

# THE TEUTONIC KNIGHTS

A MILITARY HISTORY

*William Urban*



## *The Battle of Tannenberg*



### **Background**

Two conflicts formed the bookends, so to say, of the fourteenth century in Prussia. The first, which began in the first decade of the century, was the order's acquisition of West Prussia, originally known as Pomerellia. This was a vital territory in several senses: its eastern border was the Vistula River, so that any hostile power possessing Pomerellia could interrupt the vital traffic up and down stream; its people and warriors were an important resource for the Prussian economy (especially the city of Danzig) and the order's war machine; and French, Burgundian, and German crusaders were able to travel to Prussia safely via Brandenburg, Neumark, and Pomerellia whenever the preferred route across Great Poland was closed. The Polish kings and the Polish Church, however, viewed the acquisition of Pomerellia by war and purchase as nothing less than theft. As far as they were concerned, no matter what Pomerellia's past or ethnic composition was, it was a Polish land, as the payment of Peter's Pence to the pope proved – no German state paid this tax, but the Polish lands did; and the patriots missed no opportunity to bemoan the loss of this province.

The second conflict, which concluded at the very end of the century, was over Samogitia. The Teutonic Knights saw this territory partly as a land bridge to Livonia that would permit year-round communication with their northern possessions, and partly as the heart of pagan resistance to conversion. Lithuanian grand princes, whose authority was seldom recognised by the Samogitians, fought hard to retain it as a part of their national patrimony.

Surprisingly, the Teutonic Knights had managed to make peace both with Poland (the Peace of Kalish, 1343) and Lithuania (the Peace of Sallinwerder, 1398). Two Lithuanians, Jagiełło of Poland and Vytautas of Lithuania, even

assisted in ending Samogitian resistance to the order in return for its aid in expeditions against Moscow and the Tatars.

This era of co-operation came to an end in 1409, after an insurrection in Samogitia. The Teutonic Knights had reasons to believe that Vytautas had encouraged the rebels, and that behind Vytautas was the sly hand of Jagiełło. Their usually cautious diplomacy, however, was now in the hands of a brash new grand master, Ulrich von Jungingen, who was not only relatively young but seemed to believe that his military order had lost sight of its original purpose – to fight pagans. By that he understood Samogitians and their allies, not distant Rus'ians, Tatars, pirates, or Turks. He saw the immediate enemies right at hand: Poland and Lithuania.

The grand master's haughty demands that the Poles and Lithuanians cease providing aid to the Samogitian rebels provoked cries for war in both nations. But it was not yet clear that hotheads in Poland would move to action the more cautious mass of nobles and clergy who remained in awe of the Teutonic Knights' military reputation.



### **The Changing Balance of Power**

The membership of the Teutonic Knights, and especially the grand master's council, were confident of their ability to intimidate Polish nobles, Lithuanian boyars, and the prelates of both nations, no matter that the patriotic ire of powerful groups had been raised by Grand Master Ulrich's actions in 1409. They believed that the Polish and Lithuanian rulers had too many distractions to make common cause against them; moreover, they believed too that Vytautas and Jagiełło mistrusted one another too much to co-operate militarily – everyone knew the story of their feud's origin and their many subsequent reconciliations and falling-outs – and their nobles and churchmen were, like their counterparts in the West, difficult to lead. Also, since Jagiełło and Vytautas had never yet tried to bring their armies into the heart of Prussia, it seemed unlikely that they would do more than launch attacks at widely separated points, probably in Samogitia and West Prussia, perhaps Culm. The grand master could meet these attacks by using local resources defensively against the less dangerous threats and concentrating his mobile forces against the main army, which would probably invade West Prussia.

In addition, everyone was aware that Jagiełło and Vytautas had a permanent problem to their east, where Tatars were always a danger, and to the south, where Sigismund could raise levies in his Hungarian, Bohemian, and

Silesian lands and invade Poland at short notice. Lastly, almost every German knight believed that Polish nobles might be willing to fight in defence of their homeland but would be reluctant to approve raising troops for offensive warfare; it was axiomatic that the Polish prelates and knights would talk bravely but nevertheless refuse to approve funds for war or to authorise calling out the feudal levy. That miscalculation was founded on a well-proven rule, that the Poles had long mistrusted Jagiełło almost as much as did Vytautas and the Teutonic Order. However, time changes all things, and Jagiełło's relationship with his subjects had changed over the decade he had been king; they had learned to trust him more; they had become accustomed to him. He may not have produced a son yet, but there was a daughter, significantly named Jadwiga for her mother, who would inherit the throne some day. The Poles were more confident now that Jagiełło was their king, not simply a Lithuanian prince out for the main chance.

This changed attitude displayed itself in December 1409, when Nicholas Traba, a future archbishop of Gniezno, took part in the secret meeting of Jagiełło and Vytautas at Brest to make plans for war. Their subsequent diplomatic offensive won Duke Johan of Masovia as an ally, though not Duke Ziemowit IV, who remained neutral, nor the dukes of Pomerania, who became allies of the Teutonic Order. Most importantly, the people of Poland and Lithuania were prepared psychologically for the great conflict to come.

Even those few Germans who thought that Jagiełło might fight did not expect a great battle to come about as a result of the bluster, the embargo, or the grand master's raid into Masovia and Great Poland. First of all, large battles were a rare phenomenon – the risks were too great and the financial rewards too few, especially when compared to the security of raiding lands defended only by half-armed peasants or demanding ransom from burghers. Secondly, except for sporadic conflicts such as that in 1409 there had been peace between Poland and Prussia for seven decades now, and since the Samogitian issue had been resolved in the Treaties of Sallinwerder (1398) and Raczan (1404), why should there be war with Lithuania? Few living Germans or Prussians could remember the last significant Polish or Lithuanian invasion. A border raid from Great Poland or on some less well-protected frontier area of East Prussia was likely, after which another truce would be signed. On the principal issue, Samogitia, surely the Lithuanians in 1410, like the Poles in 1409, would back down?

Similarly, it was unlikely that the grand master would invade Poland again. Once the Poles had reinforced their border fortresses the grand master could not expect another series of easy victories without considerable help from crusaders; and it was unlikely that large numbers of volunteers would come to Prussia to participate in the invasion of a

Christian kingdom, though a good number of German and Bohemian mercenaries would travel east if financial incentives were added to the usual chivalric attractions. An invasion of Lithuania was completely out of the question; no grand master had ever sent a major force east unless he was certain that the Poles would refrain from raiding Prussia as soon as the garrisons rode into the wilderness – and such co-operation was very doubtful now. Lastly, the issues at stake did not seem to be of sufficient importance for any ruler to justify the risk of hazarding a pitched battle. That was the reason that, although the rival popes in Rome and Avignon and the rival emperors, Wenceslas of Bohemia and Ruprecht of the Palatinate, took some notice of the escalating tension throughout 1409 and 1410, their efforts at reconciliation were minimal; extraordinary measures did not seem merited for a distant conflict over inconsequential lands and personal vanities.

Western Europeans took little notice of Prussia because they had much more important concerns of their own to deal with – the Council of Pisa, which was supposed to end the Great Schism in the Church,\* but which seemed to be doing little more than complicate an already difficult situation; the continuing northward advance of the Turks, who were marching out of the Balkans into the Steiermark and Croatia to threaten the lands of the Cilly family (who were related by marriage to both King Jagiełło and King Sigismund of Hungary) and thus open the way across the Alpine mountain barriers into Austria and Italy; and the war between Burgundy and France, which occupied so many families that had once sent crusaders to Prussia. Yet a great battle did occur on 15 July 1410, on a field between the villages of Tannenberg and Grunwald (Grünfelde).

