



Aleksander Pluskowski. *The Teutonic Knights. Rise and Fall of a Religious Corporation*. London: Reaktion Books, 2024. 214 pp., 6 maps, 1 diagram, 32 ill. ISBN 978-1-78-914-868-8.

There is no surprise that English-speaking authors rarely take the opportunity to write about the history of the Teutonic Order. When they do, they usually confine themselves to the period of the Order's activities in the Holy Land or during the Northern Crusades.¹ As a result, before the monograph under review, English-speaking readers had few opportunities to gain knowledge about the Teutonic Order.² Comprehensive studies covering almost the entire history of this organization were written mostly in German or Polish,³ and they serve as valuable handbooks. However, only one has been translated into English.⁴ The goal of the reviewed publication is not to shed new light on the history of the Teutonic Order; rather, it "provides a short introduction to the Order" (p. 7). Therefore, this new book perfectly fills the gap for English readers.

¹ Nicholas Morton, *The Teutonic Knights in the Holy Land, 1190–1291* (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2017); Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

² Except for a few publications, including William Urban, *The Teutonic Knights. A Military History* (London: Greenhill Books / Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2003); id., *The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights. Lithuania, Poland and the Teutonic Order* (Barnsley: Greenhill Books, 2019).

³ There are plenty of books and articles, so it is necessary here to limit oneself to a few foundational publications: Klaus Militzer, *Die Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005, 1st ed.); Hartmut Boockmann, *Der Deutsche Orden. Zwölf Kapitel aus seiner Geschichte* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1994, 4th ed.); Marian Biskup and Gerard Labuda, *Dzieje zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach. Gospodarka – społeczeństwo – państwo – ideologia* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1986); Udo Arnold, *Zakon niemiecki. Podstawy, regiony, osoby* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2023); *Państwo zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach. Władza i społeczeństwo*, ed. Marian Biskup and Roman Czaja (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2008); Jürgen Sarnowsky, *Der Deutsche Orden* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2012); also one of the monographies were written in French: Sylvain Gouguenheim, *Les Chevaliers Teutoniques* (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2022).

⁴ *The Teutonic Order in Prussia and Livonia: The Political and Ecclesiastical Structures 13th–16th century*, ed. Roman Czaja and Andrzej Radzimiński (Toruń: Towarzystwo Naukowe w Toruniu / Köln–Weimar–Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2015).

The book's structure is both chronological and thematic, and it resembles the works already mentioned by Klaus Militzer and Jürgen Sarnowsky. It is divided into ten chapters, preceded by a very brief introduction (pp. 7–8), in which Pluskowski offers opening remarks on the role of the Teutonic Knights, particularly in Prussia and Livonia. This serves as a useful preface for readers who know little about the topic.

It is worth noting that a decision was made to anglicize place names wherever possible. For the remaining ones, the historical name is given first, followed by the current name in the local language (Russian, Estonian, Latvian, or Polish). A similar approach to translation was adopted for the offices of the Teutonic Order's state in Prussia. Unfortunately, the English rendering relies on the closest equivalents from the British Isles, which occasionally misrepresents the nature of these offices.

In the first chapter (pp. 9–19), the author briefly outlines the origins of the Teutonic Knights in the Holy Land and their decision to organize themselves in accordance with the models established by the Hospitallers and the Templars. On the opening pages, we learn why they founded a hospital and how the imperial court influenced the early years of the Order's activities. This provides a concise background to the foundation of the Teutonic Order as a religious corporation.

The next chapter (pp. 20–41) focuses on the thirteenth century, which should be regarded as the community's formative period. The author highlights the role of Hermann von Salza, who skilfully exploited dynastic politics, disputes between the pope and the emperor, and contacts with the Welfs. Pluskowski also describes the Order's military organization and outlines relationships within the community. He discusses the Order's main properties in the Holy Land, such as Acre and Montfort, and links them with the narrative about hospitals as a central aspect of their activities. Finally, he briefly discusses the last years in Outremer.

The third chapter (pp. 42–52) elucidates the new challenges and directions in Europe following the decline of the Crusades to the Holy Land. The author discusses the episode in Transylvania, when the Teutonic Knights were invited by Andrew II to fight against the Cumans. They were granted land in *Burzenland* by the king. Their task was to settle on the border, to stop the Cuman raids effectively, and to contribute to the Christianization of the local "pagans," especially the Pechenegs. There were also German settlers in Transylvania, but they lacked the means to organize an effective defense, so the Teutonic Knights appeared to be the

perfect choice for the Hungarian king. As the text explains, the Order left a lasting impact on the local landscape through castle building in the *Burzenland* area.

At the end of this chapter, the author briefly describes the conflict between the Hungarian king and the local structures of the Order, which led to a papal investigation and ultimately to the Teutonic Knights's expulsion from Transylvania. Finally, he outlines the path to Prussia, clearly explaining the reasons behind the invitation extended by the Polish duke, Konrad of Mazovia. His idea was similar to that of the Hungarian king: to establish an Order to defend the border against the "pagan" Old-Prussians. At first, Konrad attempted to invite the Teutonic Order, but when they did not respond, he tried to establish the Order of Dobrzyń. According to Pluskowski, this attempt proved ineffective, so Konrad did everything he could to invite the Teutonic Knights once again. This time they accepted, secured privileges, and settled first in Culmer Land (Germ. *Kulmerland*), before eventually establishing a new rulership in Prussia.

