

History of the Crusades. Episode 291. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XXIII. Vytautas Victorius.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Teutonic Order install Vytautas in a fortress at Kaunas, with instructions to conquer strongholds along the Nemunas River in Samogitia for the Teutonic Order. Vytautas managed to complete this task successfully, and in January of 1391 some Crusaders arrived to assist Vytautas to make a push into Lithuania. This campaign was wildly successful, so successful in fact, that it forced Jogaila to totally rethink his current strategy. He has now reluctantly concluded that he can't force Vytautas out of Lithuania and Samogitia using only military means, so Jogaila has now come up with a bold plan. His plan was to get a message to Vytautas, telling him that Jogaila would give all the lands which were once ruled by Kestutis and Algirdas to Vytautas. In short, this meant placing not only Lithuania but Samogitia and the Russian Principalities under the future leadership of Vytautas.

Now this, you would have to say, was a pretty tempting offer. If it came to pass, it would mean that Vytautas would be the ruler over a vast amount of territory, not as a vassal of the Teutonic Order, but in his own right. It would also mean that Skirgaila, Vytautas' number one rival inside Lithuania, would be left with no territory whatsoever. There were two problems, however, which Vytautas spotted immediately.

Firstly, the Teutonic Order had already guessed that something like this may happen, so it had forced Vytautas to hand over a number of hostages when it had allied the Order to him, and those hostages, which included Vytautas' brother in law, were now being held in castles across Prussia. Should Vytautas take up Jogaila's offer some very nasty things were likely to happen to those hostages. To counter this problem, Vytautas sent word to Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode requesting that the hostages be transferred from Prussia to the strongholds Vytautas had recently conquered along the Nemunas River.

The second problem Vytautas faced was his need to negotiate with Jogaila. To make sure that he didn't get done over like last time, when Jogaila promised to hand over western Lithuania to Vytautas if he abandoned the Teutonic Order, only to give western Lithuania and Samogitia to Skirgaila once the deal was complete, Vytautas really needed to make sure that this time all the i's were dotted and all the t's were crossed in a watertight agreement with Jogaila. However, to create that watertight agreement, he really needed to meet personally with Jogaila to thrash out the details of the plan. But there was clearly no way that Vytautas could do this without raising the suspicions of the Grand Master, so instead, Vytautas sent a message to the Grand Master requesting that his wife Anna be allowed to join him in Samogitia. Vytautas told the Grand Master that Anna would be able to make herself useful by traveling into Lithuania to encourage the conversion to Christianity of the Lithuanians. The Grand Master agreed, and Anna traveled to reunite with her husband, who then sent her to Lithuania, not to convert Lithuanians but to negotiate on his behalf with Jogaila.

Luckily for both Jogaila and Vytautas, Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode was totally distracted at the current point in time by Sigismund of Hungary. You might remember that Sigismund of Hungary was the former Duke of Brandenburg who had married Jadwiga's older sister Mary, who was initially meant to become the Queen of Poland but who was now the Queen of Hungary. Sigismund opened negotiations with the Teutonic Order, proposing that he purchase two important border towns, Dobrin and Neumark from the Order. Jogaila, in his position as the King of Poland, very much didn't want the ambitious

Sigismund buying up strategically important towns near the Polish border, and of course, this made the Grand Master very much interested in Sigismund's offer.

With the Grand Master deep in negotiations, Vytautas made his move. William Urban reports in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" that Vytautas was currently stationed near Kaunas inside a wooden fortress which had been named Ritterswerder. Inconveniently, some English crusaders had just arrived at Ritterswerder, ready to join Vytautas on his next campaign into Lithuania. Vytautas advised them that there had been a change of plans, and sent him back on the road to Prussia. He then set fire to Ritterswerder and burned it to the ground. Vytautas then headed into Lithuania and traveled to Gardinas, which was now under the control of the Teutonic forces. Using the element of surprise to his advantage, he managed to defeat the Teutonic garrison at Gardinas, and at another stronghold nearby. William Urban states that, and I quote "In these few bold strokes, Vytautas wiped out the Crusader gains of two years" end quote.

Vytautas then traveled to Astravas to meet personally with Jogaila, with the intention of continuing the negotiations which had already been opened by Vytautas' wife Anna. William Urban reports that once Vytautas arrived at the meeting place in August of 1392, Anna's role switched from Negotiator to Mediator. She supervised the talks between the two men and was able to deftly steer them around the more contentious issues, and assist them to thrash out an agreement which was mutually agreeable to them both. In fact, the role Anna played in assisting the men to reach an agreement, despite their obvious issues of trust and antagonism, was later acknowledged, and she will become a regular participant in future negotiations between Vytautas, Jogaila, and Jogaila's brothers.

The agreement, written up and signed by Jogaila and Vytautas at Astravas ended nearly a decade of civil war inside Lithuania. Once the document was signed, Vytautas wisely commenced his rule by agreeing to share power with many of the important and influential noble families inside Lithuania and Samogitia. Then Vytautas took up the reins of power and effectively began ruling Lithuania.

William Urban reports that it took a few months for Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode to become aware of what exactly had just happened. Word coming out of Lithuania and Samogitia was sketchy and incomplete, and the Grand Master decided that he would need to wait and gain a full understanding of what exactly had just transpired, before deciding on what move the Order would make. The move the Grand Master eventually decided to make was to order the Marshall of the Order to lead some forces to Mazovia in an attempt to capture Vytautas and to teach Bishop Henrik of Plock a lesson. You might remember from last week's episode that Bishop Henrik of Plock was the man who Jogaila convinced to pass the secret offer to Vytautas, in exchange for giving the Bishop the hand of one of his sisters in marriage. The Marshall was unable to locate Vytautas, but he did find Bishop Henrik and his new wife. The Marshall captured the Bishop and then killed him.