This battle at Tannenberg/Grunwald/Žalgris – as Germans, Poles, and Lithuanians respectively call it – has assumed a prominence that exaggerates its real significance. The history of north central Europe was not suddenly transformed by this one battle. Changes in the balance of power were well under way before the battle was fought, and those changes were so fundamental that one can hardly imagine a greatly different world today if the battle had not taken place. The kingdom of Poland was already on the rise, and the day of the military orders had passed. It is not likely that the Teutonic Knights could have maintained political or military equality with

\* The French supported the Avignon pope, the English and many Germans the Roman pope, and the Council of Pisa provided a third candidate for universal recognition. The situation in Germany became somewhat clearer after the death of Ruprecht of the Rhine. Germans, despairing of King Wenceslas ever amounting to anything, began to discuss whether his brother, Sigismund of Hungary, would be an effective Holy Roman emperor. Sigismund linked his candidacy with efforts to resolve the problems of the Church.

a nation as populous, creative, wealthy, and energetic as Poland; moreover, since Poland was a multi-ethnic state and this was the fifteenth century, not the twenty-first, there would have been few, if any, changes in the ethnic composition of Prussia had those lands come into the immediate possession of the Polish crown. Within a year of the great battle the Teutonic Knights were able to defend themselves again and expel the Poles and Lithuanians from their territories. Nevertheless, the battle was so costly to the order in men and material that subsequent grand masters were never again able to regain the power or prestige their predecessors had enjoyed. For the Teutonic Knights the road led downhill from that day on, until the Thirteen Years' War (1453–66) brought complete disaster. Therefore, although the battle of Tannenberg may not be the decisive moment in the history of medieval Prussia, it was the start of a rapid and progressively steeper decline.

In the final analysis, Tannenberg was important because it was a highly dramatic event that lent itself to endless retelling, and, rightly or wrongly, the fortunes of entire peoples could be easily related to it.



### Political Manoeuvring

Not even the participants had anticipated anything like the battle that did occur. Although there had been bad feelings between the grand masters and the Lithuanian cousins for decades, the military conflict that began in August 1409 was not beyond a compromise settlement. There was international pressure applied by the popes individually to arrange just such a compromise peace, so that Christendom could stand united in its efforts to restore unity in the Church and drive back the Turks from the borders of Austria and Hungary, or at least stem their raids to collect slaves and booty.

Foremost of the secular rulers seeking to forestall the conflict was Wenceslas of Bohemia. Though widely repudiated as Holy Roman emperor by his German subjects, he sent representatives in 1409 to mediate the quarrel. They brought Ulrich von Jungingen and King Jagiełło together on 4 October for five days of talks that resulted in a truce until St John's Day (24 June) the following year. This sign of reconciliation made many hope that further compromises could be reached. The most important article in the truce agreement authorised Wenceslas to propose fair terms for a permanent peace settlement. His proposal was to be presented before Lent, a date that allowed additional negotiations to take place before the truce expired. The critical months, however, were those before Lent, when Ulrich

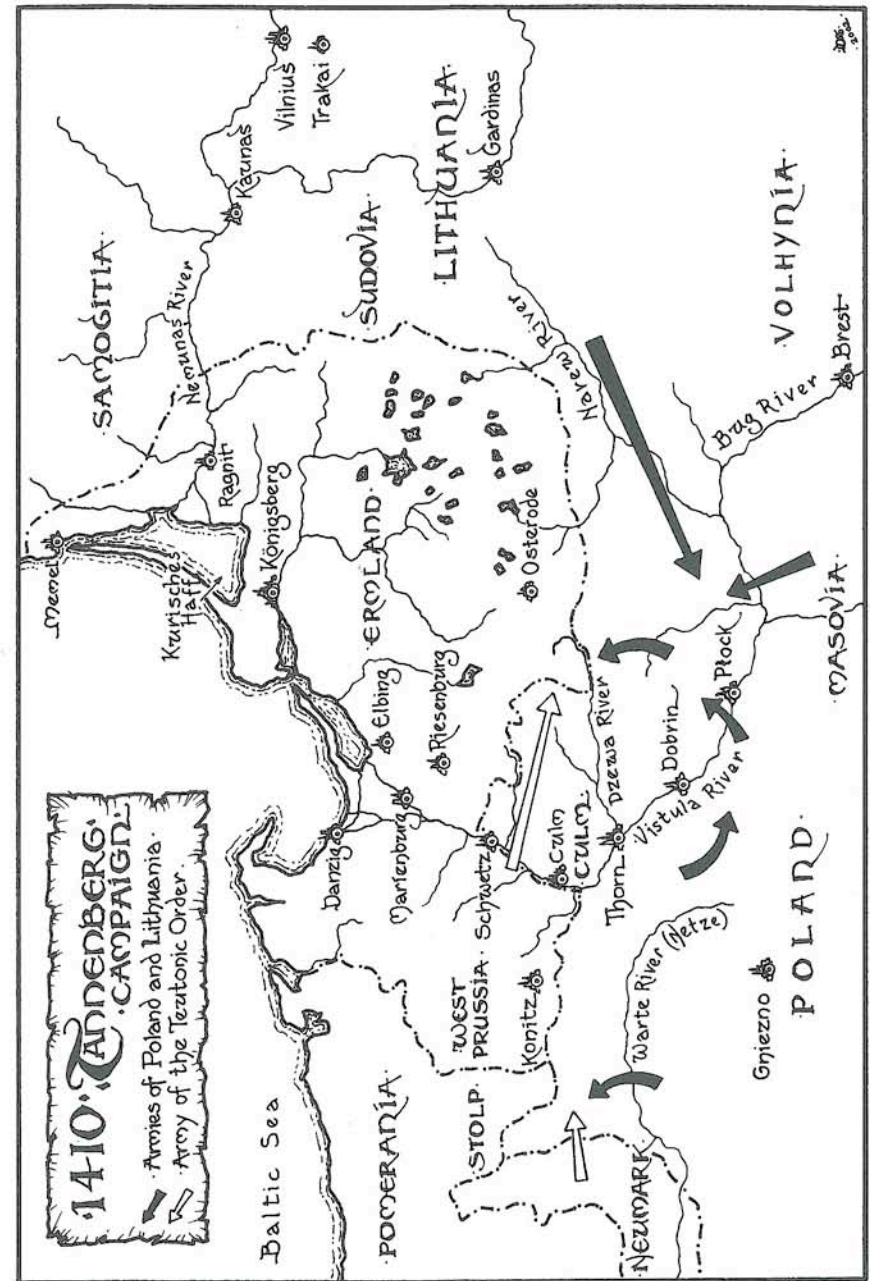
von Jungingen and Jagiełło each sought to sway the notoriously fickle monarch in his own favour.\*

The grand master had a short history of the Samogitian crusade prepared, a document that depicted the Lithuanians as undependable turncoats who had violated their promises to the Poles in 1386 and to the Germans in 1398; moreover, it claimed that those Lithuanians who were indeed Christians were, in fact, members of the heretic Russian Orthodox faith, and that the Samogitians were complete pagans who had not allowed a single baptism in the past five years. Not relying on letters alone, the grand master sent an imposing delegation to Hungary. Those representatives signed an alliance with King Sigismund in December and agreed to pay him 40,000 *Gulden* for his assistance. Sigismund, in turn, honoured his guests by asking them to be godfathers to his newly born daughter, Elisabeth. From Hungary the delegates went to Bohemia to present final arguments before Wenceslas rendered his decision on 8 February 1410.

