

Introduction

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the region south of the Baltic Sea, bordered on the west by the Vistula and to the north-east by the Neman river, which we now know as northern Poland, the Kaliningrad region of Russia and western Lithuania, was inhabited by the Prussian peoples. The Prussians were Balts, an Indo-European group quite distinct from the neighbouring Germanic and Slavic peoples. They had lived in this area for at least three thousand years; two of the tribes are mentioned by Ptolemy in the second century AD. The area was covered in dense forest, and human habitation was confined for the most part to the river valleys and the coasts. The Prussians cleared land in the forests for agriculture, and traded in honey, wax and the amber which was found along the coastline.¹ In common with many of the surrounding peoples, they appear to have practised an animistic religion, worshipping trees and nature. The *Chronicle of Prussia* is an account of the wars carried on during the thirteenth century to convert the Prussians to Christianity. These wars had the status of crusades and were conducted by the Teutonic Order, a military order which was established in the Holy Land at the end of the twelfth century.

The Historical Background to the Crusades in Prussia

The crusades against the Prussians, which lasted until 1283, were the final phase in a period of conquest, Christianisation and colonisation which had been taking place in northern and eastern Europe for at least the previous 200 years.² From the late tenth century the peoples inhabiting the lands on the southern Baltic, to the west of the Vistula, collectively known as the Wends, had come under increasing pressure from neighbouring powers: German princes, the Danish kings, and the Polish kings and dukes, as they competed to extend their influence. By 1100 at the latest these campaigns were loosely understood as crusades. By the 1140s a pattern had been established whereby armed raids subdued new territory, forts

¹ For a modern account of these peoples, see Marija Gimbutas, *The Balts*, Ancient peoples and places, 33 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963).

² Until quite recently, relatively little had been written in English on the Baltic crusades. For a detailed and authoritative overview of the Christianisation of northern Europe see Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades* (London, 1997). See also Alan V. Murray (ed.), *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150–1500* (Aldershot, 2001) and Alan V. Murray (ed.), *The Clash of Cultures on the Medieval Baltic Frontier* (Aldershot, 2009) and William Urban, *The Baltic Crusade* (Dekalb, 1975; revised 2nd edition Chicago, 1994).

were built to control the area and then colonists and missionaries were brought in to exploit the area and convert the locals.¹

What is generally regarded as the first formal crusade in the region took place in 1147, when Pope Eugenius III authorised an attack by the Danes and Saxons on the Abotrites, the pagan Wends who lived on their borders. This set a precedent whereby the wars on pagan neighbours in this area could be placed on the same footing as the crusades to the Holy Land. Campaigns against the Wends continued until 1185. When the western part of the southern Baltic region had been Christianised and colonised, the focus of the new crusading movement moved east of the Vistula to the Balts and Finnic peoples who lived there: the Prussians, Lithuanians, Livs, Letts, Estonians and Curonians.

The first to be targeted were the Livs, and missionary activity in this area began in the region of the mouth of the Dvina river in the mid 1180s. In 1200 Albert von Buxhövdén set up a bishopric at Riga and established a military order known as the Sword Brothers. Under the leadership of this order, successive waves of crusaders were able to conquer the local peoples. The northern Estonians were conquered by the Danes and finally the Sword Brothers subdued the Curonians to the south, so that by 1231 the borders of what came to be called Livonia had been established.

In the meantime, a move towards Christianising the remaining pagan peoples on the southern Baltic, the Prussians, was also beginning to gather pace. The earliest attempts to Christianise the Prussians had taken place as far back as the end of the tenth century. Adalbert of Prague was sent as a missionary by Pope Gregory V (972–999), with the support of Bolesław I of Poland, but he was killed by the Prussians shortly after his arrival in 997. A second mission, led by Bruno of Querfurt, also ended in martyrdom in 1009. It was not until 200 years later that concerted attempts were made to convert the Prussians to Christianity. The man entrusted with this mission, Bishop Christian, was a Pomeranian by birth and a member of the Cistercian Order.² He arrived in Prussia in 1206, six years after Albert had settled in Livonia. He had the support of the pope, Innocent III, and military backing was initially provided by the king of Denmark, Valdemar II (1170–1241) and later by Duke Conrad of Masovia.³ However, after initial success, which had made possible the establishment of a bishopric in 1215, the Prussians began to rebel against Christian encroachment on their land and way of life. The bishop was unable to consolidate his hold on the area round Kulm (Chełmno), which was to be the seat of his bishopric, and had to leave Prussia.

