

History of the Crusades. Episode 292. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XXIV. The Second Siege Of Vilnius.

Hello again. Last week we saw Vytautas turn once again on his allies the Teutonic Order, and once again become convinced by Jogaila to form an alliance with him. This time though, the agreement held, so the situation now is that Vytautas is effectively the ruler of Lithuania, Samogitia, and the Lithuanian possessions in the Russian Principalities, leaving Jogaila free to concentrate on his other job, being the King of Poland.

In case anyone is wondering, the real losers in this new arrangement were Jogaila's brothers. Two of his brothers ended up moving to Poland while Skirgaila, who moved to the Russian Principalities, will die in the year 1396 in the city of Kiev, likely as a result of being poisoned. Anyway, in addition to Jogaila's brothers, there was of course, one organization also deeply unimpressed about the new governing arrangement in the Baltic region, and that organization was, of course, the Teutonic Order.

As we mentioned last week, the Order's new priority became to eliminate Vytautas, and conquer all of Vytautas' territory. Before they set out to do that though, the Order will need to elect a new Grand Master. In October of the year 1393 the Order did exactly that, elevating another Konrad, Konrad von Jungingen to the position. Like his predecessor, Konrad von Wallenrode, Konrad von Jungingen was a military man, but unlike Konrad von Wallenrode, Konrad von Jungingen wasn't terribly experienced. But he was full of confidence, so what does a fledgling Grand Master do if he's from a military background and wants to defeat Vytautas and secure Lithuania and Samogitia for the Order? He calls for a Crusade, of course. In fact, he doesn't just call for one Crusade, he calls for a series of Crusades, and one after the other, he launches the Crusaders into Samogitia and Lithuania, where they rampage through the country. Actually, William Urban states in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" and I quote, "Jungingen raised the largest number of Crusaders in the history of the Order." End quote. By mid-1394, when one invasion after another had been launched at Lithuania, William Urban states and I quote "The Crusaders were running wild through the country, seemingly unstoppable." End quote.

While the Grand Master now had bunches of Crusaders running rampant inside Lithuania, he received word that a truly impressive number of Crusaders from France and Germany were intending to arrive in Prussia in the summer of 1394, and in addition the Duke of Burgundy had decided to send 150 Genoese gunners to assist the Crusaders. Deciding to make the most of this influx of military manpower, Konrad von Jungingen decided to lead the Crusaders into Samogitia, then travel up the Nemunas River to rebuild the fortress at Ritterswerder, the wooden stronghold near Kaunas which, you might remember, was destroyed by Vytautas in last week's episode. Once Ritterswerder was rebuilt, the plan was to use it as a base for future incursions into Lithuania.

Meanwhile, Vytautas had become aware that the order was intending to direct a massive Crusade into Lithuania, so he gathered together as many men as he could to oppose it. William Urban reports that he was able to form an army of around 15,000 Lithuanian and Polish fighters, and they headed to Ritterswerder as quickly as they could to counter the Order's forces. The arrival of Vytautas and his army at Ritterswerder came as a huge surprise to the Grand Master.

The first indication that the Crusaders had that an army had arrived to attack them was when their camp started to take heavy fire. The tents housing the Grand Master, the

Marshall of the Order and a local castellan were all destroyed, forcing the Grand Master to tell the Crusaders to cease building the stronghold and instead commence work on building some defensible structures to house themselves.

While Vytautas and his army looked on from their position on the other side of the river, the Crusaders quickly constructed a number of fortifications, then used that position to fire projectiles across into the Polish and Lithuanian camps. The fighting continued, with both sides hurling projectiles at each other across the river. William Urban reports that the Crusaders managed to do more damage to Vytautas' forces than Vytautas was able to do back to the Crusader forces, with the Genoese gunmen proving particularly effective with their gunpowder and cannon. While the archers and catapult machines were also able to make a bit of an impact, William Urban reports that most of the Crusader casualties arose from a sort of self-goal, an explosion which occurred on the Crusader side of the river when the Master of the Guns accidentally blew himself up.

The situation changed when a bunch of ships arrived from Ragnit, carrying the Crusaders' warhorses. The Grand Master ordered 400 of the knights under his command to mount up, and they found a shallow section of the river which they then crossed, intending to attack Vytautas' army. Vytautas saw this advance taking place and decided to retreat, ordering his army to withdraw to the Neris River.

The Grand Master didn't chase after the fleeing army, but instead spent nine days pondering what he should do next. Then he ordered work to stop on the stronghold at Ritterswerder and loaded the building materials onto the waiting ships, then sent them down-river to Ragnit. He then called a meeting of the War Council and proposed that the Crusader forces march to Vilnius and besiege it. The Grand Master had received word that Vytautas had blocked the main road to Vilnius, and that the route was also heavily guarded, so the Grand Master proposed instead to march to Vilnius along a sort of a wilderness route, avoiding the main roads but instead using the swamps and river banks to make their way to the city, hopefully undetected and un-observed by Vytautas. The plan was heartily approved, and shortly after the Crusader army mobilized, moving inland over makeshift bridges constructed over swamps, heading towards Vilnius.

It wasn't long, however, before Vytautas realized what the Crusaders were up to. The Teutonic forces had captured and executed a number of scouts which they had caught spying on their progress. But they mustn't have spotted all of them because not long afterwards the vanguard of the Crusader Army, some French cavalymen on heavily-armored war horses, rode straight into an ambush set up by Vytautas. Vytautas had set his trap next to a swamp. The French Crusaders were then faced with three bad choices: they could charge straight at Vytautas' men, who are currently bombarding them with arrows and spears; or they could turn around and head back towards the main force of the Crusader army, meaning Vytautas could follow them and trap them against their own advancing forces; or lastly, they could charge into the swamp.