The core of the Bohemian peace proposal was to return to the *status quo ante bellum*. Those were hardly terms likely to please Vytautas and Jagiełło, especially since the Lithuanian complaints were ignored and the Poles were admonished to abstain from any and all aid to the Samogitian 'non-Christians'. Wenceslas warned that he would attack whichever party refused to honour the treaty he proposed – a conventional threat without much substance to it. The Teutonic Knights had won a total victory, right down to confirmation of their right to possess West Prussia and the Neumark. In fact it was too thorough a victory, too one-sided. There was never any possibility of persuading the king of Poland to accept the mediator's terms.

The time for the order's celebration was short. Polish diplomats remained in Prague for a month, arguing vainly that the terms of the peace treaty were unfair, until Wenceslas finally lost his temper and threatened to make war on Poland himself. The Poles departed, certain that war with the Teutonic Knights, at least, would follow; perhaps there would be a gigantic conflict with all their western neighbours as well. Jagiełło, who read Wenceslas' personality more accurately, was less intimidated: he rejected all proposals for further negotiations, and when Wenceslas summoned him to a conference in Breslau in May, he left the emperor and the Teutonic Knights waiting in vain for Polish representatives, who had already announced that they would not come.

\* Historians remember Wenceslas mainly for his drunkenness. Britons and Americans remember him for the Christmas carol dating from the marriage of his daughter to King Richard II, 'Good King Wenceslas'. Czechs remember him for throwing the archbishop of Prague from Charles Bridge to drown.





## The Raising of Armies

The armies began to gather. When ready, Jagiello summoned Vytautas to join him in Masovia. Until recently that had required a journey through a dense, swampy wilderness. However, thanks to the opening of the trade route along the Narew River it was now possible for Vytautas to bring his men to the desired location near Płock without undue difficulties. The bulk of the royal forces remained on the western bank of the Vistula, but Jagiello sent Polish knights to the other bank to hold the fords for Vytautas, and more troops were coming in daily. By mid-June the king had at his disposal a force of more than 30,000 cavalry and infantry (18,000 Polish knights and squires, with a few thousand foot soldiers; some Bohemian and Moravian mercenaries; 11,000 Lithuanian, Russian, and Tatar cavalry, a formidable contingent from Moldavia led by its prince, Alexander the Good, and some Samogitians).

Grand Master Ulrich had raised a huge force too, perhaps 20,000 strong. Since Jungingen had allowed the Livonian master to conclude a truce with Vytautas, however, none of those excellent knights were able to join him; in any case, the northern knights were not enthusiastic about the war, and although the Livonian master sent word to Vytautas immediately that the truce would expire at the end of the grace period, he would not send troops to Prussia or attack Lithuania's vulnerable northern lands until that time had passed. Moreover, since Jungingen could raise only about 10,000 cavalry in Prussia the rest of his warriors were 'pilgrims' and mercenaries. Sigismund had sent two prominent nobles with 200 knights, and Wenceslas had allowed the grand master to hire a large number of his famed Bohemian warriors.

The numbers for both armies are very inexact, with estimates varying from half the totals given above to almost astronomical figures. In all cases, however, the proportion of troops in the armies remained about the same: three to two in favour of the Polish king and the Lithuanian grand prince. But the grand master had a compensating advantage in equipment and organisation, and especially in having nearby fortresses for supplies and refuge; and since, as far as he knew, the enemy forces had not yet joined, he believed that he could fight them one at a time. A few of Jagiello's and Vytautas' commanders had served together in earlier campaigns, some against the Tatars, some against the crusaders; nevertheless, their army was composed of troops so diverse that maintaining cohesion would be difficult. Jungingen had a larger number of disciplined knights who were accustomed

to fighting as units, but he also had levies of secular knights and crusaders who were prey to fits of enthusiasm and panic; he was also fighting on the defensive, better able to fall back on prepared positions and more informed about roads, tracks, and what obstacles were passable. The odds were fairly nearly equal.

An order chronicler, an anonymous contemporary continuing the earlier work by Johann von Posilge, described the preliminaries of the battle in vivid detail, thereby giving useful insights into the attitude the crusaders held toward their opponents:

[King Jagiello] gathered the Tatars, Russians, Lithuanians, and Samogitians against Christendom . . . So the king met with the non-Christians and with Vytautas, who came through Masovia to aid him, and with the duchess . . . [T]here was so large an army that it is impossible to describe, and it crossed from Płock toward the land of Prussia. At Thorn were the important counts of Gora and Stiborz, whom the king of Hungary had sent especially to Prussia to negotiate the issues and controversies between the order and Poland; but they could do nothing about the matter and finally departed from the king, who followed his evil and divisive will to injure Christendom. He was not satisfied with the evil men of the pagans and Poles, but he had hired many mercenaries from Bohemia, Moravia, and all kinds of knights and men-at-arms, who against all honour and goodness and honesty went with heathendom against the Christians to ravage the lands of Prussia.

One hardly expects a balanced judgement from chroniclers, but the accusations of hiring mercenaries certainly strikes the modern reader as odd, since the Teutonic Knights were doing the same thing. Men of the Middle Ages, like many today, hated passionately, often acted impulsively, and reasoned irrationally. Yet they were capable of behaving very logically too. The leaders of the armies soon gave proof that they were men of their era, acting as they did alternately with cool reason and hot temper. Reason predominated at the outset of the campaign.

The Hungarian count palatine and the voivode of Transylvania mentioned in the passage above returned south hurriedly to collect troops on the southern border of Poland. Their threat was unconvincing, however; consequently they had no effect on the campaign at all. Sigismund, as was his wont, had promised more than he was willing to deliver; he did nothing beyond allowing the grand master to hire mercenaries, though he was in northern Hungary at the time and could have raised a large force quickly.



## The Invasion of Prussia

The strategies of the two commanders contrasted greatly. The grand master divided his forces in the traditional manner between East and West Prussia, awaiting invasions at widely scattered points and relying on his scouts to determine the greatest threats, his intention being to concentrate his forces quickly wherever necessary to drive back the invaders. Jagiełło, however, planned to concentrate the Lithuanian and Polish armies into one huge body, an unusual tactic. Although adopted from time to time in the Hundred Years' War, it was more common among the Mongols and Turks – enemies the Poles and Lithuanians had fought often. The Teutonic Knights did the same during their *Reisen* into Samogitia, but those had been much smaller armies.

In this phase of the campaign Jagiełło's generalship was exemplary. As soon as he heard that Vytautas had crossed the Narew River he ordered his men to build a 450-metre pontoon bridge over the Vistula River. Within three days he had brought the main royal host to the east bank, then dismantled the bridge for future use. By 30 June his men had joined Vytautas. On 2 July the entire force began to move north. The king had thus far cleverly avoided the grand master's efforts to block his way north and even kept his crossing of the Vistula a secret until the imperial peace envoys informed Jungingen. Even then the grand master failed to credit the report, so sure was he that the main attack would come on the west bank of the Vistula and be conducted by only the Polish forces.

When Jungingen obtained confirmation of the envoys' story he hurriedly crossed the great river with his army and sought a place where he could intercept the enemy in the southern forest and lake region, before Lithuanian and Polish foragers could fan out among the rich villages of the settled areas in the river valleys. His plan was still purely defensive – to use his enemies' numbers against them, anticipating that they would exhaust their food and fodder more swiftly than his own well-supplied forces. The foe had not yet trod Prussian ground.

