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Castle Sieges and the Image of the Pagan Lithuanian Enemy in Teutonic Chronicles

ABSTRACT

This article examines how pagan Lithuanians are represented in Teutonic chronicle narratives describing castle sieges during the Lithuanian Crusade. Rather than reconstructing siege warfare or military techniques, the study focuses on the narrative patterns through which Teutonic authors depict pagan responses to sieges. Particular attention is given to recurrent motifs such as fearless resistance, deception, flight, appeals for assistance, and the chroniclers' emphasis on betrayal, fear and despair among the besieged pagans. The analysis demonstrates that these motifs are not presented as isolated or situational reactions but function as stable elements within a discursive image of the pagan enemy shaped by crusading ideology. Siege scenes are consistently framed as moments of psychological and moral testing, in which pagan communities are portrayed as internally fractured prior to their military defeat. Motifs of self-destruction, treachery, and panic serve to interpret the fall of fortified sites as a moral failure and a sign of spiritual separation from the Christian order, rather than as the result of strategic imbalance alone.

KEYWORDS: Lithuanian Crusade, Teutonic Order, castle sieges, pagans, representation

STRESZCZENIE

Oblężenia zamków i obraz pogańskiego wroga litewskiego w Kronikach Krzyżackich

Artykuł analizuje sposób przedstawiania pogańskich Litwinów w krzyżackich narracjach kronikarskich opisujących oblężenia zamków podczas krucjaty litewskiej. Zamiast rekonstrukcji działań oblężniczych czy technik wojennych, badanie koncentruje się na schematach narracyjnych, za pomocą których autorzy krzyżaccy ukazują pogańskie reakcje na sytuację oblężenia. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono powracającym motywom, takim jak nieustraszony opór, podstęp, ucieczka, prośby o pomoc, a także naciskowi kronikarzy na zdradę, strach

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i rozpacz oblężonych pogan. Analiza pokazuje, że motywy te nie są przedstawiane jako reakcje jednostkowe czy sytuacyjne, lecz funkcjonują jako trwałe elementy dyskursywnego obrazu pogańskiego wroga, ukształtowanego przez ideologię krucjatową. Sceny oblężeń są konsekwentnie ujmowane jako momenty próby psychologicznej i moralnej, w których wspólnoty pogańskie przedstawiane są jako wewnętrznie rozbite jeszcze przed poniesieniem klęski militarnej. Motywy samozniszczenia, zdrady i paniki służą interpretacji upadku ufortyfikowanych ośrodków jako klęski moralnej oraz znaku duchowego oddzielenia od porządku chrześcijańskiego, a nie wyłącznie jako rezultatu nierównowagi strategicznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: krucjata litewska, zakon krzyżacki, oblężenia zamków, poganie, reprezentacja

The formation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a dynamic process shaped not only by territorial expansion and the consolidation of central authority, but also by shifting power relations among neighboring states. Lithuanian rulers extended their influence across the Baltic region and into the lands of the former Rus', gradually incorporating ethnically and confessionally diverse populations into an emerging political entity. Within this polity, the Baltic core remained predominantly pagan—both among the ruling elite and the wider population—while the Rus' lands were inhabited largely by Orthodox Christian communities (Śliwa, 1990, p. 16; Kosman, 1992, p. 106; Rowell, 1994, p. 61). By the mid-thirteenth century, this developing state had adopted an increasingly assertive military policy, driven by political and economic interests as well as the broader imperatives of state formation.

At the same time, Lithuania's rise coincided with the expansion of external military powers that regarded the region as a crucial sphere of influence. In the early phase, the primary threat came from the Sword Brethren, but this was soon overshadowed by the more formidable Teutonic Order, which emerged as the dominant military force confronting Lithuania. Both military orders viewed the Lithuanian frontier as strategically significant, transforming this Baltic region into one of the most fiercely contested zones of medieval Eastern Europe. Consequently, from the earliest stages of the Grand Duchy's political development, the Teutonic Order became its principal and most persistent adversary (Włodarski, 1950, pp. 5–21; Łowmiański, 1954, pp. 338–371; Rowell, 1994; Petrauskas, 2012; Prekop, 2014; Ehlers, 2017, p. 21; Kwiatkowski, 2017, pp. 117–118).

