

History of the Crusades. Episode 319. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XXIV. Many Endings.

Hello again. Last week we saw one of our main players exit the stage, leaving a succession crisis in his wake. Vytautas, or Vytautas the Great, as he later became known, is a revered figure in Lithuanian history, and for good reason. He steered Lithuania through the choppy waters of the Baltic Crusades, and under his leadership it transformed itself from a pagan state to a Latin Christian power player. However, despite his many achievements, Vytautas never managed to father a son, and as we saw at the conclusion of last week's episode, his death sparked a succession crisis.

The official heir to the Lithuanian Grand Duchy was the aging King Jogaila of Poland. But the Lithuanian people were largely against being led by Jogaila because of rising anti-Polish and anti-Latin Christian feelings surfacing across the country, which was increasingly leaning away from Poland and the Latin Christian west, towards the Russian Orthodox east. The Holy Roman Empire and the Teutonic Order were also dead against Jogaila becoming the ruler of Lithuania as they had recently both been busy trying to place a handbrake on the rising power of the Kingdom of Poland, and having the Kingdom of Poland effectively expand its territory all the way east to Russia was the last thing they wanted to see happen.

Unfortunately though, all the other contenders to take Vytautas' place were currently children, which resulted in the Teutonic Order throwing its support behind an outsider in the leadership race, that outsider being our old friend, the double-crossing, treacherous, jail-breaker and obnoxious heavy drinker Svitrigaila. Now we should probably remind ourselves at this stage that Svitrigaila is actually King Jogaila's brother, but he isn't the sort of man King Jogaila wants to become the ruler of Lithuania. He was too closely allied with the Russian Principalities to start with, and the fact that he was also a double-crossing, treacherous person of dubious character probably didn't help. Jogaila decided instead to support the bid of one of Vytautas' brothers for the leadership of Lithuania, the aging but compliant and safely Latin Christian Zygimantas.

Okay, so what occurs now is a confusing three way power-play tussle between the Kingdom of Poland, the Teutonic Order, and Emperor Sigismund, with Lithuania, and to a lesser extent the Hussites, playing piggy-in-the-middle. Here's how it all played out.

Svitrigaila started the action by flexing his muscles and taking an army to Volhynia, which was next to the Kingdom of Poland, intent on showing his suitability for becoming the next ruler of Lithuania by occupying Volhynia and extending Lithuanian rule into the region. To prevent King Jogaila from moving the Polish Royal Army into Volhynia and bursting Svitrigaila's military bubble, Grand Master Rusdorf decided to order the Teutonic forces to invade the Kingdom of Poland, and he called on the Livonian Chapter of the Order to send men to assist him to give Poland a hiding.

What was Emperor Sigismund doing at this stage? Well, at this point in time, Emperor Sigismund has turned his focus less on the troubled politics of the Baltic region and more inwards. Why? Well, because Emperor Sigismund is starting to get on in age, and perhaps the recent death of his ally, Vytautas, has caused him to change his priorities. Just as Vytautas' obsession towards the end of his life was to have himself crowned as the King of Lithuania, Emperor Sigismund's current obsession is to have himself crowned as the King of Bohemia. The thing which is standing in the way of Emperor Sigismund wearing the

Bohemian crown are the Hussites, and the pesky manner in which they have stirred up anti-Imperial and anti-Sigismund feelings inside the Kingdom.

Now, just to clarify, Sigismund did hurriedly crown himself as the King of Bohemia back in Episode 315, but in his haste to carry out the ceremony he didn't comply with the required steps and procedures, so his coronation was later declared invalid. So Emperor Sigismund's current obsession is to defeat the Hussites, sweep into power in Bohemia, then have himself crowned validly as the King of Bohemia, complete with cheering crowds and a lavish coronation ceremony.

