

History of the Crusades. Episode 315. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XX. Catching up on news from home.

Hello again. Last week we concluded our look at the determinations made at the Council of Constance. After spending a number of years hearing arguments from both the Teutonic Order and the Kingdom of Poland, the Council of Constance eventually came down on the side of the Teutonic Order. It rejected Poland's submissions that the Teutonic Order should be disbanded on the basis that there were no more pagans to convert in the Baltic region, and it also rejected the more ambitious argument made by Poland that all the actions taken by the Teutonic Order in the Baltic region had been invalid, and that therefore all territory conquered by the Order should be handed back to the locals, with Prussia, of course, going to Poland.

We should remember, of course, that the Council of Constance was, after all, a Church Council, and it probably shouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone to learn that the Church decided to rule in support of Crusades in general and in support of the Teutonic Order in particular.

Now, while the Council of Constance has been sitting for a number of years, taking up everyone's time, everyone's energy, and our last three podcast episodes, life, drama and politics have all been continuing apace inside Prussia, Lithuania, Poland and the Kingdom of Bohemia, so we should take a quick look at what has been playing out away from Constance on the Baltic home front, and bring everyone up to speed to the year 1420, when the Council of Constance handed down its final determination.

First up for examination, we have Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania. Now, at this point in time, I should point out that Vytautas is no longer a young man. In fact, he is approaching 70 years of age, which is a pretty impressive feat for a warrior leader in medieval Europe. As a consequence, the idea of racing off to the faraway Russian principalities and to Samogitia to lead his troops in battle isn't as appealing as it used to be. In fact, for Vytautas at the moment, pretty much the most pleasurable activity he could think of was to settle back in relaxation and comfort in the fancy castle he had set up for himself at his ancestral hometown, Trakai.

The castle, which was located in an extremely picturesque spot on an island in a lake, had been designed by Vytautas' father Kestutis, but Vytautas had made a number of additions and improvements. By the year 1409, work on the castle was complete. It had been designed with comfort as well as defense in mind, and featured a six-room living quarter complex for Vytautas and his family, as well as a great hall which was centrally heated. In what was a brilliant inclusion for a castle built on an icy lake in Lithuania, a cellar under the hall contained a furnace, and warm air was transferred from the furnace into the hall via ceramic pipes. I guess it's no surprise to learn that, really, Vytautas at this point in his life preferred relaxing inside his centrally heated castle in the beautiful town of Trakai, to the exhausting and dangerous work of battling to keep his enemies and his subjects in line.

Incidentally, the castle, which today is called Trakai Island Castle, underwent a series of major reconstructions and renovations during the 20th century, work which was completed during the 1960s. It's now a major tourist draw-card, so if you are in the area it looks well worth a visit.

Anyway, while it was more than understandable for the aging warrior ruler to want to retire to his gorgeous island castle, events kept getting in the way. Samogitia, for instance, wasn't settling down, embracing Christianity, and enjoying Lithuanian rule like Vytautas was hoping it might. Possibly to boost the arguments he was making at the Council of Constance, Vytautas established a Bishopric in Samogitia in the year 1417. Instead of celebrating this move, though, the Samogitians rose in an uprising against both Lithuanian rule and the Latin Christian Church in May of 1418, which resulted in a number of churches being ransacked and burned, and saw quite a few Christian priests make the decision to leave Samogitia for good.

Likewise, the Russian principalities were proving to be as much of a headache as they ever were, and the situation wasn't helped by the fact that the more time Vytautas spent at Trakai, and the less time he spent in the Russian principalities, the more his power in Russia diminished and the less impact Lithuania had on the politics of the region.