The so-called Lithuanian Crusade, waged by the Teutonic Order from the thirteenth to the early fifteenth century, was formally presented as an effort to Christianise Lithuania. In practice, however, the Order's military campaigns rarely conformed to the idealised model of a crusade and were largely motivated by political and economic objectives. Nevertheless, narrative sources

consistently framed these activities as undertaken "in the name of God," emphasising the conversion of the neighbouring "barbarian" (pagan) Baltic lands as their primary justification (Trupinda, 1999). As a result, this ideologically sanctioned warfare took the form of sustained military pressure, marked by recurrent incursions, sieges, and widespread devastation inflicted upon Lithuanian communities—comparable to, but in many respects even more intensive than, earlier campaigns conducted in Prussia (Christiansen, 1997; Urban, 2006, pp. 66–67; Petrauskas, 2012; Dobrosielska & Radzicki, 2016, pp. 321–324).

The intensification of this military and political antagonism can be traced to the late thirteenth century. Although the first border conflicts between the military orders and the Lithuanians date back to the early thirteenth century—becoming more pronounced during the reign of Mindaugas and remaining a persistent threat throughout the century—chroniclers identify the year 1283 as a decisive turning point. From that moment onward, the confrontation between the Teutonic Order and Lithuania assumed the character of a sustained war, described by Peter of Dusburg as *bellum Lethowinorum* (Dusburg, 1861, p. 146; Łowmiański, 1954, pp. 343–344; Gudavičius, 1990, pp. 61–84; Trupinda, 1999; Kwiatkowski, 2017, p. 117).

The late thirteenth century thus witnessed a qualitative escalation in both the frequency and scale of hostilities. The construction of the Lithuanian frontier stronghold at Junigeda (also known as Veliuona) in 1291 reflects these mounting pressures: contemporary sources explicitly describe its foundation as a defensive response to repeated Teutonic incursions (Dusburg, 1961, p. 154). In parallel, the Teutonic Order reinforced its own borderland infrastructure by establishing Ragnit (Ragainė) as a key military base, from which increasingly regular and coordinated assaults were launched into Lithuanian territory (Gudavičius, 2006, p. 77; Turnbull, 2003; Baranauskas, 2007; Jóźwiak & Trupinda, 2009, p. 341; Kwiatkowski, 2016).

The military campaigns initiated by the Teutonic Order against Lithuania may be broadly classified into four types. The first comprised planned and carefully organised expeditions aimed at capturing major strategic strongholds, typically framed in the chronicles as acts of faith and as integral components of the crusading mission. The second consisted of retaliatory operations launched in response to Lithuanian incursions. A third category included short-term raiding expeditions, often directed at border regions, whose primary objective was plunder rather than territorial conquest. The final category encompassed opportunistic campaigns undertaken during periods of internal instability within Lithuania, when divisions among local elites were perceived as creating favourable conditions for attack. Teutonic chroniclers frequently explained such situations by invoking the alleged betrayal of certain Lithuanian nobles who—particularly in Samogitia—were depicted as promising to surrender fortresses and accept baptism (Ryier, 2023, p. 104).

Across these categories, the campaigns display a set of recurring features characteristic of religious warfare: surprise assaults, the destruction of outer baileys, the killing of defenders, and the enslavement of women and children (Gillingham, 2016, p. 151). The chronicles emphasise that such practices recurred from expedition to expedition and that both Christians and pagans employed comparable methods. These tactics were by no means unique to the Lithuanian Crusade but were typical of medieval warfare more generally (Keen, 1999, pp. 163–185). As Sven Ekdahl (1994) observes, military expeditions against Lithuania did not fundamentally differ from warfare practiced elsewhere in Europe at the time. Their strategy relied on swift raids designed to inflict widespread destruction, weaken the opponent, and withdraw with whatever spoils could be secured, ideally without sustaining losses. He nonetheless identifies two notable features that distinguished these campaigns from those conducted in central and western Europe: first, the extraordinary degree of violence and cruelty employed by both sides; and second, the routine enslavement of captured enemies, who were regarded as a significant human and economic resource (Ekdahl, 1994, p. 265; Urban, 1998, p. 201). At the same time, the killing of enemies—particularly male defenders of besieged fortresses—was also a common practice (Łowmiański, 1954, pp. 338–371).

Although the extensive historiography on the Lithuanian-Teutonic conflict has examined these military campaigns, as well as the technical aspects of siege tactics employed by the Teutonic Order during its crusading activity, in considerable detail, the present study adopts a different analytical perspective. Rather than reconstructing the chronological sequence of events or describing individual campaigns, this article focuses on the patterns of response attributed to populations under siege, an aspect that has largely remained on the margins of scholarship in this context.

