

Episode 267.

The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part 46. Lithuania rising.

Hello again. Last week our two crusade narratives merged as we discussed letters allegedly sent by the Lithuanian leader Gediminas, offering to convert Lithuania to Christianity. A delegation was sent to Gediminas' court in Lithuania to assess the veracity of his offer, and the delegates were impressed by what they saw. In response, Grand Master Karl von Trier made a personal trip to Avignon, to argue that the Lithuanians were only bluffing, and that the whole thing was intended to unfairly smear the Teutonic Order. However Pope John XXII declared that the Teutonic Knights were guilty of a number of transgressions. Then he wrote to Gediminas, signalling that the papacy would welcome Lithuania's conversion. As a first step in negotiating the conversion Pope John dispatched two French clerics, along with Archbishop Friedrich of Riga, from Avignon, and ordered them to travel to Lithuania to talk terms with Gediminas. With high hopes of overseeing the formal conversion by the Lithuanians to Christianity, and thus bringing the conflict in the Baltic region to an end, the three men set off jauntily to Lithuania. To assist them to safely reach their destination Pope John declared of formal truce between Latin Christendom and Lithuania, and warned the Teutonic Order that they were expected to abide by this directive. When the three men arrived in Riga in September of 1324 the Teutonic Knights did indicate that they were refraining from any attacks, and messengers were sent ahead along the route that the three men intended to take to Lithuania, to ensure that everyone along the route knew that the men were envoys from Avignon who should be accorded safe passage.

Now, while Archbishop Friedrich and his two companions are winding their way towards Lithuania, Gediminas, who has been advised of their pending arrival found himself in a bit of a bind. His main concern at this point in time was not the Teutonic Order at all. Instead the Lithuanian leader was worried about push back by the Tartar rulers on his possessions across Russia. He really needed to keep the Russian people on his side, and was concerned that if he converted to Latin Christianity the Russian Orthodox citizens and rulers of Russia may drop him like a lead balloon. So when Archbishop Friedrich and his companions arrived safely in Lithuania they were confronted by some sobering facts. Gediminas advised them that this whole thing was actually just a big misunderstanding. He had never, in fact, intended to actually convert to Christianity. He was more than willing to view Pope John as a father, but not in a religious sense. Rather he would like to enter into a father-son like relationship with Pope John who he would view as Lithuania's ally, friend

and mentor, while also practising religious freedom. Gediminas advised the no doubt gobsmacked delegates that he was intending to apply complete religious freedom across the Baltic region. Everyone could worship whomever they pleased; no one would force anyone else to convert to anything; all religious wars, conflicts, and crusades would come to an end; and everyone would live happily ever after. Really, Gediminas may have said to the stunned clerics, what's not to like about that?

When the clerics had finally regained their powers of speech, and had pointed out that they were under the impression that Gediminas had agreed to be baptised, Gediminas calmly pointed out that not once in the letters had that point been made. Gediminas advised the clerics that the assumption that Gediminas had agreed to become a fully fledged Christian was exactly that: just an assumption, a mistake that the Pope and the Latin Christians had made when reading his letters. It was all a misunderstanding that Gediminas hoped could be set aside, while the rainbow of religious freedom shone over the Baltic region, and everyone put down their swords, shook hands with one another, and shared a few high fives and back slaps.

Now to be fair to Gediminas, William Urban points out in his book "The Livonian Crusade" that the Lithuanians had changed their religious views quite a bit in recent years. Constant contact with the Latin Christian world had rendered Lithuanian paganism into a more flexible kind of faith, and Gediminas had even ordered a stone temple to be built in Vilnius, a temple which looks suspiciously like a church. In fact, in his book "Lithuania Rising", S. C. Rowell states that the remains of this temple were uncovered in 1984, during excavations of the cathedral in Vilnius, which had been built over the remains of the temple in 1387. The book points out that Gediminas, through his trading connections with Latin Christians and through his administration of principalities in Orthodox Russia, was familiar with the style and layout of churches, and was likely influenced by those buildings when he commissioned the construction of the temple. This was a big step for the pagan Lithuanians, who we used to practising their religion outdoors and in various locations in the forests, so it may have indicated that the Lithuanians were already starting to incorporate some of the practices of Orthodox and Latin Christianity into their pagan forms of worship.

