

WHEN WAS CHAUCER'S KNIGHT IN "RUCE"?

by William Urban

Over a considerable period of time various scholars have speculated that Chaucer used his contemporaries as models for some of his pilgrims and characters in the *Canterbury Tales*. Because his portrait associates him with so many specific events and places, the Knight in the *General Prologue* has been a prime target for such speculations. His campaigns in northeastern Europe, however, present an especially thorny problem:

Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
(CT, A 52-55)¹

What notable Englishmen were in Prussia during Chaucer's lifetime, and when? And, a more difficult question, what Englishmen were in "Ruce"—universally understood to mean Russia—and when? An answer to these questions would be important in itself and would throw some light on several other matters as well. One would be the date of the earliest possible composition of the *General Prologue*, or at least of the Knight's portrait. If these crusades took place in the 1390's, as seems likely, they would be the crusades closest to the experience of Chaucer and his contemporaries, and the attitude toward them would be a clue to the general attitude toward crusades in the decade when the *General Prologue* was being composed—an answer to another important question. This in turn would have considerable bearing on the question of Chaucer's attitude toward the Knight, which has been a debated issue in recent years.

No one historical character has been a serious candidate as a model for the Knight, but two scholars have demonstrated that composites of related crusaders would fit the catalogue of the Knight's crusades—except for "Ruce." In 1908 John Matthews Manly pro-

posed the Scropes family as a composite model. Three brothers had gone on crusade: Stephen in Alexandria, Spain, and Prussia; Geoffrey in Prussia; and William in Turkey. Since Geoffrey had died in Prussia in 1363 at the siege of Welun, a year when Chaucer himself was serving with King Edward III in France, he would surely have heard about the campaign. And we know he was aware of the notorious 1386 lawsuit between the Scropes and Grosvenor families over the right to a certain coat-of-arms, because he gave testimony. The disputed coat-of-arms was proved at the hearing to be on the memorial marker for Geoffrey's grave in Prussia, and this gave precedence to the Scropes.²

In 1916 Albert Stanburrough Cook argued persuasively that the model was a composite of Henry of Lancaster and his grandson, Henry of Derby, whose exploits in the Mediterranean and in Prussia were well-known. Certainly Henry of Derby's triumphal return to England in 1393 was noted by Chaucer, whose important connections with the house of Lancaster would have made it expedient for him to commemorate their crusading exploits.³ Cook's argument has generally carried the day, persuading most scholars that the *Prologue* cannot be dated before 1393.⁴

There were, however, exceptions taken to this date, all based on the supposition that Chaucer did not have any particular individual or composite in mind, but was describing a type. Thomas J. Hatton suggested that the portrait was intended to further the revival of crusading proposed by Philip de Mézières, who was active in England in 1393–94 and was instrumental in organizing the ill-fated Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396.⁵ Charles Mitchell challenged all previous interpretations by contending that the Knight's portrait was not meant to be flattering at all.⁶ This led Terry Jones to argue that Chaucer's contemporaries would have recognized in the Knight the worst type of medieval mercenary.⁷

There is real value, certainly, to seeing the Knight as a type. First, it eliminates the problem of his age. If the Knight had indeed been at Algezir in 1343, he would have had to be born before 1330, which would make him rather older than any single person thus far suggested as a model. Secondly, it enables us to speculate about Chaucer's literary motives: was the Knight a figure to emulate or to mock? This, however, brings us back to the English expeditions to Prussia, because only by studying them can we arrive at any understanding of English public opinion, especially the opinion of the upper classes, regarding fourteenth-century crusades. Cook relied heavily on the financial accounts of the Earl of Derby's expedition,⁸

and made an elegant translation of Peter von Suchenwirt's 1377 poem describing the Table of Honor set up in the Samogithian wilderness to honor the most prominent knights in that year's expedition.⁹ Cook naturally believed the Knight to be the most honorable and praiseworthy of chivalrous warriors. Terry Jones presented a very different picture:

When Chaucer tells us that his Knight had fought in Prussia and in Lithuania, he leaves it wide open as to what kind of knight he is talking about—he could be a nobleman or a mercenary. When, however, Chaucer adds that the Knight also “reysed” in Russia, he is branding him as a brigand and a mercenary, prepared to pillage and destroy Christian cities as soon as heathen.¹⁰

