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**The Last Pagan Kingdom: Conversion Colonization and the
Christianization of Lithuania**

Senior Thesis
Colorado College History Department
Spring 2012

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Introduction

Before 1386, the kingdom of Lithuania was the last pagan state left in East Central Europe. The expansion of the Roman Church from Frankish dominions in the west to the peoples in the north and east of Europe had begun in the 800s, and spread quickly throughout the Baltic region. The conversion of pagan peoples, however, was not solely an ecclesiastical concern: in the Middle Ages especially, religious and secular power were usually inextricably linked, and conversion became a form of colonization. During the ninth and tenth centuries, the Church began to build bishoprics all across Europe. These episcopal sees were “a physical and tangible embodiment of Latin Christendom,” so that the secular authority of Rome was evident in every converted country.¹ Nor were bishoprics just a single building or town: they controlled a swath of the surrounding land, so that they represented the territorial power of the Church.

Robert Bartlett notes in *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950-1350* that the Church not only exercised the authority that conversion brought, but the most powerful peoples during the Middle Ages, the Franks and Germans, fought to bring Christianity to pagan kingdoms directly in order to gain influence over the converted lands. In East Central Europe conversion came from the East Franks, the Germans, and although they exercised considerable influence through trade, not until the Teutonic Knights came on the scene in the 1200s did this German influence become outright military conquest. German

¹ Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950-1350*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

bishops actively worked to be the power behind conversion in East Central Europe as early as the 800s, disrupting the mission of the Greek priests Constantine (later Cyril) and Methodius in the lands of the Southern Slavs and replacing the priests they had ordained with Frankish and German bishops. Although the Byzantine and Roman churches had not yet suffered a complete schism, the choice that all East Central and Eastern European nations would have to make between the Eastern and Western churches was clear in this conflict between Greeks and Germans. After the western Church's victory in the southern Slavic regions, the emperor of Germany, Otto I, began to establish bishoprics and missions all along his borders with the pagan kingdoms to the East. In 968 Otto succeeded in effecting the elevation of one, the bishopric of Magdeburg, to the status of archbishopric, from which position of power he envisaged German influence as going out to any peoples to the East who could be converted to Christianity. While Poland and Hungary took charge of their own ecclesiastical development after their ruling classes' respective conversions in the 900s and 1000s, "Germany... eventually provided the impetus and the model for the creation of West Slav and Magyar churches."² The first Polish bishopric at Poznan was most likely (although records are unclear) originally subject to Magdeburg. This westward orientation became so important that the word "Latin" came to be a "quasi-ethnic" way for Catholics to identify themselves, over and above their own traditional ethnic allegiances.³ This idea of a Latin identity binding Europeans together was especially important to the German rulers, so that a "world of mixed Roman, Catholic and Germanic descent" came to be the dominant idea

² Bartlett, 8.

³ Bartlett, 19.

spread from Germany to East Central Europe.⁴ Thus, even kingdoms that would later fight for their independence from German control looked to Germany for models of religious doctrine and ritual behavior. The new-fledged churches kept their foothold, so that, long before German knights came under the sign of the cross to convert Lithuania, paganism in Eastern Europe was rendered untenable.

The Baltic as Paganism's Last Bastion

In the 1200s, the last pagan peoples in Europe lived around the shores of the Baltic Sea, east of the Elbe. Historians and anthropologists divide these peoples into two linguistic and ethnic groups: the Balts, consisting of the native Prussians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, and the Finno-Ugrics: the Livonians, Estonians, and Finns. Beginning with a joint Polish-German crusade in the first few years of the 1200s, which converted the Prussians and subjugated them to the Order of the Teutonic Knights, missionary activity in the Baltic began to increase, supported by knights from Western Europe, many of whom were Germanic. Meanwhile, conversion attempts were beginning in Livonia as well. In both places, as Bartlett points out, the original crusading orders which had been created to complete the conversion efforts were unable to last on their own. Eventually, "the potential of an older and wealthier German military order outdid these new local creations. By 1240 both the Livonian and Prussian crusades were firmly in the hands of the Teutonic Knights."⁵ Thus, the military and political manifestation of German influence through Christianity in East

⁴ Bartlett, 20.

⁵ Bartlett, 18.