The main focus of this study is on the ways in which such response patterns are represented in Teutonic narrative sources and how they function within a broader discursive construction of the pagan enemy. A crucial source for this analysis is the *Chronilce of the Land of Prussia* (*Chronicon terrae Prussiae*) by Peter of Dusburg. Completed in 1326, the chronicle recounts the Order's origins, development, and crusading activity in Prussian and Lithuanian lands (Dusburg, 1861; Polish translation: Wenta & Wyszomirski, 2004; source analysis: Wenta, 2005, pp. 115–125). Drawing on monastic annals, earlier chronicles, official reports, documents from the Grand Masters' archive in Marienburg—to which Peter had direct access—and his own eyewitness experience, the work is of particular relevance to the present study because of the attention it devotes to Lithuanian raids and of Peter's interpretative framework concerning Lithuanian conduct in warfare and responses to Teutonic attacks (Matuzova, 1997, pp. 218–252).

Closely connected with this work is the *Chronicle of Prussia* (*Di Kronike von Pruzinlant*) by Nicolaus von Jeroschin. Between 1331 and 1335, Jeroschin translated Peter of Dusburg's Latin chronicle into Middle High German at the commission of Grand Master Luther von Braunschweig (Jeroschin, 1861; English translation: Fischer, 2010). While closely following Dusburg's narrative structure, Jeroschin expanded the text by incorporating additional material from written and oral sources and by introducing his own evaluative commentary. Although the chronicle's importance lies less in its reliability as a strictly factual historical source than in its literary and cultural value, it is highly informative for tracing medieval modes of representing pagans and for comparative analysis of their portrayal during the Lithuanian Crusade. As Mary Fischer has observed, Jeroschin's work differs from Dubrurg's chronicle in its integration of secular chivalric ideals into a Christian framework, thereby bridging the conceptual spheres of faith and knighthood (Fischer, 1991, p. 222).

Another key narrative source examined in this study is the *New Prussian Chronicle* (*Chronica nova Prutenica*) by Wigand of Marburg. Wigand, a herald of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, composed one of the principal accounts of the Order's activities and its relations with neighbouring states, particularly the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, covering the period from 1293 and 1394. Originally written in Middle High German rhymed prose, the chronicle combines factual reporting with legendary elements. In 1464, the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz, commissioned Konrad Gesselen to translate the text into Latin. This version has survived almost intact. Wigand's position as a herald granted him access to a wide range of documentary materials, which left a distinct imprint on his narrative and makes it especially valuable for its detailed depictions of military campaigns and siege practices during the conflict between Lithuania and the Teutonic Order. As such, the chronicle allows for an evolutionary perspective on the representation of besieged pagan communities during the fourteenth century (Chodyński, 2006, p. 12).

In these chronicles, sieges are not presented primarily as technical military operations but rather as morally and ideologically charged encounters between Christians and non-Christians. As a result, detailed characterisation of civilian experience is relatively limited, and the information that is provided is often selective and shaped by the authors' ideological aims (Trupinda, 1999). Nevertheless, these narratives offer valuable material for analysis, as they reflect broader Christian narrative conventions used to portray pagan communities—emphasising fear, chaos, resistance, or submission in ways that reinforce established models of alterity. Through an analysis of recurring descriptive motifs in Teutonic chronicle accounts, the present study shifts the focus from the external dynamics of military action to the internal, human dimension of siege experience as mediated through discourse, highlighting collective patterns of response as constructed within the ideological framework of the Order's historiography.

In analysing the sieges of the Lithuanian Crusade, it is necessary to emphasise that they differed considerably in both duration and structure (Zonenberg, 2009; Kwiatkowski, 2013). Some were rapid assaults, while others developed into prolonged blockades marked by starvation and desperation among the besieged populations. The siege of Junigeda in 1291, for example, was a relatively brief and inconclusive operation, characteristic of the short-term assaults that predominated in the Teutonic-Lithuanian frontier zone. By contrast, the month-long siege of Kaunas in 1362 represented an exceptional undertaking, distinguished by both its scale and outcome (Marburg, 2017, p. 290; Kwiatkowski, 2013). At the same time, even short-lived sieges could recur repeatedly, as in the case of Junigeda, which was attacked numerous times between 1291 and 1367 (Baranauskas, 2007, pp. 5–6).

