

History Of The Crusades. Episode 270. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part 6. The battle of Plowce.

Hello again. Last week saw an end to the civil war in Livonia with peace finally descending on Riga. The end result is that Riga continues to thrive as a merchant city, but now it is effectively under the thumb of the Teutonic Order leaving the Livonian Chapter of the Order free to join the crusade in Samogitia. There does seem to be one person who is very unhappy about this turn of events though, and that person of course is Archbishop Friedrich, who is still in Avignon and is becoming more and more pointless, and less and less effective by the day.

We left the Samogitian Crusade back in Episode 268. With extra parties joining the action, the field of conflict was divided by Lithuania, Poland, Hungary and the Samogitians on one side, with the Teutonic Order, the Kingdom of Bohemia, and other parts of the Holy Roman Empire on the other side. By the end of the episode a truce had been called, and in a move which no one saw coming, Grand Master Orseln was assassinated by a knife-wielding Teutonic knight, who proved that his conviction for violence and unpredictable behaviour in Memel was completely justified. This means, of course, that we need a new Grand Master.

The next Grand Master to be appointed was one of the more memorable Grand Masters, distinguished by the fact that he was a poet and was also of noble birth. Luther von Braunschweig was the youngest of six sons of Duke Albrecht the Great. Duke Albrecht was the Duke of Brunswick and Luneburg. Now, even if you are a successful duke with extensive lands, it must be a bit tricky to work out what to do if you have six sons. Well, Duke Albrecht decided to groom his three eldest sons to succeed him, while he allocated each of his three youngest sons to a military order. So Otto and Conrad trotted off to the Templars and the Hospitallers, while Luther was dispatched to the Teutonic Order. Now the boy who was sent to the Hospitallers made no mark on history. The boy who was sent to the Templars clearly had the worst of the three deals, but young Luther thrived, and progressively worked his way up the ranks of the order, becoming Master of Robes when he was 34 years old, with the responsibility of settling German peasants in Prussia. He was very successful at this task. He managed to recruit a bunch of peasants from the Holy Roman Empire, many of them from his brother's lands. Then he oversaw an extensive program in Prussia which saw land cleared, churches constructed, and towns built to house his new immigrants.

As I've mentioned, Grand Master Luther was also a gifted poet, and after he became Grand Master he would pen poems to celebrate victories against Poland and Samogitia. Unfortunately, just about all of these poems have been lost over the centuries. Just one last piece of trivia about Grand Master Luther: his grandfather had been part of the Crusade of 1242, which had captured the head of St Barbara and had it enshrined at Kulm. As a result Grand Master Luther felt quite an affinity to St Barbara, and he composed a work entitled "The life of St Barbara" which is just about the only thing that he wrote to have survived the passage of time.

Luther was elected as Grand Master in early 1331, and his first move was to announce a cessation of activities against the Samogitians so the Teutonic Order could concentrate on containing Poland, a reiteration of the policy first decided by Grand Master Orseln. The plan was to support King John of Bohemia in an invasion of Silesia. King Wladislaw had claimed lordship over Silesia, but King John believed that he had an equally valid claim to it, so King John would march in and occupy Silesia. Grand Master Luther figured that King Wladislaw would be so outraged by this move that he would use all of the Polish forces to try and eject King John from Silesia, leaving the Grand Master free to invade Samogitia, without Polish interference. Sounds like a good plan, let's see how it all panned out.

In order to increase the chances of King John securing Silesia, Grand Master Luther did his best to supplement the Bohemian army with his own forces and any other forces he could muster. In the end a rather large army, consisting of Bohemians, knights from the Teutonic Order, rebel Polish noblemen who wished to make a stand against King Wladislaw, mercenaries from the Holy Roman Empire, and even a bunch of English crusaders all set off for Poland.

