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CELIBACY VERSUS LOVE:
A CONTRASTIVE APPROACH TO THE ABSENCE
OF WOMEN AMONG CRUSADEERS IN PRUSSIA
(THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH CENTURIES)

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the cultural ambience of the many crusaders who travelled to Prussia to fight alongside the Teutonic Order against Lithuania in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is noticeable that a significant number of crusaders to the Levant, especially monarchs and nobles, were accompanied by their wives; by contrast, there is almost no evidence that women went on crusade to Prussia. Some factors were undoubtedly practical, but the decisive reasons are more likely to be found in the social and cultural nature of crusading in Prussia: the celibate and spiritual character of the Teutonic Order, and the changing nature of crusading itself, in which secular, chivalric values were coming to have greater weight than in the earlier crusades to the Holy Land.

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The most intensive and longest lasting military activity of the Teutonic Order was the campaigns it fought from its state in Prussia against pagan Lithuania, which continued for several decades even after Lithuania's acceptance of Christianity in 1386/1387. In this enterprise the Order was aided, year for year, by thousands of crusaders from most of Western Europe, who saw themselves as fighting in the tradition of the appeal made by Pope Urban II for the liberation of the Holy Land in November 1095. This was why, for example, the crusaders who came to Prussia often designated their Lithuanian opponents as "Saracens", since it allowed them to present their deeds as being as meritorious as those on expeditions to free Jerusalem.¹ There was, however, one feature that characterised the crusaders in Prussia: as far as we can establish, they were unaccompanied by women.

This was a singular state of affairs compared with crusades to the Levant. It is clear that when he made his appeal Urban II was primarily hoping to recruit men of fighting age and experience. Yet despite some attempts to dissuade women and children as well as non-combatant men from participating in the crusade we can see that it attracted women from all social groups. Among the leading crusaders Raymond of Saint-Gilles, count of Toulouse, was accompanied by his wife Elvira.² Godfrey of Bouillon, duke of Lower Lotharingia, was unmarried, but his younger brother Baldwin of Boulogne had his wife Godehilde of Tosny with him; this may have been a joint decision of the two brothers to help secure the family's future in the East. Among the lesser lords and knights were Hawida, wife of Dudo of Cons-la-Grandville, and the anonymous consort Folbert of Bouillon.³ Among the many unnamed women of the lower classes we can point to significant numbers who hauled skins and pitchers of water to give to their menfolk at the siege of Jerusalem. There were even some quite exotic specimens such as the nun from Trier who had abandoned her convent for the crusade, then abandoned the crusade for a Turkish paramour, and later rejoined the Christian army in a penitent state after

¹ For the application of the term *Saracens* to Baltic pagans, see Alan V. Murray, "The Saracens of the Baltic: Pagan and Christian Lithuanians in the Perception of English and French Crusaders to Late Medieval Prussia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41 (2010): 413–429.

² Guibert of Nogent, "Historia quae dicitur *Gesta Dei per Francos*," in *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades: Historiens Occidentaux*, vol. 4, ed. Henri Wallon and Adolphe Régnier (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 1879), 134–135.

³ Alan V. Murray, *The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Dynastic History, 1099–1125* (Oxford: Prosopographica & Genealogica, 2000), 191–192, 195–196.

his demise.⁴ It is no wonder that many of the clerics with the crusade evidently regarded women as a moral hazard. There is little evidence for prostitution taking place in the army, as claimed by James Brundage, yet as casualties mounted many women lost their husbands, fathers or masters and had little choice other than to seek protection from other men, whether through forms of marriage, cohabitation or other arrangements. Clerics regarded such irregularities as threatening the moral purity of the crusade as being displeasing to God, which explains why at several junctures they proclaimed prohibitions for adultery and other immorality.⁵

By and large, secular leaders of subsequent crusades tended to regard women as an unnecessary drain on resources and discouraged their participation, while clerics continued to fear their potential to cause distraction and immorality. As the logistic basis of crusading gradually shifted to seaborne expeditions during the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the high costs of transport meant that the limited space on ships was reserved for fighting men, squires, artisans and clerics. It was also more straightforward to exclude female participants: women might be able to march across Europe with their menfolk in they travelled by land, but they could be physically prevented from embarking on ships fairly easily. However, such restrictions evidently did not apply to high-status women. King Louis VII of France thought nothing strange about taking his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine with him on what proved to be an arduous march to the East in 1147.⁶ Richard I of England was accompanied by his new consort Berengaria of Navarre as well as his sister Joan, queen of Sicily, both of whom seem to have been kept away from the fighting after reaching the Holy Land.⁷ Margaret of Provence, wife of Louis IX of France, must have experienced a less comfortable time in the East, giving birth three times during the course of his crusade in 1248–1252, once while her husband's army was

⁴ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana: History of the Journey to Jerusalem*, ed. and trans. Susan B. Edgington (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 126–129.