This argument is, I believe, exaggerated. While the Knight may indeed be less than a saint (and Chaucer tells us he had some very human failings), it strains credulity to think that the reading public and the court would have greeted his portrait with less enthusiasm than is today awarded to half-educated athletes, rich sportmen, and successful generals. The Teutonic Order still had an unblemished record except among Poles and Lithuanians, neither of whom had contacts with Englishmen nearly as significant as those established through the trade between England and Prussia. By their very participation in the crusade Englishmen seem to have endorsed the Christian and chivalric efforts against the pagans.

Locating “Ruce” might clarify the issue and answer other questions as well. How did Englishmen come to hear of it? They had no direct contacts with Russia. Although crusaders and merchants had been to Prussia, they were barred from direct commerce with Novgorod by the Hanseatic League, and they had no political, religious, or social ties with Russia. How then did they hear of the crusades against Russians? Did the Knight serve in the armies of the Livonian Order or in the almost unknown Swedish crusades?

The answer is deceptively simple: “Ruce” is probably only Rosseina, a district of Samogithia visited by most of the English crusading expeditions.¹¹ It lies north of the Memel (Nemunas) River in the Dubissa River valley, between Livonia (to the north) and Prussia (to the south). Its principal castles are Welun (Veliuona) and Rosseina (Rossein, today Raseinai). It was often attacked from Livonia and Prussia, because the Teutonic Order wanted to secure a land route between the two territories. Obviously, most Englishmen on the crusade would have remembered the name since it was so easily identified with the semi-legendary and distant Russia, and since

many Russians served in the Lithuanian army. That such an error could be maintained so long is accounted for by a general ignorance of medieval Lithuanian geography.¹² Even one of the best German editors of medieval documents identified "Ruce" uniformly with Russia.¹³

If this suggestion has merit, any number of English knights could have served in "Ruce," attracted by the revival of King Arthur's Round Table and by service under the banner of Saint George. Any number of crusaders could have told Chaucer about memorable adventures. Few, of course, could have surpassed the story told by the Earl of Derby about his exploits in 1390: he took three hundred men by sea to join the summer "Reyse" or expedition. Joining a very large army made up of rebel Lithuanians led by Duke Vitold, the order's own knights and mercenaries, Prussian vassals, and crusaders, he went up the Memel to the Nerija River, where the enemy lay in wait under Duke Skirgiello. Led by the marshal of the Teutonic Knights, the commander of the expedition, the heavily mounted knights went into the wilderness north of Kaunas (through Rossenia), crossed a ford, and took the Lithuanians in the rear, inflicting a decisive defeat. Then, joined by the Livonian armies, the crusaders besieged Vilnius in a legendary contest that almost succeeded in capturing that stronghold. The contribution of the English archers gave a boost to the flagging national pride. It was not a moment for a poet to mock crusaders.¹⁴

Even more to the point was the earlier, well-publicized French challenge to joust any three English knights just outside Calais. This affront to national honor was made by Jean de Boucicaut, who, "campaigning from the age of twelve, was almost as experienced and well-travelled as Chaucer's gentle knight."¹⁵ Although the tournament could not be arranged, the English could not allow Frenchmen to boast that they were the most chivalrous knights in Europe. In an effort to surpass Boucicaut's crusading exploits, Henry of Derby vowed to go to Prussia, and John of Beaufort (his half-brother) went on crusade in North Africa. The assertion that Chaucer's Knight had "the borde begionne" was a nationalistic jibe at Boucicaut, who had made four well-publicized crusades to Prussia and each time had sat at the Table of Honor. A further indication that this may be so is that on Henry of Derby's return from Prussia in 1391, he made a pilgrimage to Bridlington. The parallels to the Knight's portrait are obvious.

1390-91, therefore, is the best date for the earliest composition of the Knight's description in the *Prologue*. Chaucer could well have seen an individual pilgrim who had been in Prussia, Lithuania, and "Ruce." Or, more likely, it was a flattering reference to Henry of Derby.