They really, really didn't want to charge into the swamp. Crossing swamps was usually done by hastily building bridges over them, but of course there was no time here for that. With their warhorses fully armored and as heavy as small tanks, there was every chance that the horses would just sink without a trace into the deep mud, taking their riders with them. But faced with no happy choices, the Crusaders headed into the swamp. Luckily, they discovered that the swamp was actually very shallow. They made it safely over to the other side and managed to hold off Vytautas' men, while the rest of the Crusaders caught

up and headed through the swamp as well. They didn't face any more serious setbacks until they were outside the city of Vilnius.

When the Grand Master arrived outside the city, he couldn't see any sign of Vytautas' forces. Unbeknownst to the Grand Master, Vytautas was at this point in time racing to gather a relief force which he intended to take to Vilnius to block the Crusader attack. The Grand Master set up camp to the south and east of the city opposite the Old Castle, the wooden fort which had been rebuilt by the citizens of Vilnius since it was destroyed during the last siege. Once the Crusader camp had been established, the Grand Master commenced the attack on Vilnius on the 29th of August 1394, by bombarding the Old Castle.

Some Polish cavalrymen were currently stationed in Vilnius awaiting the arrival of Vytautas and his army. There weren't enough of them to launch an attack on the Crusader forces, but there were enough of them to launch an attack on the Crusaders cows. Yes, the herd of cattle which the Crusader Army had taken with them to supplement their diets were currently grazing contentedly on fields near the Crusader camp, and the Polish cavalrymen decided to attack the herd and kill them, depriving the Crusaders of some of their supplies. The attack started well enough, with the Polish cavalrymen easily defeating the unarmed cows, but then the Marshall of the Order realized what was going on, and scrambled some forces to intercept the cow-killers. In his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban reports that when some Genoese fighters joined with the Teutonic forces to attack the Polish fighters, things started going very badly very quickly for the cow-killers, and they were forced to retreat back inside the city.

Shortly after this incident, Vytautas began to approach Vilnius with his army. Scouts from the Crusader Army reported the shocking fact to the Grand Master that they estimated that Vytautas' army was ten times the size of the Crusader army. Once he had digested this sobering piece of news, Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen decided that his best move would be to leave part of his army outside Vilnius, and mobilize the majority of his forces with the intent of blocking Vytautas' army and preventing it from reaching Vilnius. The Grand Master positioned his army around a bridge which had been built over a large swamp which Vytautas would need to cross to get to Vilnius. Then he sat back and waited for him to approach.

When Vytautas arrived at the bridge, both armies formed into a sort of battle formation and fighting commenced between the two forces. Now this was a seriously weird, confusing battle, due to the location in which it was fought. The battleground was boggy, marshy and unpleasant, and to make matters worse a thick fog had descended, which made it difficult for anyone to work out where anyone else was. The fog seems to have unnerved many fighters, and Vytautas was mindful of the fact that many of the men whom Skirgaila had brought over from the Russian Principalities weren't exactly keen to be fighting for Vytautas, and might try to flee if things began to go badly. Vytautas placed a number of Samogitians amongst the Russian ranks, the Samogitians being fierce warriors, who of course, were totally fine with fighting in the swamps, and were also not unnerved at all by the thick fog. In fact, they probably liked it, on the basis that it reminded them of their nearby homeland.

But this plan didn't work. After only a short bout of hand-to-hand fighting, the Russian fighters began to withdraw and scatter. As soon as the Crusaders realized this, they charged enthusiastically straight at Vytautas' army, yelling their victory cries, a move

which, along with the fleeing Russians, unnerved Vytautas' men. The core of Vytautas' army stayed and stood their ground until Vytautas was able to make his escape. But once Vytautas was safely away, the rest of the Lithuanian army scattered and fled as well, with the Crusaders hot on their heels. The Crusaders managed to kill over 1,000 Lithuanian, Russian and Samogitian fighters, and captured at least one nobleman. The Grand Master took his fighters back to the camp outside Vilnius, where the Crusaders continued the siege.

Not long afterwards, the Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia showed up with the Livonian forces. Then the combined Livonian, Prussian, and Crusader armies concentrated on breaching the walls around Vilnius. But try as they might, the southern walls seemed to be totally impervious to all Crusader assaults, so the Grand Master decided to shift his focus to the opposite side of the city, to the north. When this also proved a difficult nut to crack, the Grand Master ordered ten massive wooden towers to be constructed, with the idea that the Crusaders would push the towers towards the wall, then use the towers to breach the wall. This sort of strategy used to work really well during the golden age of siege warfare, before the invention of the cannon. However, now the city's defenders used their cannon, placed on the battlements, to blast the towers, and destroyed most of them before they got anywhere near the walls. The few towers which did manage to reach the wall were attacked so ferociously that the Crusaders were forced to retreat. The Grand Master then ordered his army to concentrate on breaching one of the walls, which had been damaged by projectiles, but it was at this stage that the defenders seemed to gain the upper hand. The Lithuanian archers used the Crusader fighters as target practice as they attempted to breach the wall. Then the next day, the shocked Crusaders awoke to discover that the defenders of Vilnius had repaired the damaged wall overnight, and had also managed to take out a few of the Crusader gun positions.

It was all too much for the Master of Livonia, who decided to take his army back to Livonia. Then it became all too much for the Grand Master, who decided that it was time to retreat back to Kaunas, then sail down the Nemunas River, back to Prussia.

You might be interested to know that this battle, the Second Siege of Vilnius in 1394, was actually the final battle in the Samogitian Crusade. Join me next week for our second-last episode on the Samogitian Crusade, as both parties meet for peace talks. But never fear, it's not the end of the Baltic Crusades. No, the Baltic Crusades, and the episodes about them, will keep going. Until next week, bye for now.

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