⁵ James A. Brundage, "Prostitution, Miscegenation and Sexual Purity in the First Crusade," in *Crusade and Settlement: Papers Read at the First Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East and presented to R. C. Smail*, ed. Peter W. Edbury (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1985), 57–65; Alan V. Murray, "Sex, Death and the Problem of Single Women in the Armies of the First Crusade," in *Shipping, Trade and Crusade in the Medieval Mediterranean: Studies in Honour of John Pryor*, ed. Ruthy Gertwagen and Elizabeth Jeffreys (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 255–270.

⁶ Michael R. Evans, *Inventing Eleanor: The Medieval and Post-Medieval Image of Eleanor of Aquitaine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 21–28.

⁷ Gabrielle Storey, *Berengaria of Navarre: Queen of England, Lord of Le Mans* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 41–50.

fighting at Damietta in Egypt in 1250.⁸ In 1270 Eleanor of Castile not only set sail with her husband Edward I of England, but, unusually, appears to have taken a vow in her own right.⁹

The issue of the social status of those women who went on crusades is important in considering the nature of the expeditions fought by the Teutonic Order and its crusader allies against the Lithuanians, since these were the most socially exclusive form of crusading found anywhere in Europe. The many thousands of crusaders who flocked to Prussia from Germany, France, the Low Countries, England, Scotland and elsewhere in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were entirely drawn from monarchs and the titled and lower nobility and gentry, many of whom made the journey on multiple occasions. Apart from the numerous service personnel who accompanied them (and who presumably did not take the cross themselves), we look in vain for any participants from lower social groups, unlike the earlier crusades to the Levant. This social exclusivity probably had a great deal to do with the high costs of crusading in Prussia, as we shall see.¹⁰

In his exhaustive study of the cultural climate of these crusades, Werner Paravicini concluded that when noblemen from Western Europe came to Prussia, they found a world which “scarcely differed from that which they had left”.¹¹ In almost every respect this was quite true. By this time the cities of Prussia where the crusaders took lodgings had the appearance, infrastructure and amenities that would have been familiar to most of those who came from northern Europe. Unlike the Holy Land, it was a relatively peaceful and safe environment, since most campaigning was done far beyond Prussia in the wild borderlands of Lithuania. When not

⁸ Joanna Phillips, “Crusader Masculinities in Bodily Crises: Incapacity and the Crusader Leader, 1095–1274,” in *Crusading and Masculinities*, ed. Natasha R. Hodgson, Katherine J. Lewis, and Matthew M. Mesley (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 149–164.

⁹ Bernard Hamilton, “Eleanor of Castile and the Crusading Movement,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 10 (1995): 92–103.

¹⁰ Werner Paravicini, *Die Preußenreisen des europäischen Adels*, vol. I–II (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1989–1995); id., *Adlig leben im 14. Jahrhundert. Weshalb sie fuhren: Die Preußenreisen des europäischen Adels*, vol. 3, *Vestigia Prussica: Forschungen zur ost- und westpreußischen Landesgeschichte* 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020); id., *Verlust und Dauer. Weshalb sie nicht mehr fuhren und was an die Stelle trat: Die Preußenreisen des europäischen Adels*, vol. 4, *Vestigia Prussica: Forschungen zur ost- und westpreußischen Landesgeschichte* 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024).

¹¹ Paravicini, *Adlig leben im 14. Jahrhundert*, 553: “Wenn der Europäische Adel nach Preußen kam, fand er somit seine kaum veränderte Lebenswelt vor, wurde von Standesgenossen betreut und konnte ohne viel Abstriche seine Lebensweise fortsetzen, nur gleichsam in reinerer, dem Ideal angenäherter Form”.

on campaign, crusaders could live in a style far more comfortable and luxurious than was encountered by those in expeditions to the Levant. While they resided in Danzig, Thorn, Elbing, Königsberg or elsewhere, crusaders spent much of their time in feasting and celebration with their fellows; surviving financial accounts, such as those for the two crusades of Henry Bolingbroke, earl of Derby (later king of England as Henry IV) in 1390–1391 and 1392–1393 reveal considerable expenditure paid out for food and drink, including large quantities of beer, wine, fish and meat, often prepared with expensive ingredients such as spices and verjuice. They could spend their time in hawking or hunting, but in contrast to their homelands in the West, they could also find more exotic game in the form of the aurochs and bison.¹² However, while crusaders in Prussia may have spent much of their time living in a manner similar to what they were accustomed at home, there was one significant omission: as far as can be established, none of the crusaders to Prussia took wives or other female companions with them. Why should this be so?