In chapter four (pp. 53–75), the author discusses the Teutonic Order's military and religious mission. He portrays the lands to be conquered – Prussia and Livonia – and outlines earlier attempts at their Christianization. He also describes the progress of the conquest of Prussia and the incorporation of the Sword Brothers after the Battle of Saule (1236). Pluskowski emphasizes this event, since it marked the beginning of Livonia as a key area of interest. At this time, the Order also began to intervene in the region's internal politics. The author provides details about the Crusades in different parts of Prussia and mentions the Second (Great) Prussian Uprising. He also examines the conquest of Livonia and the war against the Rus' prince Alexander Nevsky, who defeated the Teutonic Knights at the Battle of Lake Peipus (1242, the so-called Battle on the Ice). As in the previous chapters, Pluskowski notes the castle-building efforts in Livonia. Finally, he describes the attempts to gain control over *Curonia* (later Courland) and *Semigallia*.

The next chapter (pp. 76–92) presents how the Order's rulership functioned in Prussia. First, the author sets out the international context of this religious corporation. On the macro scale, this provides an excellent opportunity to illustrate how the Order's structure worked on a micro scale, namely within its internal organization. He explains how convents operated and the roles of individual officials, from the grand masters down to local administrators. After describing the position of the grand master, he addresses the cooperation between the local

population of conquered Old-Prussians and Livonian Balts and Estonians and the migrants. The Teutonic Knights invited settlers from Germany and granted them privileges of location with a single purpose: to create a universal model of economy. In this system, every inhabitant was subject to the law – mostly Kulm law – and used standardized methods of measurement, for example for land. The Order also minted coins, which circulated in everyday use.

The sixth chapter (pp. 93–116) focuses on castle building in Prussia and Livonia. Pluskowski describes the criteria for selecting locations, site preparation, building materials, and common features in castle plans. He also discusses how the Teutonic Knights organized space within the buildings, indicating which parts served religious purposes and which were essential for maintaining the economy. In addressing the artistic value of the architecture, he highlights two aspects: heraldry and religious imagery. These types of decoration confirm the dual character of the Teutonic Order as both a knightly and a religious institution. Many members had personal coats of arms, while as members of a religious Order they lived according to monastic regulations. Particular attention was devoted to the Virgin Mary, who served as the Order's main patroness. In the final part of this section, the author describes the functions of the castles and the types of buildings constructed. One of the most interesting parts of the publication is chapter seven (pp. 117–133), which describes one of the Teutonic Order's most important activities: Crusading against Lithuania. First, Pluskowski outlines how the Order conducted Crusades during the fourteenth century and the changing character of the war. During this time, noblemen from across Western Europe were invited to participate in the *reysa* (military campaign). Many of them sought glory, treating it as an opportunity to cultivate chivalric ideals, earn spurs, go hunting, and engage in low-risk adventures. They understood it as a chance to experience full-time courtly life outside their own countries. For example, the Teutonic Order had a tradition called the “table of honor,” where the most distinguished knights were invited to dine with the Order's marshal and the grand master. Several well-known guests came from England, due to their connection to the Baltic route.

Some points of the campaign-agenda also reflected connections to the Christian faith, particularly the cult of the Virgin Mary (campaigns often began on her feast days) and that of St. George (patron of chivalry). Additionally, any knight who died during the Crusade could be buried in one of the churches in Prussia. Notably, the author depicts the Great Wilderness not only as a physical border

between two worlds; he also compares it to the biblical wilderness, a physical and spiritual desert, and thus a fitting backdrop for holy war against “paganism” (pp. 125–126). It should also be noted that these campaigns pursued various political objectives. The *reysen* ended at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when Lithuanians could no longer be accused of false Christianity, and new frontiers were emerging in Europe with the advance of the Turks and the presence of heretics.

Chapter eight (pp. 134–153) focuses on the causes of the collapse of the Teutonic Order’s rulership in Prussia. As main factors, Pluskowski identifies the wars against Poland-Lithuania, along with the related financial consequences and territorial losses, particularly after the so-called ‘Great War’ (1409–1411) and the Thirteen Years’ War (1454–1466). Another factor, mentioned but considered less significant, was the role of towns, their involvement in organizations such as the Hanseatic League, and their political aspirations. They could act against the Teutonic Order, for example through the Lizard Union (Germ. *Eidechsen-gesellschaft*). Opposition did not come only from traders and town authorities; the Order also faced numerous internal conflicts, including disputes within its Livonian branch. All these factors contributed to an identity crisis within the Teutonic Order and to the beginning of its decline.

The last substantive part of the text is chapter nine (pp. 154–168), which provides a historiographical summary of the Teutonic Order’s final decades in Prussia. The author emphasizes the significant role of the Reformation and Lutheranism for the collapse, first in secularized Prussia and later in Livonia. In the concluding section, Pluskowski briefly outlines the fate of the Teutonic Knights after 1525 within the empire, noting their continued association with the Habsburgs until 1809 and their relocation to Vienna.

Chapter ten (pp. 169–171) serves as a conclusion and provides a very brief summary of the content presented throughout the book.

The work’s final sections consist of the notes (pp. 173–191) and the bibliography (pp. 192–206). A geographical and personal index is also included (pp. 208–214). In addition to the textual content, the volume contains numerous iconographic representations (pp. 17, 28, 34, 35, 40, 46, 47, 58–59, 62, 63, 71, 91, 97, 98, 102–103, 106, 108–109, 111, 115, 128, 140, 144, 146, 151, 159), seven maps (pp. 10, 61, 81, 82, 127, 148, 166), and one chart (p. 149). Photographs of monuments, reconstruction plans, and historical sources are printed in color, while some plans and maps are presented in black-and-white.

In conclusion, Aleksander Pluskowski's book is highly useful for readers unfamiliar with the history of the Teutonic Order. The author skilfully reviews the most recent research of Polish and German scholars on the Teutonic Knights. It is a well-written book that can serve as both a handbook and a solid introduction. Overall, the publication successfully fulfils the purpose intended by its author.

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