Central Europe became the Teutonic Knights, a religious order of nobles with the power to conquer by force if persuasion failed. The Baltic peoples, in any consideration of whether or not to convert to Christianity, were forced to were forced to maintain a careful balance in resistance of Teutonic control. This was a critical concern for Lithuania, which found itself one of the last pagan nations in the region, indeed, in all of Europe.

Part I: The Necessity of Conversion

Conquest of Prussia

The Teutonic peoples had a long history of conflict with both Slavs and Balts. Beginning in the 1200s, the Teutonic Knights, who had been founded in the Holy Land but gained their power in East Central Europe, became the most prominent German group to fight and conquer the Balts. In the early thirteenth century, the Baltic peoples remained pagan. Through the forced conversion of one particular group of Balts, the Prussians, the Teutonic Knights gained a foothold in the region of East Central Europe. The conversion of the Prussians began with conflicts between Poland and Prussia. Despite the large area of land which belonged to Poles, Poland as a nation was relatively weak, owing in large part to disunity. The last great king of all Poland had been Boleslaw, who had died in 1138, and since then the country had been divided into four duchies, later subdivided, with each region ruled by a scion of the Piast royal family. These scions were frequently at odds with each other, and

while none of the duchies was strong enough to stand in the long term against their neighbors, they could not manage to cooperate. Even the nominal king of all Poland was, in reality, barely more than duke of his own small region. The situation was so politically unsustainable that “over the years the country almost ceased to exist.”⁶

Compounding Poland’s problems were the frequent raids from pagan Prussia, especially against the closest Polish duchy, Masovia. Duke Conrad of Masovia was an ally of the Polish King, Leszek, and wanted to focus his attentions on the king’s agenda of bringing the other duchies more firmly under his control, to prevent the kingdom from being taken over little by little by other powers. However, the raids from Prussia were “becoming more numerous and more damaging every year,” distracting Conrad from what he considered more important concerns.⁷ Conrad, in seeking to convert the Prussians, who had resisted all former missionary activity, had wider goals than relieving the pressure of pagan raids; the hope was that, through conversion, Prussia could be made part of the Polish kingdom.⁸

The entry of the Teutonic Knights into this conflict came through the mediation of Bishop Christian of Oliva, a former failed missionary to the Prussians. Christian counted Duke Conrad and King Leszek his allies, but both were too caught up in internal Polish struggles to lend the warriors needed for a forcible conversion. At the same time, the Teutonic Knights, whose grandmasters had long been interested in the problems of Baltic paganism, were being expelled from their

⁶ William Urban, *The Prussian Crusade*, (Lanham, MD: University of America, 1980), 50.

⁷ Urban, *The Prussian Crusade*, 64.

⁸ Urban, *The Prussian Crusade*, 78.

castles in Hungary after angering the Hungarian king, and were reeling from the loss of land and property. In 1228 Bishop Christian made contact with them, and relayed a letter from Conrad inviting the Knights to crusade in Prussia on behalf of the Poles in exchange for a few lands in the regions of Culm and Lubov. Herman of Salza, the Grandmaster of the Order, accepted the offer, but mistrusted Conrad's intentions and did not believe the lands that would be granted under the agreement were sufficient.⁹

The Teutonic Knights made their initial invasion of Prussia with a small force in 1230, constructing the castle of Vogelsang in Culm and managing to hold the region against counterattacks until reinforcements were able to arrive. By the summer of 1233, the Order had 10,000 knights in the parts of Prussia under its control, and were able to mount an offensive that conquered the region of Pomesania and built several new fortresses and castles to cement their control. By 1234, the Prussians had been subdued by the Teutonic Knights and their rulers had accepted baptism. At this point the Order acted on its earlier displeasure with the terms of the agreement with Conrad: von Salza revealed a document, the Treaty of Kruszwica, in which Conrad promised the Order not only the lands in Culm, but any future conquests made, essentially granting them the entirety of Prussia. Conrad claimed, as modern historians widely believe, that the treaty was fabricated by the Order. Historian William Urban notes that "Pious forgeries were a means of conducting diplomacy then... A few rulers may have rejected the practice as an

⁹ Urban, *The Prussian Crusade*, 89.

unethical means of obtaining an advantage over an opponent, but only a very few.”¹⁰

Bishop Christian attempted to compromise by claiming two thirds of all the conquered territories and granting the Order the other third, but the Grandmaster insisted on the arbitration of the Papal Legate, who ruled in favor of the Order and turned the compromise around, giving the Knights two thirds and Conrad and Christian one. In practice, however, a furious Conrad received only a few castles out of the land he had been promised by the legate, and the Teutonic Knights stayed in Prussia to rule even after the conversion had been accomplished.