King Waldislaw scrambled to get the Polish forces, along with supplementary fighting men from Lithuania and Hungary, into position, and decided to allocate a significant portion of the command to his son Prince Casimir, on account of the fact that King Wladislaw himself was getting on in age of this point in time, and thought that a lengthy campaign on horseback may be beyond him. William Urban reports in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", however, that many of the Polish fighters weren't terribly confident of the young Prince's military capabilities, and large-scale desertions occurred, when King Wladislaw put in place measures which increased Prince Casimir's authority.

It turns out that the Polish troops were quite justified to hold such concerns. Prince Casimir didn't offer much resistance to the invasion of Poland by the Teutonic Knights whom he was ordered to oppose, and, in fact, was nearly captured by them at one point, before narrowly escaping into a nearby forest. King Wladislaw sighed, mounted his horse, and led the remainder of the Polish army against the King of Bohemia's forces, who were invading to the south.

Now, this invasion of Poland was absolutely awful for the people of Kujavia and Masovia, as well as the people of Silesia. Basically, to get to Silesia, the orders forces, consisting of a goodly number of mercenaries, marched southwards from Prussia through Masovia and Kujavia, before eventually arriving at Silesia. Silesia was in fact right next door to the kingdom of Bohemia, so King John's army could just march northwards and pop over the border, but the Order's army absolutely wreaked havoc on their march southwards. In a scandal which was a public relations disaster for the Order, and which did nothing to improve their relationship with the Pope, the Order's army behaved atrociously, with unusually high reportings of rapes, along with the usual complaints of murders, pillaging, burning of buildings, and the like. Still with only a weak resistance to their invasion into Polish territory posed by Prince Casimir, the Teutonic army was able to make its way successfully into Silesia, where it met up with the Bohemian army.

King Wladislaw found he had insufficient forces to eject the invaders, so King John of Bohemia set himself up as the occupier of Silesia. However, occupying a territory wasn't terribly interesting, and King John was a man of action, so he soon found himself drawn to a conflict in Italy. He left some subordinates in charge of Silesia, packed up, and headed off to sunny Italy.

Now, this may not have been the wisest move on King John's part. While he had managed to successfully occupy Silesia, pockets of Polish resistance remained, particularly inside the well fortified castles of the region. King John had experienced no luck in attacking or destroying these castles, and his subordinates who were left behind to look after Silesia after the King departed, had no luck either. With these offenders still in place, Silesia was not secured, and if Silesia was not secured, then Grand Master Luther didn't feel that he was free to turn his full attention to Samogitia.

So Grand Master Luther decided it was time to teach those pesky Polish defenders a lesson. Together with King John, he proposed a joint campaign in which not only the Polish castles would be taken, but the Polish army would be confronted and beaten as

well. Both men agreed that King John would return from Italy and lead the Bohemian forces to a rendezvous point with the Teutonic forces, which would be commanded by Marshall Dietrich von Altenburg.

The rendezvous point was the town of Karlisz. This town was in Silesia, just near its border with Gniezno. To get to this rendezvous point, the Teutonic army had to march southwards from Prussia into Kujavia, then further south through Gniezno, then over the border into Silesia. The march of the Teutonic army was relatively uneventful, with the usual killings, plundering and destruction taking place along the way, but when they arrived at Kalisz, King John and the Bohemians were nowhere to be seen. In fact, worryingly, the only armed men who seemed to be present in the region belonged to the Polish forces.

Now, of course, back in medieval times communications were not anything like they are today. Today, the Marshal of the Teutonic forces could just text King John and enquire as to his whereabouts, but back in medieval times there actually wasn't a lot of the Marshall could do. He could send scouts out, and he probably did exactly that, but really, King John's army could be anywhere, and the chances of a scout stumbling across it would have been pretty small. As it happened, King John had been delayed on his journey back from Italy, but he had mustered his army, and he was around two days' march away, to the south. Had the Marshal of the Teutonic forces known this he would probably have set up camp and stayed put, but he had no idea where King John was, or how long it would take to reach Karlisz, or even if he would reach Karlisz at all. So, with Polish fighters making menacing noises and gestures in the surrounding region, he decided to withdraw slowly to the north.

