crusade. Handily for him, the pagans of Lithuania were in need of conquering and converting to Christianity, which meant that he could Crusade close to home, without having to go far afield to somewhere like the Holy Land. So he gathered his men and set out on Crusade in January of 1352 by journeying to Pomerania and issuing a formal declaration of hostility against, wait for it, King Casimir of Poland.

As William Urban points out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", it was a rather strange turn of events to see an English Crusader commence his campaign against the pagans of Lithuania by issuing a challenge to the Latin Christian King of Poland, so what exactly is going on here? Well, Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode had recently opened negotiations with King Casimir over a boundary dispute concerning land in Mazovia. King Casimir had failed to agree that the boundary of Prussia should extend over the land in question, so the Grand Master decided to use a bit of muscle to convince King Casimir to change his mind, and a bit of muscle just happened to be heading in King Casimir's direction, in the form of Henry of Derby and his Crusaders. So Henry of Derby spent some time readying his men for an attack on Poland, then he sat back and waited for the go-ahead from the Grand Master. But the green light to commence the invasion of Poland never came. In a double blow for Henry of Derby and his Crusading ambitions, the Grand Master managed to negotiate a compromise with King Casimir, so in the end the English crusaders weren't needed.

But by the time all of this had become apparent, it was too late for Henry to march his men to Prussia. By the time they would have arrived, they would have missed the force of Teutonic Knights, which was departing from Konigsburg on a winter campaign to Lithuania. So Henry stormed around in a huff for awhile, and still itching for a fight, made his way to the Rhineland region in the Kingdom of Germany, where he managed to get into an argument with a local aristocrat, Otto von Braunschweig-Grubenhagen, who then challenged him to a duel. After much negotiation it was declared that the duel would take place in Paris in December, but in the end it was vetoed by the King of France, so that was the end of that.

Still itching for a fight, Henry of Derby then had the brilliant idea that he would make his way to Prussia and stay there until next winter, meaning that he would absolutely definitely be able to join the next crusading expedition against the Lithuanians. But as he was making his way through Westphalia on his way to Prussia, he was robbed at sword point by a bunch of bandits who took all his money, leaving him no option but to return to England. To save himself the embarrassment of having to admit that his campaign to convert pagans had come to nothing, due to the actions of a bunch of common thieves, William Urban reports that Henry invented a grand tale which involved him being dramatically kidnapped and then held to ransom. Apparently, that sort of thing happened all the time. Aristocrats were often kidnapped while traveling and then ransomed, so everyone nodded along and believed Henry's face-saving tale.

Now this won't be the last that history hears of Henry of Derby, because Henry of Derby's full name was Henry Bolingbroke. Patreon listeners will be familiar with Henry Bolingbroke from Patreon Episode 56, the first episode in our new series on the Wars of the Roses, where we describe how Henry Bolingbroke booted his cousin King Richard II off the throne, becoming King Henry IV.

Anyway, it turns out that Henry didn't miss much. The expeditions which departed from Prussia in 1352 and 1353 achieved very little, and for the next few years Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode was frustrated in his attempts to build on the success of his victory on the Strebe, and deal the Lithuanians some savage blows. The problem was that he just couldn't get enough crusaders to make the journey to the Baltic region. The plague had put an end to many crusading dreams, and once the Hundred Years War kicked off again, English and French fighters were occupied there. Internal disputes inside the Holy Roman Empire kept many other noblemen from traveling far from their homes, and a general economic downturn across Europe really just sealed the deal. The Lithuanians took full advantage of this situation and made frequent raids into both Prussia and the Kingdom of Poland.

Now King Casimir of Poland has been encountering a number of difficulties in his attempts to keep the Lithuanians and the Russians from raiding into his kingdom. Casimir's policy, which he had pursued for the last decade or so, was to expand his kingdom outwards to the east and the south-east, to encompass the regions of Volhynia and Galicia. If he could secure these areas and prevent the Lithuanians from establishing bases there, then it would be a relatively simple task to keep the remainder of his kingdom free from pagan raids. However, securing Volhynia and Galicia was easier said than done. Kestutis had managed to form alliances with some of the local lords in these regions, and his policy of sending frequent raiding parties into the area, who would race around doing as much damage as they could and scoring as much booty as they could carry before racing back to Lithuania, meant that King Casimir was finding it hard to prove to the local people that Poland could safeguard their interests. Finally, in May of 1350, King Casimir was presented with an opportunity to personally confront an army of raiding Lithuanians. Leading the Polish royal forces out of Krakow, Casimir managed to combine with fighters provided by a local Duke to defeat the Lithuanians in a battle which took place near a river.