Expense can hardly have been a major factor. For wealthy monarchs and nobles it would scarcely have added significant costs to bring wives and female attendants with them. A voyage from most parts of Western Europe to Danzig was much less arduous than sailing to the Holy Land, and in the cities of Prussia noblewomen could have lived in far greater comfort and safety than in Palestine or the Nile Delta. Admittedly in the Holy Land there were numerous shrines and places with biblical associations that may have been especially attractive to pious women. We can find examples like Sibylla of Anjou, who accompanied her husband Thierry, count of Flanders, to Palestine but in 1159 decided against returning to the West and entered the convent of Bethany.¹³ Prussia lacked holy places of such significance, although it has recently been argued that the Teutonic Order attempted to create a new sacred landscape there, so one might suppose that there would have been enough places of interest to attract and occupy wives and other female dependants

¹² *Expeditions to Prussia and the Holy Land made by Henry Earl of Derby (afterwards King Henry IV) in the Years 1390–1 and 1392–3*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (Westminster: Camden Society, 1894); Francis R. H. Du Boulay, “Henry of Derby’s Expeditions to Prussia 1390–1 and 1392,” in *The Reign of Richard II: Essays in Honour of May McKisack*, ed. F. R. H. Du Boulay and Caroline M. Barron (London: Athlone Press, 1971), 153–172; Alan V. Murray, “Hospitality, Heraldry and Honour: Crusading as Performance in Late Medieval Prussia,” in *Penser les Croisades Tardives: Diversités, modalités, postérités*, ed. Benjamin Weber and Stefan Stantchev (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Midi) [forthcoming 2026].

¹³ Bodo Hechelhammer, “Die Kreuzfahrerin: Sibylle von Anjou, Gräfin von Flandern (*1110, †1165),” in *Kein Krieg ist heilig: Die Kreuzzüge*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Kotzur (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2004), 229–233.

of crusaders if they had been present.¹⁴ Another hypothetical question which is difficult to answer is the question of propriety. Would crusaders have been willing to leave their womenfolk in the towns in Prussia for weeks on end while they were campaigning many miles away in the Lithuanian borderlands, or could sufficient chaperoning arrangements have been put in place to ensure that reputations could be preserved? Yet since neither alternative seems to have been tested we must look to other factors to explain the absence of women among crusaders in Prussia.

It is important to note that the ethos of crusading was beginning to change by the end of the twelfth century. The earliest crusades were often characterised by conspicuous manifestations of piety, as manifested, for example, in the veneration of the Holy Lance found at Antioch in 1098 or the fasting and processions at the siege of Jerusalem in 1099. While the noble and knightly classes were the mainstays of crusading, clerical writers were keen to keep them focused on spiritual motivations and moral conduct in their participation. Throughout the twelfth century church authorities regularly pronounced prohibitions on tournaments and religious sanctions on participants, on the grounds that these promoted vanity, materialism, wastefulness and unnecessary danger as well as keeping knights from more worthy pursuits such as the defence of the Holy Land. Yet in 1198 much of the organisation and recruitment for a new crusade to be directed against Egypt was held at a tournament at Ecry-sur-Seine in northern France. In the course of the following two centuries, tournaments often featured as venues for the dissemination of crusade propaganda and recruitment of crusaders.¹⁵ Now crusaders saw no contradiction between participation in tournaments and warfare in the service of the Christian faith. One can perhaps see a reflection of these developments in the changing terminology applied to crusades and their participants. In the twelfth century the crusades to the Holy Land are most commonly described as “pilgrimage” (*peregrinatio*) and crusaders as “pilgrims” (*peregrini*). The later campaigns launched from Prussia are usually denoted by the Middle High German term *reyse* (meaning a military expedition), which became so common that it was adopted by authors writing in French and Middle English. Their participants are usually described in German as “guests” (*gäste*) and in Latin by the equivalent (*hospites*),

¹⁴ Gregory Leighton, “Did the Teutonic Order Create a Sacred Landscape in Thirteenth-Century Prussia?,” *Journal of Medieval History* 44 (2018): 457–483.

¹⁵ Jonathan Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople* (New York: Viking, 2004), 39–51; Timothy Guard, *Chivalry, Kingship and Crusade: The English Experience in the Fourteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), 123–158.

terms which highlight their status as welcome visitors in the state of the Teutonic Order.

We can observe distinctly secular motives appearing in vernacular accounts. A salient example is the Austrian herald Peter Suchenwirt, who composed a poetic account of the expedition to Prussia made in 1377 by Albrecht III, duke of Austria (1349/1350–1395). He begins by describing the preparations for the journey, relating how the duke and his companions “spared neither body nor possessions for God, for honour and for chivalry” (*di sparten weder leib noch güt / durch got, durch èr, durch ritterschaft*), a formula which shows a more diverse motivation than in the earliest crusades.¹⁶ Interestingly, the same source reveals how the duke explicitly asks the ladies of his court to remain behind, despite the pleasure that they give to him and his knights:

The duke bade the lovely, gentle women remain at home, and they adorned themselves to the delight of many, just as the cool Maytime adorns both field and forest.¹⁷

The final event before the departure of the crusaders is a round of dancing and other entertainments in which the ladies play a prominent part. The theme of love of women is highlighted once more when the poet describes the Austrian crusaders entering Lithuanian territory:

Many a fine banner could be seen fluttering high in the air. Caps with ostrich feathers were worn by many a proud warrior who had joined the company for the sake of pleasure, in the hope of joy and the ardour of love; as signs of favour they had been given gold, silver and jewels; on their bonnets

¹⁶ Peter Suchenwirt, “Von Herzog Albrechts Ritterschaft,” ed. Ernst Strehkle, in *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum. Die Geschichtsquellen der preußischen Vorzeit*, ed. Theodor Hirsch, Max Töppen, and Ernst Strehkle, vol. II (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1863), lines 20–21 (English translations of Suchenwirt’s work are by the present author). For the context of Albrecht’s crusade, see Wolfgang Achnitz, “Die gestörte Hochzeit. Literatur und Geschichte in den Ehrenreden des vermeintlichen Herolds Peter Suchenwirt,” in *Mittelalterliche Kultur und Literatur im Deutschordensstaat in Preussen: Leben und Nachleben*, ed. Jarosław Wenta, Sieglinde Hartmann, and Gisela Vollmann-Profe, Sacra Bella Septentrionalia 1 (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2008), 483–498.

¹⁷ Peter Suchenwirt, “Von Herzog Albrechts Ritterschaft,” ed. Strehkle, lines 54–59: *Der herzog dà zu hause pat / di zarten minechleichen weib / di zirten iren stolzen leib / zu frauden manigerlaie, / recht as der chûle Maie / blûmet anger und den walt.*

they bore shining pearls large and small, and garlands and jewels all shone in the sun.¹⁸

The stress on pleasure and love as motivations and the delight in wealth and material finery contrast with earlier writings which emphasise religious dedication and piety.¹⁹

Other sources are even more explicit. One of the most enthusiastic crusaders of the fourteenth century was Jean II Le Meingre (1366–1421), known to contemporaries as Boucicaut, who visited Prussia in 1384–1385 and 1390–1391. We know a great deal about his life from a biography written in Middle French by an anonymous cleric, which states that on the first of these occasions Boucicaut “took himself to Prussia where he made every effort to do damage to the Saracens, and he spent a season there before returning to France.” However, the biographer implies that Boucicaut’s decision was prompted by his love for an unnamed lady:

I am convinced that it was in this way that my lord Boucicaut – with no ignoble thoughts – was able to attain his ambition, for a lady must be ignoble herself to refuse so loyal an admirer. Which I believe explains why, on his return, Love reserved the most joyous and tender welcome for him from his loving Lady.²⁰

The chivalric biography of Boucicaut was highly influenced by the conventions of courtly love and romance, so it is difficult to establish how far his devotion to the unnamed lady was real or simply fanciful; nevertheless, it is clear that love features as the significant factor in his decision to travel to Prussia. While the idea of fighting for Christendom is perhaps implicit in this account, Boucicaut’s motivation is described predominantly in secular and chivalrous terms. Similarly, the biography tells us that Boucicaut and three of his companions composed a dialogue between a knight and a lady, known as the *Livre des Cent Ballades*, while they

¹⁸ Peter Suchenwirt, “Von Herzog Albrechts Ritterschaft,” ed. Strehlke, lines 246–255: *Vil banir sach man wirdeleich / hoch in den luften fledern; / schapel und strauzenfedern / fürt dā manig stolzer helt, / der sich zu liebe hēt geselt / durch vreuden trōst, durch minne prūnst: / dem was geschancht in lieber gunst / golt, silber, edelstain; / perlein grōz unde chlain / sach man auf hauben liechtgevar, / chrenz und chlaināt offenwar, / daz er gab gegen der sune glast.*

¹⁹ Stefan Vander Elst, “Chivalry, Crusade, and Romance on the Baltic Frontier,” *Mediaeval Studies* 73 (2011): 287–328.

²⁰ *The Chivalric Biography of Boucicaut, Jean II Le Meingre*, trans. Craig Taylor and Jane H. M. Taylor (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016), 36–37; Craig Taylor, *A Virtuous Knight: Defending Marshal Boucicaut (Jean II Le Meingre, 1366–1421)* (York: York Medieval Press, 2019).

were on crusade in 1388–1389, which again shows how they saw no contradiction between secular motives and crusading.²¹

It is Paravicini, more than any other scholar, who has characterised the Prussian *reysen* as a fundamentally different kind of crusading compared with the first century after the Council of Clermont. In his most recent work he argues that crusaders in Prussia were motivated more by the secular values of chivalry and honour than religious piety. Their heroes were not saints, but exemplars from the past such as the Nine Worthies (the three triads of Jewish, Greco-Roman and Christian warriors who were regarded as epitomes of chivalry); the keepers of their traditions were not priests, but the heralds who recorded the deeds and coats of arms of the crusaders; their holy texts were not the books of the Bible, but chivalric romances.²² Since the inauguration of the crusade movement in 1095 the meaning and ideology of chivalry had developed considerably under the influence of poets such as Thomas de Bretagne, Chrétien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, whose works set out a vision of knighthood which was quite different to that described by Pope Urban II at Clermont. A major feature of these new and popular Arthurian romances was the idea of chivalry in the service of love.²³ In this cultural and intellectual climate it would seem that there might be a prominent place for women in the Prussian *reysen*, yet although the examples cited above suggest that love might act as inspiration for crusaders, there was evidently no desire to have women participate in crusade expeditions. In attempting to resolve this paradox it may be helpful to examine some of the conditions of crusading in Prussia.