The grand master had left 3,000 men under Heinrich von Plauen at Schwetz (Swiecie) on the Vistula, to protect West Prussia from a surprise invasion in case the Poles managed to elude him again and then strike down-river into the richest parts of Prussia before he could cross the river again. Plauen was a respected but minor officer, suitable for a responsible defensive post but not seen as a battlefield leader. Jungingen wanted to have his most valuable officers with him, to offer sound advice and provide examples of

wisdom, courage, and chivalry. Jungingen was relatively young, and a bit hot-headed, but all his training advised him to err on the side of caution until battle was joined. Daring was a virtue in the face of the enemy, but not before.

Jagiełło, too, was a careful general. Throughout his entire career he had avoided risks. No story exists of his ever having put his life in danger or led horsemen in a wild charge against a formidable enemy. Yet neither was there the slightest hint of cowardice. Societal norms were changing. Everyone acknowledged the responsibility of the commander to remain alive; everyone accepted the fact that the commander should guide the fortunes of his army rather than seek fame in personal combat.

Consequently it was no surprise that the king's advance toward enemy territory was slow. His caution was understandable. After all, he could not be certain that his ruse had worked; and he had great respect for Jungingen's military skills. Without doubt, he worried that he would stumble into an ambush and give the crossbearers their greatest victory ever. He must have been half-relieved when his scouts reported that the crusaders had taken up a defensive position at a crossing of the Dzewa (Drewenz, Drwęca) River. At least he knew where Jungingen was, waiting at the Masovian border. On the other hand, the news that the grand master's position was very strong could not have been welcome.

So far each commander had moved cautiously toward the other. Jagiełło and Jungingen alike feared simple tactical errors, such as being caught by nightfall far from a suitable camping place, or having to pass through areas suitable for ambush or blockade; in addition, they had to provide protection for their transport, reserve horses, and herds of cattle. Although each commander was experienced in directing men in war, these armies were larger than either had brought into battle previously, and the larger the forces, the more danger there was of error, of misunderstanding orders, and of panic.

Judged by those criteria, both commanders deserve high marks for bringing their armies into striking distance of each other without having made serious blunders. Both armies were well-supplied, ready to fight, and confident of a good chance for victory; the officers all knew their opponents well, were familiar with the countryside and the weather, and in full command of the available technology. The resemblance of some formations to armed mobs was offset by martial traditions, individual unit drill, and widespread experience in local wars. Neither army was handicapped by dissensions in command, quarrels among units, unusual prevalence of illness, or excessive anxiety about the impending combat – these problems existed, but they were probably shared equally and were not serious enough to merit mention in contemporary accounts. In short, there were no excuses for failure.

For the Teutonic Knights, each commander, each officer, each knight was as ready for combat as could reasonably be expected. All that remained uncertain was how the battle would begin, how individuals would react, and how the affair would unfold – for those are unknowns always present in warfare. Though many individuals had participated in raids and sieges, few had personal experience in a pitched battle between large armies. Some crusaders may have gained sad experience at Nicopolis in 1396,\* and some of their opponents may have survived Vytautas' 1399 disaster on the Vorskla in the Ukraine against the Tatars, but those would be the only ones who knew what to expect when tens of thousands of combatants came together for a few minutes of intense struggle. Only they knew first-hand that warfare on this scale was chaos beyond imagination, with commanders unable to contact more than a few units, with movement limited by the sheer numbers of men and animals on the field, with the senses overwhelmed by noise, smoke from fires and cannon, and dust stirred up by the horses, the body's natural dehydration worsened by excitement-induced thirst, and exhaustion from stress and exertion. This led to an irrational eagerness for any escape from the tension – either flight or immersion in combat. Aside from that small number of experienced knights there was only the practice field and small-scale warfare in Samogitia, the campaign in Gotland,† and the 1409 invasion of Poland. Those provided good military experience, but there had not been a set-piece combat between the Teutonic Knights and the Lithuanians for forty years, or between the Teutonic Knights and the Poles for almost eighty. Throughout all of Europe, in fact, there had been many campaigns, but few battles. For both veterans and neophytes there was consolation in storytelling, boasting, prayer, and drinking.

The Lithuanians were more experienced, but only in the more open warfare on the steppes and in the forests of Rus'. Riding small horses and wearing light Rus'ian armour, they were not well equipped for close combat with Western knights on large chargers, but they were equal to their enemy in pride and their confidence in their commander. Memory of Vytautas' disaster on the Vorskla had been dimmed by subsequent victorious campaigns against Smolensk, Pskov, Novgorod, and Moscow. Between 1406 and 1408 Vytautas had led armies against his son-in-law, Basil of Moscow, three times, once reaching the Kremlin and at last forcing him to accept a peace treaty

\* French and Hungarian crusaders were massacred by the Turks because they had lacked battlefield discipline. It was an experience that made Sigismund of Hungary extremely cautious for the rest of his long career.

† On behalf of the Prussian merchants and the Hanseatic League, the Teutonic Knights had destroyed a major pirate base at Visby, then held the island for several years against Danish efforts to retake it.

that restored the 1399 frontiers. Vytautas' strength was in his cavalry's ability to go across country that defensive forces might consider impassable; his weakness was that lightly-equipped horsemen could not survive a charge by heavy warhorses bearing well-armoured knights – he counted on his Tatar scouts to prevent such an event happening by surprise.

The mounted Polish forces were more numerous and better equipped for a pitched battle with the Germans, but they lacked confidence in their ability to stand up to the Teutonic Knights. The contemporary Polish historian Długosz complained about their unreliability, their lust for booty, and their tendency to panic. Most Polish knights – at least 75% – sacrificed armour for speed and endurance, but they were not as 'oriental' as the Lithuanians. In this they hardly differed from the majority of the order's forces, light cavalry suitable to local conditions. Of the rest, many Polish knights wore plate armour and preferred the crossbow to the spear, just as did many of the Teutonic Knights' heavy cavalry. The weakness lay in training and experience: many Polish knights were weekend warriors, landlords and young men; they were non-professionals who knew that they were up against the best trained and equipped troops in Christendom. Although some of them had served under the king previously, he seems to have drawn more troops from the north for this campaign than from the south; and it was the southern knights who had served with him in Galicia and Sandomir. Jagiełło could have called up more knights, but he could not have found room for them at the campsites, much less fed them. The masses of almost untrained peasant militia were much easier to manage; their noble lords could assume they would feed themselves and they could sleep outside no matter what the weather was. While the peasants' usefulness in battle was small – at best they could divert the enemy for a short while, allowing the cavalry time to regroup or to retreat – they were good at pillaging the countryside, thereby helping feed the army, and the smoke of villages they set afire might confuse the enemy as to where the main strength of the royal host lay.