The consequences of the Prussian Crusade in conversion-based colonization were extensive. The Germans had always had an influence over Christianity in the Slavic and Hungarian nations of East Central Europe, whose churches received direction from Teutonic bishoprics. However, this was the first time in the region that conversion consisted of a lasting military conquest, which left the converted people not just subservient but completely subjugated. While Poland and Hungary had at times feared the power of the Holy Roman Empire, the Prussian Crusade made the Teutonic Knights the power with which East Central European nations had to contend if they wished to remain independent and retain their own identity. Thus, although Lithuania took no part in the conquest and conversion of the Prussians, this Crusade created the situation in which this Baltic kingdom's conversion became a matter of profound importance. From Prussia to Livonia, the Teutonic Knights established wide-reaching control, a major threat to Lithuanian autonomy.

¹⁰ Urban, *The Prussian Crusade*, 111.

Conquest of Livonia and Estonia

Before the late 1100s, the Lithuanians were one of many pagan tribes living along the Baltic Sea in northeastern Europe. To the west Lithuania was bordered by Catholic Poland and by Prussia, which would be conquered and Christianized by, then become the stronghold of the Teutonic Knights. To the east there were the scattered Russians, ruled by separate city-states or by the Golden Horde of the Mongols. To the north, the small tribes of Curonians and Semgallians were easy prey for Lithuanian raids. Even further north were the Livonians and Estonians, with whom the Lithuanians also clashed frequently. None of the Baltic tribes had strong alliances with any of the others; their relationships were characterized by constant fighting and raiding, usually with the Lithuanians as the aggressors. However, the conquest and conversion of the tribes left Lithuania vulnerable and isolated.

The first of the Baltic tribes to be conquered were the Livonians, the weakest. In the mid-1100s, the Germans had multiple reasons to see the conquest of Livonia as advantageous. The first was economic: German merchants traded with the Baltic tribes, especially the Livonians, As this trade became more and more lucrative, with the German market eagerly snapping up furs, honey, wax, leather, and amber from Livonia, the traders sought increased security to ensure that nothing would happen to their business. They actively supported any imperial or religious venture that would increase German influence over Livonia, protecting the German merchants who made their fortune there. The second consideration was religious: the Roman

Catholic Church was becoming more and more interested in the conversion of the Baltic. To some extent this was due to loss of face the Church felt at the fact that pagan civilizations still existed alongside the Christian kingdoms of Europe. However, the Church also saw conversion of the Baltic as a potential road to bringing conversion to the Eastern Orthodox Russians, as to Catholic eyes, “pagan and eastern orthodox practices were equally odious.”¹¹ The first step towards the conversion of Livonia began with a Germanic bishop named Meinhard, who in 1180 established a mission where the Dvina River flows into the Baltic Sea. Unfortunately for him, the native Livonians were content with their own gods. Moreover, Meinhard’s expectation that the new Livonian Christians would pay taxes to help with the building of churches and monasteries made conversion a difficult pill to swallow. Meinhard’s mission had little funding or military support from home. A disappointed Meinhard died in 1196, having made little progress toward his goal.

Two years later, developments in Germany made expeditions to Livonia possible. The political situation in Germany had stabilized and the economy prospered, while the Crusades in the Holy Land fired the imaginations of many knights and nobles and convinced them to seek an enemy closer and easier to reach. Small crusades to Livonia were mounted in 1198, but the breakthrough occurred in 1199, when Albert, the nominal Archbishop of Riga, the seat established by Meinhard, approached the pope on the matter. Albert asked him “whether the goods of the pilgrims to Livonia were to be placed under the protection of the pope, as is the case of those who journey to Jerusalem. It was answered, indeed, that they were

¹¹ William Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1975), 24.

included under the protection of the pope, who in enjoining the Livonian pilgrimage for the plenary remission of sin, made it equal with that to Jerusalem.”¹² This papal response made it clear that, in the eyes of the Church, converting Livonia was as important as protecting the Holy Land. It provided an easier crusading option for nobles who wished to avoid the long journey to Jerusalem without losing face.

