

THE CORRECT TRANSLATION OF "RUCE"

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For many years historians have confused the tiny, underpopulated fourteenth century Lithuanian province of Rossenia (modern Rasenai) with Russia. This came about because the medieval German name for the province was practically identical with that of Russia, and because the province was so insignificant during the Middle Ages that many scholars did not realize that it existed. This has led to misunderstandings about the territorial desires of the Teutonic Order and to confusion among Chaucerian scholars.¹

"Rus" was the medieval name for Russia, commonly used throughout the West, although with slight variations in pronunciation and spelling. Historians became accustomed to translating this name or any name close to "Rus" in spelling as Russia. As will be demonstrated, this reliance on phonetics led to an error. This error can be corrected by the use of logic and a closer study of Lithuanian provincial names from the fourteenth century.

The critical instance of confusion came with the issuance of the two grants in 1337 by the Emperor Louis IV, who awarded in the first instance the provinces "Samayten, Karsow vel Rusye," and in the second and provinces "Ouchsteten, Samayten, Karsow, Ruezzen," to the grandmaster of the Teutonic Order, Dietrich von Altenburg.² In effect, these were the lands nearest the castles built on the Nemunas River at Welun and Baiernburg by his nephew, Heinrich von Bayern. Such a grant of pagan lands by a Holy Roman Emperor was not novel. What was novel was that generations later scholars read this list to mean all of Lithuania with its Russian possessions. That meant, in effect, much of eastern Europe. This misconception arose despite the fact that in the first document it was necessary to envision the grant of a tiny province already held by the crusaders (Karschauen), with a moderately sized province well-known as the home of the most determined pagans (Samogithia), and a generalized grant of land that encompassed numerous principalities and extended over many hundreds of miles

to the north and the south (Russia). In the second document it was easier to imagine such a grant since the list begins with the heartland of Lithuania (Aukstaiten). Armed with this evidence, historians created a myth that the Teutonic Knights were out to conquer all the Slavic lands. Since this myth built upon a solid foundation of medieval Polish arguments that the Teutonic Order had illegally seized Polish provinces in 1309 and in the 1330s and perhaps had no right to any part of Prussia, it was eagerly accepted by both friends and enemies.³

There are numerous problems that appear in dealing with these documents. First, the spelling varies. Probably this is the result of two requests to the emperor rather than a scribal choice (or Aukstaiten would have appeared on both lists). Secondly, there is little information about the extent of the province of Rossenia. Presumably it covered the lands in the bend of the Neumunas and Dubissa rivers, north and somewhat east of Karschauen. The center would have been at Rossenia, and it could have extended to the castle of Rusye on the Nemunas.

The previous century had seen the Teutonic Knights conquer immense territories in Prussia and Livonia. One unfamiliar with the specific details of the crusades that made these conquests possible might assume that the advance was solely the result of a desire for land. That would be partially true, but it would also be a simplification that distorts two very different and complex stories. This author's two histories of the crusades against the pagans have attempted to show how the crusades developed an inner logic of their own that evolved in the changing context of political developments in the Holy Roman Empire, in Scandinavia, in Poland, and locally; crusader goals varied, sometimes defensive, sometimes expansionist, but usually they remained true to the effort to convert the pagans and Orthodox Christians to Roman Catholicism. Territorial desires were usually, but not always (especially in the case of Samogithia) secondary to religious ones.⁴ This thesis runs counter to that found in Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian histories, and even against that espoused by some Germans. This is, I believe, because the writing of medieval history has often reflected contemporary politics.

It is worth noting that Max Hein, who identified Rossenia with Russia in editing the documents for the *Preussisches Urkundenbuch*, did so in 1944 at the height of Nazi lunacy. But he was following a tradition set in 1830 by Johannes Voigt, the greatest of the early scholars of the Teutonic Order.⁵ Hein's translation has not been challenged.

Today, now that German claims to those provinces, to Livonia, to parts of Poland, and even to Prussia have been invalidated in nearly every sense, it is possible to look more dispassionately at this matter; it is possible to avoid taking sides in terrible controversies that have immediate political consequences. This gives us tremendous advantages over previous generations. We can debate the motivations and the ambitions of the various heads of states without at the same time debating current political issues.

It is my belief that the Teutonic Order had less sweeping ambitions for territorial acquisition than has been believed. That is not to say that it did not have territorial ambitions. It is only to note that Grandmaster Dietrich von Altenburg (1335-41) and his successors were rational men who knew well the limits to which their manpower and money could be stretched. The Teutonic Order was not reluctant to seize new territories, if an easy conquest seemed likely. To have acted otherwise would run counter to human nature (and particularly medieval human nature). The seizure of Pomerellia in 1309 is proof of this.