Apart from the different degrees of participation of women, a significant difference between crusades to the Levant and those launched from Prussia lay in their direction. Even after the establishment of the Frankish principalities of Outremer, European monarchs on crusade tended to take a major role in decision-making and direction alongside the local rulers. This was done, for example, by Conrad III of Germany and Louis VII of France with Baldwin III of Jerusalem during the Second Crusade. In other cases the local sovereigns were simply sidelined, as done by Richard I of England and Philip II of France with Guy of Lusignan during the Third Crusade, and Emperor Frederick II and his representatives with John of

²¹ *The Chivalric Biography of Boucicaut*, trans. C. Taylor and J. H. M. Taylor, 33.

²² Paravicini, *Adlig leben im 14. Jahrhundert*, 21–40.

²³ Joachim Bumke, *Höfische Kultur. Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*, vol. 1 (Munich: DTV, 1986), 64–71, 318–330; Richard W. Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 85–101.

Brienne during the Fifth Crusade. In Prussia, however, the Western “guests”, no matter how exalted their status, were dependent on the direction of the Teutonic Order. It was officers of the Order who decided on the timing and objectives of the winter and summer campaigns in which the crusaders took part. It was the same men who organised the course of the expeditions in the field, and it is doubtful whether any of the crusaders – even those who had come to Prussia more than once – had more than sketchy knowledge of the geography of the Lithuanian borderlands. The evidence of the texts known as the “Litauische Wegeberichte” shows that the crusade armies were guided by Prussian and Lithuanian scouts employed by the order.²⁴ In short, for all their valour, enthusiasm and the number of troops and the wealth that they brought with them, the Western crusaders were wholly dependent on the expertise and goodwill of the Order if they were to carry out the campaigning which they had come to pursue.²⁵

In contrast to the increasingly worldly Western crusaders, the Teutonic Order continued to maintain a highly pious and spiritual concept of its warfare against the pagans, and liturgical celebration was a feature of its campaigns as well as of conventional life.²⁶ As a monastic organisation, it had a quite different attitude to women compared with that demonstrated by its guests. Its prime obligations were chastity, obedience and poverty, as set out in the first chapter of the Teutonic

²⁴ “Die litauischen Wegeberichte”, ed. Theodor Hirsch, in *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum*, ed. Hirsch, Töppen, and Strehlke, II: 662–711; Stefan Striegler, *Raumwahrnehmung und Orientierung im südöstlichen Ostseeraum vom 10. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert. Von der kognitiven zur physischen Karte* (Berlin: J. B. Metzler, 2017), 70–85; Patrick Meehan, “Recontextualizing Indigenous Knowledge on the Prussian-Lithuanian Frontier, ca. 1380–1410,” in *Recreating the Medieval Globe: Acts of Recycling, Revision and Relocation*, ed. Joseph Shack and Hannah M. Weaver (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2020), 93–199.

²⁵ Alan V. Murray and Gregory Leighton, “The Continuous Crusade in Northeast Europe: Warfare in Livonia, Estonia, Prussia, and Lithuania, 1198–1411,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Medieval Military Strategy*, ed. John D. Hosler and Daniel P. Franke (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), 70–82.

²⁶ Gabriela Wiechert, “Die Spiritualität des Deutschen Ordens in seiner mittelalterlichen Regel,” in *Die Spiritualität der Ritterorden im Mittelalter*, ed. Zenon Hubert Nowak, *Ordines Militares. Colloquia Torunensia Historica VII* (Toruń: Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika, 1993), 131–146; Bernhart Jähnig, “Festkalender und Heiligenverehrung beim Deutschen Orden in Preußen,” in *Die Spiritualität der Ritterorden im Mittelalter*, ed. Nowak, 177–188; Krzysztof Kwiatkowski, “Christ ist erstanden... and Christians Win! Liturgy and the Sacralization of Armed Fight against Pagans as Determinants of the Identity of the Teutonic Order in Prussia,” in *Sacred Space in the State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia*, ed. Jarosław Wenta (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013), 101–127.