As you can imagine though, Gediminas' arguments didn't go down too well with the delegates. William Urban reports that Gediminas conducted himself in as regal a manner as he could, as he addressed the delegates. Around 20 scribes and members of the Lithuanian noble classes supported him as he spoke, in a similar manner as that inside a

Royal Court. He offered to continue to uphold the truce between Lithuania and the Latin Christians; he offered to protect Latin Christian merchants; and to extend an invitation to Latin Christian artisans to come and live in Lithuania. He would do just about anything in fact, except for the one thing which the delegates urged him to do: convert to Christianity. However, when they delegates refused to accept his overtures, and insisted upon his conversion, apparently his regal game face slipped, and Gediminas lost his temper, shouting the following at the delegates, and I quote. "What can you tell me about the Christians? Where is there more injustice, evil, violence, destruction and usury than amongst Christian men, and especially among those monks, the Teutonic Knights, who commit all kinds of evil, capturing Bishops, imprisoning them, and holding them in misery to force them to do as they wish; killing priests and monks; inflicting harm on the citizens of Riga, and never keeping a single promise that they have made to the Christian converts." End quote.

While Archbishop Friedrich may well have been nodding along in agreement with this outburst, it was becoming clear that the mission to convert the Lithuanians to Christianity was a total failure, and that there was no point continuing the negotiations. Magnanimously, Gediminas offered to send a representative with the delegation when they travelled back down to Riga. The representative, a nobleman and close confidant of Gediminas, would act as a spokesman for Gediminas, and would inform the Latin Christians of Livonia himself of the stand taken by the Lithuanians. This offer absolved Archbishop Friedrich of the embarrassment of having to explain the failure of the mission to the clerics and citizens of Riga who had gathered to hear the outcome. The Lithuanian nobleman addressed the crowd in Riga, stating, and I quote "The king [meaning Gediminas] never sent letters concerning the baptism of himself or his people, neither to the Pope, nor to the maritime cities, nor to the provinces, as is publicly stated." End quote. The nobleman went on to confirm through the crowd that Gediminas was not intending to convert to Christianity, and was instead intending to stay true to the pagan beliefs of his ancestors.

While no Lithuanians were converted to Christianity, Archbishop Friedrich was still able to fire a few salvos at the Teutonic Order before he left for Avignon. Firstly, he demanded that the order pay a sum of money to cover their expenses, threatening to excommunicate members of the order if the money failed to materialize. Then he wrote a very long document which included a stinging passage about the Order. The passage in question stated, and I quote. "Since we, Brother Friedrich Archbishop of the Church in Riga, have known that the Master and Brothers and individual persons of the Fraternal Order of St

Mary of the Germans are obstacles to the Christian Faith, destroyers of churches, violators of good morals, outrageous kidnappers of Bishops, other prelates and clerics, many of whom they have killed, notorious besiegers of castles and avid occupiers of possessions of churches, conspirators, perjurers, and makers of assemblies, they shall have no authority in the sea of Riga.” End quote.

Archbishop Friedrich made his way back to Avignon in the spring of 1325, and once there settled into his now very familiar routine of trying fruitlessly to get Pope John to deal a fatal blow to the Teutonic Order. While this whole saga may have ended up being a disappointing waste of time for Archbishop Friedrich and the Papacy, the whole not-going-to-convert-to-Christianity-after-all ploy ended up working in Gediminas' favour. By publicly rejecting Latin Christianity, he maintained power and influence in many of the Russian principalities, while his fierce words about the Teutonic Order and his kind words about the papacy ended up forming the basis of an alliance between Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland.