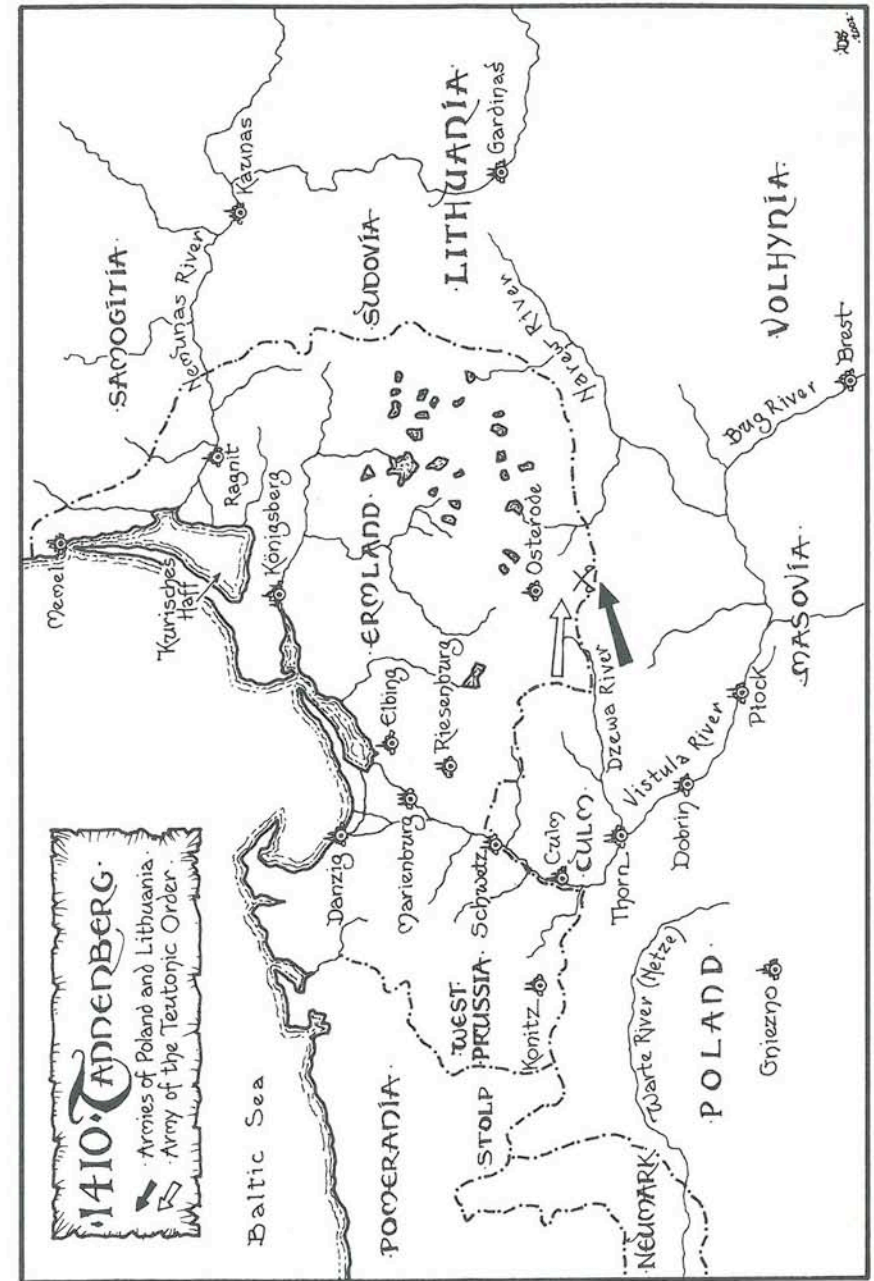
The size of Jagiełło's and Vytautas' armies must have created serious problems for the rear columns. By the time thousands of horses had ridden along the roads, the mud in low-lying places must have been positively liquid, making marching difficult and pulling carts almost impossible; moreover, the larger any body of men and the more exhausted they became the more likely they were to give in to inexplicable panic. Scouting reports were unreliable; there were too many woods, streams, and enemy patrols. Nevertheless, the king, no matter how exhausted, nervous, or unsure he and his military advisors might be, had to avoid giving any impression of indecisiveness or fear; he had to appear calm at all times. Jagiełło's dour personality lent itself to this role. A non-drinker, he was sober at all times, and his demeanour was that



of total self-control. His love of hunting had prepared him well for the hours on horseback and feeling at home in the deepest woods; he would have regarded the lightly inhabited forests of Dobrin and Płock as tame stuff indeed. Vytautas was the perfect foil; he was the energetic and inspirational leader who was everywhere at once, at home among warriors and disdainful of supposed hardships. No common soldier could complain that their commanders did not understand the warrior's life or the dangers of the forest, or that they did not share the tribulations of life on the march.

This need to appear to be in command was itself a danger – any army on the march can be held up at a ford or a narrow place between lakes and swamps, even if no enemy is present. The commander has to give some order, any order, even if it's only 'sit down', rather than seem to be unable to make a decision. Such circumstances, compounded by exhaustion, thirst, or anxiety, often resulted in hurriedly issued orders to attack or retreat that the men are unable to carry out effectively. In short, circumstances might limit the royal options to bad ones, and the perceived need for haste might cause the king to select the worst of those available. Jagiełło was certainly aware of all this, for he was an experienced campaigner. However, for many years his strength had lain in persuading his foes to retreat ahead of overwhelming numbers, or in besieging strongholds; his goal had always been to prepare the way for diplomacy. Now he was leading a gigantic army to a confrontation with a hitherto invincible foe, to fight, if the enemy commander so chose, a pitched battle in hostile territory.

Jagiełło seemed to have been checked at the Dzewa River before he could cross into Prussia. He was unwilling to attempt to force a crossing at the only nearby ford in the face of a strongly-entrenched enemy; he would not find it easy to move eastward and upstream – while the headwaters of the Dzewa presented no significant obstacle to his advance, the countryside there had once been thickly forested, and important remnants of the ancient wilderness still remained. Most importantly, although the Teutonic Knights had used the century of peace to establish many settlements in the rolling countryside, the roads connecting the villages were narrow and winding. There were too many hills and swamps for roads to proceed from point to point, and strangers could easily lose their sense of direction in the dense woods. The villagers were fleeing into fortified refuges or the forest. Although many of the inhabitants spoke Polish (immigrants not being subject to linguistic tests in those days), they were loyal to the Teutonic Order, and none wanted to fall into the hands of Vytautas' flying squadrons – especially not the terrifying Tatars – which were trying to locate the defensive forces and find a way around them. Making peasants give information or serve as guides was part of warfare. Burning villages marked the progress of the scouting units.



Though this could hardly have been seen easily by the two armies confronting one another at the ford, they might well have been aware of the rising columns of smoke.

However, terrorising the countryside, burning, and pillaging was a far cry from the battle tactics that the Poles had become accustomed to; the long era of peace had softened the sensibilities of these amateur warriors. Polish knights were soon complaining to Jagiełło about their allies' behaviour – Tatars hauling women into their tents and then raping them repeatedly, killing peasants who spoke Polish, treating captives inhumanely – until the king finally ordered the prisoners released and admonished the steppe horsemen to avoid such cruel practices in the future. This restraint was not in his best interests – the king's best hope for making Jungingen weaken his position was to wreak such destruction on nearby rural communities that the grand master would feel compelled to send troops to protect them. However, within a short time Jagiełło and Vytautas saw that Jungingen was too good a commander to disperse his forces at such a critical moment.

The king must have been frustrated, yet he was unwilling either to allow his campaign to end from empty bellies or send his men to be slaughtered on some obscure river bank. While it was not clear that he could move eastward through the woods and swamps and around the incredibly complicated system of lakes without being easily blocked by the grand master, then forced to fight at a disadvantage, that seemed his only hope. This was, after all, the grand master's home ground, and surely the Teutonic Knights would have seen to the building of some roads. If so, however, why were they not using them now to harass the Polish rear?

