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TEUTONIC ORDER AND THE BATTLE ON THE VORSKLA RIVER IN AUGUST, 1399 (NUMISMATIC ASPECT)

One of unexplored problems of medieval history of Central and Eastern Europe is the battle that took place on August 12, 1399, in which the joint army of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas suffered a crushing defeat by the Golden Horde Khan Kutlug Timur and General Edigey. This battle was far greater concerning human resources and its consequences than the Battle at Blue Waters in 1362 and Kulikov Battle in 1380. But in contrast to those battles it was won not by Christians, but the Tatars. That is why in most Ukrainian and Russian historical publications (especially the Soviet period) the battle was mentioned with a few lines, or even with words as «Battle at the Vorskla River» or «Battle at the Vorskla».

According to written sources, particularly, the Lithuanian and Zhmoytska Chronicle, Nikiforovskaya, Novgorod First, Slutsk, Supraslka and other chronicles, military disaster befell the army of Vytautas somewhere near the Vorskla River. There are many hypotheses which tend to localize the site of the battle. But they are difficult to prove or, conversely, to disprove, since there was no systematic archaeological research on this issue and accordingly there is no material evidence «for» or «against». The fact remains is that it occurred somewhere at Rus-Tatar borderlands which was at that time in the area of the river Vorksla¹. Taking into consideration poor written sources, we can state that the battle occurred no further Poltava region where the Vorskla flows through Kotelva, Zenkov, Dikanka, Poltava, Novi Sanzhary and Kobelyaky districts.

Today there are no official or non-official material evidences about the battle or about the stay of the united multi-thousand army headed by Vytautas. At the same time the army had to leave some artefacts and most probable of them were numismatic materials, so called «zguby» that is coins that had been lost by their holders. The European coins had to be lost by not only representatives of Crusade Army but also looters who ransacked the bodies of dead soldiers.

At the end of the XIV century the recognized currency in the countries of Central Europe was Prague grosz but in the region of the battle those coins were not found. On the other hand, the army of Vytautas, to which Pope Boniface IX gave the Crusader privileges, had not only representatives of the Lithuanian and South Rus lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but also Poland, Moldova as well as the Teutonic Order State in Prussia. A gathering point for this multinational army of Crusaders was Kyiv, in which troops were arriving during a month [1, 102]. According to Vasiliy Lyaskoronskiy from Kyiv the joint army of Vytautas came forward «on the left bank of the Dnipro, through the rivers Sula, Psyol and others until, finally, reached the river Vorskla» [1, 108].

As for the members of the Teutonic Army who participated in this campaign, it is known that it was a military unit led by Commander of Ragnit Marquard von Salzbach.

1 For reference: the Vorskla is one of the biggest left inflows of the Dnipro. It flows in Ukraine in Sumy and Poltava regions.

In historiography there are various data concerning the number of his contingent. There were from a few to a hundred of knights and from several hundreds to 1600 soldiers. Yet, studies show one figure – a hundred and some historians put different meanings into it. For example, Igor Grekov and Alexandr Barbashev [2, 96-97] think the Teutonic squad was about 100 soldiers, and Polish about 400 soldiers [3, 78]. In our opinion the researchers made a mistake while determining the number of the above-mentioned military units by simplified translation of the term «spears». In «Analytical notes on the history of the Teutonic Order in the 14th century» the records of events that occurred in 1399 state that «the emperor of the Tartars gave Vytautas a great battle, and that he arrived there and brought one hundred spears of Prussians and 400 of Poles. They all stayed there so there were few of them who came back home»[4]. Similar number was mentioned by Johann von Possilge [5, 230]. Taking into consideration that during the period under research a «spear» was a separate unit of a Knight, that is a combat unit, composed of 4-7 people and 3-4 of them were mounted and according to the well-known Polish scientist Stefan Maria Kuczynski a Commander spear could even be composed of 10-12 soldiers [6, 248], we can assume that the total number of representatives of the Teutonic troops in the joint army of Vytautas was not fewer than 400 people including about 100 knights.

In the treasury books of Marienburg (Malbork) there is an entry on November 2, 1399 that «425 m deme monzemeister am sotage noch omnium sanctorum vor 300 schok bemischer grochen, die deme kompthur zu Rangnih worden gegeben, als her ken Tatern zoch, den groschen zu 17 pfengen gerechent» [7, 34] (our translation, Vasyl Orlyk - 425 marks to Monzemeister on Sunday after All Saints² for 300 «kopas» of Bohemian grosz which were given to kompthur in Rangnih when he was on the Tatars (against the Tatars) going (crusade) grosz (for) 17 pfennig counted). Thus, according to this document, we can state that for participation in the military campaign in the crusading army of Vytautas against the Tatars in 1399, a squad of Marquard von Salzbach received 300 “kopas” of Prague (Bohemian) grosz.