One of the clearest narrative depictions of short-term siege warfare is found in Peter of Dusburg's account of the winter siege of Bisenė in 1283. Dusburg describes how Master Konrad von Tierberg "attacked ceaselessly from early morning until midday," inflicting heavy casualties on the defenders while also sustaining losses:

> Frater Conradus de Tirbergk magister terre Prussie predictus, et multi fratres cum magno exercitu tempore hyemali transierunt glaciem Memele, et intrantres terram Lethowie castrum dictum Bisenam a mane usque ad meridiem fortiter impugnaverunt, tamque infesti erant in dicta impugnacione, quod occisis multis de castro et letaliter vulneratis tandem potenter intraverunt, quibusdam captis, aliis trucidatis, in cinerem redegerunt (Dusburg, 1861, p. 147).[1]

The castle ultimately fell, was burned to ashes, and its inhabitants were either killed or taken captive, after which the attackers proceeded to raid the surrounding countryside (Dusburg, 1861, p. 147). This account encapsulates key features of siege warfare as represented in the chronicles: continuous missile exchanges, the exhaustion of defenders, fluctuating momentum, and the near-total destruction that followed a successful assault. During the initial attacks, male defenders were typically killed, while women and children were

1 Nicolaus von Jeroshin draws on Dusburg's depiction of the siege and presents a similar picture of the siege: "The Master, Brother Konrad von Tierberg, whom you have often heard me mention before, assembled many brothers and a huge army, with whom he embarked on a campaign during the winter, crossing the frozen Memel and quietly entering Lithuania and laying siege to a castle called Bisenė, which he attacked ceaselessly from early morning until midday. he attacked it so ferociously that the Lithuanians became very weary because many of their number had been shot and seriously wounded, although they injured many of the Christians too. The battle ebbed and flowed until at last the brothers' strength told and they were victorious, capturing the castle and burning it to ashes. Of the people who were there, some were captured and taken away as prisoners while the others were killed." (Translation into English as in: Jeroschin, 2016, p. 208).

taken captive. However, once firmer control had been established, surviving men could also be imprisoned (Jensen, 2017, p. 288).

Although the chronicles rarely provide direct insight into the thoughts or emotions of the Lithuanians under siege, their detailed depictions of extreme violence—such as combat, destruction of property, and enslavement—allow for an analysis of how the psychological dimensions of sieges are implied within the narratives. Fear, despair, and anger recur implicitly throughout these accounts. Moreover, the sources make it possible to identify several recurring strategies attributed to besieged populations, including attempts to avoid danger through flight, fearless resistance to the enemy, the search for assistance—whether human or divine—and efforts to negotiate or capitulate under pressure.

Attacking forces typically enjoyed advantages in initiative, preparation, and the element of surprise. Small-scale raids often dispersed before a fortress could fully mobilise its defenders. At the same time, defenders benefited from superior knowledge of local terrain, motivation to protect their homes and families, and the expectation that attackers might commit costly errors (Powers, 1999, p. 26). Military resistance was therefore a common response, both during initial assaults and in the course of prolonged sieges. Peter of Dusburg describes such resistance in his account of Kolainiai in 1290, where the castle commander Surminas and his 120 warriors withstood a large Teutonic force until nearly all were killed. Despite the overwhelming odds, the defenders are portrayed as fighting with exemplary courage:

> In hoc castro fuit Surminus capitaneus, et erant cum eo CXX viri bellicosi, qui viriliter fratribus restterunt. Tandem omnes castrenses preter XII fuerunt letaliter vulnerati, sic quod sanguis de meniis fluxit, sicut aqua pluvie inundantis (Dusburg, 1861, p. 152).[2]

A similarly vivid depiction appears in the chroniclers' accounts of the siege of Grodno (also known as Gardinas; Bel. Hrodna) in 1284, where the defenders are portrayed as demonstrating exceptional courage during the defense of the castle, "resisting bravely" the fierce assault:

> Anno domini MCCLXXXIIII idem magister, necdum bello infidelium saciatus, congregavit validum exercitum, et cum Scumando ductore processit contra castrum Gartham tempore estivo, et dum transivisset Memelam ordinavit sagittarios ad loca debita, applicatisque scalis ad menia tam grande bellum ortum fuit inter eos, quod formidolosi talia inspicere non auderent. Istis viriliter impugnantibus,

2 In this castle there was a commander, Surminas, and with him were one hundred and twenty warriors, who bravely resisted the brothers. In the end, all the castle's inhabitants except twelve were mortally wounded, so that blood flowed from the walls like water from a flooding rain.