It was around this time that Henry Bolingbroke decided that he wanted to have another crack at crusading in the Baltic region. He sailed to Danzig but found the situation much changed from his last Crusade, two episodes ago. Having landed in Danzig, Henry discovered that English Crusaders had seriously fallen out of favor with the Prussians, and in fact with just about everyone. Their reputation for being fussy, uppity fighting companions, who no one really liked, was now widespread. It was so widespread, in fact, that some of Henry's English crusaders were set upon in the streets of Danzig by a Prussian fighter, who ended up being killed in self-defence by one of Henry's men.

Undeterred, Henry traveled on to Königsberg, but ended up having a heated disagreement with Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode, who wouldn't let Henry carry the banner of Saint George during the upcoming Crusade.

Henry then decided to take his business elsewhere. He waved the anti-English German Prussians goodbye, made his way to the Holy Roman Empire, then headed southwards towards Venice. After arriving in Venice, he boarded a ship for the Holy Land and went off to do some crusading far away from the cranky old Germans. William Urban points out that relations between Prussia and England continued to deteriorate after this point in time, with fewer and fewer English crusaders making the journey to the Baltic region, and trading partnerships between English merchants and the cities of the Hanseatic League also became troublesome.

Meanwhile, Vytautas settled into his new role as ruler of his vast new territory, Vytautas declared himself to be a vassal of Jogaila, and then departed to spend some time in the Russian Principalities, which he wanted to bring securely under his control so that he could return to Lithuania and confront the threat posed by the Teutonic Order. The threat posed to him by the Teutonic Order was that the Teutonic Order really, really, really wanted Vytautas dead. It was pretty clear that the Teutonic Order was no longer interested in trying to flip Vytautas back over to their side once again, and it was instead intent on eliminating him and trying to retake the territory it had lost in Lithuania and Samogitia.

In January of 1393 a large crusading army made its way from Prussia to Gardinas, intent on destroying the Lithuanian stronghold there. You might be interested to know that one of the leaders of the expedition was none other than Wilhelm of Guelden, of "staying in prison voluntarily because I swore an oath not to leave" fame, from Episode 288. The Crusaders marched to Gardinas, besieged it, and after only three days managed to breach its walls. The Crusaders killed more than 1,000 Lithuanian fighting men and captured 3,000 others. The Marshall of the Teutonic forces decided not to bother repairing the damaged castle and garrisoning it with men from the Teutonic Order, as he figured that Vytautas would likely be able to retake it without too much trouble. Instead, the Teutonic Order left the damaged and abandoned castle alone, deciding that it no longer posed any threat as a base to which the Lithuanians could retreat after expeditions to the Nemunas River in Samogitia.

Rumors then started to circulate that Vytautas had ordered a stronghold to be built near the site of one of the first strongholds built by the Teutonic Order in Prussia, the long-since abandoned castle of Vogelsang. This was a strategically sensitive area and it was a pretty cheeky move for Vytautas to attempt to construct a Lithuanian stronghold right on the borders of the provinces of Kulm and Dobrin. A Teutonic force was dispatched to the site and when it arrived the army found that a castle was indeed under construction, under the supervision of Jogaila's former right-hand man Hans of Riga. The Teutonic forces attacked the construction project and the Lithuanians were sent scampering back to Lithuania. William Urban reports that no one was killed and only one prisoner was taken captive as a result of this campaign, that prisoner being not a Lithuanian, but a nobleman from Mazovia who was suspected of assisting the Lithuanians to construct their stronghold near the Mazovian border. The Teutonic forces took the nobleman back to Mazovia, where they tied him onto his horse in a purposefully embarrassing fashion, and then released him on an oath that he would later present himself at Marienburg in Prussia.

Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode decided to keep trying to locate and capture Vytautas, and to keep attempting to win back the territory they had temporarily held in Lithuania, so he spread word that crusaders from across Europe were welcome to travel to Prussia for crusades to Lithuania to try to accomplish these goals. Although if you were English, you might not be so welcome. As Polish clerics were pointing out to anyone who would listen, though, Lithuania was now a Christian country, so what on earth was the Teutonic Order thinking when it decided to conduct crusades into the now-Christian Lithuania? Eventually, Rome started taking notice of the concerns raised by Poland, and of the irony of the Latin Christian Teutonic Order calling on the Latin Christians of Europe to go on Crusade to Latin Christian Lithuania.

Eventually, in 1393 the Grand Master was forced to allow a Papal Legate to supervise a meeting between the Grand Master and Jogaila, which was set to take place over the course of ten days in Thorn. The ten day talks involved much feasting and entertainment as well as diplomatic discussions, but before the ten days was up, Jogaila abruptly left the talks. The Papal Legate arranged for another meeting to take place in the summer, but Grand Master Konrad von Wallenrode died suddenly, just before the meeting was due to take place. Since the arrangements for the meeting had all been finalized, it went ahead anyway, with the Marshall of the Order attending in place of the Grand Master. A prisoner swap was agreed to, but nothing of substance in relation to the future of the Samogitian Crusade was decided.

In case anyone is wondering, the end of the Samogitian Crusade isn't too far away. The official date for the end of the Crusade is in 1399, so in six years time. But don't panic, it's not the end of the Baltic Crusades. Once we finish the Samogitian Crusade, we will continue with the Baltic Crusades and see them out to their bitter, bitter end. For the moment though, we are in the final throes of the Samogitian Crusade. Join me next week, as a new Grand Master is elected and the Teutonic Order once again attempts to besiege the Lithuanian capital city Vilnius. Until next week, bye for now.

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