¹ See Christiansen, *Northern Crusades*, pp. 27–34.

² For a detailed account of Christian's career in Prussia, see Hubert Zenon Nowak, 'Milites Christi de Prussia. Der Orden von Dobrin und seine Stellung in der preußischen Mission', in Josef Fleckenstein and Manfred Hellman (eds), *Die Geistlichen Ritterorden Europas* (Sigmaringen, 1980), pp. 339–52.

³ Conrad I of Masovia (1187–1247) became duke of Masovia in 1199 and of neighbouring Kujavia in 1202.

In 1228, he and Conrad jointly established the Order of Dobrin, a military order modelled on Albert of Riga's Sword Brothers, to provide a permanent garrison in the area. At the same time negotiations appear to have begun to bring the Teutonic Order to Prussia to lead the crusade. This order was not in a position to take up the offer at that time, since it was committed to supporting the Emperor Frederick II's much delayed crusade to the Holy Land. It was not until this crusade had finally taken place, in 1228, that the order was in a position to send its first expeditionary force into Prussia. The intervention of the Teutonic Order proved to be the decisive turning point in the campaign to convert and subdue the Prussians, and marked the beginning of more than fifty years of crusading in Prussia under its leadership.

The Early History of the Teutonic Order and Its Arrival in Prussia

The Teutonic Order had been founded more than one hundred years previously. It began as a field hospital in 1190 in Acre during the Third Crusade, established by merchants from Bremen and Lübeck. It was made a military order shortly afterwards, in 1198, at an extraordinary gathering of princes from Germany, almost certainly with the aim of strengthening Hohenstaufen strategy in the Mediterranean. Emperor Henry VI had been crowned king of the kingdom of Sicily in 1194,¹ and although he died in 1197 and did not take part in the crusade, he had already given the hospital lands in Barletta and Palermo. The new order was confirmed by Pope Innocent III the following year.² For the next 50 years, during the period of its rapid growth, the order's fortunes were closely allied to those of the Hohenstaufen dynasty.

In 1209, ten years after the establishment of the order, the Thuringian *ministerialis* Hermann von Salza became grand master.³ He is portrayed by the chroniclers as a gifted and successful diplomat who cultivated a role as mediator between Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) and the papacy. He used the influence he gained to establish the order's independence from the two older orders, the Templars and the Hospitallers, and to build up holdings of land both in the Holy Land and in Europe. From the outset, he appears to have been trying to find a territory which the order could control in its own right. His first, abortive, attempt to do this was in the Burzenland.⁴ The order had been invited here in 1211 by

¹ Henry VI had married Constance of Sicily, the sole legitimate heir of King William II of Sicily in 1286. He had been crowned king of Sicily in December 1194 after the death of Tancred of Lecce, who had disputed his claim and had had the support of the southern Italian barons, and was in the process of consolidating his hold on the kingdom.

² For a detailed account of the order's early years and its acquisition of lands outside the Holy Land, see Udo Arnold (ed.), *Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens 1190–1994* (Marburg, 1998), pp. 4–11.

³ See Arnold (ed.), *Hochmeister*, pp. 12–16.

⁴ South eastern Transylvania, now part of Romania.

King Andrew II of Hungary (1177–1235). King Andrew gave the order the task of defending the eastern borders of Hungary against the Cumans, a nomadic Turkish people, who were attacking Transylvania during this period. It carried out this task so effectively that both the king and local magnates became alarmed by its success and evident territorial ambitions and it was finally forced to leave the Burzenland in 1225.¹

