

History of the Crusades. Episode 298. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part III. Trying Times.

Hello again. Last week we saw Samogitia rise up in rebellion, which in turn aroused suspicions in the Grand Master as to Vytautas' involvement in Samogitian affairs. The Grand Master of the Teutonic Order ended up invading Lithuania, with the aim of ousting Vytautas and placing the Order's new ally, one of Jogaila's younger brothers, into the position of Grand Duke of Lithuania. However, while the two-pronged Teutonic raid into Lithuania netted the Order a bunch of prisoners and caused a great deal of damage, it didn't end up defeating Vytautas, who left Lithuania to deal some devastating blows to Teutonic possessions in Samogitia and Livonia. By the end of last week's episode, both sides had had enough of the destructive conflict, and had met to thrash out a peace agreement.

The attempts to broker a peace deal which both sides could accept continued on and off until a breakthrough occurred in May of the year 1404. Interestingly, these peace talks didn't involve Vytautas, who was off campaigning in the Russian Principalities, but the two principal attendees - Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen and the King of Poland Jogaila - managed to come up with an arrangement which involved all three parties, the Grand Master, Jogaila, and Vytautas, reaffirming the Treaty of Sallinwerder, and it also involved the Grand Master agreeing to renounce the Teutonic Order's claim on the strategically important town of Dobrin. Jogaila in particular, was pleased with the Dobrin part of the agreement, and he managed to convince a reluctant Vytautas to agree to the terms of the agreement, which he signed at Ritterswerder in August of 1404.

Now the fact that the Treaty of Sallinwerder has just been reaffirmed is, of course, very bad news for the Samogitians, as one of the terms of the Treaty of Sallinwerder was that Lithuania would drop all of its claims to Samogitia, which in effect meant that Poland and Lithuania would now need to stand back, while the Teutonic Order asserted its authority over the rebellious region. In fact, Jogaila and Vytautas did more than just stand back. They actively encouraged the Samogitians to lay down their weapons and surrender to the Teutonic Order. Most of the rebels did exactly that, but when a handful of Samogitians refused to capitulate, Vytautas actually agreed to join forces with the new Marshall of the Teutonic Order on a winter campaign to subdue the rebels. Incidentally, the new Marshall of the Teutonic forces is Ulrich von Jungingen, who, as you may have guessed from his name, is the younger brother of the current Grand Master, Konrad von Jungingen. In January of 1405 Ulrich von Jungingen led a group of crusaders into Samogitia, along with a Lithuanian force led by Vytautas. They managed to subdue some of the rebellious Samogitians and gathered some hostages who were to be taken back to Prussia to ensure future Samogitian compliance.

In July of the year 1406, some visiting crusaders popped over to Samogitia and spent the summer building a wooden castle which they named "Neu Konigsberg", or "New Konigsberg", which was likely meant to represent a little bit of Prussia in Samogitia, a base from which the Teutonic Order could keep an eye on the pesky, rebellious Samogitians. The crusaders returned back to Prussia in the spring, leaving an impressive garrison of 60 Prussians and 400 Lithuanians at Neu Konigsberg. In September, Grand Master Jungingen sent an army to Neu Konigsberg, carrying extra supplies for the castle, but if all this fussing over a wooden fortress was meant to cower the Samogitians into defeat, it didn't work.

A group of rebels decided to launch an attack on Neu Konigsberg. They made their way to the defensive ditches surrounding the castle and, covering themselves with large shields to defend from arrow attacks, they advanced all the way over to the castle walls. But that's as far as they got. The walls of the fortress were manned by crossbow men as well as gunners, and very soon crossbow bolts were being fired and cannon were being discharged at the advancing Samogitians, most of whom were cut down by the attack. Once the barrage had ceased, the men from the castle ventured out to capture or kill the remaining rebels, and that was pretty much the end of the last stand made by the Samogitian rebels. In the winter of 1405 to 1406, the rebels formally surrendered, and Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen ordered a bunch of castles in Samogitia to be rebuilt, and re-garrisoned.