At the same time, a civil war in Germany between the Welf and Hohenstaufen camps, begun in 1198, made it to the nobles’ advantage to be able to escape the conflict without throwing their weight behind either candidate, and so be assured of the protection of their goods. The first army Bishop Albert raised won many victories against the Livonians. In order to keep hold of these conquests the new bishopric had to weather the ups and downs of the war in Germany.

Nevertheless, Albert’s Archbishopric of Riga survived, and in 1204 and 1205 he set about creating a militant order, modeled after the Templars, for permanent service in Livonia. This new Order of Swordbrothers diminished the Archbishop’s reliance on the willingness of German knights to travel to the Baltic, and thus made it possible for Riga to grow as the conquest of Livonia continued.¹³ Albert and the Swordbrothers almost immediately came into conflict over land distribution, but eventually came to the agreement that the Swordbrothers would receive one third of all the land conquered, thus setting a precedent for martial rule that would be continued by the Teutonic Knights.

¹² Henry of Livonia, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, trans. James A. Brundage (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1961), 35-36.

¹³ Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, 44.

Meanwhile, in 1219, Estonia was nominally conquered by the Danish king, Waldemar, who entered the country with an army that likely numbered in the thousands, although contemporary accounts give ridiculously high estimates. However, after a few early victories, Waldemar was lulled into a false sense of security. Believing the Estonians had given up the fight, he was surprised by a native counterattack that scattered his troops. The Danish king was only saved by the intervention of the Swordbrothers and the army of the Archbishopric of Riga. The German Crusaders then devastated Estonia until the natives who were left rushed to accept Christianity. Thus, although the king of Denmark was on parchment their ruler, the Christian Estonians were from the beginning far more influenced by the Germans than by the Danes. In later years they came to be staunch allies of the Teutonic Knights and German Livonia, ignoring Denmark altogether.¹⁴

The Crusades in the Baltic region had been bloody and difficult, but the Bishop of Riga and the Swordbrothers had managed to convert all of Livonia and Estonia and bring them under German influence. Urban describes the political motivations of these Crusades, even in the early days of Bishop Meinhard's mission. Although conflict between Meinhard and the pagans ostensibly had to do with the collection of taxes, "fundamentally the issue was power...the real issue was authority over the tribes."¹⁵ The German Crusaders sought to exert their own influence over the Baltic peoples, but they also wanted to prevent the extension of the influence of Orthodox Russia, of whose princes some Baltic tribes were already vassals. Moreover, by converting the Baltic, Western Christendom would gain a

¹⁴ Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, 105.

¹⁵ Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, 28.

staging ground for the effort to convert the Russians as well, “thereby uniting a divided Christendom.”¹⁶ This ambition to spread Roman Catholicism across the entire breadth of Europe was stymied by the presence of the pagan Lithuanians, who were feared by native Livonians, Estonians, and German knights alike. The Swordbrothers’ ambitious attempts to convert Lithuania, as well, ended in disaster for the militant order, but allowed the entry of a more dangerous foe to paganism: the Teutonic Knights.

The Teutonic Knights

After the conquest and conversion of Livonia, the Swordbrothers turned their attention southward to Lithuania. Besides its religious motivations, the Order had economic concerns as well. The Swordbrothers needed a large field army, as well as castles and forts as bases in which to garrison it. Although they drafted Livonian and Estonian natives as foot soldiers, they also needed to recruit knights and officers from the west. When even those numbers were not enough, they began hiring mercenaries. Their lands in Livonia and Estonia did not provide adequate funds for the upkeep of this army and its castles, so the order was forced on a path of conquest and expansion to the south. With these needs in mind, in 1235 Volquin, master of the Swordbrothers, led an army, including Livonians and substantial numbers of Estonians, into Lithuania, meeting the pagan forces at Nalsen.

¹⁶ Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, 24.