Jungingen, for his part, does not seem to have worried about a Polish flanking manoeuvre. Teutonic Knights from nearby convents had hunted for recreation in these woods; hence they were familiar with every village, field, and forest; they knew well how the many long, narrow, twisting lakes would limit the options available to invading armies. Polish and Lithuanian scouts had been active for days, looking for paths through the surrounding woods, and they had yet to find one. The assurance of such local residents as had undoubtedly agreed to act as guides and scouts for the Teutonic Knights, that the roads were not suitable for the use of any large army, may have given Jungingen more confidence in his superior strategic position than was warranted.

This confidence was misplaced, however. When the Lithuanian scouts reported that they had found some roads leading toward Osterode that could be used – if the army moved before the Germans learned what was planned – the king and grand prince acted on the information quickly.

Jagiełło consulted with his inner council, then gave orders to prepare for a secret, swift march eastward and north around Jungingen's fortified posi-

tion. He assigned each unit its place in the order of march and instructed everyone to obey the two guides who knew the country. The royal trumpeter would give the signals in the morning; until then no one was to make any movement or noise that might betray his plans prematurely. Unless his army could get a start of many hours, the stratagem was hopeless. Meanwhile, he sent a herald to make another effort at a peaceful settlement of the matter. Quite likely this was a deceptive manoeuvre to persuade the grand master that the king was in a desperate situation, but it might also have been a *pro forma* means of persuading the peace commissioners that he was truly desirous of ending the war without further bloodshed. It is hard to imagine what terms Jungingen might have considered acceptable in this situation, but the grand master nevertheless called a meeting of his officers; with one exception, they preferred war to further negotiations.

Jagiełło's actions may well have increased the grand master's overconfidence in the superiority of his situation. Certainly, when Jungingen's scouts saw the Polish camp empty, they assumed that the king was withdrawing. The Germans crossed the river on swiftly erected pontoon bridges and set out in pursuit, knowing that there is nothing easier to destroy than an army on the retreat. However, when the scouts saw that the Poles and Lithuanians were moving north-east in two columns, working their way in a wide arc around their flank, Jungingen had to reconsider his plans. If his men continued following the enemy units, they would not be able to stop Vytautas' Tatars from torching countless villages; worse, they might find themselves trailing the enemy through deep forests or fall into an ambush at some ford with nothing but desolated lands and wilderness at their rear. Therefore the grand master changed the direction of his advance in order to get ahead of the enemy columns. In fact the speed at which Jungingen's army moved almost caused it to overshoot the Polish and Lithuanian line of march. Meanwhile, the Polish scouts had completely lost contact with the Germans and were surprised when they found Jungingen once again blocking the roads north.

Jagiełło, in luring the German forces east, away from their strong fortresses in Culm, was moving his own army far from safe refuges, too; moreover, he had divided his forces, sending the Lithuanians east and north of the road used by the Poles. Should the grand master somehow attack his forces by surprise, especially before they could reunite, Jagiełło might suffer an irreversible disaster. Because many Poles still considered him a Lithuanian under the skin, Jagiełło was placing his crown at risk in seeking battle under such conditions. This was something that Ulrich von Jungingen surely understood – a victory over the Polish and Lithuanian armies could ruin his order's ancient enemies now and forever.

What the grand master did not understand was the need to remain calm and rational. When scouts reported to him that the invaders had gone as far as Gilgenberg and had burned the city, inflicting indescribable outrages on the citizens, Jungingen's temper flared. No more positional warfare – he would march on the foe by night and attack by surprise at dawn. When the grand master set his army in motion he was taking a risk that he could have avoided. The best-informed German chronicler, Posilge, described the recent movements of the two armies thus:

The grand master with his forces and the guests and mercenaries rode against the king to the border near Drewenz, near Kauernik, and the two armies camped opposite one another. Because the king of Poland did not dare cross the Drewenz, he went toward Gilgenberg and took that city and burned it, and they struck dead young and old and with the heathens committed so many murders as was unholy, dishonouring maidens, women, and churches, cutting off their breasts and torturing them, and driving them off to serfdom. Also the heathens committed great blasphemies on the sacraments; whenever they came into the churches they ground the host in their hands and threw it under their feet, and in that way committed their insults. Their great blasphemies and insults went to the hearts of the grand master, the whole order, and to all the knights and men-at-arms among the guests; and they rode with righteous indignation against the king from Lubov to Tannenberg, to the village in the district of Osterode, and came upon the king without warning, having come in great haste fifteen miles by daybreak on the 15th of July. And when they could see the enemy, they formed their ranks and held the enemy in sight for more than three hours. The king meanwhile sent the heathens out to skirmish, but the Poles were altogether unready. If they had attacked the king immediately they would have won honour and booty, but that, unfortunately, did not happen; they wanted to call him out to fight chivalrously with them. The marshal sent the king two unsheathed swords with the heralds.

Such were the movements of the two armies. Jungingen had managed to bring his forces against the Poles and Lithuanians without warning, a considerable feat for any era. Then he wasted his advantage, letting the sleepless soldiers stand in battle order without food or drink until the enemy was ready. After that, he had his men dig camouflaged pits to trap the charging Polish cavalry, then ordered a withdrawal from that line so that the royal forces in the woods could have room to deploy in two lines in the open field against him. As a result, not only were his pits now part of the Polish defensive line, but his powerful artillery was now stationed at a place where it was

ineffective; moreover, his infantry was standing where it was difficult to provide proper support for the massed bodies of knights. Even considering that the grand master could hardly expect the Polish knights to charge unless they had room to line up their units, this was poor generalship. Jungingen's troops were tired, wet from a morning shower, hungry, and undoubtedly becoming nervous. Moreover, the day was unusually warm, and the men were not accustomed to heat. Nevertheless, Jungingen had a good chance of prevailing if only he could persuade the king to commit his troops to battle first, allowing the experienced knights the opportunity for one of their long-practised counter-strokes. The grand master's pride, arrogance, and rashness were partly balanced by his courage and skill in battle – and he had a large force behind him. The masses of knights in the huge formations masked the poor placement of his supporting troops and gave him confidence in a total victory.

The sight of the armies forming their lines of battle was something that no participant ever forgot: the grand master's elite corps of white-clad knights around his large white banner with the black cross, the colourful flags of the castellans and bishops; Jagiełło's crowned white eagle on a red field; the archbishop of Gniezno's white cross on a red field; the castellan of Cracow's crowned bear; the Polish marshal's lion-head breathing fire against a blue background; the Lithuanians' white knight (Vytis) on a white horse; and the geometric symbol for Vilnius. The serried ranks of the infantry and bowmen paraded into place, accompanied by music; the artillery was dragged to whatever slight rise might give the cannon a better field of fire. Messengers rode back and forth, ordering units to make small changes in their stations, and officers encouraged their men to stand valiantly and fight bravely.

One cannot ignore the role contemporary values played in this contest. The grand master wasted his advantages by not attacking promptly, then delaying longer in order to send the chivalric challenge for battle – two swords. The king was meanwhile purportedly hearing masses, ignoring the requests by his commanders for instructions. Jagiełło had displayed excellent generalship in bringing his forces into the field, even considering the slowness of his advance after slipping away from the ford so cleverly; now he, too, seemed to let events run their course without his direction. Perhaps the king was using the religious services to delay the beginning of the battle, knowing that the German knights and horses would tire from wearing heavy armour; perhaps he was waiting for reinforcements; and perhaps he was paralysed by exhaustion and indecision. Historians' arguments about this point will never be fully resolved. Perhaps genuine piety persuaded him that time spent in prayer was the most important activity he could undertake at that moment.

