

History of the Crusades. Episode 286. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XVIII. Poland and Lithuania.

Hello again. Last week we saw some major developments take place in the politics of the Baltic region, with Kestutis' son Vytautas escaping from custody in Lithuania and eventually being convinced by the Teutonic Order to become the newly-Christianized leader of western Samogitia. Once the Order's relationship with Jogaila broke down, the Order then convinced Vytautas to make a play for the leadership of Lithuania itself. They set Vytautas up in a castle in Samogitia, from which he was meant to Christianize the Samogitians, a venture which wasn't going too well. As Vytautas accompanied his new allies the Teutonic Knights on pagan-killing, sacred-site-desecrating missions, he started having second thoughts about the choices he had made. So when Jogaila discreetly approached him with an offer for Vytautas to switch sides and join with Jogaila to kick the Teutonic Order out of Lithuania and Samogitia, Vytautas readily agreed.

Now Jogaila, of course, has a plan here. We saw in last week's episode that the Polish throne is currently vacant, and that before he died King Louis of Hungary, who had reigned as the King of Poland as well as the King of Hungary, had indicated that he wished his two surviving daughters to succeed him. King Louis' eldest daughter Mary, who was aged in her late teens, is married to young Sigismund of Brandenburg, so Sigismund is all set to use his wife's succession rights to place himself on the Polish throne. We saw last week how Sigismund gathered an army and marched into Mazovia to successfully convince the last-man-standing in the famous Piast dynasty, the current Duke of Mazovia, to drop his claim to the crown.

However, since that time things haven't gone too well for Sigismund. The problem lay first in the fact that he was German, and secondly that he was second in the line of succession to become the next Holy Roman Emperor. Did the Polish people want a German aristocrat with rock-solid ties to the Holy Roman Empire to be anywhere near the halls of power in Poland? No, they did not. So the idea of having Mary inherit the Polish crown was being quietly shuffled to the side. That meant that all eyes were now turning to Mary's younger sister Jadwiga.

Now, there is some dispute amongst historians as to Jadwiga's age at this time. While many historians insist that she was only around eleven years old, William Urban maintains that, recently, evidence has come to light that she was a few years older than that, around fourteen. Anyway, Jadwiga had always expected to inherit the Kingdom of Hungary, while her older sister scored the bigger prize of Poland, but now it looked like the best idea would be for Jadwiga to be upgraded to become the ruler of Poland.

Inconveniently, Jadwiga was betrothed to Wilhelm von Habsburg, an Austrian prince who was pretty happy with the prospect of marrying the future Queen of Hungary. A bunch of influential Polish barons traveled to Hungary to meet with Jadwiga, and they informed her that she would no longer be growing up, marrying her childhood friend Wilhelm, and becoming the Queen of Hungary. Nope, there'd been a change of plans. Wilhelm was now off the table as a marriage prospect. They had someone else in mind, a really nice young man from Lithuania who they were sure she would love to marry. Yes, OK, he was currently a pagan while Jadwiga was a particularly pious Latin Christian, but that would all change once Jogaila converted to Christianity. And yes, they realized that Jogaila was nearly three times as old as Jadwiga, and that Jadwiga couldn't actually speak the Lithuanian language, but really, these were just a little problems which will surely be

overcome. The Polish barons likely beamed enthusiastically at Jadwiga, who may have blinked back at them in a dazed sort of manner. Then they readied her for her journey to Poland for her coronation.

Now, clearly you have to feel for Jadwiga at this point. She was reportedly an intelligent, attractive and accomplished girl who showed talent both as a musician and a scholar. But she was only young, and her whole world has just been up-ended. She had focused all her education and all her attention on matters Hungarian, and she was apparently genuinely attached to young Prince Wilhelm of Austria, whom she had known since infancy.

She dutifully attended her coronation ceremony in Poland on the 15th of October 1384. Then Prince Wilhelm dashed onto the scene, keen to reclaim her as his bride. With the support of his German allies, he managed to take the Royal Castle at Krakow, and released all the prisoners in the castle's dungeon as a sign of his goodwill. However, as Norman Davies states in his book "God's Playground, The History of Poland", the celebration was short-lived. The castellan of Krakow broke into the royal castle, removed the Austrian Prince, and eventually he was ejected from the Kingdom of Poland altogether. A desperately unhappy Jadwiga appealed to her mother back in Hungary to intervene, but her mother was reluctant to get involved. So, Jadwiga then turned to the Archbishop who, instead of helping her to bring Prince Wilhelm back to Poland, instead informed her of the good news that the Pope had formally annulled her betrothal to her Prince. Jadwiga was now all out of options. As Norman Davies states, and I quote, "After weeks of agonized prayer, she bowed to the inevitable" end quote.