There were other years when English crusaders passed through Rossenia, but those campaigns were all before 1390.¹⁶ There was no significant English participation in the crusade after that date. The Englishmen who came had made so much trouble for their hosts—quarreling with Frenchmen, brawling with Scots, and demanding the right to carry the banner of Saint George in the van—that the Teutonic Knights apparently asked them to leave.¹⁷ The Earl of Derby, who returned to Prussia in 1392, went home without participating in the winter expedition. If one wishes to use these events as an argument that Englishmen would no longer support crusading, one may do so.

By the time the English recovered from the hurt to their pride, the Teutonic Order had suffered a military defeat of staggering proportions at Tannenberg (1410), the Lithuanians had declared themselves converted to Roman Christianity, and the Hundred Years' War had resumed. Western Europeans began to look at the Teutonic Knights with less favor, and their reputation has declined steadily, down to the present day.¹⁸

It is perhaps unfortunate that Chaucer's contemporaries did not choose to identify individuals in his writings the way Dante's did. Chaucer, of course, was not a contemporary of Dante, and his writings were not political commentaries. Readers treated him the way they did Boccaccio: as a poet and story-teller, not a composer of a *roman à clef*.¹⁹ He was undoubtedly influenced by current events, and he had a sharp eye for distinctive and colorful personalities, but there is no evidence that he was slavish in his descriptions. The Earl of Derby would not have recognized himself, but he would have recognized allusions to his exploits. He would not likely have been amused by an ironic reading. And, Chaucer, as a courtier, would have known that kings had ways of making courtiers aware of their displeasure.

Crusading was a dead tradition by the end of the century. Indeed, as has been often pointed out, chivalry itself was dying. For Englishmen of the next generation the Knight was almost as remote a figure as he is to us. The list of his crusades did not mean much to them. What mattered was that he represented the last of a vanishing species. His physical type, to be sure, was seen in the streets right through the Wars of the Roses—as Jones points out—but the ethos of such fighting men was completely different. For all readers the Knight became the worn-out but noble example of the cherished ideal type of Christian warrior.²⁰

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1. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).
2. "A Knight Ther Was," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Association*, 38 (1907), 89-107. Reprinted in *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 46-59; *Chaucer Life-Records*, ed. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1966), pp. 370-71.
3. Reprinted as *The Historical Background of Chaucer's Knight* (New York: Haskell House, 1966). Muriel Bowden, however, held to Manly's date: *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York: MacMillan, 1954), pp. 63-67. And Manly himself was not persuaded: *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York: Henry Holt, 1926), pp. 254-56.
4. John Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer* (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 288.
5. "Chaucer's Crusading Knight, A Slanted Ideal," *ChauR*, 3 (1968), 77-87. And see Robert P. Miller, *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 156: "A sober sense of obligation to the Christian community seems to have informed the chivalric code of those dedicated to the defense of Christendom."
6. "The Worthiness of Chaucer's Knight," *MLQ*, 25 (1964), 66-75; this is echoed weakly in Donald H. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), pp. 96-98, 230, with the emphasis on obsolete values being expressed by all the clerical figures.
7. *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980). This is in direct opposition to the interpretation of Muriel Bowden, *A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Co., 1964), pp. 18-23.
8. *Expeditions to Prussia and the Holy Land made by Henry, Earl of Derby. 1390-1, 1392-3*, ed. Lucy Toumlin Smith, *Camden Society, N.S.*, 52 (London, 1894).
9. "Beginning the Bord in Prussia," *JEGP*, 14 (1915), 375-84.
10. Jones, *Chaucer's Knight*, p. 59; Miller disagreed, *Chaucer, Sources and Background*, pp. 159-209; Lucy Toumlin Smith, *Expeditions*, p. xviii, notes that the word "Reise" had come into common use in English, with special reference to a Prussian crusade, and thus demonstrates that the crusades there were both well-known and popular.
11. *Encyclopedia Lituanica*, IV, 347, with a map on V, 48; Smith remarked in editing the *Expeditions* 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" (*Expeditions*, p. xxiv).
12. William Urban, "The Correct Translation of 'Ruce,'" *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 13 (1982), 12-18; Cook missed this because he relied on Johann von Posilge, in *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum* (Reprint Frankfurt/Main: Minerva, 1965), II, 164-67, for the description of Henry of Derby's expedition; he noted that Posilge consistently used apparently unambiguous words for *Russians*, as on p. 110: "czogin hin ken Russin." The Latin variant was "fecit optimam reisam cum paucis contra Rutenos." If he had consulted a more colloquial source, "Die Litauischen Wegebericht," in the same volume, he would have noted "Rossieyn" (p. 676), "Rosseyen" (pp. 677-78), and "Rosseyen" (p. 688). Phonetically these are almost identical with the words Johann von Posilge used for *Russia*.
13. Max Hein, editor of Volume 3, Part 1 of the *Preussisches Urkundenbuch* (Königsberg: Gräfe und Unger, 1944). The Austrian chronicler Peter von Suchenwirt, who was in Prussia in 1377, wrote, "Des dritten tages chom das her/ vroleich in ein ander lant/ das was Russenia genannt," and "daz der wuchst dreu ganze lant/ di ich mit namen tue bechant: /Sameit, Russein, Aragel." *Scriptores*, II, 166-67. There is, therefore, at least a reasonable supposition that the English visitors would have been told (probably in Latin or by a translator) that they were in the province of Rossenia, and that they dropped the "nia" from the name exactly as they did with "Prussen." As