Learning from the mistakes the Order had made the last time Samogitia had surrendered, this time the Grand Master appointed an administrator for Samogitia, whose brief included bringing western agricultural practices to the Samogitians, in particular the three-field-rotation system, with the idea being that the warlike Samogitians would be better expending their energies at the plow, herding animals, or weeding fields, instead of taking up arms against their oppressors, and that once the former pagans learned about collective farming and received the benefits of higher standards of living, then the Samogitians would settle down, enjoy their new lives as peasant farmers, and everyone would live happily ever after.

But as you can probably guess, it wasn't going to be quite that easy. For countless generations, the pagan Samogitians had measured their worth by their success on the battlefield. To be a Samogitian man meant to be a Samogitian warrior, and a successful warrior was the one thing that every Samogitian man aspired to be. To simply tell the Samogitians that those days were over, and that now success would be measured by how many sheep you could chase around, or how many plants you could coax into life from seeds sown in the newly-drained swamps, was really never going to work. In the end, the only way most Samogitians could endure the new arrangement was to still call themselves warriors, but not mention the fact that to make a living, many warriors were working the fields or herding cattle or horses. So long as they didn't call themselves peasants, they could still be warriors. Even though they did the work of peasants, they looked like peasants, and sounded like peasants, they weren't peasants. Nope, they were warriors, who just had to frequently act a little bit like peasants.

While the Samogitian warriors were learning to totally not be peasants, the main players, Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen, Jogaila, and Vytautas, were learning to totally try to pretend that they were all friends and allies now, and definitely not mortal enemies who were preparing to knife each other in the back at the earliest opportunity. Interestingly, the first cracks in the alliance between the three power-players started appearing in the relationship between Jogaila and the Teutonic Order. Having agreed to surrender its claim to Dobrin, the Order was adamant that it keep hold of other disputed territories and towns in the borderlands, while Jogaila, keen to keep the Polish noblemen on-side, kept pushing for the Order to cede some of its claims. This push and pull between Poland and the Teutonic Order started to look like it might get a little out of hand, so Vytautas found himself in the unusual position of acting as a peace broker between the two sides.

Vytautas was able to ease the rising tensions and patch up the relationship between Poland and the Teutonic Order, and in gratitude for this service, both Jogaila and Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen agreed to assist Vytautas in his current campaign in the

Russian Principalities. Yes, after having sworn to never dabble in Russian politics ever again following his humiliating defeat at the Battle on the Vorskla, Vytautas is now inserting himself back into the complex Russian political scene with a vengeance. But the bad news for Vytautas is that the Russian political scene was incredibly complicated, so complicated in fact, that it is likely that Vytautas, and many of the main players, may have had no idea about what exactly was going on. As pointed out by William Urban in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", what appeared to have been going on, based on chronicles written at the time, was that the Khan who had defeated Vytautas at the battle on the Vorskla, a man called Edigu, was secretly backing Basil I of Moscow, who himself was attempting to become the overlord of Novgorod.

Vytautas held ambitions to bring both Novgorod and Pskov under the Lithuanian umbrella, so not realizing exactly what he was up against, he commenced a series of military campaigns in the year 1406, against both Pskov and Novgorod, fully supported by both Poland and the Teutonic Order. So as a result, he led a talented bunch of fighters, which included the commander of Ragnit Castle, the Governor of Samogitia, and a bunch of Polish, German, Lithuanian, and Samogitian fighters to Russia, the Samogitians likely being the happiest of the bunch, leaving their farms behind to take on their preferred roles as warriors. Unbeknownst to Vytautas, though, the new Khan Edigu was running a highly effective disinformation campaign behind the scenes.

