

## History of the Crusades. Episode 284. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XVI. The Supreme Prince of Lithuania.

Hello again. Last week we saw the rise of a new player in the Baltic Crusades, Algirdas' son Jogaila, who was elevated to the position of Grand Prince of Lithuania after his father's death. The young, intelligent, quietly focused Jogaila commenced his rule by negotiating a number of treaties with the Teutonic Order, treaties which on the face of them, were designed to keep his six brothers from challenging his position, but were secretly more about undermining his uncle and co-ruler Kestutis. Now some major power plays are about to take place in Lithuanian politics, driven of course, by Jogaila. To set ourselves up in a good position to understand what is about to happen, let's take a quick look at the major players and their current states of minds.

Firstly, of course, we have Jogaila, who we met last week. Joining Jogaila around this time is a man called Hans of Riga. Hans was the governor of Vilnius until he joined team Jogaila as Jogaila's chief advisor. The very handy thing about Hans is, as you can probably guess from his name, he was raised as a German and was fluent in the German language and in the culture of the Teutonic Order. He had rejected his German heritage and had moved to Vilnius as a merchant, but his talent for politics saw him move progressively into leadership positions in Vilnius, until he found himself the governor of the city. Hans will be incredibly useful to Jogaila, and will quickly become his indispensable right-hand man. With his extensive knowledge of trade in the Baltic region, his fluency in German, and his acquaintance with many facts regarding the Teutonic Order, both in Prussia and Livonia, Hans initially acted as Jogaila's interpreter in dealing with the Germans, but quickly made himself useful as an advisor and confidante, to the extent that occasionally Jogaila would send Hans to represent him at diplomatic meetings.

Still in Lithuania, but on the opposing side to Jogaila, even though he doesn't know it yet, is Kestutis. Ruling Lithuania following Algirdas' death has become a bit of a headache for Kestutis, who now has to concern himself about his nephew's motives, as he seems to frequently turn up to battles too late to be of any real assistance, and doesn't seem to be at all eager to assist Kestutis in his fights against the Teutonic Order. Adding to Kestutis' problems are Jogaila's other brothers, some of whom may make power plays of their own.

Assisting his father to make sense of all of this mess was Kestutis' son and heir, Vytautas. Vytautas was a solid military man who had learned to be proficient on the battlefield under his father's tutelage. However, he was kind of clueless when it came to people, and was much too trusting, particularly of his cousin Jogaila. Jogaila found it easy to convince Vytautas that everything was fine, and that he was carrying on exactly where Algirdas left off, and Vytautas

then advised his father of this.

The other players we need to keep in mind are Jogaila's brothers. Those aligned with him were the outgoing and entertaining Skirgaila, who Jogaila sent to negotiate with the Teutonic Order, as we saw in last week's episode, and another brother, Kaributas. The brothers opposed to him were mainly Dmitri and Andreas, who had plans to knock Jogaila off his perch and rule the Russian Principalities themselves.

Now I guess it won't come as a surprise to anyone to learn that Jogaila's decision to go behind Kestutis' back, and make secret deals with the Teutonic Order, was not going to remain a secret forever. In the year 1379 Jogaila sent Skirgaila on another mission to meet with the Teutonic Order, and he was gone for such a long time that the explanation which Jogaila had provided for his absence, that he was attending a wedding in Mazovia, was not really being believed by anyone. When rumors started circulating around Lithuania that Skirgaila was not attending a wedding at all, but had gone to the Holy Roman Empire to conspire with the Emperor or even the Pope, Kestutis was finally forced into action. He arrested Jogaila, then declared himself to be the sole Grand Prince of Lithuania. That may well have been the end of Jogaila, except it wasn't. Astonishingly, he was able to talk himself out of his predicament, confessing to Kestutis that he had overreached himself and stepped out of line. He managed to apologize so profusely and convincingly that Kestutis forgave him. So instead of executing or exiling his ambitious nephew, Kestutis gave him some territory in western Lithuania, which Jogaila no doubt promised to settle into, and keep out of mischief.