Now the obvious questions that need answering here are, firstly, why does Jogaila want to be King of Poland? And more importantly, why on earth do the Polish barons think that this is a good idea?

Well, Jogaila, as we all know, is a strategic thinker. Lithuania has for some time been the pagan meat in the Latin Christian sandwich, stuck in the middle while the Teutonic Order pushes on them from one direction and the Kingdom of Poland pushes on them from the other direction. Jogaila has seen the writing on the wall. It is obvious to Jogaila that Lithuania cannot hold out as a pagan power indefinitely, particularly if it is to be a major political player in the region, and Jogaila intended very much for it to be a major political player in the region. The experience of Vytautas in recent times had shown Jogaila what it would likely be like if he converted to Christianity and allied himself with the Teutonic Order. So the obvious move would be to convert to Christianity and ally himself with the Order's biggest regional opponent, Poland. Poland and Lithuania had after all formed marriage alliances in the past, and the fact that the Polish throne had just been occupied by a fourteen year old girl who needed a husband was just the incentive that Jogaila needed.

And for Poland, Jogaila was a better choice than a German man, so long as he paid the right price, and Jogaila was more than willing to hand over all the concessions the Polish barons demanded. These included: Jogaila was required to convert to Christianity and must ensure that all his Lithuanian subjects also received baptism; Lithuania had to release all the Polish prisoners and slaves it currently held; Lithuania had to agree to provide military assistance to the Kingdom of Poland when requested against the Teutonic Order; and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had to permanently join itself to the Kingdom of Poland.

In August of 1385, a delegation of barons from Poland presented these demands to Jogaila, who agreed to them all. A formal document was then created, describing the agreement that Jogaila was to be baptized along with all the Lithuanian people. Then that document was formally sealed, not only by Jogaila but by three of his brothers, including Skirgaila, and Kaributas, and by Vytautas as well. The document was then taken back to Poland and waved at Jadwiga, who then, reluctantly I imagine, agreed to marry the Grand Prince of Lithuania.

Now, you might ask, how come Vytautas has added his seal to the document? Well, the answer to that question is, by the time the document was sealed in August of 1385, Vytautas was no longer under the thumb of the Teutonic Order, but was in fact firmly under the thumb of Jogaila. How did this come about? Well, it went a little something like this.

As we have seen before, a year earlier in the summer of 1384, when it became clear to Jogaila that Vytautas was having second thoughts about being the Order's man in Samogitia, Vytautas agreed to turn on his allies and assist Jogaila to force them from Samogitia and Lithuania. Jogaila planned this event well. The Order was currently firmly entrenched in a number of strongholds along the Nemunas River in Samogitia, and Jogaila decided to launch his strike against them there. So he told Vytautas to take an army of four hundred men to the Order's stronghold at Georgenburg on the Nemunas River and to tell the castellan that Jogaila's forces were approaching, and to send to Ragnit for assistance. The castellan did exactly that, then invited Vytautas and his army into the castle. Vytautas was then able to take and destroy the castle. He was able to take another stronghold in a similar manner, but by the time he attempted to intercept the men from Ragnit who had come to answer the Order's called to arms, word of his treachery had spread.

The castle that both Vytautas and Jogaila had singled out as their main target was the castle at Marienwerde. Confusingly, there was also a Marienwerde castle in Prussia, but this Marienwerde, which was in Samogitia, was located on the mouth of the Dubysa River, and was currently being used as the main base by the Teutonic Order for its pushes across Samogitia and into Lithuania. So Vytautas led his army up-river to Marienwerde, while Jogaila and Skirgaila also led armies to the castle.

The siege of Marienwerde Castle had lasted for four weeks when a relieving force of Teutonic Knights from Prussia, under the command of Grand Master Konrad Zollner von Rothenstein, arrived in October of 1384. For the past few weeks, Lithuanian siege engines and catapult machines had been mercilessly attacking the castle. After assessing the situation, the Grand Master decided that it was hopeless and that Marienwerde was lost. The Lithuanians held all the strategic points outside the castle and had effectively trapped the castle's garrison. The men of the garrison were exhausted, and many had been injured by stones hurled from the catapults. The Grand Master decided that he didn't have enough men or resources to surround the Lithuanians and trap them against the castle walls, so he decided that the men of the garrison of Marienwerde would have to look after themselves, and he left them to it.