Now, he may have been hoping that a slow withdrawal would enable King John to catch up with him, but the opposite happened. When King John heard about the withdrawal, he threw his hands into the air and decided that the Teutonic army had given up and was going home, so King John decided to give up and go home as well. So the Marshall of the Teutonic forces is now leading a sizeable army through Poland without backup.

As the Teutonic army is slowly making its way back towards Prussia, the Polish army is gathering itself together. King Wladislaw, who by this stage was suffering from ill health, was leading the Polish forces, which by the time everyone had gathered together, ended up being numerically larger than the Teutonic force, but less well equipped. It was probably for this reason, and the fact that, according to one historian, King Wladislaw was relying on sheer willpower at this stage just to remain on his horse, because of how sick he

was feeling, that King Wladislaw chose to just trail along behind the Teutonic army, rather than lead an attack.

An opportunity too good to miss occurred, however, when Marshall Dietrich split the Teutonic forces into three sections. King Wladislaw decided to attack the weakest of these three divisions, which had descended upon the small village of Plowce. According to William Urban in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", this move took Marshall Dietrich totally by surprise. The Marshall had, in fact, settled into his camp, his horses were unsaddled, and he had removed his armour. But the Marshall hurriedly donned his suit of armour, ordered his warhorse to be prepared for battle, then tried to find out what was going on. Finding out exactly what was going on proved difficult, as a heavy fog had descended over the area, but the Marshall gathered his forces, divided them into five divisions, then proceeded to face the Polish royal forces, which King Wladislaw had also divided into five divisions.

What took place after that was a major, lengthy, and hard-fought battle, which lasted from sunrise on the 27th of September 1331 until 3 PM in the afternoon on the same day. The reason why the battle raged for most of the day was, of course, the fact that both armies were fairly evenly matched. According to William Urban, the deadlock in the fighting was only broken when the horse carrying the Marshall's banner was pierced by a spear. The horse fell and the man charged with carrying the banner had nailed the banner to the saddle, to save him from having to physically carry it for so many hours. The position of the fallen horse, though, made the banner impossible to remove. When the Teutonic army saw the banner fall, they assumed that their leader had likewise fallen, and began milling around in disarray. The Polish forces took full advantage of this and struck hard, turning the tide of the battle in their favour.

By the time the battle was over, King Wladislaw and his son Prince Casimir had in their custody 56 Teutonic Knights, along with Marshall Dietrich. Shockingly though, instead of ransoming the knights, King Wladislaw ordered them to be executed on the spot, although he did spare the Marshall and a handful of wealthy Teutonic castellans whom he intended to ransom.

The reason why King Wladislaw did this soon became apparent. Two divisions of Teutonic Knights, along with the castellan from Kulm, had been dispatched from Prussia to relieve the Teutonic forces and were fast approaching the scene of the battle. The exhausted

Polish troops were ordered to reform, and they faced the fresh Teutonic troops, with another long and hard fought battle continuing until nightfall.

The Polish forces were eventually defeated, and Marshall Dietrich was released after having been found chained to a wagon. Marshall Dietrich immediately gave the order that all Polish captives were to be executed. The 600 Polish fighters who had been captured by the Order were then killed while still wearing their chains. Both King Wladislaw and Prince Casimir managed to flee the battlefield.

When the Bishop of Kujavia sent men to clear the battlefield of corpses, an astonishing 4187 bodies were laid to rest in mass graves dug for the purpose. A chapel was built near the graves, where visitors could pay their respects and pray for the fallen.

Interestingly the battle site became a pilgrimage venue for the Polish people, and even today the site is marked by a cross and a stone monument. Despite not winning the battle, Poland has viewed the battle over the years as a successful attempt to prevent the Teutonic Order from expanding into Kujavia. On the flip side the battle became a point of shame and embarrassment for the Teutonic Order, due to the order given by the Marshall to execute hundreds of Polish prisoners.

So, step one of the Grand Master's plan to occupy Silesia and keep King Wladislaw occupied in Poland hasn't gone as well as he had hoped. Join me next week as the Samogitian Crusade continues. Until next week, bye for now.

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