Edigu, unsurprisingly, was a rising star in the steppe region, following his victory at the Battle on the Vorskla. Due to this victory, and the fact that he enjoyed the support of the Great Khan Tamerlane, Edigu had managed to unite the Golden Horde forces with other Hordes in the region until he was ruling a gob-smackingly huge portion of territory, a region which today would extend from Crimea and eastern Ukraine all the way east to modern Tajikistan, then northwards to cover most of modern Kazakhstan, then up into parts of Siberia. It was an amazingly large region, and Edigu was doing a pretty impressive job of ruling it. However, he didn't like the idea of Lithuania pushing into the Russian Principalities, and he also wanted to avenge the death of his father who had been killed by Vytautas' ally Tokhtamysh. So he sent word to Basil of Moscow that he would support him to push back against the Lithuanian invaders, and would back Basil should he decide to take a shot at ruling Novgorod.

Then Edigu started to spread word amongst the Russian people that Vytautas was bringing the Teutonic Order to Russia with a view to ousting the Russian Orthodox religion from the Russian Principalities, and replacing it with the Latin Christian faith. Concerned Russian citizens were then alerted to the fact that Vytautas' army contained not only Teutonic Knights but a bunch of Polish clerics, and gradually Vytautas began to notice that his allies in the Russian Principalities were beginning to move away and distance themselves from Lithuania, and instead were shifting their support to Basil of Moscow.

So once again, Vytautas' ambitions for the Russian Principalities were being thwarted by Khan Edigu, not on the battlefield this time, but by some impressive backstage political maneuvering. You might be interested to know that Edigu did eventually manage to avenge his father's death, when he arranged the assassination of Tokhtamysh in Siberia, and you might also be interested to know that many years later, in the year 1419, Edigu himself was assassinated by one of Tokhtamysh's sons, to avenge the death of Tokhtamysh. And you thought politics today was cutthroat.

Anyway, the upshot of all of this was that the alliance between Jogaila, Vytautas and Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen was tested by Vytautas' failed campaign to take Pskov and Novgorod, and was further tested by the death of Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen, early in the year 1407.

Now, Konrad von Jungingen had been a competent, well respected and highly successful leader of the Teutonic Order, and really, if the Order had a choice, it would like to elect a person who was as similar to Konrad as possible to replace him. So I guess it's not too much of a surprise to learn that Konrad's younger brother, the Marshal of the Order Ulrich von Jungingen, was elected as the next Grand Master. Trouble was, Ulrich really wasn't a Konrad clone. He wasn't as wise as his older brother, tended to be impetuous, and wasn't as gifted a leader as Konrad had been. As William Urban states in his book "The Livonian Crusade", Ulrich was, and I quote "a brilliant but unstable leader, and experience would only make him more reckless, not more cautious. He steered the organization towards dangerous shoals while believing that he was holding the course" end quote.

So, how is the new Grand Master going to fit into the three way alliance between the Teutonic Order, the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania? Well, that was the question on everyone's minds, and shortly after being elected to the position of Grand Master, Ulrich, along with the Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, Konrad von Vietinghof, was invited to meet with Jogaila and Vytautas. The meeting involved informal as well as formal discussions, and William Urban reports that Ulrich turned up at the meeting accompanied by 150 wagons which were loaded with food and alcohol. Yes, that's probably worth repeating. Ulrich bought 150 cart loads of food and drink to his get-to-know-you meeting with Vytautas and Jogaila. So, it's safe to say that nobody at that meeting was left feeling hungry or thirsty. Unsurprisingly, the meeting went well, and a new alliance was formally brokered between Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen, Jogaila, and Vytautas, which Vytautas then immediately drew upon to try and get the Teutonic Order to support Lithuania having another crack at taking Pskov, Novgorod, and maybe even Moscow.

Now it's a very good thing that these three men are feasting and raising their glasses together, because they are all about to face a mountain of challenges. Just to give you a sneak peek, the attempt by Lithuania to push into the Russian Principalities will become a hot mess of chaos, the Samogitians are about to rise in revolt once again, and Grand Master Ulrich will need to turn his attention to Gotland once more. So, as you can see, the relationship between the three men is about to be sorely tested. Join me next week as those tests begin and cracks start to appear in the three way alliance. Until next week, bye for now.

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