> obsessi fortiter resisterunt, cadebantque ex utraque parte plurimi vulnerati. Tandem sicut deo placuit, fratres potenter intraverunt, et occisis omnibus et captis, per incendium destruxerunt. Hoc facto mille viri et octingenti intraverunt territorium dicti castri, vastantes quam plurimum incendio et rapina, et captis multis hominibus et occisis cum preda maxima redierunt (Dusburg, 1861, p. 147).[3]

Interestingly, Nicolaus von Jeroschin retains the core narrative structure of this attack while enriching it with additional technical detail. He notes that the attackers outside "fought their way up towards the battlements," while those within the walls "resisted courageously," injuring the assailants by hurling arrows, stones, and tree trunks and by shooting at them. At the same time, Jeroschin underscores the overwhelming scale of the assault, observing that these defensive efforts ultimately proved ineffective, as the defenders themselves were subjected to "countless arrows" fired in return (Jeroschin, 2016, p. 209).

The courage and fearlessness of Lithuanian defenders are emphasised repeatedly in narrative accounts. In the description of the defence of Grodno in 1306, Peter of Dusburg highlights the remarkable resilience and audacity of the besieged, depicting a garrison that not only withstood repeated assaults but also actively confronted the attackers in open combat:

> Unde factum est, quod dum fratres castrum impugnarent, castrenses, ex adverso se viriliter opponentes, exierunt ad prelium, quod diu inter cos duravit. Tandem fratres fugaverunt eos. Reversi igitur ad castrum, post modicam horam resumptis viribus et audacia iterum exierunt ad pugnam, et hoc factum fuit pluribus vicibus ab ortu solis usque ad meridiem. Quandoque isti illos, aliquando illi istos represserunt. In isto certamine multi de infidelibus letaliter sunt vulnerati, et plures mortui ceciderunt (Dusburg, 1861, pp. 172–173).[4]

3 In the year of the Lord 1284, the same master, not yet exhausted by warfare against the infidels, mustered a strong army and, with Skumand as guide, advanced against the castle called Garthen in the summer season. After crossing the Memel, he deployed archers in suitable positions, and when ladders were set against the walls, so fierce a battle arose between the two sides that even the brave would not have dared to look upon it. While the attackers pressed on manfully, the besieged resisted bravely, and many on both sides fell wounded. Finally, as it pleased God, the brothers forced their way inside and, after killing some and taking others captive, destroyed the castle by fire. When this had been done, one thousand eight hundred men entered the territory belonging to the said castle, laying it waste by fire and plunder; having taken many people captive and killed others, they returned with very great booty.

4 An equivalent description can be found in Nicolaus von Jeroschin's chronicle: "The commander found the fortress well defended by bold, stalwart heroes. When the Christians began to storm it the garrison fearlessly threw open the castle gates and began a battle which went on for a long time. Finally the brothers forced them back and they retreated into the fortress. Shortly afterwards they came out and fought the Christians again. They did this so often that they frightened the attackers by throwing themselves back into the battle with renewed energy" (Jeroschin, 2016, p. 251).

Such depictions of Lithuanian resistance correspond closely to the broader discursive construction of pagan Lithuanians in the Order's chronicles. While they are consistently represented as aggressive and formidable adversaries who pose a persistent threat to Christian forces, the chroniclers simultaneously emphasise their courage and endurance as defining characteristics. This ambivalent portrayal served a clear narrative function: by acknowledging the bravery and military competence of the pagan enemy, the chronicles heightened the perceived danger faced by the crusaders and thereby reinforced the moral legitimacy of the campaigns directed against them (*The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, 2003, p. 111; Dusburg, 1861, p. 146; Tyerman, 2011, pp. 23–44; Urban, 1994, p. 214; Christiansen, 1997, p. 135).