The Kingdom of Poland, of course, was no fan of the Teutonic Order, particularly after the whole annexing of Pomerelia saga, but it was a strong Latin Christian Kingdom. The new friendship between Poland and Lithuania bore some fruit when the armies of both states combined to invade Western Galicia, scoring a significant amount of territory for both states. Slowly, almost without anyone realising it, pagan Lithuania was becoming increasingly powerful, and was well on its way to becoming a major power player in the region. The culmination of the acceptance by Latin Christian Europe of pagan Lithuania as a valid and respected new player at the table came in late 1325, when Gediminas' daughter Mary married the heir to the Kingdom of Poland.

This new Alliance was publicly supported by the papacy, but while it signalled closer ties between pagan Lithuania and Latin Christendom, it didn't mean that Lithuania was intending to cease its attacks on Latin Christian targets. In fact, with his new ally in tow, Gediminas stepped up his attacks on Teutonic Order targets in both Livonia and across the Baltic region. At one stage he even marched an army through Poland to attack Teutonic possessions and the positions of allies of the Teutonic Order inside the Holy Roman Empire, targeting Brandenburg and Saxony.

Having a bunch of pagans, whether they were allied with Poland or not, attacking and defeating Teutonic possessions deep in the heart of Latin Christendom came as a bit of a shock to everyone. Luckily for the Teutonic Order, they had a new Grand Master who

seemed to be up to the task of taking on these rampaging pagans. His name was Werner von Orseln, and he had been the castellan of the stronghold at Ragnit, so he was well versed on the situation in Samogitia, and had hands on experience in fighting pagans. It was pretty clear to everyone that, while the focus of the previous Grand Master, Karl von Trier, had been on the orders activities inside the Holy Roman Empire, the new Grand Master's focus would be on the region he knew best: the battle grounds of Samogitia. This wasn't to say that the Holy Roman Empire wasn't important to the Order though.

Handily for the Teutonic Order, the Papacy was currently at loggerheads with the Holy Roman Empire. This was not really newsworthy in itself, as historically the Papacy was more often than not in conflict with the Holy Roman Empire, but the conflict ended up working in the Order' favour. Two men, Louis of Bavaria and Friedrich of Austria, had been vying for election to the Imperial throne. Pope John had publicly backed Friedrich of Austria, but in the end, Louis of Bavaria had won the throne. Relations between Emperor Louis IV and Pope John rapidly deteriorated, and culminated in the Pope laying an interdict across Germany in 1326, resulting in the suspension of all Church services in the region.

Now, the Teutonic Order was also in conflict with the papacy, and with the Order already enjoying strong ties to Germany it wasn't hard to guess that the Holy Roman Empire was going to be throwing its full support behind the Teutonic Order. If we transfer all these political machinations and allegiances to the conflicts in the Baltic region, you can see the players all lining up into two camps. In one corner there stands Gediminas and Lithuania, along with his many Russian vassals, supported by his ally the Kingdom of Poland. Also in this corner are Archbishop Frederick and the citizens of Riga, along with the pagans of Samogitia. In the opposing corner we have the Teutonic Order, with their new battle-hardened and Samogitian-based Grand Master standing out in front, supported by their powerful ally, the Holy Roman Empire. Sitting firmly on the fence is Pope John. The Pope despises the Holy Roman Emperor but he also wants to keep the Teutonic Order in the Baltic region, so he is unable to walk over and join the Lithuanian / Poland group, even though that is most likely where his heart lies.

Right, so that's pretty much the situation at the end of the year 1326. Everyone is putting on their fighting gloves, doing their warm-ups, and itching to get back into the ring. Join me next week as they do exactly that. We head over to Samogitia for the next round in the Samogitian Crusade, with a reinvigorated Lithuania and their new ally Poland, supporting the Samogitians, while Grand Master Orseln leads a bunch of eager Crusaders from the

Holy Roman Empire into Samogitia to attempt to conquer the region. Until next week, bye for now.

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