

History of the Crusades. Episode 290. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XXII. Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode.

Hello again. Last week we followed the Crusaders on campaign to Lithuania, where the Crusaders attacked the Lithuanian town of Vilnius with the ultimate aim of securing the town, defeating Jogaila and Skirgaila, and elevating their man Vytautas to the position of ruler of Lithuania. None of these events came to pass, but it did result in one crusader, Henry Bolingbroke, the future King of England, drinking a lot of beer with his men.

We also saw last week the death of Grand Master Konrad Zollner von Rothenstein and his replacement by another Konrad: Konrad von Wallenrode. Now, William Urban points out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" that, as the current Grand Commander of the Teutonic Order, Konrad von Wallenrode was the obvious standout candidate to be elected as the next Grand Master. The Wallenrode family had played prominent roles inside the Teutonic Order for some time, and Konrad von Wallenrode had enjoyed success as Grand Commander. Despite this though, there were apparently significant misgivings inside the Teutonic Order about the appointment of Konrad von Wallenrode to the position of Grand Master. Why? Well, because Konrad von Wallenrode was a military man, through and through. In fact, to say that Konrad von Wallenrode had little or no interest in religion wasn't too much of an exaggeration, and William Urban reports that Konrad took so little notice of priests and God that he was once accused of heresy. The worst fears of the religious men of the Order seemed to have been realised when, after being elected as Grand Master, one of Konrad von Wallenrode's first acts was to reform the command structure inside the Order to increase his authority.

Thankfully, though, as well as being a solid military man, Konrad von Wallenrode was well aware of the virtues of diplomacy, and he reached out to Jogaila, hoping to come to some sort of arrangement whereby Jogaila could keep Lithuania but would hand Samogitia over to the Order, a move which William Urban points out, must have alarmed Vytautas, who had been led to believe that he was going to be ruling Lithuania, not Samogitia, as a vassal of the Order.

The Konrad von Wallenrode form of strongman diplomacy even made itself apparent inside Prussia. Apparently many castellans inside Prussia had been treating their subjects harshly, and the new Grand Master decided to put an end to this by kicking a few heads in high places. To put it simply, Konrad von Wallenrode was a warrior's warrior and as a ruler he treated his fighting men well but came down like a ton of bricks on castellans who he saw as overstepping their authority. The result of this was that people in elevated positions across Prussia and the surrounding regions, who usually enjoyed the patronage and protection of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, became terrified of this new Grand Master, while the warriors and knights of the Order sat back and winked and nodded at each other about the fact that finally, one of their own, a warrior through and through, was in the highest position of power inside the Order. As a chronicler at the time put it, and I quote "This Grand Master was greatly feared by the castellans and officers of the Order, for he did not allow them to use force against their poor subjects. Also, this Lord was greatly feared by the neighbouring rulers, the dukes and other nobles, whoever they were, and he ruled mildly over his knights and warriors, the cities, and the country districts." End quote.

So with a warrior in the position of Grand Master, I guess it won't come as a surprise to anyone to learn that word was soon sent out from Prussia across Europe that a massive

Crusade would be making its way to Samogitia then onto Lithuania in the summer of 1391. Heralds were sent far and wide to encourage the fighting men of Europe to join the Crusade, and to perhaps be invited to dine with the new warrior Grand Master at the Table of Honor at the end of their campaign against the enemies of the Church. Konrad von Wallenrode ordered feasting and entertainments to be on display in Konigsberg to attract Crusaders, and the first crusader to arrive was the excellently-named Frederick the Quarrelsome of Meissen, who showed up in Konigsberg with 500 cavalymen. Frederick the Quarrelsome made himself at home in Konigsberg, wined and dined with his men, enjoyed the entertainments, then with no apparent explanation waved goodbye, mounted his horse along with all of his cavalry men and returned back home.

The next bunch of Crusaders stayed longer than Frederick the Quarrelsome, but unlike Frederick the Quarrelsome, some of these crusaders were actually quarrelsome, really quarrelsome. The trouble was, different national groups tended to bring their quarrels from home with them on Crusade. Just because people who traditionally had fought against each other were now meant to be on the same side, fighting as Latin Christians against the enemies of the Church, didn't mean that they could just set their differences aside. The French and English had managed to do this successfully. Despite being on different sides of the Hundred Years War, they seemed to be able to fight together without too much drama when required to do so.

However, this wasn't the case for the English and Scottish fighters. A bunch of Scottish crusaders led by William Douglas arrived in Konigsberg, while separately a bunch of English crusaders also arrived, led by a man called Thomas Woodcock. Apparently both parties had separately made their way to Danzig on their way to Prussia, and while in Danzig had caused no end of trouble, with violent clashes between the Scottish and English crusaders breaking out on the streets of the town. And things only got worse once they reached Konigsberg. When William Douglas was appointed to be commander of the expedition, tensions reached breaking point and William Douglas ended up being confronted and then killed by four assailants on a bridge in Konigsberg. His death led rioting to break out, with French crusaders and Scottish crusaders fighting English crusaders in violent clashes.

Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode decided that the best way for everyone to forget all their differences would be to march into battle as quickly as possible, so he knocked a few heads together, yelled a bit, forced the troops into line and ordered them to leave immediately for Samogitia, where they were to head to the fortress at Kaunas. When they arrived at Kaunas, the Grand Master rewarded the Crusaders with an exceptionally good feast, a meal described by William Urban as, and I quote "a feast never surpassed for lavishness and expense" end quote. Having recovered from their massive eat-fest, the Crusaders then proceeded to Lithuania.