In some cases, the inhabitants of threatened castles were compelled to demonstrate considerable "creativity" in their efforts to resist or evade the enemy. A particularly illustrative example appears in the account of the 1290 campaign in the region of Kolainiai. Rather than describing a direct assault on the fortress, the episode reflects a defensive action undertaken in its immediate surroundings and may be interpreted as a behavioral strategy aimed at avoiding imminent danger. As Teutonic forces passed the castle of Kolainiai, the castellan Surminas convened the local population to devise a plan of deceiving the brothers. They resolved that one of the inhabitants—who knew Polish—would dress as a woman and, when a Teutonic ship approached, stand on the bank of the Memel and beg to be taken aboard and freed from pagan captivity. Once the group reached the designated location, the disguised man seated himself on the riverbank while his accomplices concealed themselves nearby. When Komtur Ernecke approached, the impostor pleaded in a sorrowful voice to be rescued and released "from service to the devil." Moved by compassion, Ernecke steered the vessel toward him. As soon as he drew near, the deceiver seized the boat, whereupon the hidden accomplices rushed out, killing Ernecke and his entire retinue (Dusburg, 1861, p. 152). In this way, the inhabitants of Kolainiai eliminated an immediate danger and asserted control without engaging in direct military confrontation.

When local resistance proved insufficient, particularly during prolonged sieges, besieged communities sometimes appealed for external assistance. Such support could be provided not only among neighbouring Lithuanian castles but also from beyond Lithuanian territory. A prominent example is found in the conflict between the townspeople of Riga and the Teutonic Order during the eighteenth-month siege of the city in 1297, when the citizens of Riga appealed to the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytenis for intervention. In response, Vytenis attacked Castle Karkus, captured members of the Order, and devastated the surrounding region (Jeroschin, 2016, p. 233).

Within Lithuanian communities themselves, one of the most effective mechanisms of collective defence was the use of signalling to alert neighbouring

settlements and mobilise reinforcements. Dusburg records an episode in which a Teutonic attempt at a surprise assault of Junigeda failed due to the effectiveness of Lithuanian warning practices. According to his account, the defenders detected the approaching forces in advance and immediately sent smoke signals to alert surrounding communities. This early warning enabled the rapid mobilisation of a Lithuanian relief force. Deprived of the element of surprise, the Teutonic army restored to a prolonged and violent assault on the castle, which ultimately proved unsuccesful. Unable to capture the stronghold, the attackers limited themselves to burming the outer bailey before withdrawing. Shortly thereafter, a substantial Lithuanian force, assembled in response to the smoke signals, pursued the retreating brothers and engaged them in fierce skirmishes (Dusburg, 1861, p. 184).[5] Elaborating on this episode, Nicolaus von Jeroschin emphasises that the use of smoke signals was a customary defensive practice among pagan communities facing siege: "the heathens .... immediately sent smoke signals, which was the usual practice to alert the heathens in the surrounding areas that the castle was being attacked by the brothers' army" (Jeroschin, 2016, p. 270). Equally significant is the emphasis placed on the effectiveness of Lithuanian resistance, which not only prevented the capture of the fortress but also compelled the attackers to confine their actions to the destruction of its surrounding structures.

Sieges also prompted spiritual forms of resistance. Baltic pagan practices—such as appealing to deities and the offering of sacrifices—appear in chronicles as mechanisms through which defenders sought divine intervention. Although these rituals are portrayed by the chroniclers as misguided and contrary to Christian doctrine and morality, they nonetheless reveal an important dimension of Baltic resilience: belief systems functioned as psychological anchors in situations of extreme and existential threat.

Not all attacks, however, could be effectively resisted. Some were launched unexpectedly, often at night or in the early hours, when inhabitants and defenders were asleep, severely limiting the possibility of organised defence. This is illustrated by Nicolaus von Jeroschin's account of the attack on Aukaimis in 1328, in which many Lithuanians were caught unprepared. According to the chronicler, the attackers found numerous inhabitants still in their beds and put them to the sword, leaving only a handful of survivors. He emphasises the near-total destruction of the settlement, noting that scarcely anyone in the castle—whether men, women, or children—escaped death, and that whatever had

5 "... castrenses premuniti, accenso igne per indicium fumi vicinis gentibus fratrum exercitum prodiderunt. Procedentes itaque fratres dictum castrum fortiter impugnaverunt, tandem post longam altercacionem habitam inter eos, dum amplius agere non possent, suburbium dicti castri in cinerem redegerunt. Hoc facto dum fratres recederent, omnes vicine gentes viso fumo ignis predicti convenerant, et ipsos sepius hostiliter invaserunt, sic quod multi utriusque partis graviter vulnerati fuerunt, et frater Theodoricus Pirremont occisus et plures de infidelibus interfecti."

not been destroyed by violence was consumed by fire, as the outer bailey was burned to the ground (Jeroschin, 2016, p. 288).