Conventional religious practices were generally considered more important than cool-headed strategic or tactical decisions. 'God's will be done.' His opponent, Jungingen, took time for prayer too. The German troops began singing their anthem, *Christ ist erstanden* (Christ is Risen). Meanwhile, the Polish and Lithuanian troops chanted their battle-song, *Bogu rodzica dzewica* (Virgin Mother of God).



### The Combat

The knights with the two swords arrogantly presented them for the king's use and Vytautas', challenging them to come and fight. The king responded calmly, dismissed the heralds, then gave the signal for the battle to begin. While the Poles advanced in reasonably disciplined order, singing their anthem, the Lithuanians charged wildly and scattered the lightly armed units opposite them. Then the contending forces hammered away at one another for about an hour. Beyond this, there is little agreement in the various accounts. Apparently the Poles did not commit their major units, because the Germans remained on the defensive, awaiting an opportunity to charge ruthlessly into the rear of some retreating formation or gap in the lines.

The battle of Tannenberg is still being refought by historians today. Although the outline of the combat is very clear, German, Polish, and Lithuanian historians are not in agreement about the various actions which occurred during the battle, or even where the fighting took place on the broad field. The memorial chapel and mass graves have been located by archaeologists, but since some of those might indicate the slaughtered prisoners and wounded who perished over the following few days, there is no agreement even as to where the armies lined up. This much is agreed upon: the visiting crusaders were stationed on the left opposite the Lithuanians, presumably because they would be more motivated to fight against Tatar pagans than Polish Christians, but perhaps just because that was the most convenient posting; the Teutonic Knights held the centre and right of the line, opposite the Poles and their mercenaries.

The most important description of the battle is that of Jan Długosz, the Polish court historian. It is brief and tends to glorify the Polish contribution to the victory at the expense of the Lithuanian. In sum, he wrote that one wing of the 'crossbearers' defeated the horsemen under Vytautas after fierce fighting. Although Vytautas and the Smolensk regiments remained on the field, the Tatars fled, followed by many Lithuanians and Rus'ians. The German crusaders, seeing the wild flight of the enemy, assumed they had

won a victory and left their positions to pursue them. This left a gap in the order's lines. The Poles, meanwhile, had been holding their own against the Teutonic Knights. Now, seeing their opportunity, they pressed harder, and came in through the gap created on the left when the crusaders broke ranks to pursue the Tatars; soon the Polish knights had put the main battle force of the Teutonic Knights in great difficulty.

This generally accepted understanding of the battle has been modified significantly by a recently discovered letter written in 1413 by a well-informed noble or mercenary captain. Its finger-wagging admonition to keep the ranks of the knights firmly in hand supports an alternate version of the combat given by less well-known chroniclers, that a small number of crusaders attached to the Teutonic Knights had fallen for a tactical ruse by the Lithuanians, a feigned retreat that led pursuers into a trap sprung by Polish knights waiting on the flank. The Lithuanians and Poles then drove into the disordered lines and rolled up the crusader formation.

Jungingen, seeing the disaster unfolding, should probably have sounded the retreat. Nothing of the kind entered his mind, however. His hot blood raging, he gathered together all the knights he could into a wedge formation and charged directly for a slight height where he supposed the king would be found; certainly, he could see the royal banner flying there and a large number of heavily-armed knights. Jungingen did not lack the courage to stake everything on this one charge – he knew that the warhorses would be too exhausted to bear his men from the field if the attack failed. Perhaps he hoped that his charge, coming at a somewhat unexpected angle, would find the Polish forces insufficiently disciplined to change their formation quickly enough to meet him. He was wrong. Vytautas, seen at the centre of Matjeko's painting, had seemingly been everywhere at once on his wing of the battlefield, performing fantastic and courageous feats; he now hurried over to the royal position with his men, perhaps to urge the king to reinforce the main battle lines with his reserves. In any case, Jungingen's advance fell just short of the royal bodyguard. In vain, he yelled 'Retreat!' Surrounded and exhausted, Jungingen perished with a multitude of his best men. The rest of the cavalry, seeing him fall, fled in disorder. Panic quickly spread through the German ranks. The light cavalry from Culm seem to have led the flight. The Polish knights, once they had destroyed the main battle force, turned on the disordered surviving units as they tried to escape down the narrow roads and chewed them up one after another. The rearmost German knights were hindered in their terrified flight by the tangled units ahead of them. Unable to get past the masses of men, horses, and wagons, unable to fight effectively against an enemy coming up from behind, all they could do was to try to surrender or die fighting against hopeless odds. The crusaders

on the victorious left wing came back booty-laden only to fall into the hands of those who held the battlefield. This was Długosz's account of the battle; it quickly became the accepted story. Even the Germans agreed with Długosz, perhaps because he credited the Teutonic Knights with at least a partial victory, a rout of the pagan wing of the great army.

Polish historians emphasise royal generalship. They describe Jagiełło's determination to participate in the combat personally, how the royal banner was brought to earth at one point, and how the king was saved from injury only by the last-moment intervention of Zbigniew Oleśnicki, the royal secretary, when a knight from Meissen, Luppold von Köckritz, charged directly for him. Mythology did not hesitate to turn this incident into a personal combat between Jagiełło and Jungingen. In short, according to Polish patriotic scholarship, Polish intelligence, courage, gallantry, and self-sacrifice had won the day.

Lithuanian historians disagree sharply with this interpretation of events. They insist that Vytautas' men had made a tactical retreat, one common to warfare on the steppe, a ruse that tricked the crusaders from Germany into breaking ranks and dashing into an ambush. They regard the presence of Vytautas and the units from Smolensk fighting in the ranks of the victors during the decisive period of combat as proof that the main Lithuanian forces did not run away, but only lured the Germans into disordering their forces so badly that the way was open for the Polish attack. Credit for the victory should go to the grand prince, who inspired the tactics, who exhausted horse after horse in his relentless direction of the cavalry units, first on the right wing, then at the height of the fighting in the centre, when he brought the reinforcements that repelled Jungingen's charge; not to his rival, Jagiełło, who was practically useless during the entire combat, unable to give commands or to inspire by personal example.

Modern scholars, despite new archaeological information and newly discovered archival material, have not come to complete agreement as to what transpired. Everyone agrees that Jungingen made mistakes in bringing his army onto the field of battle; everyone agrees that Jungingen and Vytautas were brave warriors who risked their lives in desperate combat; almost everyone agrees that Jagiełło, for one reason or another, chose to remain where everyone could see him, by his tent on the hill, and that the decisive moment of battle was when the crusaders' attack on that position failed. All but the Lithuanians are practically unanimous in agreeing that a feigned retreat by an entire army was difficult and risky, although it was a common tactic for small units everywhere in Europe; also, if the retreat was a ruse, why was there no ambush of the pursuing forces? Or was there? More likely, the flight of the Lithuanian wing of the army was not planned. Jagiełło was,

if anything, a cautious commander, and he would have understood that the retreat of an entire wing of his army would have been a disaster if the victorious crusaders had maintained discipline and charged with their full force into the gap left by the fleeing horsemen, then smashed into the flank of the royal forces. On the other hand, the forest at the rear of the Polish line, which would have hindered a retreat, may have shielded the central Polish battle formation from view or from an effective attack from the flank or rear. Because everyone agrees that the Teutonic Knights' defeat resulted from the ill-disciplined pursuit of the Lithuanian forces, the dispute about the motivation of the Lithuanian units cannot be resolved to universal satisfaction: either there was a strategic retreat on the part of a significant fraction of Vytautas' forces or those Lithuanians, Rus'ians, and Tatars had been driven from the field in defeat.