The siege ended up continuing until December, when the Lithuanians set fire to the castle moat, which they had filled with wood. The garrison of the castle decided to surrender in preference to being burned alive, and Jogaila took around six hundred of them into captivity. With Marienwerde in Lithuanian hands, Jogaila was able to secure all the fortresses in the upper reaches of the Nemunas River. Then he turned his efforts towards forcing the Order out of Lithuania.

In his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban points out that it was around this time that Jogaila decided that he really didn't need Vytautas anymore. While he had promised him the region around Trakai in return for his cooperation against the Teutonic Order, Jogaila gave Trakai, a bunch of Russian principalities, and Samogitia, to Skirgaila. Vytautas was instead, given a small area near the borders of Prussia, Mazovia and Volhynia. Of course, being the ruler of border regions, Vytautas was constantly on alert, and had to spend most of his time patrolling his lands and keeping them in line. Of course, this is likely exactly what Jogaila had known would happen. Far away from the center of power and completely reliant on Jogaila for assistance in controlling his restless population, Vytautas was forced to fall into line, with that line being located right underneath Jogaila's thumb. As William Urban states, and I quote "Vytautas found himself a marcher Lord, subordinate to and dependent upon Jogaila, doing the dirty work of defending the country without hope of profit or advancement" end quote.

So once again, Jogaila won, and you probably won't be surprised to hear that he kept on winning. The Polish barons worked with Jogaila to deflect any serious opposition to Jogaila taking the Polish crown and the Duke of Mazovia, who, now that young Sigismund had dropped his tilt at the throne, was currently the man with the strongest claim to the title, found himself agreeing to marry one of Jogaila's sisters and being gifted with extensive lands in Russia. Finally, the path to the Polish throne was clear and Jogaila rode to Krakow, where he was baptized into the Christian faith, then married to Jadwiga. Then on the 1st of March 1386, Jogaila was crowned as King Wladislaw II of Poland.

Now, this is a rather momentous moment in the history of Poland, the history of Lithuania and in the history of Europe. As Norman Davies states in his book "God's Playground, A History of Poland", and I quote, "It was a decisive moment in the life of two nations. For four long generations spanning 186 years, Jogaila and his heirs drove the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in harness, like a coach and pair." End quote. In reality, what this meant on the ground was that Poland split the union which had been created between itself and the Kingdom of Hungary, and it then effectively replaced Hungary with Lithuania.

But things didn't go all Jogaila's way. Jogaila was keen for the Polish barons to use their influence in settling family feuds back in Lithuania, but this never happened. The Polish barons also never became the attack-dogs against the Teutonic Order which Jogaila hoped they might be. And it took quite a while for Jogaila to wield any effective influence in Polish politics.

Although she was very young, Jadwiga was a smart, pious and extremely popular queen who was clearly beloved by her people. She threw herself into a number of charitable causes, some of which had an impact far beyond her reign. According to Norman Davies, Queen Jadwiga once used her cloak to cover the remains of a copper-smith who had drowned, and this act was celebrated to the extent that her cloak became the banner of the copper-smiths guild. Also, apparently the imprint of one of her shoes remained behind on a stone which she had rested her foot on while removing a golden spur from the shoe to give to a poor stonemason. The stone was later inserted into the wall of a nearby church. Later in her life, when Jadwiga became seriously ill, the castle was swamped with gifts of chickens, vegetables, and other items sent in by concerned peasants, hoping to assist in her recovery.

Now, with all this goodwill from her subjects, Jadwiga really didn't need the assistance of her husband Jogaila to rule Poland, and she made that pretty clear to him. William Urban reports that Jadwiga often ignored Jogaila's advice, and sometimes even worked purposefully against his plans.

But, the marriage difficulties between the new rulers of Poland and Lithuania aside, the questions that will affect the Baltic Crusades going forward are: how will the Teutonic Order react to this new arrangement; and how do the pagans of Lithuania and Samogitia feel about their new obligation to convert to Christianity? Join me next week as we answer these questions and more. Until next week, bye for now.

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