

History of the Crusades. Episode 280. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XIII. The Siege of Kaunas 1362.

Hello again. Last week, we saw an effort by the Archbishop of Prague to convert the Lithuanian leaders to Christianity fail spectacularly, with the two pagan brothers making outrageous demands in return for their baptism, then laughing at and mocking the delegation when they objected. The upshot of this event was that converting the Lithuanians to Christianity by peaceful means was now permanently off the table as a goal to be pursued, so the only option left on the table was to convert the pagans by force. The Teutonic Order then spent time and effort constructing a bunch of new castles in Samogitia, which would provide a larger, more permanent Latin Christian presence in the region. Then, in the spring of the year 1362, fighting men from across Prussia, along with crusaders from Germany, Italy and England, gathered in Prussia, ready to head to Samogitia. This was to be a major Crusading expedition. William Urban describes it in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" as being a, and I quote, "huge force" end quote.

Now you will notice that the Crusaders are departing in spring, not winter. That's because they don't need to ride across frozen rivers and swamps to get to Samogitia. Why don't they need to ride across frozen rivers and swamps to get to Samogitia? Well, because they are sailing there. Yes, in a novel break from tradition, the Grand Master and the Marshall of the Teutonic forces have come up with a plan to get everyone on board ships. Those ships would then make their way up the Baltic coast to the mouth of the Nemunas River, then they would sail all the way up river through Samogitia until they entered Lithuanian territory, and arrived at the mighty Lithuanian fortress at Kaunas. Now we haven't discussed Kaunas in much detail, but now we will zoom down and take a closer look at it.

The Lithuanian fortress at Kaunas was an extremely impressive structure, which was traditionally considered to be impregnable. It boasted a number of natural defenses, being located on a narrow piece of land at the meeting place of two rivers, the Nemunas River and the Neris River. Another factor which made the castle at Kaunas notable was the fact that it was made of stone and brick. Its foundations were of stone, while its walls and towers were painstakingly constructed of small red bricks. The other thing you should note was this castle was huge. It housed a permanent garrison of 3,500 men commanded by Kestutis' son Vaidutas.

Now, if you ever find yourself in Lithuania, I highly recommend that you get yourself to Kaunas and visit the museum at Kaunas Castle. One of the towers of the original castle has been preserved, and it houses a military museum, which runs frequent exhibitions. There is a permanent exhibition on the 1362 siege of the castle by the Crusaders, featuring a diorama

and an animated interpretation of the siege. The museum also houses a crossbow, arrowheads, spearheads, an axe, and fragments of pottery, which were uncovered from an archaeological excavation of the period around the siege. So if you're in the area, it looks well worth a visit.

Anyway, as I have already mentioned, the castle was considered to be impregnable, but that didn't seem to bother the large Crusader army. Flotillas of ships ferried the army to the banks of the Neris River, on the opposite side of the river to the castle. The Crusaders set up camp while some of the ships turned around and sailed back down the river to collect the rest of the army. As soon as the Crusader camp was set up, engineers started work on building a bridge across the river, connecting the camp to the castle. The bridge took three days to complete, then construction started on building a range of siege engines, including catapults, rams, and an absolutely gigantic siege tower. At the same time, the Crusaders dug a deep ditch around their camp, protecting it from a rear attack, which would have left the Crusaders pinned against the river. Once completed, the ditch was filled with water, and earth which had been excavated from the ditch was used to construct a defensive wall around the camp.

Once all these works were finished, the siege turned into an attack. Catapult machines bombarded the walls of Kaunas Castle while the Crusader army streamed across the bridge to attack the castle walls. A dry moat, which surrounded part of the castle, was gradually filled with rubble, and work commenced on undermining one of the main castle walls. In response, the castle archers targeted the swarming crusaders, and under cover of darkness Lithuanian fighters would venture out of the castle on regular missions to burn down or destroy the Crusaders' siege engines. Apparently, Kestutis had been at Kaunas when word came in that the Crusaders were on their way to attack the town. He immediately placed his son in charge of the castle, then left to gather the Lithuanian forces, and to summon his brother Algirdas to wage a counterattack. Once the armies had gathered, the two Lithuanian leaders then attempted to attack the Crusader army from the rear, but the water-filled ditch and the walls did an impressive job of defending the Crusader position, and after one single clash with the Crusader forces, both Lithuanian leaders made the decision to withdraw. They made camp on a nearby hill, where they could watch the siege unfold.

What they saw would have dismayed them greatly. The catapult machines were accurately and effectively bombarding the castle walls, and once the siege tower had lumbered its way across the Crusaders' bridge and over the filled in moat, archers inside the tower were able to target the Lithuanians defending the castle ramparts. The death knell for Kaunas Castle sounded when the under-miners successfully took down one of the castle walls, the huge structure collapsing in a pile of brick-strewn rubble. Thousands of Crusade of fighters streamed over the rubble into the castle. William Urban reports that the Crusaders killed

around 600 men, before they were forced to withdraw because a fire had broken out inside the castle and was raging out of control. The fire ended up killing more than 2,000 Lithuanian defenders, along with a handful of Crusaders. The end result of the fourteen day long siege was that Kaunas Castle, the legendary brick castle of the Lithuanians, fell to the Teutonic Order. While 200 crusaders died in the battle, around 3,000 Lithuanians lost their lives. Kestutis' son Vaidutas was captured along with 500 of his fellow-Lithuanian fighters, who were marched back to Prussia to be ransomed.