What Jogaila in fact did was to sit quietly and patiently out to the side, observing local politics and waiting for his chance to pounce. His chance to pounce came when Kestutis was forced to take an army into the Russian Principalities to deal with one of Jogaila's brothers, Kaributas, who was causing problems. Kestutis delegated the rule of Lithuania to his son Vytautas during his absence, but Vytautas decided that things were looking peaceful and uneventful enough for him to leave Vilnius and travel to his family base in Trakai. Vytautas then placed Jogaila's former right hand man and former governor of Vilnius, Hans, in charge of Vilnius during his absence.

Deciding that this was an opportunity too good to pass up, Jogaila raced to Vilnius, took over power from Hans, and sent an urgent message to the Teutonic Order requesting assistance. He then raised an army of local highlander warriors and led them in a march to Trakai, hoping to capture Vytautas. Within a short period of time, three armies had mobilized: Jogaila and his highlanders were heading towards Trakai; the Marshall of the Teutonic forces had received Jogaila's request and was marching with an army of Crusaders to Jogaila's assistance; and Kestutis was also headed back to Lithuania. A horrified Kestutis learned,

soon after arriving in Lithuania, that the treacherous Jogaila had taken over Vilnius and was currently on his way to seize Kestutis' son, So Kestutis hurriedly gathered an army of Lithuanian lowlanders, and soon everyone was marching as quickly as they could towards Trakai.

Jogaila arrived there first. He attempted an assault on the fortress at Trakai, which was housing Vytautas. The assault failed, but Jogaila didn't want to lift the siege of the town, in case his men viewed it as a defeat. Worried that if this occurred, his army of Lithuanian highlanders may have second thoughts about supporting him, but also worried that his army would be effectively trapped and attacked from behind if Kestutis showed up, Jogaila continued the siege, and when word came in that an army was spotted marching towards Trakai, Jogaila informed his cheering men that it was the Teutonic army, come to save them. The good news was that the army was in fact, the Latin Christians, but the bad news was that Kestutis' forces were following close behind them. When Kestutis arrived, however, he was faced with two hostile armies. Unsure how best to proceed, Kestutis opened negotiations with Jogaila, but while they were talking, an extra Teutonic force marched in from Livonia, effectively sandwiching Kestutis' army between a bunch of hostile forces, with no means of retreat.

This new development meant that Kestutis now had no real option other than to surrender unconditionally to Jogaila, which he did. Did Jogaila send Kestutis to his own little bit of land in the west, like Kestutis had done to him? No. Jogaila had Kestutis chained and bound, then had him transported to a nearby fortress. Then five days later, Kestutis was found dead in his cell, and a short time after that Kestutis' wife died from drowning. People who were not Jogaila's fans alleged that Jogaila had a hand in both of these deaths, but supporters of Jogaila believed his pronouncement that Kestutis had killed himself and that Kestutis' wife had drowned either accidentally or also intentionally at her own hand.

So how is Jogaila's ambitious to-do list looking now? Well, it's looking pretty healthy. The "eliminate Kestutis" box is now well and truly ticked. The Teutonic Order seems to be well on its way to being contained enough not to attack Jogaila's forces, and the power play Jogaila has just successfully pulled off, defeating Kestutis and making himself the new sole Grand Prince of Lithuania, saw his rebellious brothers have second thoughts about opposing him, and they all gradually fell into line in support of him. So impressive, ruthless, calculating and rather bold, but still impressive.

But his work isn't yet done. Jogaila may now be the sole ruler of Lithuania, but he is currently faced with two related domestic political issues. There were more than a few Lithuanians who were staunch supporters of Kestutis, and weren't all that keen to recognize Jogaila as their

new leader, and those men may well throw their support behind the still very much alive, and still very much admired military man, Kestutis' son Vytautas.

Now really, in the manner in which he resolves these problems, we get a glimpse at Jogaila's true character, and see his talent for making cool, calculated, objective decisions, even under great pressure. The obvious way to deal with the Vytautas problem, and the way in which most people in Jogaila's position would have proceeded, would be to quickly eliminate Vytautas, like what had occurred to his parents. Jogaila could make up some sort of excuse that hopefully could explain Vytautas' sudden demise, and Vytautas would be out of the picture permanently, meaning that the people of Lithuania would have no one to mobilize behind who could lead them in a battle to overthrow Jogaila. But Jogaila could see some problems with this plan. There were already significant unhappy mutterings amongst Lithuania's fighting men about the manner in which Kestutis and his wife had met their ends. At the moment, those mutterings were just mutterings, and the mutterers seemed to be happy to wait and see how things played out before deciding whether to take action.