Rule.²⁷ The rule specified that the brethren should avoid kissing and even conversing with women, for fear that these things might lead to “worldly love” (*werltlicher minne*), and should not even embrace their mothers or sisters.²⁸ Later additions to the rule pronounced prohibitions on associating with “bad women” (*bösen wiben*) and on “sinning with a woman”.²⁹

As Kristjan Toomaspoeg has pointed out, it was not difficult for knight brethren to avoid women on service in the Holy Land, but it was another matter in the Teutonic state in Prussia, where women were encountered everywhere and female servants were permitted in the Order’s houses.³⁰ Many temptations might present themselves outside the normal, regulated environment, which is why a complete chapter of the rule determines how the brethren should behave when travelling, warning especially about inns of ill repute.³¹ If we examine some of the literature produced for use within the Order we can see that the chastity of the knight brethren was often picked out as a particular issue in conventional life. We see this especially in the Latin history of the Order written by Peter von Dusburg at some point before 1330, which was soon translated into German by Nikolaus von Jeroschin, probably because its content could only be made fully accessible to the knight brethren in vernacular form.³² While most of the narrative of both Latin and Middle High German texts consists of a history of the Order, interspersed in it are numerous exemplary episodes from the lives of individual knight brethren. I have argued elsewhere that these episodes may have been collected from oral tradition, and employed by priest brethren of the Order in homilies and sermons delivered

²⁷ *Die Statuten des Deutschen Ordens nach den ältesten Handschriften*, ed. Max Perlbach (Halle/Saale: Niemeyer, 1890), 29–30.

²⁸ Ibid., 50.

²⁹ Ibid., 80, 84.

³⁰ Kristjan Toomaspoeg, “Between Ideal and Reality: Concubines, Prostitutes, and Dishonest Women in the Military Orders’ Everyday Lives – Some Considerations on an Old Issue,” *Ordines Militares Colloquia Torunensia Historica. Yearbook for the Study of the Military Orders* 29 (2024): 69–88.

³¹ *Die Statuten des Deutschen Ordens*, ed. Perlbach, 50–51.

³² Petrus de Dusburgk, *Chronica terrae Prusiae*, ed. Jarosław Wenta and Sławomir Wyszomirski, *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, n.s. 13 (Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 2007); “Kronike von Pruzinlant des Nicolaus von Jeroschin,” ed. Ernst Strehlke, in *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum. Die Geschichtsquellen der preußischen Vorzeit*, vol. I, ed. Theodor Hirsch, Max Töppen, and Ernst Strehlke (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1861), 303–624.

in the vernacular.³³ Some of them offer illuminating insights into the Order's attitudes to celibacy and to the temptations presented by women in general.

One such exemplary anecdote concerns a knight brother named Albrecht von Meißen, who was plagued by temptations of the flesh. He asked for divine assistance, whereupon a heavenly voice communicated to him a prayer in German that he was to say every day to keep himself pure. Jeroschin's vernacular version is more explicit than that of Dusburg:

In his youth the devil had used his tricks to arouse in him the desires of the flesh, which consumed him and caused him great distress, but God's pure warrior resisted with all his might, reigning in his desires by starving himself and by other means both day and night. At the same time he often used to call on God in prayer to free him and relieve the distress the devil's wickedness inflicted on him with such terrible torture. On one occasion it happened that the devil tormented him so much that he seldom had any rest from it, and it caused him such anguish that he cried with his whole heart to heaven for help, which then came to him from God. He heard a voice speaking clearly to him: "Albrecht, Albrecht, listen: if you want to drive off the devil and escape the temptation of the flesh you must speak these words constantly, without interruption, every day: 'O supreme love, give me righteous thoughts and pure desire in my heart, so that I long for you; give me a life without sinfulness, make my conscience clear and release me by your salvation from the sins of the flesh'". And when he dedicated himself to constantly praying this prayer, the fire of temptation which had tormented him so ferociously, urging him to wickedness, was extinguished, and he was never again tempted in mind or body by violent lustful urges.³⁴

³³ Alan V. Murray, "The Devil among the Teutonic Knights: Temptations, Miracles and Spiritual Armour in the Chronicles of Peter von Dusburg and Nicolaus von Jeroschin," in *W służbie zabytków / In the Service of Monuments*, ed. Janusz Hochleitner and Karol Polejowski (Malbork: Muzeum Zamkowe w Malborku, 2017), 29–38.