Once they arrived at their destination, however, things turned a little sour. Their plan was to start with the town of Trakai, and once that was taken, to then concentrate on having another crack at Vilnius. However Skirgaila and Jogaila had anticipated this strategy and had already moved to effectively block it. When the Crusader army arrived at Trakai, they discovered that Skirgaila had already engaged in a scorched-earth sort of policy around the town. Everything for miles had been reduced to a pile of useless ash. Crops, villages, and buildings had been totally destroyed, not only in the region surrounding Trakai but, in a devastating blow to Vytautas - his favorite place in Lithuania, his family seat, the town of Trakai itself - had been effectively wiped off the map, with every building in the town,

including its fortress, reduced to a pile of rubble. With no people, no livestock, and no stores of food anywhere for miles around, there was no loot to plunder, no town to attack, and ominously for such a large army, absolutely no food for the Crusaders or their horses.

The Grand Master quickly came to the realization that a lengthy siege of Vilnius was now impossible. With no way to feed his army while they surrounded and besieged the city, the whole exercise would be a pointless one. So after pondering his options for a few days, the Grand Master ordered the Crusaders to retreat back to Kaunas. Once at Kaunas, the Grand Master ordered a fortification to be constructed for Vytautas, and he left Vytautas at Kaunas with a garrison of Teutonic Knights, the idea being that Vytautas would establish himself at Kaunas and gradually reconquer the strongholds along the Nemunas River for the Teutonic Order.

Now you might be left wondering at this point about the destruction that the Lithuanian leaders had ordered to take place at Trakai and the surrounding regions. Although the strategy ultimately proved successful as a way of preventing the Teutonic Order from advancing on Vilnius, the amount of suffering it imposed on the local people who lived at Trakai or who farmed the surrounding regions must have been immense. William Urban points out that due to the total destruction of the countryside, local people who wished to stay and rebuild were forced to rely on imported food and equipment from Poland to survive. As the King of Poland, Jogaila had the authority to obtain from Poland the huge imports of staple food stuffs required to keep the people in the region from starving. But the volume of food needed was so vast that it stretched the resources of the Kingdom of Poland to the limit, to the extent that, as pointed out by William Urban, when Bohemian forces later raided into Silesia, Jogaila could spare no resources to defend the territory.

Vytautas spent the next few months conquering and securing territory along the Nemunas River, and in January of 1391 some crusaders arrived from Prussia to assist him to make a push eastwards into Lithuania. Now, unfortunately for Vytautas, some of these crusaders were Englishmen. William Urban points out that although the English had reputations as being solid and capable fighters, they tended to be quarrelsome and rather uppity, and an argument broke out over who should bear the Crusader's banner with the English Crusaders insisting it should be one of their own and the Teutonic Knights pointing out that since the Crusade was instigated by the Teutonic Order, one of them and not an English Crusader should have the honor of bearing the Crusade banner. Apparently the argument was only settled after the personal intervention of Vytautas and Vytautas' wife Anna, who managed to calm everyone down. Once everyone had hit the Crusade trail, however, they seemed to forget their differences in the excitement of battle.

And what made things even more exciting, and made the quarrels readily forgotten, is that this Crusade was really, really successful. The push eastwards from Kaunas into Lithuania went really, really well. So well, in fact, that Jogaila was left scrambling, trying to work out how to salvage the situation. The Crusaders captured the stronghold which had been the base of Kaributas, who you might remember was killed in last week's episode, during the assault on Vilnius. The Crusaders killed 2,000 Lithuanian fighters during this battle, and Jogaila responded to the threat by relieving Skirgaila of his duties and replacing him with another one of his brothers, Vygantas. However, this move was short-lived as Vygantas died shortly after taking command, possibly as a result of poisoning, possibly instigated by Vytautas, but this is the subject of much speculation.

When Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode ordered the Teutonic forces to begin work on constructing strongholds to secure his new Lithuanian territory, Jogaila was forced to change course. Deciding that he could no longer defeat the Crusaders militarily, he decided to, once again, have a crack at getting Vytautas to change sides and, once again, turn on his Teutonic allies. You might remember that last time Jogaila tried this he lured Vytautas to the Lithuanian camp by promising him the whole of western Lithuania, the town of Trakai, and all the region surrounding it. However, once Vytautas had committed to switching sides, Jogaila instead gave this territory to Skirgaila, and gave Vytautas a nasty, troublesome region way out in the borderlands. So Jogaila knew that to lure Vytautas over to his side once again he was going to need to offer something really spectacular, like really, really spectacular, to entice Vytautas this time round.

So Jogaila did come up with something really, really spectacular. In a sign of just how desperate things had become, Jogaila decided that he would offer Vytautas all the lands once held by his father Kestutis and his uncle Algirdas, so effectively all of Lithuania, Samogitia and the Russian Principalities, a move which would result in Skirgaila having no lands whatsoever, which was likely another factor designed to tempt Vytautas into making the deal.

There was just one small problem though. Jogaila needed to contact Vytautas in order to communicate the offer to him, but Vytautas was firmly located in the middle of enemy territory and was constantly surrounded by officers from the Teutonic Order. In the end, Jogaila dangled the offer of marriage to one of his sisters in front of Bishop-elect Henryk of Plock, in return for one little favor. The one little favor Henryk had to perform, in return for marrying into the Polish-Lithuanian ruling family, was to travel to meet with Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode, purporting to open peace negotiations between Lithuania and Prussia. In reality though, Henryk's brief was to secretly pass Jogaila's offer to Vytautas. Henryk managed to pass the offer to Vytautas without being spotted, then returned to Lithuania and skipped off into the sunset with Jogaila's sister.

Does Vytautas take Jogaila up on his tempting offer? You'll need to join me next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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