Jogaila knew that to successfully rule Lithuania he needed to win the hearts and minds off the Lithuanians. He was, after all, a man more seen as a product of the Russian Principalities, and it wouldn't take much for the Lithuanians to decide that they needed someone more, well, Lithuanian as their leader. And, Jogaila reasoned, should Vytautas suddenly die from whatever cause, that could be the tipping point which would set his people against him. So Jogaila didn't eliminate Vytautas. Instead, he arrested him and detained him in prison, safely out of harm's way. Then he appointed the popular charismatic Skirgaila to rule Vytautas' lands. Then Jogaila set about organizing an appropriately lavish funeral for Kestutis, no doubt calculating that this act would increase his standing in the eyes of Kestutis' supporters. Kestutis was cremated in an elaborate pagan ceremony in Vilnius, with a raft of sacrificial animals, including horses and hunting dogs, along with clothing, weaponry and anything else which Kestutis was likely to need in the afterlife joining his body on the pyre.

Deciding that the people of Lithuania were now behind him, Jogaila then turned to the Teutonic Order. The Order had already proven themselves to be invaluable allies, assisting him to rise to the position of sole ruler of Lithuania. Jogaila wanted to keep them in this position so that he could turn his attentions towards expanding his possessions in the Russian Principalities without having to worry about the Order attacking Lithuania while he was away. So he negotiated a four year long military alliance with the Order. To cement the deal Jogaila knew that he had to give the Order something they wanted, and Jogaila knew exactly what the Order wanted.

So Jogaila declared that he would be baptized as a Latin Christian, and he told the Teutonic

Order that it could have the western part of Samogitia. Jogaila then invited officials from the Teutonic Order to travel to Vilnius as special guests at the formal ceremony in which Jogaila would be awarded the title of sole ruler or Supreme Prince of Lithuania. Present at the ceremony were Master Vrymersheim from Livonia and other high ranking members of the Order from Livonia.

Why weren't there any representatives from the Prussian Chapter of the Order present at the ceremony, you might ask? Well, that's because they were currently all in Prussia, electing a new Grand Master. Why were they electing a new Grand Master? Well, because Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode had recently died. In his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban reports that Grand Master Winrich died peacefully, in full command of his senses, having made his final confession and having received the last rites.

And really it was totally understandable that Winrich von Kniprode was, at that time, in a relaxed, satisfied frame of mind. He had commanded the Teutonic Order successfully for over thirty years and while he would die before the formal ratification of the military alliance between the Order and Jogaila was signed in October of 1382, the Grand Master had been alive to hear the outcome of the negotiations, and to the Grand Master it looked like all his lifelong goals had now been achieved. It seemed that finally, the pagan Lithuanians had been convinced to convert to Christianity, and it also looked like Samogitia had been conquered, so Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode smiled to himself and gently drifted off to eternal peace.

But the Grand Master may not have rested so peacefully had he known what was about to happen next. In fact, Grand Master Winrich von Kniprode had to some extent contributed to what was about to happen next. As William Urban points out, while the Grand Master had ruled extremely successfully for thirty or so years, his success meant that he hadn't really changed the leadership team which he had created to support him inside the Order. As a result, all the members of the leadership team were now very old men, and were all getting close to their use-by dates. In fact, the Marshall of the Order had also recently passed away. Actually, there was only one single man in the leadership team of the Teutonic Order who was, at the time of Winrich von Kniprode's death, considered to be young enough to be elected to the position of Grand Master. After much debate, hand-wringing, and sleepless nights (that's "knights" with a K as well as "nights" with an N), that man, whose name was Konrad Zollner von Rothenstein, was formally elected to the position of Grand Master of the Teutonic Order.

Trouble was, the position Konrad Zollner von Rothenstein had held in the leadership team was Master of the Robes. As such, he had a total of zero experience in diplomacy and zero experience in warfare, so he really wasn't equipped to deal with Jogaila, who was quickly

proving himself to be a master at both of these things. Join me next week to see how the new Grand Master of the Teutonic Order fares against the new Supreme Prince of Lithuania. Until next week, bye for now.

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