

History of the Crusades. Episode 318. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XXIII. Coronation Crisis.

Hello again. Now, before we start on this week's episode, I have a quick announcement to make. The announcement is: the final episode on the Baltic Crusades will be our final episode for the year 2019, so how's that for timing? So Episode 321, the last episode in the current series, and in fact the last episode on this current feed, will air on the 20th of December, and I'll be back sometime in the new year with a new feed and a new series on the rise of Andalusia and the Spanish Reconquista. So in case you were wondering what the schedule was for the rest of this year, now you know. Okay, back to the narrative.

Last week we saw King Jogaila of Poland become the happy father to two young boys. However, while solving Jogaila's succession issues, the birth of Jogaila's sons upset Imperial plans to get a German Prince on the Polish throne, a Prince who was being groomed to marry Jogaila's daughter and previous heir Jadwiga. Jadwiga's claim to the throne was nullified by the birth of her new baby half-brothers, and for good measure Jadwiga herself later conveniently died, suddenly and unexpectedly, leaving the succession path clear for the baby boys.

The rising power of the Kingdom of Poland was causing alarm bells to ring, even amongst Poland's allies. Emperor Sigismund, whose plan to influence the kingdom of Poland via Jadwiga's future husband had now come to nothing, came up with a new plan designed to clip Poland's wings. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania had been slowly distancing itself from its former close ally Poland, by forging new ties with the Teutonic Order, and by emphasizing its eastern leanings; leanings towards Orthodoxy rather than Polish Russian Christianity, and leanings towards the Russian Principalities rather than its neighbors to the west.

At the Great Conference of 1427, Emperor Sigismund decided to give Lithuania a boost, aimed at assisting it to come out of Poland's shadow and stand on its own two feet. He did this by recommending that the now elderly Grand Duke Vytautas be crowned a King, elevating him to the same status as that enjoyed by King Jogaila of Poland, and raising the profile and power of Lithuania. However, the only person who seemed to be super-keen about this plan was Vytautas. Importantly, the only man who had the power to turn Vytautas from a Grand Duke into a King, Pope Martin V, poured cold water on the idea, believing that there were a number of much more pressing matters facing the Church, and that taking the rare step of creating a new European Kingdom wasn't anywhere near being on his to-do list.

But Grand Duke Vytautas wasn't deterred. He had taken the idea of himself as a King to heart and was determined to see it through, one way or another. Unfortunately for Vytautas though, one of the men adamantly opposed to the granting of a Lithuanian crown was Zbigniew Olesnicki. Remember Zbigniew Olesnicki? We met him back in Episode 304 when he was the young priest who saved Jogaila's life during the Battle of Tannenberg. You may recall that Jogaila offered to reward Olesnicki with a knighthood following this heroic act, but Olesnicki declined, stating that he felt he was more suited to carrying out God's work in the Church. Well, since the Battle of Tannenberg, Olesnicki has gone from strength to strength. At this point in time, he is one of Jogaila's most senior advisers, and he is also currently the Bishop of Krakow. Over the years he has become a talented statesman and diplomat, and he is now going to be using all of his impressive power and influence to attempt to prevent Lithuania from becoming a Kingdom.

Oddly, William Urban reports in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights" that King Jogaila himself wasn't overly concerned about the situation, and would have been happy with either outcome. So if Lithuania became a Kingdom, that would have been fine with Jogaila, but if it remained a Grand Duchy, well, that was okay too. So the King of Poland was neutral about the issue. However, Olesnicki kept pestering Jogaila to oppose the elevation of Vytautas, and in the end Jogaila threw his hands into the air and agreed to send an envoy to Vilnius in late summer of the year 1430, to meet with Vytautas and have a chat about the matter.

Coincidentally, the late summer of the year 1430 was the time Vytautas had arranged for his secret coronation, so while Olesnicki was working his contacts over in Rome to get the Papacy to oppose the move, and while King Jogaila was making plans for his representatives to travel to Lithuania to have a chat about the issue, Vytautas was quietly planning his coronation. Now, for a coronation, you obviously need to have a venue, an audience, a crown, and someone to crown you. Vytautas had decided that his coronation could take place at Saint Stanislaw Cathedral in Vilnius, and that the Bishop of Vilnius, Mathias of Traki, would perform the coronation ceremony. He had already sent invites to the Russian Princes, the Tartar Khans and the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, who had all indicated that they would attend. Now all he needed was a crown, a sceptre, and an orb.