Even the occupation of Pomerellia, however, cannot be understood apart from the situation existing at the turn of the fourteenth century. Six decades earlier the Teutonic Order had fought and defeated the duke of Pomerellia several times and nevertheless did not seek to occupy the entire territory. To be sure, important castles and posts along the Vistula were taken, positions of obvious military importance for any future conflict. However, much had changed in the meantime. In fact, there had been almost a complete revolution in relations with Poland, from a close alliance to mutual fear and hostility. First, by 1305 King Ladislas was openly unfriendly and, moreover, was ambitious to restore the greatness of Poland at the expense of his neighbors. Second, the Templar Trial in France was a precedent for the destruction of inconvenient crusading orders. Third, the Pomerellian line of dukes had become extinct and the territory had gone to Ladislas, giving him control of the lines of communication from Germany to Prussia. Fourth, in 1306 the Pomerellians had revolted against Ladislas and obtained aid from the Dukes of Brandenburg; Ladislas had asked the Prussian master to intervene and restore order, which he did. Fifth, Ladislas then refused to pay the Teutonic Order 10,000 Marks for the expenses incurred in its military operations. Looking at this situation and not seeing any advantage in handing over Pomerellia to Ladislas, the grandmaster then paid the dukes of Brandenburg, who had been overlords of the late line of dukes, 10,000 Marks for their right to the title. This led to a series of wars between the Teutonic Order and King Ladislas, wars the Teutonic Knights won. Seen in this light, the aggression was not as cold-blooded and premeditated as was later maintained. It was wrong, but the immensity of the error was not immediately apparent; and at the time the action seemed preferable to its alternative.

In 1329 the Teutonic Order invaded Poland and occupied several provinces in the bend of the Vistula south of Prussia. This was a response to Ladislas' attack on Culm in 1328, which disrupted the first large-scale crusade into Lithuania in several years. The grandmaster held the provinces until 1343, when Ladislas' successor, Casimir the Great, signed a treaty that guaranteed the Teutonic Order peace on its southern frontier.⁶ Thus, this invasion was directly connected to the personalities then ruling and to the Polish claim on Pomerellia. It was, for the Poles, similar to problems simultaneously faced in Silesia and Galicia, where the king and his neighbors disputed the ownership of territories with cloudy titles.

The Livonian Wars are more complex. What began as military expeditions to protect missionaries and converts early in the thirteenth century became of

necessity wars of conquest. There were no natural frontiers in Livonia to stop expansion until the crusaders reached those formed by the Dūna River and Lake Peipus. The crusaders faced a situation where they had to conquer the Livs, the Letts, and the Estonians, or be defeated. With the considerable aid of the traditionally oppressed minor tribes, the crusaders crushed the major pagan tribes. The crusading order of that era, the Swordbrothers, then ran afoul of the papacy in its struggle with Frederick II and, needing money to hire mercenaries, tried to expand in all directions at once, crossing the natural frontiers to attack Russians and Lithuanians. Overrunning its resources, that order was effectively destroyed in 1236 in Samogithia and was absorbed into the Teutonic Order, which sent troops to the north to rescue the situation.

A very famous battle took place shortly afterward, when a crusading army of Germans and Scandinavians was defeated in 1242 by the Novgorodian prince, Alexander Nevsky. This "Battle on the Ice" on Lake Peipus has been fundamentally misunderstood. The German contingent was composed of vassals from Danish Estonia and former Swordbrothers who refused to bow to the defensive policy ordered by the new master. After this rebellious group was annihilated, the Teutonic Order made peace with the Russians and only rarely found reasons for military conflict in the rest of the century.⁷

In the early fourteenth century this changed. Lithuanian princes came to power in Pskov and Polotsk. They attacked Livonia savagely in an effort to divert the Livonian Knights from assisting in the crusade against Samogithia. The region around Dūnaburg (Daugavpils) became a battlefield. The major crusader efforts were against Lithuania, however, and it would be difficult to show that the Livonian Knights had any serious wishes to occupy the Russian states. The struggle over Dūnaburg was strategic. From Dūnaburg the crusaders could strike into Samogithia and Aukstatai, often combining the attacks with expeditions up the Nemunas from Prussia. Thus, some of the Russian wars were by-products of the crusader desires to conquer and convert the last remaining pagans in Lithuania.⁸

To attract crusaders to participate in the expeditions into Samogithia the grandmasters began to emphasize the chivalric aspect of fourteenth century holy war. They set up Arthurian Tables of Honor in the wilderness and allowed prominent nobles to dub as knights young squires who performed valiant deeds burning villages and slaying peasants. This in time changed the entire psychology of the warfare. The crusade became a secular sporting event. Also, the grandmasters found it necessary to hire mercenaries for both the crusades and the occasional wars with Poland. These sins against the Holy Ghost were redoubled in the fifteenth century by the refusal to recognize the Samogithian conversion to Roman Christianity as genuine. The original crusader goal of protecting converts and missionaries was thus perverted into display and landlordism; this became a fanatical, hopeless effort to hold on to Samogithia.