This was exacerbated by Vytautas' attempts to bring the Latin Christian Church and the Orthodox Churches closer together. Again, this was one of his talking points at the Council of Constance. While uniting the two Churches seemed like a worthy goal on paper, in practice, the Latin Christian Church was pretty much entirely unwilling to make any concessions to the Orthodox Church to enable this to happen. So in reality, all that transpired was that Vytautas' efforts in this regard came to nothing, and the whole attempt really just shone a spotlight on the fact that Vytautas was closer to the Latin Christian Church than the Orthodox faith. This, of course, reduced Vytautas' popularity in the Russian principalities and made his relationship with senior figures inside the Orthodox Church decidedly prickly.

Now, amongst all of this drama, two stand-out incidents occurred to Vytautas at this time. The first incident commenced with the death of his wife, Anna, in the year 1418. Anna had been an effective, able, and talented counselor and advisor, in addition to being Vytautas' wife. Although her death must have come as a massive shock to Vytautas, he didn't take long to find an attractive young replacement. While the speed in which Vytautas decided to remarry may have caused a minor scandal, the minor scandal turned into a major scandal when it was discovered that the woman Vytautas had chosen to become his next wife was actually Anna's niece, Juliana Olshanska. Unfortunately, Juliana also happened to be currently married to someone else. The major scandal then turned into a major, major scandal when Juliana's husband was suddenly murdered, conveniently clearing the way for the wedding. Despite the scandals and the opposition of the Church, Vytautas married Juliana in November of 1418.

Now, one reason for the rush Vytautas may have felt to marry a pretty young wife was his lack of heirs. Vytautas had been married to Anna for nearly 50 years, but that union had only produced one child, a girl named Sophia. If the elderly Vytautas could manage to father a son with his new wife, then his succession problems would immediately disappear.

Which brings us to the second stand-out incident which occurred to Vytautas. As you might have guessed, it is connected to the question over the succession to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and it involves the re-emergence of one of our past players back onto the stage, that player being Svitrigaila. Svitrigaila had been languishing inside a prison cell in Ukraine due to the fact that he had first tried to ally himself with the Teutonic Order to oust Vytautas, and had then allied himself with the Duchy of Moscow to oust Vytautas.

While both these attempts have been unsuccessful, Vytautas decided that, in order to prevent any re-occurrence, it would be best for everyone if Svitrigaila stayed safely inside a prison in the Russian principalities, where he couldn't involve himself in any further political intrigue against the Lithuanian ruler.

But in the year 1418 Svitrigaila managed once again to involve himself in political intrigue against the Lithuanian ruler. A bunch of Russian noblemen, concerned about Vytautas' close ties to Poland, the failure of Vytautas to unite the Orthodox and Latin Christian Churches, and Lithuania's waning influence in the Russian principalities, decided to break Svitrigaila out of jail. They approached the commander of the castle holding Svitrigaila and offered him their services as mercenaries. Once they had gained the commander's confidence, they secretly let 500 of their men inside the castle gates late one night, slew the commander and his officers, then freed Svitrigaila from his cell, and rode westwards with him.

No one really knows to this day exactly where Svitrigaila went after his jailbreak. Some historians have him appearing in Austria and Hungary, while others speculate that he made his way to Samogitia. All we need to know at this point in our narrative is that Svitrigaila is now roaming freely somewhere in Europe, a fact which is making Grand Duke Vytautas and King Jogaila of Poland rather nervous.

Talking of King Jogaila, what has he been up to? Well, even though Jogaila is also no longer a young man and is currently aged in his sixties, he has been keeping himself rather busy. In fact, he is currently showing absolutely no sign of wanting to slow down and spend more time relaxing in centrally heated castles. For the duration of the Council of Constance, Jogaila's main concerns were to maintain pressure on both Prussia and the Teutonic Order, and do his best to play nice with Vytautas and the people of Lithuania, who are of the view that the Kingdom of Poland had wrongly taken too much of the credit for the victory at Tannenberg, and that Lithuania was being denied its share of the spoils of victory.

