

The Enigma of the Teutonic “Red Bull*” Helmet



By Cliff Repicky 09/10/2016(rev 03/02/2017)

Everyone has seen them, and it’s a given that it will come up in a conversation involving the Teutonic Order and one thing they’re known for, it’s the winged helmet. Ornamented helmets are nothing new in the history of helmet design, and neither is the fact that helmets with attachments/ornamentation were employed during combat activities, be they staged (*jousts & combat pageants*), or real world struggles. One need only look as ancient Egypt, Greece, Far East, or Rome for examples. In more contemporary times, we can find German helmets of the Great War, or US military designs of the Cold War OPFOR helm, or even today’s ACH with NVG/camera attachments. The use of papier-mâché, light woods and leather, also increase their maneuverability, as well as off a “break away” option should they be grabbed or harnessed in combat.



The stigma of the Teutonic winged helmet comes at us from a couple different directions.

The first is that it is unwieldy and not combat functional/plausible:

It’s not a matter of unwieldiness of design based on the various attachments and their placements, it’s a matter of what one trains with, thus making them comfortable with its employment and possible limitations. The use of padding and chin straps help prevent a lot of excessive movement, and when done properly help to negate a lot of the unwieldy feeling (*try wearing a helmet with an NVG attachment on the front for the first time, you’ll see what I mean.*)



Readers should also remember that its myth tends to center of the Teutonic Order of the XII-XIII centuries. These warriors were trained to fight from horseback. The initial weapon employed by them would have been the primary weapon of all mounted medieval Christian knights of the age, the lance. As can be seen in many effigies and paintings from an even later age, the employment of such a helm was quite popular during jousts and ceremonial pageantry. This fact brings up two points: (1) this style of helmet can be employed during a mounted engagement, often several times (*implying that it was seated well*), and did not deter the wearer from making more combat approaches against an opponent. The other, stemming from the pageantry aspect, is that it served to identify the wearer. From a combat perspective, this would serve a similar purpose as a unit’s banner, you could even reference the Knights Templar’s Beauséant and its purpose during combat.



The second direction of the argument is that it never existed in the Teutonic Order due to no graphic evidence:

Sergei Eisenstein brought the ornamented helmet to visual prominence for the “modern day” audience, with his production of the 1938 movie *Alexander Nevsky* that focuses on the Battle of Lake Peipus in 1242, a defeat of the German crusaders at the time (*We’ll look at some missing details of this in a bit*). In it, the senior knights/princes of the Teutonic Order wear a full spectrum of elaborately decorated great helms. The anti-winged helm crowd will first point out that this production was a propaganda creation, designed to show the Germans as “monsters”. I’ll be the first to agree there, but let’s take a look at that logic in more detail for a moment.



If his intent was to use their likeness to portray the Germans as monsters, then he was addressing a psychological/mental aspect that all folks have. Much like the applications later seen in Dracula or Friday the 13th movies, graphic images that touch a part of a target audience's mind, designed to trigger the flight or fight response.

Now let's visit the pagan villagers of Northern Europe at the time of this battle. They lived in the little wooden dwellings, making a living by farming the land, fishing, or hunting. They worshipped the old ways, Deities tied to what they knew; the sun, crops, woodlands, etc.. Now out of the fog comes riding an apparition that is larger/taller (*due to his mounted position*), wearing clothing and armor that was probably new to their knowledge (*and white for that matter.....remind me what color ghosts are in most regions of the world*), with their faces hidden, now that helm and its design is being employed as a psychological weapon.



Now we can quickly revisit the first point;



Our helm wearer is mounted and engaging dismounted targets (*Although its plausibility of use in dismounted combat can be seen in both SCA and BN/Bohurt activities*). Targets lower than his helm whilst sitting in the saddle. We've seen that he can employ a lance against another armored opponent, with opponent, lance first. After initial contact, he's at liberty to employ a secondary weapon of his choosing; sword, mace, or axe. Can you imagine the chaos of the dismounted folks after the impact of several to many densely formed armored riders (*Shock & Awe*)? Now we have crusaders chasing fleeing targets in several directions, and after a while, they'll want to reform and prepare for follow on operations. If by chance the initial contact turned into general melee, then separated units could rally around those they recognize, because they could see them above the scrum and from a distance.



Now to answer where Sergei Eisenstein might have gotten his inspiration from. From all accounts, he probably got his inspiration from the Codex Manesse, a book of songs/poetry produced in the mid XIV century, although there are several other examples from the period as well.