Given this almost single-minded attention to an underdeveloped border territory, one can conclude that the Teutonic Knights did not lose sight of the

primary purpose of their crusade—to convert the pagans—until the fifteenth century. They were willing to moderate or abandon territorial claims if the tribesmen of a region became Roman Christians. This was the case in the 1240s,⁹ in the 1250s¹⁰ and in the 1320s.¹¹ Samogithia, because of its strategic location between Prussia and Livonia, was the only region that the Knights believed had to be both conquered and converted. Lithuania could have peace, territorial integrity, and a military alliance against the Russians and Tatars — if only the people would become Roman Christians.

Between 1381 and 1410 the Teutonic Order had apparently achieved its goals. The grandmasters had set allied Lithuanian dukes in power—first Jagiello and then Vitold—and in turn those princes had formally surrendered title to Samogithia and promised to convert the remaining Lithuanians to Christianity. This arrangement did not last, of course. The Lithuanian dukes later reconsidered their promises and encouraged the Samogithians to rebel. In the Peace of Thorn that followed the Battle of Tannenberg (1410) the Teutonic Knights were forced to give up possession of Samogithia for the lifetimes of Jagiello and Vitold.¹²

The Teutonic Knights were hostile to the Russian Orthodox Church, just as the Russians despised the western version of Christianity. Nevertheless, the wars between the Teutonic Order and the Russian states were due either to the Lithuanian Crusades (where the crusaders often fought the Russian subjects of the dukes) or quarrels over trade.

The Teutonic Knights wanted Rossenia, not Russia. The confusion arose because that province was obscure, rarely named in the documents. Usually Samogithia was named alone, not broken into its provincial components. That did not, however, mean that the 1337 listing was unique. In 1377 the Austrian poet, Peter von Suchenwirt, listed three provinces ravaged by the crusaders that year: "Sameit, Russein, Aragel." These were the provinces at the meeting of the Nemunas and Dubissa Rivers and downstream.¹³ The "Litauische Wegebericht" mentioned Rossenia among the regions travelled by armies and messengers.¹⁴ Chaucer's Knight, who had travelled in "Ruce," was probably Henry of Derby or in his company. Henry's crusade of 1390-1391 was well-known and unusually well-documented. He passed through the province of Rossenia. Presumably there he was told the name of the province in Latin or by a translator. Since he knew Russians were in the Lithuanian army, it is plausible to believe that he thought he was in Russia and that this error was then passed on to Chaucer.¹⁵

If the supposition is correct that Rossenia was confused with Russia, then some accusations against the Teutonic Order have to be reconsidered. First, the grandmasters did not make exaggerated claims to land. Their ambitions were limited to those provinces occupied in the 1390s and Aukstaiten. Their armies did, indeed, ravage Aukstaiten often, and several times they besieged the great fortress at Vilnius. Thus, their ambitions were within their limits of manpower and money. Second, the claim was barely larger than the traditional ones dating from the 1250s for control of the land bridge between Prussia and Livonia. Occupation of those lands was considered necessary for year-round communication

and mutual reinforcement. The first grant of 1337 listed only lands downstream from and north of the confluence of the Nemunas and Dubissa rivers. This indicates that their plans remained essentially strategic. Last, compared to English claims against France or Hungarian claims against Naples, the exaggeration by the grandmasters appears moderate. One always expects some exaggeration so that negotiators have room to make compromises. That may account partly for the Lithuanian claims to most of Prussia and extensive parts of Livonia, and for Polish claims to most of the territories occupied by the Teutonic Order.

The Teutonic Knights had their very human failings. They looked upon themselves as the elite of crusading chivalry. Most visiting crusaders apparently agreed, and they were not despised even by their most bitter enemies. An excess of pride and arrogance led to their devastating fall in the fifteenth century, but it did not lead them to the foolish ambition of asking the Holy Roman Emperor for all of Russia.