The battle at Nalsen ended in a clear victory for the Christians.¹⁷ Chroniclers of the time tell us that two thousand Lithuanians were killed, the rest fleeing. Volquin then led successful attacks on many settlements in the surrounding region. However, the Swordbrothers' funds were running out, and a single great victory did not mean that the Lithuanians could be subdued in time to extract the necessary revenues from their land. It seemed the Order would be unable to continue its campaign. Master Volquin's answer to this dilemma was to seek a union between his Order and that of the Teutonic Knights.

The Teutonic Knights had been founded during the Crusades in the Holy Land in 1198, but had gained their real fortune and influence in East Central Europe. They received patronage from both the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope, and by the 1230s had amassed a good deal of wealth and influence.¹⁸ The Grand Master of the order had been asked to arbitrate in several disputes in the area, an indication of the esteem and power he wielded. In 1230, in a staggering act of naiveté, Poland had asked the Knights to assist with a Crusade to convert pagan Prussia, in the hopes that the land would be added to the Polish sphere of influence.¹⁹ Once the other Crusaders had left, however, the Teutonic Knights built their own castles in Prussia and continued the campaign, subduing all the pagans and making Prussia their home and base of operations. From here, they attacked other pagans to the east, especially the Lithuanians.

¹⁷ Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, 157.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Oskar Halecki, *Borderlands of Western Civilization*, (Florida: Simon Publications, 1980), 83-84.

The Teutonic Knights were financially secure and, unfortunately for the Swordbrothers, they were unwilling to share power. They would only consider absorbing and taking over the other order, never uniting with them on an equal footing.²⁰ Negotiations between the two orders in a papal court quickly stalled. Before any kind of agreement could be reached, the point was rendered moot by a disastrous defeat in Samogithia, a land held by Lithuanians but independent of the Lithuanian Grand Duke. The Swordbrothers attacked a Lithuanian settlement and took it by surprise, but were in turn attacked on their return journey and all but fifty or sixty of the knights killed. Master Volquin himself lost his life. The Swordbrothers effectively ceased to exist, and in the aftermath of the disaster, those who were left returned to negotiations with the Teutonic Knights without any ground to stand on. The Order of Swordbrothers was completely absorbed by the Teutonic Knights, who thereby gained a strong foothold in Livonia.²¹

The Teutonic Order almost immediately inherited the same conflict with the Archbishopric of Riga that had plagued the Swordbrothers – the conflict over land distribution. Unlike the Swordbrothers, however, the Teutonic Knights had the support of the pope. By the 1250s, the papacy had granted the Teutonic Knights far-reaching privileges and immunities, including the right to settle disputes within the order, the right to defend themselves from any attacks without consulting church officials, freedom from taxes and, most important, freedom from excommunication by anyone except the pope. This made the Teutonic Order the dominant power in Livonia, and took it completely out of the control of the Archbishopric of Riga. By the

²⁰ Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, 158.

²¹ Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, 159.

1280s, any pretense of keeping the Order's various lands separate was abandoned, and Livonia was ruled directly from Prussia.

Even before the Teutonic Knights became the dominant power in Livonia, in the 1240s, they had considered the conversion of Lithuania a goal. As it was, with Lithuania hostile and pagan, the only way to reach Livonia from Teutonic Prussia and the German lands further west was by sea, through the port city of Riga. Were the Teutonic Knights to convert and gain power over Lithuania, they would have unbroken control from Prussia to Livonia, and would be free of even the slightest reliance on the Archbishop of Riga. Subduing Lithuania would also protect the lands already held by the Teutonic Knights, since the Lithuanians had continued their habits of raiding into Livonia. Moreover, the conquest of Lithuania would create "an uninterrupted German-controlled territory [that] would reach from the Vistula to the Gulf of Finland."²² For this reason, the Order focused its attention southward, over the protestations of the archbishop of Riga, who wanted the drive east to continue and the conversion of Russia to be made a priority.