In his book, "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban reports that the following conversation took place between the Grand Master and Kestutis following the Crusader victory, and I quote. "On Good Friday, Kestutis called out to the Grand Master, 'If I'd been at the castle, you wouldn't have captured it so easily. With all your crusaders, you'd never have taken it from me.' The Grand Master retorted, 'Why'd you leave it then, when you saw us coming?' To which he got in return, 'My army didn't have a leader. I had to be with it.' 'Well, come occupy it now. We'll let you in.' 'How could I do that? The whole field is filled with ditches and fortifications.' Winrich almost laughed, apparently. 'If you want to come down, we'll flatten it all out for you.' Kestutis did not reply. He took his men home. He later ransomed Vaidutas, who appears only once in subsequent records in the year 1401 as the commander of Naugardukas." End quote.

And what did the Crusaders do with the ruins of Kaunas Castle? Well, the Teutonic Order's engineers advised the Grand Master that the structure was beyond repair, so as soon as the Latin Christians had completed their victory feast, they set fire to what remained of the castle, then crossed the bridge back over the Neris River. They then set fire to the bridge as well, then boarded their ships and headed off back down the river to Prussia.

The destruction of Kaunas Castle left the way clear for future crusading expeditions to travel up the Nemunas River and pass unopposed into the Lithuanian heartland. The two Lithuanian leaders were aware of this fact, so just as the new goal of the Teutonic Order was to build on their victory by next striking deep into Lithuania, the new goal of Algirdas and Kestutis was to rebuild Kaunas Castle, as quickly and as strongly as possible. William Urban reports that Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode was unable to muster a large enough army to attack Lithuania for the next couple of seasons, due to bad harvests and further outbreaks of the plague.

As William Urban notes, this was truly unfortunate, as Lithuania at this point in time was particularly vulnerable. Not only was Central Lithuania open to attack following the destruction of Kaunas, Algirdas was spending all his time in Russia fighting the Tartar Khans. A civil war had broken out between the Tartar rulers, and Algirdas was taking full advantage of the situation by carving out more territory for himself in the Russian Principalities. Following his

defeat of one Tartar army in 1363, Algirdas and his Lithuanian forces occupied Kiev. He then turned his attentions to attacking Moscow. He would be directing all his resources towards this goal for the next few years and he will come close to achieving it. William Urban reports that in the years 1368 and 1370 the Lithuanians marched all the way to the stone walls of the Kremlin in Moscow, and that Algirdas himself personally threw a spear into the wooden gate of the Kremlin. Anyway, the upshot of all of this was that Algirdas was concentrating all of his attentions on his Russian campaigns, and he had no time and no men to spare to assist his brother Kestutis to defend Lithuania against any Teutonic invasion.

In fact, Kestutis himself was extremely busy at this time, conducting campaigns in Volhynia and Galicia, fighting the Royal Polish forces, the Hungarians and the Tartar invaders, so he also was unable to spare many men to assist in the defense of Samogitia, or to counter a Crusader invasion of central Lithuania. So it was extremely fortunate for the Lithuanians that no Crusader invasion took place. Even had the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order managed to muster a large enough force to venture into central Lithuania, he may have been reluctant to take his forces there. William Urban points out that the plague hit Lithuania with devastating force around this time, so the few Crusading expeditions which left Prussia traveled to Samogitia, and avoided Lithuania completely.

Now interestingly, also around this time, Livonia was starting to re-enter the Baltic Crusades. The mighty Livonian fortress at Dunaberg, which you might remember was located way inland in the upper reaches of the Daugava River, was an ideal base from which the Teutonic Order could strike into the Lithuanian heartland. In addition, fortresses operated by the Livonian chapter of the Order in Kurland, Memel, Goldingen and Mittau, became useful as a way of striking into Samogitia from the rear, while the Prussian forces attacked it from the front. Unfortunately though, William Urban notes in his book "The Livonian Crusade", the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Order didn't have its own chronicler, so very little is known about the Crusading activities of Livonia at this time. Only exploits and campaigns significant enough to be mentioned in the Prussian or Russian Chronicles are currently known to history. Still, the Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, Arnold von Vietinghoff, launched a number of successful Crusades against Lithuania around this time, following the burning of a number of Livonian churches by Lithuanian raiders, and Livonia managed to spawn its very own chivalric Crusading hero, a man called Robin von Eltz. We will return to Livonia next week to learn more about these two men.

In the meanwhile, Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode led small expeditions to Samogitia. While these raids were only small, and only tended to attack other small groups of Samogitians or half-completed forts on the Nemunas River, William Urban makes an interesting observation about the nature of the pagans and the Christians, at this time. At the

beginning of the Baltic Crusades, the Latin Christians tended to view the pagans as savage barbarians and the Christians viewed the practices of the pagans, such as human sacrifice and the burning alive of prisoners, with a deep, religious sort of horror. However, in recent times, particularly after Kestutis' spectacular and much heralded Great Escape from Marienburg Castle, the pagan fighters seemed less alien to the Crusaders, and a sort of mutual respect and even appreciation was building between the two sides of the conflict. The pagan Lithuanians had by this stage abandoned their most extreme treatment of prisoners. They were no longer burned alive, but were often ransomed in the manner practiced in Latin Christendom. William Urban points out that the Lithuanian leaders were well-traveled, had all the up to date Western military technology, and had enough contact with Latin Christian fighters in Poland, Prussia and Hungary that their harsh pagan rough edges had sort of been sanded off. This didn't mean that the Lithuanians were entirely Westernized, but they were now more seen as respected adversaries, rather than scary, devilish alien barbarians.

And on that note, we will sign off for this week. Join me next week as we pop back to Livonia to follow the exploits of Master Arnold and Robin von Eltz, as they take on the Lithuanian pagans. Until next week, bye for now.

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