NOTES

- 1 To mention only the most recent (and also the best) histories, Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades: the Baltic and Catholic Frontier, 1100-1525* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 155: "The grand-master was authorized to conquer the whole of Eastern Europe by the emperor Lewis," and Karol Gorski, *L'Ordine teutonico: alle origini dello stato prussiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971), 97. More cautious is Paul Knoll, *The Rise of the Polish Monarchy: Piast Poland in East Central Europe, 1320-1370* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 99: "he granted to the Knights the whole of Lithuania, together with all other heathen lands bordering thereon."
- 2 *Tabulae Ordinis Theutonici*, ed. Ernst Strehlke (Berlin: Weidmann, 1869; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 201-03. The authenticity of the documents, especially the first with its gold seal and red and green silk string still attached and the numerous contemporary copies is beyond doubt. *Preussisches Urkundenbuch*, III, Part 1, ed. Max Hein (Königsberg: Gräfe und Unzer, 1944), 96-101. A description of Heinrich von Bayern's expedition is found in "Die Chronik Wigands von Marburg," *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum*, II (Leipzig, 1863; rpt. Frankfurt/Main: Minerva, 1965), 492-94. For a listing of Rossenia's appearances in the documents, see Anton Salys, "Geschichte des zemaitischen Sprachgebiets," Part 3 of *Die zemaitischen Mundarten* (Diss. Universität Leipzig; Printed-Kaunas: Spindule, 1930), 63-64. Salys notes the importance of Rossenia in the 15th century and the campaigns which ravaged it in the 14th, but does not recognize it in the 1337 document.
- 3 Wolfgang Wippermann, *Der Ordenstaat als Ideologie* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1979) is the best survey of attitudes over the centuries. Polish claims are found in *Lites et res gestae inter Polonos Ordinemque Cruciferorum*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Poznań and Warsaw: Cornice, 1890-1895).
- 4 William Urban, *The Baltic Crusade* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1975) and *The Prussian Crusade* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980). The traditional story is best told by Henryk Łowmiański, "Agresja Zakonu Krzyżackiego na Litwę w wiekach XII-XV," *Przegląd Historyczny*, 45 (1954), 338-71, 543-45, 561-62, and Leon Koczy, *The Baltic Policy of the Teutonic Order* (Torun: the Baltic Institute, 1936). An analysis of chronicles written by Germans in the era of the crusades against the Baltic pagans supports the contention that religion was of more importance than nationality: Paul Görlich, *Zur Frage des Nationalbewusstseins in ostdeutschen Quellen*

- des 12. bis 14. Jahrhunderts, No. 66 of *Wissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte und Landeskunde Ost-Mitteleuropas* (Marburg/Lahn: Johann Gottfried Herder-Institut, 1964).
- 5 Johannes Voigt, *Geschichte Preussen von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum Untergange der Herrschaft des Deutschen Ordens, IV* (Königsberg: Bornträger, 1830), 552, 559. Max Hein, "Die Verleihungen Litauens an den Deutschen Orden durch Ludwig den Bayern im Jahre 1337," *Altpreussische Forschung*, 19 (1942), 36-54.
 - 6 Paul Knoll, *The Rise of the Polish Monarchy*, 83-120.
 - 7 Friedrich Benninghoven, *Der Orden der Schwertbrüder* (Köln-Graz: Böhlau, 1965).
 - 8 William Urban, *The Livonian Crusade* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981).
 - 9 William Urban, "The Prussian-Lithuanian Frontier of 1242," *Lituanas*, 21, no. 4 (1975), 5-18.
 - 10 King Mindaugas gave away several provinces that were resisting his efforts to form a Lithuanian kingdom. In return, the Teutonic Order recognized him as king over the remaining, more important provinces of central Lithuania. See Zenonas Ivinski, "Mindaugas und seine Krone," *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung*, 3 (1954), 380-86; and Manfred Hellmann, "Der Deutsche Orden und die Königskronung des Mindaugas," *ibid.*, 387-96. Shortly, the Teutonic Order made a two-year truce with the Samogithians, interrupting a devastating military campaign in hopes of obtaining a peaceful conversion of those pagans. *Livländische Reimchronik*, ed. Leo Meyer (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1963; first published, 1876), 105-06.
 - 11 When King Gediminas was believed to be ready to accept Roman Christianity, the grand-master reluctantly granted him a truce so that churchmen sent by the pope could speak with him. There is an extensive literature on this. The best introduction is Kurt Forstreuter, "Die Bekehrung des Litauerkönig Gedimin. Eine Streitfrage," *Jahrbuch des Albertus-Universität zu Königsberg/Pr.*, 6 (1955), 142-58.
 - 12 *Die Staatsverträge des deutschen Ordens in Preussen im 15. Jahrhundert*, ed. Erich Weise, I (Königsberg: Gräfe und Unzer, 1939).
 - 13 *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum*, II, 166-67.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 676-78, 688.
 - 15 The best description of the expedition is Albert Cook, *The Historical Background of Chaucer's Knight* (New York: Haskell House, 1966). For the documents, see *Expeditions to Prussia and the Holy Land Made by Henry, Earl of Derby, 1390-1391, Being the Account Kept by His Treasurer*, ed. Lucy Tomlin Smith, Vol. 52 of *Camden Society New Series* (1894). Smith wrote (p. xxiv of the introduction): "It may be said that the identification of foreign names, both of persons and places, has in many cases been a matter of no slight difficulty; the safest guide is perhaps the phonetic, putting oneself in the place of an Englishman in a foreign land who tries to write down what he hears."