While Emperor Sigismund was busy looking over towards Bohemia, making needy whimpering noises, King Jogaila ordered a contingent of the Polish Royal Army to confront the invading Teutonic forces, while he himself, Jogaila, went to Lithuania to deal with the Svitrigaila issue. Even without their King, the Polish Royal forces fought brilliantly, ambushing the Livonian forces, and smashing them to pieces as they tried unsuccessfully to retreat. This, of course, was a major embarrassment for the Grand Master, who had not expected his seasoned fighters to be beaten by Poland so quickly and comprehensively. He hurriedly signed a truce with Poland, but he seems not to have given sufficient thought to its terms. The truce effectively ended the Order's support of Svitrigaila, and was seen by many senior figures inside both Prussia and the Teutonic Order as being a humiliating back-down. As William Urban notes in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", the terms of the truce, and I quote "undermined his prestige beyond recovery" end quote. With his prestige now fatally undermined, Grand Master Paul of Rusdorf pretty much sits the rest of this power-play out on the sidelines with the Teutonic Order.

Now, despite having lost the support of his only real regional ally, the Teutonic Order, Svitrigaila went into action. He managed to get himself elected as the Grand Duke of Lithuania with the support of prominent Lithuanian noble families, but his election was immediately declared invalid by the Kingdom of Poland, which was legally required to be consulted in any election of a Grand Duke. Bishop Olesnicki then traveled to Lithuania to drum up support amongst the Polish-leaning Latin Christian Lithuanians for the election of Zygimantas to become the next leader of Lithuania, while Svitrigaila concentrated on building his power-base amongst the anti-Polish, pro-Russian, pro-Orthodox factions.

The end of all of this lobbying basically saw western Lithuania declare for Zygimantas, while eastern Lithuania stood behind Svitrigaila. With neither side having enough support to overcome the other, Lithuania now looked set to descend into civil war.

Meanwhile, back in Bohemia, Emperor Sigismund was trying desperately to defeat the Hussites in order to clear the way for his coronation, but he was pretty much thwarted in his ambitions by the Hussites, in concert with King Jogaila, who was supporting the Hussite army behind the scenes. Emperor Sigismund then decided to embark on a new strategy. The stick approach hadn't helped settle his dispute with the Hussites, so now he decided to try the carrot approach, dangling the possibility of concessions in front of the Hussites in the hope that enough of them would be appeased to enable Sigismund to go ahead with his coronation.

Back in Lithuania, Svitrigaila was trying desperately to gain the edge over his rival by scoring himself some powerful eastern allies. The nearly sixty year old Svitrigaila married the daughter of a powerful Russian family, one which was competing with Vytautas' grandson Basil II for the title of Grand Duke of Moscow. He also arranged an alliance with

the Tartars, gaining a tick of approval from the Great Khan. However, his absence from Lithuania gave King Jogaila the chance to increase Polish support in the country. Jogaila's forces managed to quell the rebel forces supporting Svitrigaila in Volhynia, and a plot orchestrated by Poland actually saw Svitrigaila's pregnant new wife kidnapped and taken prisoner. A spooked Svitrigaila then fled to Polotsk, while Zygimantas managed to occupy both the Lithuanian highlands and Samogitia with the assistance of the Polish Royal forces. Zygimantas' popularity seemed to be growing, despite the revelation that Poland had forced him to agree to hand Lithuania back to Poland after his death should he become the next Grand Duke of Lithuania.

A now desperate Svitrigaila decided that he needed more allies in order to stage a comeback, and the only such ally he could find was the Teutonic Order. The Grand Master re-kindled his alliance with Svitrigaila, and sent some knights from the Livonian Chapter of the Order to Svitrigaila, where they fought alongside his Russian Orthodox allies. Once again, the forces inside Lithuania now appeared to be evenly balanced, and once again no end to the conflict appeared to be in sight.

Until May of the year 1434. What happened in May of the year 1434? Well, King Jogaila was in Moldavia. Late one night he heard a nightingale singing in the Moldavian forests, and decided to take a stroll in the forest to try to locate it. He caught a cold from the expedition and died a few days later. He was 80 years old.