In it we find an individual identified as Tannhäuser who was a German lyric poet and singer. Details of his biography are obscure beyond the poetry (*plausibility avenue*), which dates between 1245 and 1265. It's believed he shared familial lineage with the old nobles, the Lords of Thannhausen, who held castles at Tannhausen, near Ellwangen and Dinkelsbühl; and the Tannhausen castle, at Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz, all in Bavaria or Southern Germany (*this will be important in a moment*).

The Codex Manesse identifies him as a knight and poet who founded the Venusberg, the home of Venus, and spent a year there worshipping the goddess (*kind of farfetched but wait...paganish in sound, sort of like Livonia and surrounding areas of the time. **.*).

It says the after leaving the Venusberg, Tannhäuser is filled with remorse, and travels to Rome to ask the Pope if it is possible to be absolved of his sins. The Pope replies that forgiveness is as impossible as it would be for his papal staff to blossom. Three days after Tannhäuser's departure Urban's staff blooms with flowers; messengers

are sent to retrieve the knight, but he has already returned to Venusberg, never to be seen again. It is believed that he died after 1265. So where did he go?

The Codex Manesse depicts him clad in the Teutonic Order habit, suggesting he might have fought the Fifth Crusade (1213–21 sort of early for him just based on the image's age in the Codex, but Lake Peipus battle occurs in 1242 giving a possibly better description to his graphic age in the depiction, coupled with his death around 1265), or refer back to the possible dates for the writing of the Codex. (Knights were allowed to join in the order without taking the vows and serving an appointed time; this appointed time could be the duration of a campaign or a set number of years. They were allowed to marry or be married, but they were constrained to leave half of their goods at their deaths as a bequest to the order. Tannhäuser of Richard Wagner fame was such a knight brother serving his time. He wears the grey habit of one who might have served for a specific period of time and then returned to the West with a full white cape of the Order. The Northern Crusades were supported by annual arrivals of Crusaders from Germany and the rest of Europe, who return home after the crusading season ended), but there's another avenue that's not been explored, the Northern Crusades.



It's a recorded fact that nobles from around Europe (Germany, England, etc) could participate in the "Winterreise" and "Sommerreise" (seasonal campaigns against pagans)- while being guests of the Teutonic Order. So people were likely to bring their stylized helmets to be recognizable to their hosts and allies as they campaigned in Lithuania. They held status as crusaders per Papal privilege in 1245.

One might question if they were allowed to retain their headgear during these operations, opening a plausibility door to Tannhäuser's helmet scheme seen in the Codex. This is further opened to the realm of possibility due to Teutonic Great Helms" first appear around the late 13th to early 14th centuries, about the time the Teutonic Order and its affiliates launched these types of campaigns.

As I pointed out earlier, the Battle of Lake Peipus occurred in 1242, well within Tannhäuser's life time. There were at this time three Orders with militant missions in Northern Europe supporting a crusade against Prussian pagans. They were, the Teutonic Order (proper –this is the one most everyone is familiar with), the Order of Dobrzyń, and finally the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, who after the defeat at Saule in 1236, were incorporated into the larger Teutonic Order proper, but remained an autonomous entity with its own Master.

By the time of the Battle of Lake Peipus in 1242, the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, were now a part of the larger Teutonic Order and known as the Livonian Branch of the Teutonic Order (1237). They had originally been subject to the authority of the Archbishop of Riga (who by the way is shown wearing a winged helmet in battle) but, with the capture of Livonia and Estonia which they ruled as sovereign states, they were effectively independent. The new Master of Livonia, a senior Teutonic Commander now became a provincial Master in the Teutonic Order and the knights of the combined body adopted the Teutonic insignia. Historically though, this union had been brought up on a number of occasions, but the Teutonic Order representatives who went to visit and assess such possibilities, had returned with unfavorable reports about the Livonian brothers regarding their less than acceptable adherence to any Rule.



(One is reminded of the images of Templars playing chess, which was not approved by their Rule set forth by St Bernard himself. Apparently as the saying still goes today, "When one is father away from the flag pole, things

are done a bit differently". For who knows better what works and doesn't work "at the tip of the spear" than the fighting man over the politician? The bottom line here is that no Order remained true and by the letter of their Rules in adherence.)