This was the part of the plan which was proving a little tricky. Suitably regal crowns, sceptres, and orbs aren't the sort of thing you can just pop down to the market place to buy. In fact, it was safe to say that all the appropriately regal crowns, sceptres and orbs currently in existence in Europe were all required within their own Kingdoms, so the only option was to get them crafted, or made from scratch. This posed its own set of problems. Such items required a certain level of craftsmanship which was hard to come across, and the only such craftsmen currently taking commissions were the men in the Imperial workshop in Nuremberg. So Vytautas was forced to commission the creation of his crown, sceptre, and orb from Nuremberg in the Holy Roman Empire. He had done so, and the craftsman were currently busy at work, racing to meet the deadline Vytautas had set for his late summer coronation.

In Easter of 1430 Olesnicki, the Bishop of Krakow, had traveled to Lithuania to try to talk Vytautas out of holding his coronation. He failed. In the summer of 1430 King Jogaila's representatives traveled to Lithuania with an offer for Vytautas to drop his coronation plans in exchange for Jogaila giving Vytautas the crown of Poland, and sending Jogaila's children to Lithuania to make them Vytautas' wards. This very generous offer was also rejected. According to William Urban, Jogaila's representatives ended up falling to their knees and begging Vytautas not to go through with his coronation, but Vytautas told them that the plans were already in motion and it was too late to back out now. When this news was reported back to Jogaila, he decided to personally travel to Lithuania, to have a man-to-man, leader-to-leader talk about the issue with Vytautas.

Bishop Olesnicki, however, was concerned that Jogaila's personal intervention may be too little, too late, so instead he came up with a cunning plan. The crown, sceptre, and orb which Vytautas had ordered to be crafted in Nuremberg were now ready, and just had to make their way over to Lithuania in time for the ceremony. Checking his maps, Olesnicki decided that the Imperial messenger tasked with transporting the Riga regalia would likely travel to the northeast of the Holy Roman Empire, then make a sharp turn eastwards,

entering Prussia via territory in Neumark, before crossing over into Lithuania. Neumark was a restless border region, and Olesnicki decided to make it even more restless by ordering Polish troops to launch an attack there, making it unsafe for travelers to pass through. The ploy worked, and the bearers of the crown were forced to alter their travel plans, deciding to enter Lithuania, not via Prussia but via Poland. As soon as the items entered the Kingdom of Poland, Olesnicki arranged to have them confiscated.

So now, poor Grand Duke Vytautas has his coronation venue all sorted, and his guests are starting to arrive in Vilnius, but he has no crown, no sceptre, and no orb. This was, as you might imagine, all a little awkward. There was no way that the coronation could proceed without a crown and the other necessary regalia. Emperor Sigismund reached out to Vytautas and offered to instruct the Imperial Crown jewelers to start work on another set of coronation items, but Vytautas knew that that would take too long. Instead, he came up with his own plan. He had already been forced to tell the guests who had shown up for his coronation about the awkward lack-of-a-crown problem, and despite reassuring them that the coronation ceremony would be ready to go ahead as soon as the minor issue of the lack of a crown was resolved, many guests had already drifted away back to their homelands. To prevent the rest of them from doing so, Vytautas decided to throw a lavish party at his island castle in Trakai. Conveniently, King Jogaila was heading towards Lithuania, and Vytautas decided that the best way forward would be to keep his remaining guests entertained in style at Trakai, while, as soon as Jogaila arrived in Vilnius, Vytautas would negotiate with Jogaila for the return of his confiscated Crown.

King Jogaila did arrive at Vilnius, and Vytautas did immediately start pressuring him to order the release of the crown, however, Jogaila refused to budge. Holding onto the crown was the easiest way to prevent Vytautas from raising himself to the position of King.