There was also a solid reason why Jogaila wanted to go out of his way to maintain friendly relations with Lithuania, that reason being he was Vytautas' heir, and assuming that he outlived Vytautas, then Jogaila would become the new ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. So Jogaila has spent as much time as he could spare, traveling around Lithuania, and also venturing to Polotsk, Smolensk and Kiev in the Russian principalities, spreading Polish goodwill and smoothing the way for a painless transition to the Duchy of Lithuania for Jogaila and his heirs.

Now, like Vytautas, Jogaila's only child at this point in time is a girl. In fact, all around the Baltic region, leaders seemed to be suffering from the succession blues. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban describes how Jogaila received delegations from the Tartars and a number of representatives from powerful Russian cities such as Novgorod. As William Urban states, and, I quote "This was perceived as an effort to restate his claim to supremacy in Lithuania, which he stood to inherit once Vytautas died, because the Grand Duke had no son. At this point however, Jogaila had no son either, nor had Sigismund for that matter, nor Wenceslas. Everyone was concerned about a succession crisis." End quote.

You might remember that, following the death of Queen Jadwiga, Jogaila married Anne of Celje, a woman whom he found to be vacuous and uninteresting. However, Anne did bear

him a child, a daughter who ended up being named Jadwiga, after Jogaila's first wife, which must have been a little awkward. Luckily for everyone, little Jadwiga seemed to have inherited the best genetic traits from both her parents. The intelligent, lively, and attractive child immediately became the apple of Jogaila's eye, and he set about giving her the education in statecraft and politics that she would need to become the heir of Poland and Lithuania.

However, in the year 1416 Anne of Celje died, and Jogaila jumped at the opportunity to score himself a new wife and possibly a son. The woman he chose to marry in the year 1417 was Elizabeth Pilecka, a very wealthy Polish noblewoman who had already been married three times. Elizabeth wasn't a popular choice amongst the Polish people who judged that being married four times was one time too many. A good Christian was apparently only able to be married three times during their lifespan. To make sure that he had the Church's blessing, Jogaila obtained a dispensation for the union from the Council of Constance, then the couple were married. However, during the wedding ceremony, a big storm blew up, which of course, was viewed as a bad sign. When Elizabeth died three years later of tuberculosis, many people nodded wisely and knowingly, believing that the cursed marriage had been brought to its justified end.

At this point in our narrative, Jogaila is looking around Europe for another wife, a woman who will strengthen his political alliances and hopefully bring him a much-needed son. He will actually take three years to locate a suitable bride, a woman of the Orthodox faith who he hoped would boost Poland's popularity in the Russian principalities. And in case you're wondering, yes, his new wife, Sophia, will bear him three sons, knocking Jadwiga from the line of succession. But that's all some years into the future.

Now we come to the Kingdom of Bohemia. King Wenceslas died heir-less, while hunting in the year 1419, possibly due to a heart attack. His brother Sigismund was designated as his heir, but due to the recent Jan Hus controversy, Sigismund was about as popular in the Kingdom of Bohemia as a werewolf at a Christening. As a consequence, rioting and anti-German protests were breaking out all over the city of Prague. Emperor Sigismund did manage to make his way safely to Prague in the year 1420, but the feeling against him was so pronounced that he was forced to hold a swift and improvised coronation ceremony, which ended up being invalid, before racing back out of the Kingdom to the safety of his Empire.

Over in the Teutonic Order, Michael Kuchmeister is still Grand Master, but Archbishop Johannes Wallenrode died in the year 1418, the morning after he had enjoyed a lavish feast in the city of the Liege. This was actually a huge loss for the Order. The Archbishop's conduct throughout the Council of Constance had elevated his status and office, and he had gained the respect of many of Europe's power-brokers.

So now we are all caught up. Basically, everyone is stressed out about succession issues, and Svitrigaila is prowling around on the loose, somewhere in Europe. Join me next week as the drama continues, with war breaking out in the Baltic region once again, in the year 1422. Until next week, bye for now.

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