In other cases, siege pressure compelled defenders to open the castle gates and seek terms, as during the siege of Pieštvė in 1322:

> Supervenientibus ergo tenebris noctis, cessaverunt fratres ab impugnacione. Sequenti die dum iterum vellent ad pugnam accedere, castrenses dederunt obsides, promittentes se fratrum imperio subjacere. Sed artante ipsos rege Lethowinorum, fidem prestitam postea non servabant (Dusburg, 1861, p. 186).[6]

Similar declarations are attributed by Wigand of Marburg to the inhabitants of Junigeda and Pieštvė during the campaign of 1363, when they informed the Komtur of Ragnit that they wished to descend, surrender "their wives, children, and all their possessions," and accept the Christian faith (Marburg, 2017, p. 322; Zonenberg, 1994; Kwiatkowski, 2021). What is particularly significant here is not the strategic logic of such actions as attempts to escape danger and preserve life, but rather the chroniclers' emphasis on their alleged insincerity. Wigand explicitly notes that such requests were made not out of genuine submission but because no other means of escape remained: "The pagans ask to leave the house, since no way of escape was open to them" ("Pagani petunt discessum a domo; quia nec patuit eis locus fuge," Marburg, 2017, p. 326).

In some instances, prolonged siege conditions also gave rise to guerilla-style resistance in response to Christian occupation, reflecting the capacity of besieged populations to adapt to the realities of sustained warfare (Dusburg, 1861, p. 160).

However, not all responses to siege—whether actual or anticipated—were hostile. Local elites sometimes chose negotiation or collaboration with the enemy, which were often driven by internal rivalries within Lithuania or opposition to central authority (Kwiatkowski, 2017, pp. 125–128). Peter of Dusburg, for example, attributes the fall of Pieštvė—an important stronghold in Samogitia—which together with Bebirvaitė, guarded access to the region and functioned as one of the centres of internal political opposition—to treachery (Dusburg, 1861, p. 159; Gudavičius, 2006, p. 79). Another case dates back to 1301, when Draika of Aukaimis secretly contacted the Teutonic Order, "seeking baptism and assistance." When the enemy army approached, Draika—who was on guard duty that night—opened the castle gates from within, enabling the brothers to massacre the garrison and enslave the civilian population:

6 With the coming of the darkness, the brothers therefore ceased their attack. On the following day, when they again wished to advance to battle, the defenders gave hostages, promising to submit themselves to the authority of the brothers. However, being pressed by the king of the Lithuanians, they afterwards did not keep the faith that had been pledged.

> ... quod dum fratres ad impugnandum dictum castrum accederent, ipsa nocte vigilia et custodia castri dicto Draykoni competebat. Unde appropinquante exercitu fratrum, portam castri secrete aperuit, et fratres intrantes omnes preter unum, scilicet filium Sudargi, graviter tamen vulneratum, occiderunt. Captis mulieribus et parvulis castrum cum suburbio funditus cremaverunt, dictusque Drayko deductus usque Raganitam cum tota familia est baptizatus (Dusburg, 1861, pp. 166–167).[7]

A similar episode is recorded in 1308, when Spudo of Pūtvė delivered the castle to the Order, after which its inhabitants were either killed or taken captive (Jeroschin, 2016, p. 254). The close attention paid by the chroniclers to such acts of betrayal served a specific ideological purpose: it not only explained the military successes of the Order but also reinforced a moral interpretation of pagan society as internally unstable and prone to disloyalty (Nelson, 1986, p. 283).

Taking into account the ideological character of the Order's chronicles—aimed at diminishing the Lithuanian enemy and presenting them as a morally inferior Other in contrast to the Christian knights—an important component of siege narratives is the emphasis placed on fear experienced by besieged citizens and defenders. Despite generally acknowledging the courage of the Lithuanians, the chroniclers foreground episodes in which warriors, confronted with the danger posed by the Teutonic knights, "throw down their weapons and flee to save themselves" (Dusburg, 1861, p. 182). A similar pattern is attributed to the civilian population of besieged fortresses, who are depicted as attempting to escape danger either by abandoning the stronghold or by retreating into its inner fortifications. This is illustrated, for example, in the account of the siege of Gediminas' castle in 1324, when, upon reaching the outer fortifications at day break, the attackers burned them down and killed everyone they found inside, apart from those who managed to flee into the main castle ("incendio destruxerunt, et occiderunt quicquid in eo repertum fuit, preter eos qui ad castrum confugere poterant") (Dusburg, 1861, p. 190).