Henry Higgins reminds us, pronunciation is not one of the English strong points. How many foreign towns and countries have escaped having their names anglicized?

14. Smith, *Expeditions*, p. xix, remarks on the wide notice of this taken by chroniclers; Cook, *Historical Background*, pp. 39-42; John Lavan Kirby, *Henry IV of England* (London: Constable, 1970), pp. 30-35. It is not generally known that the kings of England paid annual subsidies to the Teutonic Order: Hans Koeppen, "Die englische Rente für den Deutschen Orden," *Festschrift für Hermann Heimpehl* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1972), 11, 402-22; and *Expeditions*, p. xiii.

15. Kirby, *Henry IV of England*, p. 29; on following pages Kirby lists the knights who followed Henry to Prussia on the two expeditions. Another very likely expedition would be that of 1366, when English crusaders from the Prussian army were transferred to the forces of the Livonian master and were led in the general direction of Pólozk, a Russian territory subject to the Lithuanian dukes: William Urban, *The Livonian Crusade* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), p. 138.

16. This would be in general agreement with J. S. P. Tatlock, *Development and Chronology of Chaucer's Works*, Chaucer Society, 2nd ser., No. 37 (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1907), p. 83, who suggests that Chaucer began the *Prologue* in 1387 and put the Knight into his prominent position about 1388-90.

17. Already by 1385 there was considerable annoyance expressed by the English that the Teutonic Knights "favent inimicis Regis et Regni tam gallicis quam Scotis et Flandrensibus." *Codex Diplomaticus Prussicus*, ed. Johannes Voigt. Reprint of 1857 edition. (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1965), V, 13, and 11-16, 31-38, 40-41. For the Year 1391 the chronicler Wigand von Marburg noted "Interim fit dissencio ex parte Anglicorum et Schotorum" (*Scriptores*, 11, 644). The footnotes on the page give the full, sorry story of the English inability to suppress their quarrels even for the duration of a short expedition. See also two articles by Hans Koeppen, "Das Ende der englischen Preussenfahrten," *Preussenland*, 8 (1970), 10-52; and "Die englische Intervention für den Ordensgebietiger Engelhart Rabe," *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung*, 19 (1970), 665-76.

18. See Wolfgang Wippermann, *Der Ordensstaat als Ideologie* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1979); and Eric Christensen, *The Northern Crusades* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1980).

19. Derek Stanley Brewer, "introduction" to *Geoffrey Chaucer, The Parlement of Foulys* (London: Nelson, 1960), p. 33: "When existing persons are referred to allegorically, some clue must be provided. . . . No convincing case has ever been made for an allegorical application in his poems where there is no specific reference." Robert Dudley French, *A Chaucer Handbook*, (New York: Crofts, 1927), p. 203, does identify some pilgrims, but does not go beyond Manly's arguments about the identity of the Knight.

20. "It is curious to reflect that the criticism Chaucer has received throughout these five centuries in reality forms a measurement of judgment—not of him—but of his critics." Caroline F.E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), I, cxxxiv-v.