³⁴ Petrus de Dusburgk, *Chronica terrae Prussiae*, ed. Wenta and Wyszomirski, 344–347 (III, 230); "Kronike von Pruzinlant," ed. Strehlke, lines 18,833–18,881: *Der selbe in sînre jugint / was von des argin tûvils kunst / inzunt mit der unkûsche brunst, / dî sîrre an im glûete / und in vreislichin mûete; / dâwidir doch mit allir craft / der reine gotis degin vacht, / daz vleisch mit hungir clemminde / und mancherwîs ôt hemminde / zu pflege beide nacht und tac; / dâbi er ouch ofte pflac / an got mit bete schrîen / daz er in wolde vrîen / und an im dempfin dise nôt, / dî im des tûvils erge bôt / mit sô swindir quâle. / Nû quam zu einem mâle, / daz in der tûvil abir zû / trat mit semelichir mû, / dâvon er seldin hatte rû, / und geworchte im so wê, / daz er mit ganzis herzin vlê / kegn himele umme hulfe schrê / di im dô von gute quam; / want eine stimme er vornam, / dî offnlichin sprach zu im: / Albrecht, Albrecht, nû vornim, / wiltû von dir vortribin / den tûvil unde blibin*

A more drastic course of action was pursued by Brother Bertold Brühaven, who found it more difficult to maintain his vow of chastity than those of poverty and obedience. He decided to test himself by sleeping naked alongside a beautiful, virginal young girl. This procedure went on for a year, after which the girl was able to attest both to her own integrity and Bertold's chastity. One might question whether propriety would have allowed such an extraordinary experiment, but it illustrates how sexual temptations presented by women were seen as a danger to the wellbeing of the Order.³⁵ Other stories have a more cautionary character. The knight Johannes von Ilberstedt lived a dissolute life, without respect for the sacraments. Once, after receiving communion, he forced himself on a young girl, whereupon he was snatched up by demons who transported him on his bed through the air. Only when he cried out in supplication to the Virgin Mary and promised to join the Teutonic Order did the demons let him fall. A reformed character, he fulfilled his promise and gave many years of service to the Order until he died in 1324.³⁶

The Virgin Mary occupied the supreme position in the Order's practices of veneration, liturgy and display.³⁷ However, the literature produced for consumption within it also gave prominent places to other biblical exemplars and saints. It is hardly surprising to find among them Judas Maccabaeus (a biblical warrior and one of the first triad of the Nine Worthies) and the martyr St George, who by the time of the crusades was regarded as an especial patron of knighthood. St Adalbert, whose life was written by Nikolaus von Jeroschin, offered a highly appropriate exemplar as a missionary who had died while trying to convert the heathen

/ von dem vleische unbekort, / sô soltu innic dise wort / gar ân undirbrechin / alle tage sprechin: / Ô allirhôeste minne, / gib mir rechte sinne / unde lütirs herzin gir, / daz ich sene mich nâch dir; / gib mir ein lebin âne mein / und mache mîn gewissin rein / und lôse mich mit heile / von des vleischis meile'. / Und dô er mit andacht getet / etsliche wile diz gebet, / so gar an im d' brunst vorlasch, / di vor úf in sô swinde drasch / in schundinde zu abekust, / daz vorbaz keiner hande lust / an im mit ubirswenkir glüt / bewal diweder lib noch mût. English translation from: *The Chronicle of Prussia by Nicolaus von Jeroschin: A History of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, 1190–1331*, trans. Mary Fischer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 213–214.

³⁵ "Kronike von Pruzinlant," ed. Strehlke, lines 19,018–19,103.

³⁶ Petrus de Dusburgk, *Chronica terrae Prussiae*, ed. Wenta and Wyszomirski, 454–457 (III, 350); "Kronike von Pruzinlant," ed. Strehlke, lines 25,988–26,041.

³⁷ Kurt Gärtner, "Marienverehrung und Marienepik im Deutschen Orden," in *Mittelalterliche Kultur*, ed. Wenta, Hartmann, and Vollmann-Profe, 395–410; Gregory Leighton, "Reysa in laudem Dei et virginis Marie contra paganos: The Experience of Crusading in Prussia during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries", *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung. Journal of East Central European Studies* 69 (2020): 1–25.

Prussians. It is also striking that an exclusively male corporation venerated ancient female martyrs such as St Barbara, St Katherine of Alexandria and St Margaret of Antioch, as well as more contemporary holy women such as Elizabeth of Thuringia and Dorothea of Montau. Helen Nicholson has suggested that these female saints embodied the virtues of humility, patience and endurance which could be regarded as part of the idea of heroic suffering promulgated as a central tenet of the Order's ideology by Peter von Dusburg and Nikolaus von Jeroschin.³⁸ One might also suggest that knight brethren may have been encouraged to sublimate their bodily desires into veneration for the Order's array of female saints.

As a sovereign ruler the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order maintained a court at Marienburg. Most of the daily routine of the Master and his high officers and chaplains was taken up with religious observances and administrative matters, although some time had to be set aside to receive high status crusaders who wished to pay their respects to the Order's leadership. It is noticeable that some of the personnel employed at the court were quite unusual for a religious order: heralds, musicians, minstrels, dwarfs and fools, and even a monkey. One can hardly assume that these people were retained for the benefit of the knight brethren, no matter how high their office; rather, it is more likely that they were primarily employed for the amusement of the crusader "guests", who were hosted at feasts with luxurious food and drink and the kind of entertainment that they believed their rank entitled them to.³⁹

The main point of contact between the Order and its guests outside warfare was the peculiar institution known as the Table of Honour (Germ. *Ehrentisch*), a prestigious ceremonial banquet given once per season by the Order. It was an all-

³⁸ Anette Löffler, "Hohe Feste, niedere Feste. Der liturgische Festalltag in den Konventen des Deutschen Ordens," *Ordines Militares Colloquia Torunensia Historica. Yearbook for the Study of the Military Orders* 29 (2024): 41–68; Helen J. Nicholson, "Saints Venerated in the Military Orders," in *Selbstbild und Selbstverständnis der geistlichen Ritterorden*, ed. Roman Czaja and Jürgen Sarnowsky, *Ordines Militares. Colloquia Torunensia Historica XIII* (Toruń: Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika, 2005), 91–113.