As a result of this set-back, from 1226 at the latest Hermann was engaged in discussions with Frederick II and Conrad of Masovia about the possibility of establishing a similar venture in Prussia. A number of factors combined to make this an appealing option. Firstly, crusading in the Baltic had become an even more attractive proposition since Honorius III became pope in 1216.² His papacy gave renewed impetus to mission work and conversion and he was the first pope to send a legate to the Baltic. William of Modena arrived in 1224 and was involved in plans to promote the crusade there. Secondly, the Prussian attacks on Masovia and Kujavia were increasingly diverting Conrad's energies away from Polish dynastic struggles, and the Knights of Dobrin were seemingly unable to hold them in check. Finally, the order was able to use the lessons it had learned in the Burzenland. Hermann von Salza approached this new enterprise much more cautiously. He negotiated autonomy for the order in the lands it conquered, and had the terms documented by Conrad in the Treaty of Kruszwica, in which the duke and all third parties renounced their claims to these territories. Frederick II had already given his support to the conquest of Prussia by the order in 1226. Pope Gregory IX confirmed these agreements in 1234, placing the Kulmerland and all as yet unconquered lands under the direct over-lordship of the pope, to whom alone the order was to be responsible. Finally, the emperor issued the Golden Bull of Rimini in 1235 (although his chancery predated it to 1226) giving his sanction to the Prussian venture. With these safeguards and guarantees in place, Hermann initiated a period of conquest and settlement which continued until the Prussians were finally subdued in the last years of the thirteenth century. It is the account of these wars which the order recorded in the *Kronike von Pruzinlant*.

The *Kronike von Pruzinlant*

The chronicle was written after the completion of the Prussian crusade, in the decade from 1331 to 1341, by Nicolaus von Jeroschin, a chaplain in the Teutonic Order. It was a translation and expanded version of a Latin chronicle, the *Chronicon Terrae*

¹ See William Urban, *The Teutonic Knights. A Military History* (London, 2003), pp. 31–7.

² Honorius III was pope from 1216 to 1227. For an account of his role see Iben Fonnesberg-Schmidt, 'Pope Honorius III and Missions and Crusades in the Baltic Region', in A.V. Murray (ed.), *The Clash of Cultures on the Medieval Baltic Frontier* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 103–22.

Prussiae, written between 1326 and 1331 by Peter von Dusburg, who was also a priest in the order.¹ Dusburg's chronicle had been commissioned by the order's grand master, who at that time was Werner von Orseln (1324–30). Jeroschin's translation was commissioned immediately after the original had been written, by the next grand master, Luder von Braunschweig (1331–35), and finished during the period of office of his successor, Dietrich von Altenburg (1335–41).²

The Author

Little is known about Nicolaus von Jeroschin, the author of the *Kronike von Pruzinlant*, other than what he himself tells us in the chronicle. His birthplace has been variously postulated as Prussia, Thuringia or Saxony, with the most recent research favouring Prussia. His date of birth is thought to have been around 1290, since eye-witness accounts of events occur in the chronicle from 1311.³ Further speculation in the nineteenth century about the extent of his knowledge of the language of the common people has led to suggestions that he may have come from a relatively humble background.⁴ He himself only says that he speaks German, as he learned it as a child, and that his language has no claims to courtly refinement (p. 28). This in itself is likely to be a conventional affirmation of humility and need not be taken at face value. As well as the chronicle, Jeroschin also wrote a life of St Adalbert, the first Prussian martyr.⁵ In this, he tells us that he became a member of the Teutonic Order under Gottfried von Heimberg, who was commander of Königsberg from 1326 to 1329.⁶ He describes himself as a chaplain during the time that Dietrich von Altenburg was grand master (p. 27). It has been conjectured that at the time of writing the chronicle he was quite old, for the not

¹ Peter von Dusburg, *Chronicon Terre Prussie*, ed. Max Toeppen, SRP, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1861), pp. 3–219; translated into German and annotated by Klaus Scholz and Dieter Wojtecki as *Chronik des Preussenlandes*, *Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters* 25 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984).

² The only full modern edition of the chronicle is the edition by Ernst Strehlke, SRP, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1861), pp. 291–624.

³ See Ernst Strehlke's introduction to the chronicle in SRP vol 1, pp. 293–4; Nicolaus von Jeroschin, *Die Deutschordenschronik. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der mitteldeutschen Sprache und Literatur*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer (Stuttgart: F. Köhler, 1854; reprographically reproduced Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966), pp. xxi–xxiii; Udo Arnold, ²VL (1987), vol 6, 1081–9.

⁴ See Nicolaus von Jeroschin, *Die Deutschordenschronik*, pp. xxiii–xxiv.

⁵ Only a fragment survives in Ernst Strehlke (ed.), SRP, vol. 2, pp. 423–8.

⁶ See Johannes Voigt, 'Über eine bisher unbekannte dichterische Bearbeitung der Lebensbeschreibung des hl. Adalbert vom Ordenskaplan Nicolaus von Jeroschin', *Neue Preußische Provinzial-Blätter*, 3, no. 7 (1861), pp. 329–36.