

History of the Crusades. Episode 282. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XIV. The Battle of Rudau.

Hello again. Last week we returned to Livonia, to see the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Order become involved in crusading once again. More specifically, the Livonian Knights embarked on campaigns deep in Lithuania from their castle at Dunaberg, and also conducted numerous border raids into Lithuania and Samogitia.

This week we are returning to the Samogitian Crusade. As we saw in last week's episode, Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode had been enjoying numerous military successes against the Lithuanians, and had utilized the Livonian Chapter of the Order to full effect on his campaigns inside Lithuania. In addition to fighting the pagans, Grand Master Winrich was kept busy building and strengthening precious ties to the towns of the Hanseatic League, ensuring that the benefits of international trade were felt across Prussia. And he also did his best to patch up his troubled relationship with King Casimir of Poland.

In the year 1362 he invited King Casimir to make a formal visit to Marienburg Castle in Prussia. This was quite a savvy move on the Grand Master's part. The Grand Master had formed the personal opinion that the King of Poland may have underestimated the wealth and grandeur of the Teutonic Order and that this may have colored the Polish monarch's dealings with the Order. In fact, he was sort of right. Apparently, King Casimir had been informed by some of his advisers that the Order's castles were poorly provisioned, sparse, uncomfortable sort of places, so when the Polish King agreed to travel to Prussia, the Grand Master made sure that Marienburg Castle showed its brightest face. He also made sure the cellars and storehouses inside the castle were all fully stocked, and after treating King Casimir and his entourage to a suitably lavish and sumptuous meal at the castle, he made a seemingly impromptu offer to take the Polish King on a personal tour of the castle, showing him around all the secret places which visiting opponents of the Order would never normally get to see. Of course, the ever-curious and interested King Casimir jumped at the opportunity to check out the inner workings of one of his enemies' castles, so Grand Master Winrich accompanied him on the tour, making sure that they visited all the cellars and store houses, which were chock-a-block full of supplies.

It turns out that this secret tour idea of the Grand Master's was an excellent plan. Not only did it serve its purpose of encouraging the Polish King to think that every Teutonic castle was impervious to siege warfare because of the bountiful supplies they had in stock, and that the Order was a wealthy and sophisticated player in the region, it also seemed to break down some of the prickly feelings which had developed between the two men. The feasting and entertainments of the castle continued for the next three days, and by the end of the stay both

men had sort of come to an understanding. They hashed out a broad plan to reset relations between the Order and Poland, and as William Urban points out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", the plan they agreed on would ensure a measure of peace between the Order and the Kingdom of Poland, which would last reasonably well until the year 1409. But things were not all entirely rosy between the new buddies Grand Master Winrich and King Casimir, because in the 1360's King Casimir attempted to extend his authority over Pomerania.

Now Pomerania, you might remember, was the piece of land sandwiched between Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire, and the Grand Master was concerned that, should the Kingdom of Poland extend its feudal authority over the region, then not only would overland trade between Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire be destroyed, but communications between the Order and its constituents back in the Kingdom of Germany might also be affected.

The Principality of the Holy Roman Empire which was closest to Pomerania was Brandenburg. Brandenburg also bordered the Kingdom of Poland, so King Casimir went about trying to acquire bits of Brandenburg as well. The Kingdom of Poland's forays into Pomerania and Brandenburg ended up being a bit like a game of chess. Every move which King Casimir made was immediately countered by a move made by the Grand Master. As King Casimir attempted to muscle in on the internal politics of Pomerania, the Grand Master alerted the Holy Roman Emperor, who immediately set about making marriage alliances and shoring up ties between the Empire and Pomerania, which blocked King Casimir's moves. When King Casimir acquired some castles in Silesia which looked like they may gain him some leverage over Brandenburg, the Grand Master went on a spending spree of his own, buying up land in Pomerania. The back and forth moves by both men only ended in the year 1370, with the unexpected death of King Casimir. King Louis the Great of Hungary then became the next King of Poland, and King Louis was much too busy trying to push the Russian Tartars out of Hungary to worry about acquiring land in Pomerania and Brandenburg, so the issue died with King Casimir.