³⁹ Christofer Herrmann, "Alltag und Lebensverhältnisse des Hochmeisters in der Marienburg in der ersten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts," *Ordines Militares Colloquia Torunensia Historica. Yearbook for the Study of the Military Orders* 29 (2024): 153–176; Hartmut Boockmann, "Spielleute und Gaukler in den Rechnungen des Deutschordens-Hochmeisters," in *Feste und Feiern im Mittelalter*, ed. Detlef Altenburg, Jörg Jarnut, and Hans-Hugo Steinhoff (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1991), 217–227; Marek Radocz, "Karły w służbie zakonu niemieckiego w Prusach," in *Pomerania – Prussia – Polonia. Rozprawy ofiarowane prof. Wiesławowi Długoszkiemu z okazji 65. urodzin*, ed. Rafał Kubicki (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2022), 378–401.

male gathering, restricted to the Order's high officers and around a dozen of the most distinguished crusaders, who were selected according to the testimony of the heralds present in Prussia. These favoured individuals were presented with badges bearing the motto "Honour Conquers All" in golden letters. This institution was thus a considerable concession to ideas of worldly honour, especially individual valour, and one might argue, vanity, which went against the entire religious ethos of the order.⁴⁰ There is some evidence that women were present at feasts organised by the crusaders themselves; Peter Suchenwirt relates that on reaching Thorn, Duke Albrecht invited elegant, well-dressed ladies to partake of his hospitality, but these are likely to have been the womenfolk of the local nobility and wealthier burgesses, and no officers of the Order appear to have been present. There was further feasting when the Austrians reached the court of Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode at Marienburg, although there is no mention of women on this occasion.⁴¹ In fact, the paucity of references to women in the accounts of feasts and other entertainments in general suggests that the majority of guests restrained any sexual desires for the duration of their stays and compensated for the lack of female company with the physical activities of campaigning and hunting, and other activities which can be regarded as male bonding.

The foregoing discussion has established a significant difference between two of the major theatres of crusading. In the crusades to the Levant many lords and knights were accompanied by their wives, especially if they intended to settle in the East, although it is likely that in the majority of cases wives remained at home to oversee estates and families. Lower-status women, however, were probably faced with a choice of accompanying their menfolk or facing economic hardship or possibly destitution. It was only the shift to seaborne expeditions from the time of the Third Crusade onwards that significantly reduced the numbers of women who were able to reach the Holy Land. Travel to the Baltic region was much less arduous, while life in Prussia was certainly safer and potentially more congenial than in Palestine or Egypt. There was no practical reason why women could not have accompanied their menfolk to Prussia, yet this evidently did not happen. It is difficult to prove conclusively, but I would suggest that, among other factors, the absence of women among the crusaders in Prussia was to a large extent influenced by the Teutonic Order's views of the female sex as presenting temptation and unnecessary distraction from the proper conduct of Holy War. Whether the Order

⁴⁰ Albert S. Cook, "Beginning the Board in Prussia," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 14 (1915): 375-88.

⁴¹ Peter Suchenwirt, "Von Herzog Albrechts Ritterschaft," ed. Strehlke, lines 69-160.

actively discouraged the presence of women with crusaders is difficult to say, but it would seem that the ambience of crusading in Prussia was not conducive to their presence. The Western crusaders may have aspired to deeds which would increase their reputation among high-status women (and men) of their home countries, but they did not countenance their own womenfolk accompanying them to Prussia. As a result, the crusades against the Lithuanians were fought by two all-male social groups which had quite contrasting views of women. The knight brethren of the Teutonic Order were sworn to lifelong celibacy and were obliged by their vows to avoid the temptations of the flesh; the lay crusaders, by contrast, were sexually active men who often undertook their crusades in the hope of gaining honour and the recognition of women. The Order allowed the secular crusaders to indulge in many worldly pursuits, from banqueting to hunting, and even encouraged these, for example, by the gift of falcons to important crusaders. In turn the crusaders were obliged to submit to a temporary celibacy, not only on while campaign, but also during their stays in the cities of Prussia. The effect of the compromise between the two groups – each with a fundamentally different ethos – produced a quite unusual phenomenon when compared with expeditions to the Levant: a crusade without women.

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