King Jogaila seems to have moved away from his neutral stance at this stage. After all, if Vytautas failed to become King, then Emperor Sigismund's plan to pull Lithuania out from under Poland's wing and elevated to the same level as Poland would be stymied, and Jogaila's succession plans in relation to Lithuania would remain as they were. So Jogaila stood his ground and said "No".

The only option Vytautas had then was to try to wear Jogaila down, and convince him to change his mind. But Vytautas also needed to spend time in Trakai entertaining his guests and making sure they didn't scamper off back home before his coronation had taken place, so Vytautas was forced to journey back and forth between Vilnius and Trakai.

Vytautas was at this point in time, approaching 80 years of age, and the stress and physical exhaustion involved in trying to keep all his coronation plates spinning in the air may have been too much for him. As he was riding in a rush back to Vilnius from Trakai to continue the negotiations, he took a fall from his horse and was seriously injured. He was transported back to Trakai and died two weeks later. As a Lithuanian chronicler at the time stated, and I quote "In our age, nobody was to be compared to Prince Vytautas, in taking an obscure, dark, and ignoble fatherland, and through the fame of his deeds making it shine brilliantly, as no other Duke was later able to do." End quote.

As one of the power-players in our narrative exits the stage, he leaves behind him a power vacuum and succession crisis. King Jogaila, by rights, should now rule Lithuania as Vytautas' successor, but just about everyone who wasn't Polish was dead against this idea. The last thing the Teutonic Order, or the Holy Roman Empire, wanted to see was the

already powerful Jogaila become even more powerful by extending his territory all the way eastwards to Russia, and the last thing the Lithuanian people wanted was to be ruled by the aging King Jogaila, when anti-Polish and anti-Latin Christian feelings were so high across the country.

The only other succession option sitting on the table though, were currently young children. Concerns about the personal power and personal dislike of Jogaila may be set aside if Jogaila's son was allowed to step into Jogaila's shoes and rule Lithuania, but both of Jogaila's sons were too young to rule on their own, which raised the tricky question about regencies and the like. Likewise, Vytautas' only child, his daughter Sophia, had married Grand Prince Basil I of Moscow. She did have a fifteen year old son, who was also called Basil, from this marriage. However, young Basil was of the Russian Orthodox faith, and there was a great deal of disquiet in Poland and Prussia about Basil's young age, about the fact that he was not of the Latin Christian faith, and about the strong ties between Lithuania and Moscow that such a move would formulate.

Due to uncertainty around the succession, descendants of Gediminas kept popping out of the woodwork and putting their hands up to be considered as the next ruler of Lithuania. Now, do you remember back in Episode 315 when we saw Svitrigaila break out of jail? And remember that he sort of disappeared into the forests of Samogitia, and no one really knew where he was? Well, he's back.

Svitrigaila, in fact, attended Vytautas' funeral, and unfortunately made a bit of a spectacle of himself. Fortified by some alcohol, which was no doubt freely flowing at the event, Svitrigaila sauntered up to King Jogaila and attempted to convince him that he, Svitrigaila, was the answer to everyone's problems, and was the obvious leading candidate to replace Vytautas. Jogaila scoffed at the suggestion and told him that it would be up to the Kingdom of Poland to decide who should rule Lithuania, and that as a result he, Svitrigaila, was not even in the running. This exchange apparently caused Svitrigaila to drink even more heavily, and he soon became loud and obnoxious, which wouldn't have done anything at all to convince the power-players who were in attendance at the funeral that Svitrigaila was a genuine contender for the position.

With no clear contender emerging, and with the Teutonic Order, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Kingdom of Poland circling Lithuania like a pack of vultures, it looked likely to everyone that a civil war was about to erupt inside Lithuania.

As everyone jostled for position, Grand Master Paul of Rusdorf decided to make a bold play, and back an outsider to take the place of Vytautas. Who did the Teutonic Order decide to support to become the next Grand Duke of Lithuania? Yes, you guessed it, everyone's favorite intoxicated prison escapee, Svitrigaila.

Join me next week as we navigate some pretty choppy waters in the search to find someone to rule Lithuania before it descends into civil war. Until next week, bye for now.

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