A recurring narrative device in these accounts is the depiction of despair as the culmination of pagan fear in the face of Christian assault. This motif is frequently employed to heighten the emotional intensity of siege narratives. One particularly prominent theme is that of self-destructive behaviour, whereby besieged populations burn their possessions and the outskirts of their

7 ...so that, when the brothers approached to attack the castle, the guard of the castle that night had been entrusted to the aforementioned Draika. Therefore, as the army of the brothers drew near, he secretly opened the castle gate, and the brothers, entering, killed all except one—namely the son of Sudargis—who, however, was grievously wounded. After capturing the women and children, they burned the castle together with its outer bailey to the ground, and the said Draika was taken to Ragnit, where he was baptised together with his entire family.

fortresses in order to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. Such actions are described, for example, during the siege of Junigeda in 1367, when, upon recognising the approaching danger, the inhabitants "began to fear and burned the stronghold with all what was in it" ("quod percipientes in castro bayores et ceteri ceperunt timere et soli domum cum omni continentia concremabant", Marburg, 2017, p. 352).

An even more dramatic example appears in Wigand of Marburg's account of the Teutonic campaign against Pilėnai (Pillenen) in 1336. According to Wigand, the besieged inhabitants, overwhelmed by terror at the sight of the approaching army and having abandoned all hope of withstanding the siege, burned their possessions and turned their violence against one another. He recounts the striking episode of an elderly pagan woman armed with an axe who killed one hundred people before taking her own life (Marburg, 2017, p. 196; Baronas, 2008, pp. 27–60).

Two crucial dimensions of this narrative strategy merit particular attention. The first concerns the concept of despair itself, which in the medieval Christian worldview—following the teachings of St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—was understood as a grave vice directly opposed to the theological virtue of hope (Miller, 2012, pp. 387–396; Drever, 2022, pp. 145–166). Despair signified a rejection of divine mercy and a surrender to diabolical influence. Consequently, by depicting pagans as succumbing to despair and committing suicide—another mortal sin in Christian doctrine—the chronicler reinforces their spiritual alienation from the Christian order.

Such destructive behaviour is attributed not only to anonymous members of the pagan population but, significantly, also to their rulers. Continuing his account of the same siege, Wigand reports that the pagan king[8]—protected by his retainers with shields—survived the initial assault and fled to a hiding place. There, overcome by despair, he stabbed his wife and threw her into the fire (Marburg, 2017, pp. 196–198). The chronicle further relates that the pagans, shaken by this calamity, "bowed their heads, and the king put them all to death" ("Pagani in tanta afflictione concussi inclinaverunt cervices suas, et rex omnes occidit", Marburg, 2017, p. 198). Given that, in the medieval worldview, a ruler symbolised the state itself, such a portrayal—depicting a pagan king not as a courageous warrior dying in battle, but as a terrified fugitive murdering his own wife and subjects—served to discredit both his personal courage and the very notion of legitimate and honourable kingship.

This repeated imagery of fortresses collapsing without prolonged combat, and of defenders driven to self-destruction by fear alone, reinforces a central motif in crusading historiography: the psychological and spiritual defeat of pagans even before the final blow is struck. By framing such outcomes as the

8 Gediminas was Grand Duke of Lithuania at the time of this campaign.

inevitable result of divine justice operating through Christian arms, the chroniclers interpret pagan despair not merely as a tactical failure, but as a moral collapse—a visible sign of separation from God's grace and submission to the fate reserved for the enemies of the faith.

Overall, the analysis of siege narratives in the Teutonic chronicles—as illustrated by the accounts of Peter of Dusburg, Nicolaus von Jeroschin, and Wigand von Marburg—demonstrates that the behavioural patterns attributed to besieged Lithuanians during the Lithuanian Crusade, ranging from resistance and deception to flight and appeals for assistance, are not presented as isolated or situational responses. Rather, they recur as structured narrative patterns shaped by crusading ideology. The chroniclers' repeated association of pagan defenders with fear and internal collapse—often culminating in self-destruction or treachery—serves less to record the course of events than to interpret defeat as a moral outcome. At the same time, these texts preserve fragmentary yet significant evidence of how besieged communities sought to survive prolonged warfare and adapt to the complex and shifting conditions of the Lithuanian Crusade.

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