From the standpoint of observers at a distance of almost six centuries, the important fact is that the grand master's lines were left in disarray, a situation that the Polish and Lithuanian units led by Vytautas exploited. Those scholars who put faith in the possibility of a ruse tend to inquire how many Tatars were in Vytautas' levy, as if only steppe warriors could perform such a manoeuvre. Unfortunately, no contemporary source gives us more information about numbers than did Długosz, and not all scholars agree even upon the composition of the Polish and Lithuanian armies. But no matter. The Tatar contingent was not large, and it does not seem to have done any harm to its pursuers. Nor does it matter – the result was the same: the disruption of the German lines on the left wing led to a subsequent victory in the centre by the Polish forces. The Lithuanians had hitherto borne the brunt of the fighting, as the casualty figures substantiate, and they were still contributing significant pressure on the foe's disintegrating lines.

The grand master must have considered ordering a retreat and rejected it; Jungingen's decision to gamble everything on a massive charge at the royal tent might have been the best choice available. A chaotic retreat through the forest might have led to as complete a defeat as the army in fact suffered; and surely there would have been criticism that the grand master had missed his best chance to obtain a total victory over an enemy who was equally exhausted, certainly somewhat disorganised, and perhaps ready to collapse. Already thousands of Poles and Lithuanians had fallen in combat; some units had broken, and others were wavering. Had, by chance or skill, an arrow, spear, or sword brought down the king or great prince, the day would have belonged to Jungingen.

The total losses were almost beyond contemporary calculation: the oldest and also the lowest estimate was that 8,000 men died on each side. For the Teutonic Knights that meant that at least half the armed men perished.

Thousands more became prisoners. Most of the order's troops taken captive were put to the sword; only secular knights and officers were held for ransom. The dazed survivors gathered later, exhausted, wounded, and often without equipment, in the nearest cities and castles.

Jagiello and Vytautas, for their part, were in no position to hurry with their armies into Prussia. Even though victorious, their losses had been heavy. The troops were fatigued; the horses were exhausted. The Lithuanians had fought for many hours, and the Poles had suffered, too, from the lack of sleep and drink, the tension of waiting, and the draining excitement of pitched battle. When the Germans fled, the Poles and Lithuanians had followed them for ten miles, cutting down those they overtook, and driving others into the swamps and forests to perish. When the victorious horsemen returned to camp they needed rest. Those with the most stamina went in search of booty, returning much later as exhausted as those who had been unable to move a foot from the battlefield. Meanwhile, the foot soldiers had been busy on the battlefield, gathering weapons, money, jewellery, and clothing, finishing off the wounded, slaughtering the lower-class prisoners, and burying the dead in mass graves. The Poles and Lithuanians needed a short pause to rest and to celebrate, possibly to pray, and to care for wounded and fallen comrades. Tatars and irregular troops rushed ahead to rob, rape, kill, and burn, starting panics that would hinder the organisation of regional defence.

There was no further effective resistance. The Teutonic Knights had lost so many castellans and advocates, so many knights, and so many militia units, that defences could not be manned. Those who survived had taken refuge wherever they could, often far from their assigned posts. The highest-ranking leaders had fallen almost to a man: the grand master, the marshal, the grand commander, the treasurer, and 200 knights. Marquard von Salzbach, the order's expert on Lithuanian affairs and a former friend of Vytautas, was apparently taken prisoner by Jagiello's men, then beheaded by the grand prince. He had refused to be properly humble and submissive. Arrogant and proud to the end, unrepentant about having taunted Vytautas about his mother's virtue, he and his companions had anticipated being treated in a manner befitting their status; nevertheless, when their fate was clear there is no indication that their courage flagged. They had understood from the beginning that there was no good in being Jagiello's and Vytautas' former friends.

Some contemporaries believed that Tannenberg was a disaster to the crusading cause comparable to Nicopolis, but most simply marvelled at the huge losses in men, horses, and equipment. As the continuation of Posilge's chronicle said: 'The army, both cavalry and infantry, was routed completely,

losing lives, goods, and honour, and the number slain was beyond numbering. May God have pity on them.'

That the defeat was so total and so final was hard for contemporaries to grasp. The news spread to courts where old men remembered the exploits of their youth in Lithuania – in Germany and France the disaster could hardly be believed; to bishops and burghers in Livonia, who were not sure whether to rejoice or mourn; to wives and families in Poland and Lithuania, who both exulted in their rulers' exploits and gave thanks for the safety of husbands, brothers, and friends; to neighbouring rulers who may have hoped for another outcome of the war, one in which perhaps all the armies would have gone down in defeat together. Everyone demanded more information, and especially an explanation of how the Teutonic Knights could have suffered such an unexpected disaster. The responses were varied. The Teutonic Knights talked about treason, the numbers of the enemy host, and unfortunate tactics; the Poles were satisfied with courage, skill at arms, good generalship, and God's favour.

The propagandists of the order worked hard to persuade contemporaries that the disaster was not as bad as it appeared, that it was the work of the devil through his agents, the pagans and schismatics – and most of all, that it was the fault of *the Saracens*. Moreover, they argued that now more than ever crusaders were needed in Prussia to continue God's work. The Polish propagandists laboured, too, to present their interpretation of events, but they did not have the long-term contacts which had been developed in many crusading *Reisen*. Their praise of Jagiello and his knights tended to awaken more sympathy for the hard-pressed order than was good for Polish interests. After the first impact of the news was absorbed by the European courts, after the first months of difficulty had passed, interpretations favoured by the order tended to prevail.

The modern reader, looking back on almost six centuries of events that dwarf the battle of Tannenberg without driving it from the public mind, hardly knows how to understand the negative attitudes toward the Teutonic Knights. Comparisons to Wilhelmine Germany of 1914 and to Hitler are unworthy of comment, though Germans of those generations thought of their acts as deeds of national revenge for the battle in 1410. In the context of twentieth-century events one is tempted to say that contemporaries of Tannenberg were right, that there is a divine justice operating in the world. In concluding that the Teutonic Knights had paid the price for having lived by the sword and swaggered in a world of pride, contemporaries found that Biblical admonitions came easily to mind: Tannenberg was God's punishment for the Teutonic Order's outrageous conduct. Pride had risen too high – Jungingen personified his order's universally acknowledged tendency to arrogance and anger – and a fall had to follow.

The deficiencies of this method of justifying past events (*Weltgeschichte als Weltgericht*) should be obvious: if victory in battle reflects God's will, then the Tatar domination of the steppe and the harassment of Polish and Lithuanian borderlands is also a reflection of divine justice; God punishes kings by sacrificing many thousands of innocent lives. Good Old Testament theology, but hard to fit into a New Testament framework. It is best that we do not tarry long in either the shadowy realm of pop psychology or dark religious nationalism, but move back into the somewhat better-lit world of chronicles and correspondence.

Conflicting views of modern historians about the battle of Tannenberg and its aftermath make for interesting if confused reading. One could summarise them roughly by saying that until the 1960s each interpretation reflected national interests more than fact. Since then, historians have become both more polite and less certain of their inability to err. Archaeology is beginning to shed light on the battlefield, giving promise that problems left by the literary sources may be more fully resolved. Political issues in Germany and Poland that seemed to depend on every imaginable historical justification have disappeared with the political parties that sponsored them, so that at last a quiet discussion about the past is possible. Most importantly, since the fall of Communism German and Polish historians have come to respect each other sufficiently to give real attention to one another's ideas. There is, indeed, reason to hope that some day we may come to a better and more general agreement as to what really happened at Tannenberg and what it really signified.