The Polish King then went on to defeat the Lithuanians in a number of other battles. But weirdly, while he was winning the battles, Casimir was losing the war. Why? Well, because while the Polish Royal army was engaged in tackling one Lithuanian army, numerous other pagan fighters would race around the countryside, burning, pillaging, looting and engaging in as much destruction as they possibly could, and Casimir was powerless to stop them. At this stage, the King of Poland decided that he needed reinforcements, so he requested assistance from both his nephew King Louis of Hungary, and the Pope.

Finally, in the year 1351, King Casimir scored a major victory, capturing the Lithuanian who had been leading the raids into Volhynia, a man called Lubartis. King Casimir returned to Krakow triumphantly, only to promptly fall seriously ill, leaving King Louis of Hungary to complete the sweep of Volhynia, with the aim of expelling the Lithuanians once and for all.

Everything seemed to be going swimmingly for King Louis, until a very strange thing happened. Kestutis, one of the co-ruler's of Lithuania, suddenly appeared alone in King Louis' camp. He approached the King with a tempting offer, that offer being that he, Kestutis, would convert to Christianity, on the condition that Poland and Hungary agreed to partner with him against the Tartar Khans of Russia. King Louis could scarcely believe his luck. He immediately commenced detailed negotiations with Kestutis about the conversion, calling off his forces while the talks were held. If King Louis had paused to think for a moment, he might have concluded that this was all too good to be true. And that's because it was all too good to be true. The whole offer was actually a clever deception. King Louis proposed requesting the

Papacy to recognize Kestutis as a Christian King, following his conversion, and Kestutis had made a big show of sealing the deal by sacrificing a red bull in an elaborate ceremony which followed pagan customs closely, but which Kestutis conducted using the Russian language instead of the traditional Lithuanian, so as not to offend the gods. An impressed King Louis agreed to release Lubartis in a gesture of goodwill, which was exactly what Kestutis had been waiting for.

One night after Lubartis had been released, Kestutis crept out of the Hungarian camp, met up with the Lithuanian forces who were camped nearby, and led an attack on the Hungarian forces. King Louis was eventually forced into an embarrassing retreat out of Volhynia, losing all of the gains that which King Casimir had made over the preceeding decade. The following year, King Casimir, having recovered from his illness, returned to the region and did his best to reacquire the land that King Louis had lost, but was largely unsuccessful. King Louis ended up joining King Casimir, but both monarchs were forced to withdraw after a Tartar invasion of eastern Poland.

In a desperate measure to acquire some money to finance the push-back against the invasion, King Casimir actually mortgaged an entire town, the town of Dobrin, or Dobrzyn, in Mazovia, to the Teutonic Order. Transferring an entire town to the Teutonic Order seems like an unusual way of raising some cash, but according to William Urban, the Teutonic Order had occupied and then returned the same town previously, so there was some precedent for the move. William Urban also points out that the fact that Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode and King Casimir negotiated and signed off on this deal indicated that a measure of trust existed between the two men. It would have meant that the Teutonic Order was supportive of Poland's efforts to push back against the Lithuanians and the Tartar invasions, and that the Order was willing to lay down a considerable sum of money to assist Poland to achieve its goals. It also indicates that King Casimir must have been OK with the Order moving in on one of his towns and taking it over, even if it was only a temporary measure.

So it seems that the Order throwing some money at King Casimir and moving into Dobrin was a win-win situation for everyone, which it was. Until it wasn't. Join me next week as the bromance between King Casimir and Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode turns sour as the two men fall out over the ownership of Dobrin, and the two major regional powers, the Teutonic Order and the Kingdom of Poland, move from a relationship of cordiality and cooperation, to one marked by confrontation and conflict. Until next week, bye for now.

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