Now, instead of knocking heads with the King of Poland, the Grand Master was free to continue knocking heads with the Lithuanian leader Kestutis. You might remember that, two episodes ago In Episode 280, the Teutonic Order managed to besiege and destroy the Lithuanian fortress at Kaunas. Grand Master Winrich of von Kniprode was adamant that Kaunas Castle not be rebuilt. The Grand Master ordered his Knights to construct a castle on an island opposite Kaunas, a castle which he unimaginatively named Inselberg, or "Island Castle". However, when the Grand Master traveled to Inselberg in April of 1370 he found, to his dismay, that the Lithuanians had already commenced work on reconstructing their fortress at Kaunas. The Grand Master's men drove the Lithuanian workmen away, and then he had the fabulous idea of using the bricks and other materials being used by the Lithuanians to

build another castle of his own, near the site of the destroyed Kaunas, to prevent Kaunas from being rebuilt.

The site he chose was an island close to the shore, in the river near the site of Kaunas. This island was in a very handy spot. In his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban notes that the island was practically at the mouth of four separate and strategically vital rivers: the upper Nemunas, the Strebe, the Neris and the Nevešis. Any one of these rivers could be easily accessed from the second Island Castle, which the Grand Master named Gotteswerde, or "God's Island". Only one side of the island could be accessed by horses, the side which was closest to the shore and where the river was shallow enough to be forded on horseback. Of course, all sides could be accessed by boat, and in winter when the river froze all sides could be accessed over the ice, but the Grand Master believed that Gotteswerde Castle would prove difficult for the Lithuanians to attack.

However Kestutis, like Grand Master Winrich, fully appreciated the excellent strategic location of Gotteswerde and decided that if he would have any chance of rebuilding Kaunas at any time in the future, then Gotteswerde would first need to be destroyed. So he spent three months gathering his forces, and in the late summer he launched his attack. He set up an astonishing eighteen catapult machines which he used to batter the castle walls, and constructed a siege tower which he was able to haul across the filled-in moat surrounding the castle. After five weeks of constant bombardment, the Lithuanians managed to breach the castle's defenses. The garrison inside the castle surrendered, and Kestutis ordered the castle's defenses to be rebuilt and repaired. Once this work was complete, he installed a Lithuanian garrison inside the castle, packed up, and returned to Vilnius.

Seven weeks later, Marshall Hennig traveled to Lithuania to negotiate for the release of the Latin Christian garrison of Gotteswerde Castle. He met personally with Kestutis, and there was an opportunity for the two sides of the conflict to negotiate a peace treaty along with the release of the hostages, but both Lithuania and the Teutonic Order were adamant in their claim to Samogitia. Neither side would budge on their wish to retain Samogitia for themselves, so the negotiations ended in acrimony, with the Marshall of the Teutonic Order leaving Lithuania with only a handful of garrison members, whom he was able to ransom.

As soon as he returned to Prussia, Marshall Hennig made plans to attack the now Lithuanian fortress of Gotteswerde. Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode sent an army of Latin Christian fighters his way, so in November the Marshall sailed up river from Ragnit Castle and arrived at Gotteswerde. The attack came as a complete surprise to the Lithuanians, who had assumed that the cold autumn weather would see the Latin Christian fighters staying at home beside their firesides. Marshall Hennig set up his siege machines and catapults and began

pummeling the castle walls. The walls had only been hastily repaired after the last attack, so only five days later the earthen walls, which had been temporarily propped up with timber frames, gave way, and the Marshall took the castle. Kestutis had raced from Vilnius as soon as he received word of the attack, but he arrived too late to do anything other than to make a halfhearted strike on the rear of the Order's army, and do the best he could to attack Latin Christian fighters who were roaming the area in small groups scavenging for supplies.