Now that we know the number of pfennig in a Mark (1 mark - 720 pfennig), grosz in a «kopa» (1 «kopa» – 60 grosz) and the ratio of a grosz to pfennig specified in the document (one grosz – 17 pfennig). It becomes clear that the mint of the Teutonic Order State in Prussia carried out not only emission functions, but also banking, in particular, it was a depository of the Order Treasury. The issuance of 425 marks to monzemeister of Marienburg (in terms of money (monetary weight) system of the Teutonic Order State in Prussia) was nothing but reimbursement to the treasury of the Order of 300 «kopas» of Prague grosz given to Prussian Crusaders of Marquard von Salzbach for the campaign against the Tatars (425 marks = 306000 pfennig = 18000 grosz = 300 «kopas» of grosz).

Moreover, using the above-mentioned in the treasury book «rate» value of Prague grosz in monetary (money-counting) system of the of the Teutonic Order State in Prussia in 1399, we can calculate the actual cost of the Order coins – shillings. Based on the fact that during that period 1 shilling corresponded to 12 pfennig and 1 grosz to 17 pfennig, we calculate that 1 shilling of the Order cost 0.70 of Prague grosz.

So, due to the records made in the treasury book of Malbork we know the value of the Order money in 1399, and most importantly – the «currency» in which the money was

2 All Saints Day – a Christian Holiday, a day of memory of all saints. It is celebrated by Catholics on November 1st.

given for the campaign against the Tatars. Those were the coins which could be used by the representatives of the crusading armies during their stay in the southern Rus lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. They could lose the coins on their way to the site of the battle, during the battle and during the escape after the defeat at the river Vorskla back to Kyiv. In addition, the Teutons who took part in military campaign apart from treasury funds could have their own money, traditional for monetary circulation of the Teutonic Order State in Prussia. These are, in fact, coins of the Order and the above-mentioned generally accepted in Central and Eastern Europe «currency» – Prague grosz. So, the presence of the Teutonic troops of 400 or more people on the territory of the left bank of the Dnipro could leave a «numismatic» trace.

However, until recently there were no coins found. Only on April 24, 2012 in Poltava region, in the woods a few kilometres from Dykanka in the direction of the river Vorskla a Halbschoter was accidentally found (Fig. 1), minted during the reign of Grand Master of the Teutonic Order State in Prussia Winrich von Kniprode. This type of coin is described by Voßberg #106 [8, 92].



Figure 1.

Av: ĀmONETA:DOMINORNm\PRVSSIE
Rv: ĀHONORŸmAGRIŸI[.]ICIUM:DILIG[.]

An arrowhead (Fig. 2) was found near the coin which experts tend to identify as Tatar or Rus of XIII-XIV century.



Figure 2.

So, taking into account the unusual nature of the numismatic finding for the lands of Povorskl in late XIV century [9], we can assume that the Halbschoter of 1368-1380 emissions [10, 44] with the marks of an extensive stay in the monetary circulation could get to the area due to the representatives of units formed of the knights and soldiers of the Teutonic Order State in Prussia led by Commander of Ragnit Marquard von Salzbach, which was a part of the crusading army of Vytautas. The coin could be lost by the warriors on the way to the battle or during escape after the crushing defeat of the army of Khan Kutlug Timur and General Edigey. It is also possible that the halbschoter could be lost by looters who ransacked the bodies of the fallen soldiers, or someone else who still had contacts with representatives of the Teutonic Order. Perhaps this finding will help to localize the place of the battle in the future. We believe that to solve a complex scientific problem such as localization of sites of historical battles, we need to attract a variety of historical sources, including numismatic ones. It is difficult not to agree with the thesis of Valentin Yanin that «numismatic materials constitute a major source for a historian, as well as records and acts, archaeological monuments and objects of ancient art» [10, 15]. Therefore, among the first steps to determine geographical coordinates of the route and deployment of Vytautas army, battle site at the river Vorskla in August 1399 and escape routes, funds and materials should be investigated at the Archaeological Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Museum of History, Museums of Poltava region for the subject of findings in the Vorksla basin and on adjacent areas, coins minted in the last quarter of the XIV century by European issuers, whose representatives were part of the joint crusading armies of Vytautas. These are the coins of Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Poland, the Teutonic Order State in Prussia, Moldova, and most common in these countries European coins, in particular Prague grosz.

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Тевтонський орден і битва на річці Ворсклі в серпні 1399 року (нумізматичний аспект)

Стаття присвячена дослідженню документальних та нумізматичних джерел щодо участі у битві на річці Ворскла в серпні 1399 року загону тевтонських лицарів. Аналізується запис від 2 листопада 1399 року в казначейській книзі з Марієнбурга (Мальборка), про повернення в казну суми виділеної цьому загонові для участі в даній військовій кампанії. Особлива увага приділяється дослідженню полскої держави Тевтонського ордена в Пруссії емісії 1368-1380 рр. знайденого в 2012 році в Полтавській області.