Now refer back to the location of the Tannhäuser family's holdings in Southern Germany. Members of important families throughout Europe sported images, crests, etc., that helped them identify themselves to others (*see helm and shield scheme*). The earliest Livonian knights had come mostly from southern Germany. Knights and those of distinguished families could see better chances of assignments to leadership positions with the Orders, this is because with their acceptance and positions came support and resources. They had been fighting pagans in Livonia and surround areas for nearly 40 years. This is a lot of time to establish solid TTPs (Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures). You can bet they would stack the deck with every combat multiplier at their disposal before battle, since they were always outnumbered by the indigenous population (*the same issue faced by the other preeminent Orders in the Outremer*). Just imagine a pagan in his homeland as he faces off with men of iron for the first time. His primitive weapons for the most part useless against the mail armor of Germanic knights. Add to this the height advantage of being mounted, coming out of the mists, wearing such a helmet, and one might see the psychological advantage gained by just a few over a larger group, who've never seen such things in their superstitious lives.



The Battle on the Ice was fought between the Republic of Novgorod led by Prince Alexander Nevsky and the crusader army led by the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Knights (*see, not the Teutonic Order proper, but organization that had a somewhat rogue history but wore the mantel of the black cross*) on April 5, 1242, at Lake Peipus. It was a significant defeat sustained by the crusaders during the Northern Crusades, which were directed against pagans and Eastern Orthodox Christians and the perfect setting for Eisenstein's propaganda film for a Russian audience during the time of Hitler's rise to power. The defeat marked the end of their campaigns against the Orthodox Novgorod Republic and other Slavic territories for the next century.

They say that behind every myth there's a cornel of truth, but folks rant about no existing visual or tangible evidence to support the ideal of the Military Order winged helmet. I'll refer them to the whole Russian removal of German, Catholic, and Western images after the revolution through the Cold War. Clearly the thought of having anything Teutonic related would have been a no go, if you wipe it clean, its memory will disappear after a few generations ***. Then there's the whole Catholic shadow of the Military Order in an Orthodox land. Have you ever seen a faction leave anything from a rival up, that might possibly contest the status quo?

Well that's my take on it. I look forward to the feedback, and until then "**Gott mit uns!**"



Note:

* Reference to the RED BULL drink that coined the phrase "*It gives you wings*".

** Livonia to the southeast, it turns out, was known as the land of the Mother. (*Any member of a Military Order under the influence of traditional Templar/Teutonic guidance, would shun the company of women, and*

punishable by the Rule of the Order, thus adding to the plausibility of Tannhäuser's story)

Back in Karelia, we come at last to a king's decree granting a land to women and protecting them under his rule. The Letter of Protection by King Birger Magnusson for womankind in Karelia on Oct. 1, 1316.

The original parchment letter was until the end of 19th century kept in the Viipuri (Viborg) city archives. Now it has been moved to the National Archives in Helsinki. The backside of the document contains a writing: Privilege to womankind, wives, widows, and maidens in Viborg and the whole of Karelia given by King Birger Anno 1316 and similarly confirmed by King Albrecht Anno 1360.

All who will see this letter, we Birger, by the grace of God King of the Swedes and the goths, Salute wishing eternal Salvation in Lord. Through this note we will for both those to come as well for those living now, following the advice and consent of the Noble men Gentlemen Canute Jonsson, the judge (lagman) of the Ostrogoth, Thor Kætilsson, and Johannes Brunckow, our high chancellor (drots) and other members of our council, firmly pass a statute, to be obeyed as a law, that all wives and women who live subjected to our castle of Vyborg or in the land of Karelia be they married, widows, nuns or virgins, shall enjoy peace and security like in our realm Sweden herself for both in property and person, so that our royal punishment will most severely meet the transgressors. Therefore all and everyone are strictly prohibited from burdening the foregoing wives and women with any kind of injustice or molesting, or inflicting on them any kind of corporal violence, if he wants in our kingdom to avoid the punishment, which is what is in our Swedish realm told in the due law.

Date Yninge Anno Domini 1316, on the first of October.

In the year 1316, Karelia became by a king's decree and seal a land of women.

*** Aleksander Pluskowski points out in his work The Archaeology of the Prussian Crusade, that much of the physical evidence-remains, frescoes, and traditional historical pieces were eradicated by Russian authorities during and after the great patriotic war (1939-1945).

Sergei produced his film before the eradication of Teutonic symbology by Russian authorities began in former Ordern Stadt lands. It didn't help that Hitler's propaganda machine used images of Teutonic Knights as material to motivate Germanic people in the war. This provides the possibility/plausibility that Sergei Eisenstein might have had access to images and artifacts to support his helmet designs in his work as well, not to mention many of the original sources of the winged helmet come from Russian sources, like the St Petersburg Collection (figurines and artwork).



Ref:

William Urban's works:

- The Teutonic Knights
- The Livonian Crusades

Aleksander Pluskowski's Archaeology of the Prussian Crusade

Upton's Primitive Rule of the Knights Templar

Links:

<http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/roelipilami/tags/helm/>