In his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban notes that chroniclers at the time gave conflicting reports about what exactly took place after Gotteswerde was taken, but it appears that once the Marshall had secured all the castle walls, he built a fire around the castle keep, knowing full well that the keep still housed the Lithuanian fighters. As soon as Kestutis saw what was happening he sent a herald to the castle to request the Marshall to spare his men. Marshall Hennig refused to answer this request, and 109 Lithuanian warriors were burnt alive in the resulting inferno.

The Marshall then gathered all the surviving Lithuanian prisoners and contacted Kestutis to arrange an exchange of these men for the Latin Christian garrison members who he had not been able to ransom at their last meeting. A furious Kestutis met with the Marshall to facilitate the exchange, and then swore that during the following winter he would lead a massive army into the heart of Prussia, to which Marshall Hennig replied "Bring it on." Okay, that wasn't actually a quote. Apparently, Marshall Hennig said something to the effect of: if Kestutis invaded Prussia, the Order's Knights would respond by meeting him and smashing him on his head.

Okay, so now tensions have risen to extreme levels, and it's game-on. Both sides are readying themselves for a huge face-off during the next winter campaigning season. Kestutis and Algirdas raised an army each. Kestutis' army consisted mainly of Samogitians, while Algirdas' army was predominantly made up of Russian fighters. In total they mustered between 2,000 and 3,000 men.

Marshall Hennig received word that the armies were assembling, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He guessed they were intending to invade Prussia, but he had no idea where they intended to focus their assault, so he sent word to Grand Master Winrich to place units across Prussia on high alert.

Then, in February of 1370, the Lithuanians struck. They marched through Samogitia then traveled across the frozen Bay of Kurland around the Baltic coastline, into Samland. Somewhat oddly, the Lithuanians didn't encounter much resistance at all, so they marched into central Samland then set up camp, sending raiding parties out in all directions to plunder, pillage and destroy as much of Samland as possible. The Grand Master responded by

gathering the Teutonic forces, which ended up amounting to around 2,000 men, and he ordered them to head to central Samland. Apparently the Grand Master rode up a hill in central Samland and was confronted with scenes of burning villages and traumatized locals. The Teutonic Order managed to capture a Lithuanian fighter, and under torture he revealed that Kestutis and Algirdas were waiting nearby, with the Lithuanian army lined up in battle formation. The Grand Master ordered the Teutonic forces to ready themselves for an attack, and an epic pitched battle between the pagans and the Latin Christians commenced, with a cavalry charge from the forces from Kulm.

Now, unfortunately, not a lot of detail is known about this battle. There are even disputes to this day about where exactly it took place, but chronicles placed it as happening on a large field near the town of Rudau. Apparently it became pretty clear pretty quickly that the cavalry men from the Teutonic Order were vastly superior to those from the Lithuanian army. They were better trained, better equipped, and they had the upper hand right from the start. Kestutis withdrew his forces not long after the assault commenced, while Algirdas took the brunt of the cavalry charges, which were blunted to some extent by the fact that Algirdas' forces had positioned themselves on top of a thickly forested hill.

By the end of the day's fighting, both Lithuanian armies were in full retreat, being pursued doggedly by knights on horseback. William Urban describes desperate scenes as small groups or even lone individual Lithuanians tried to make their way unsupported through the winter landscape, deep inside Samland, pursued by ever increasing numbers of Latin Christians who arrived to cut off all their escape routes. The end result, not surprisingly, was a win for the Teutonic Order, but the win came at quite a cost, with twenty six Knights, including Marshall Hennig, having lost their lives, along with 100 fighting men. The Lithuanian dead numbered around 1,000, with many other pagan fighters being taken captive and held in various castles across Prussia.

Is this the end for the pagan fighters? Well, nearly. William Urban reports that the loss left both Kestutis and Algirdas reeling to such an extent that there will be no major Lithuanian military offensives against Prussia for the rest of the fourteenth century. Ouch. But although the Lithuanian leaders are off to the side, licking their wounds, the Crusade rolls on. Join me next week as we explore the fallout from the Battle of Rudau. Until next week, bye for now.

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