It's hard to overstate the influence Jogaila had on the Baltic region during his lifetime. His journey from a young pagan ruler to becoming one of the major Latin Christian power-players of Europe is a truly remarkable one, and unfortunately his passing left a power vacuum, as his young son and heir Wladislaw was only 10 years old when his father passed away. Bishop Olesnicki stepped in as the power behind the young throne, but both the Hussites and Zygimantas had now lost a powerful ally.

The Hussite rebellion died down a couple of years later when the Papacy made a number of concessions to the Hussites in return for their formal submission to Rome. It sounds on paper like the Church defeated the Hussites, but that's not how most people at the time saw it. In fact, for the first time ever, the Papacy had allowed a group of people whom it viewed as heretics, to make submissions to which it gave weight and consideration, and then, to everyone's shock, the Papacy made significant concessions to the Hussites, which in effect enabled the Hussites to practice their form of Christianity inside the Kingdom of Bohemia.

With the Hussite wars now effectively over, Sigismund, in the year 1436, was finally recognized as the King of Bohemia. But he didn't get to enjoy his position for long. Emperor Sigismund died the following year, in 1437, and was buried, at his request, in the Kingdom of Hungary. While Sigismund may have been mourned in the Kingdom of Hungary and across other parts of his Empire, he wasn't so much in the Kingdom of Bohemia. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban relates a description of the late Emperor Sigismund by a Bohemian chronicler. The chronicler described Sigismund as, and I quote "a heretical King, betrayer of the Lord God and his scriptures, violator of unmarried and married women, murderer, arsonist, and wrecker of destruction on the Czech language" end quote. When Sigismund's grave was opened in the year 1755, observers described his corpse as being clothed in gold, holding an orb, with a silver crown on his head.

With the decline of another one of our power brokers, I guess you are now all wondering how the civil war in Lithuania ended up playing out, and who ended up ruling Lithuania when the dust finally settled. Well, the civil war continued in Lithuania following Jogaila's death, with Poland continuing its support of Zygimantas, and the Teutonic Order, mainly in the form of the Livonian Chapter of the Order, supporting Svitrigaila, with the assistance of a number of Tartar and Russian fighters.

When the two forces clashed in the year 1435, in a battle which William Urban describes as "the Second Tannenberg", the Polish forces emerged victorious, predominantly due to their employment of heavy artillery. When the Polish forces fired their cannon at a fort which the Teutonic and Russian forces had constructed out of wagons, the noise was apparently so intense that many fighters fell to the ground in a semi-conscious state. The shock of the artillery barrage and the noise it made caused the Tartars to flee, then the defensive line of the Teutonic army began to fall apart. In the confusion, many defenders around the wagon fort attempted to flee, while many others, including the Master of the Livonian Chapter of the Order, were killed.

The Polish victory saw Zygimantas rise to become ruler of Lithuania, after pledging his loyalty to the new young Polish King, Wladislaw III. Svitrigaila received the governorship of Kiev and Volhynia as a consolation prize, but in the year 1438 he abandoned his new realm and went to seek refuge in Moldavia.

Peace had finally come to Lithuania, but tensions between the new ruler and supporters of Svitrigaila were still evident, and they were brought into stark focus in the year 1440 when Zygimantas was assassinated, by a fan of Svitrigaila and his accomplice. Any notions the assassins may have had that the departure of Zygimantas would herald the return of their hero, or another pro-Orthodox pro-Russian contender, were quashed when Bishop Olesnicki and the Polish Queen-mother Sophia, who had been working for many years to increase Polish influence in the East, managed to place Jogaila's second-eldest son, Casimir, in power. Casimir was only 13 years old at the time and would rule Lithuania as viceroy for his older brother, King Wladislaw of Poland, bringing Lithuania once again firmly under Poland's wing.

Young Casimir actually did a pretty good job of ruling Lithuania. He ended up relying predominantly on Lithuanian advisers. However, Casimir maintained good relations with his brother the King of Poland, and Bishop Olesnicki, so that when Casimir found himself crowned the King of Poland in 1447, after his brother was killed in battle, he managed to successfully rule both Poland and Lithuania. His dad would have been proud.

Join me next week as we turn the spotlight on the declining fortunes of the Teutonic Order. Until next week, bye for now.

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