The Teutonic Knights fought almost constant border skirmishes against the Lithuanians in the fifty years between the 1240s and 1290. They especially targeted a semi-autonomous tribe of ethnic Lithuanians, the Samogitians, who were considered fierce and savage warriors and who perpetrated many of the raids into Livonian territory. According Urban, "the Teutonic Knights saw the Lithuanians (and particularly the Samogithians [alternate spelling]) as their last great mission, their

²² Halecki, 83.

most important crusade.”²³ Urban rather idealistically discounts the significant political and economic reasons for pursuing the conversion of Lithuania. He assumes that the Teutonic Knights, as a religious order, can be expected to have been devout, and that their entire reason for being was to convert pagan peoples and protect the faith. However, the Teutonic Knights’ actions in Prussia and Livonia make it clear that the Order was very concerned with building up its own land and power, and believing that religious duty was the Knights’ only concern seems naïve.

Peace settlements were finally begun between the Order and the Lithuanians in 1290. Though the peace did not last long, the Teutonic Knights were unable to make any permanent progress past their frontier of 1290. The stalemate was so long-standing that the modern border between Lithuania and Latvia follows the line between the lands held by the pagan Lithuanians and those held by the Teutonic Knights in Livonia. This was the end of the first Baltic Crusade, which saw a balance of power established between Christians and pagans that, when upset, led to the necessity of a Lithuanian conversion.

Poland

Although Poland had been a strong kingdom in the 1100s, the thirteenth century was a period of decline, with central authority diminished and the kingdom divided into a number of weak petty duchies. This disintegration was the result of infighting among rival claimants to the Polish throne and the lack of any strong

²³ William Urban, *The Livonian Crusade*, (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 17.

figure able to unite the Polish nobles behind him.²⁴ Poland's weakness occurred at a perilous time: growing Teutonic power in Prussia, increased Mongol activity in Russia threatening new attacks westward, and the continued aggression of pagan Lithuania all combined to make Poland's position during the 1200s vulnerable.

Because of this, Poland did not play a role in the important political maneuverings and religious conquests that occurred in the 1200s, so allowing the Teutonic Knights to become a dominant force in East Central Europe. This situation changed in the 1300s with the succession of several powerful leaders who reunited Poland and made it a force to reenter regional politics. The first of these leaders was Wladyslaw Lokietek, who became leader of Little Poland, the southern region centering around Krakow, in 1306.²⁵ Lokietek worked throughout his reign to reunite the petty duchies of Poland and attempting to reconquer regions taken by the Teutonic Knights. He was succeeded in 1333 by his son Casimir, who did so much for the Polish kingdom that he is remembered as Casimir the Great. This monarch developed an internal administration for the lands that his father had reunited, and codified Polish law as well as encouraged the development of Polish cities.²⁶

Under the rule of Casimir the Great Poland began seeking increased cooperation with Lithuania. These alliances were characterized by "a community of interest" against the Teutonic Knights, who had taken over the traditionally Polish

²⁴ Halecki, 98.

²⁵ Halecki, 122.

²⁶ Halecki, 123.

region of Pomerania and who were seen by Poles and Lithuanians alike as a threat.²⁷ Lithuania and Poland frequently found themselves in opposition, particularly over the territories of Halych-Volhynia, which both sought to conquer, but Polish missionaries had been present in Lithuania since the 1200s. King Casimir, like the Teutonic Knights, sought the conversion of Lithuania, although according to Halecki – admittedly biased towards Poland – he did so in order to more easily ally with the Lithuanian Grand Dukes against a common enemy.

Casimir the Great had no children of his own, and was succeeded by a nephew, Louis of Hungary, who experienced opposition from those who desired a native candidate for the throne. In order to preserve his Polish inheritance, Louis granted the nobles of Poland great authority in decision-making. That power came to include authority over which of Louis' children – or rather, as he had only daughters, which of his sons-in-law – would rule after him. The nobles' choice settled on Jadwiga, Louis' younger daughter, and on a marriage between her and the Grand Duke of Lithuania.

Lithuania

Lithuania before the 1300s was uninvolved in the politics and power plays of East Central Europe. The extent of its foreign policy was raiding other nearby states, and though Lithuanian forces occasionally attacked the Teutonic Knights in Livonia in the course of this raiding, they avoided the Crusades that saw the conquest and

²⁷ Halecki, 97.

conversion of their fellow Baltic pagans. Under the rule of Mindaugas in the 1250s, Lithuania briefly entered into negotiations with the Teutonic Knights for the conversion of the kingdom.²⁸ However, either due to duplicitous apostasy of the Lithuanians or the aggression of the Teutonic Order, depending on the view of the historian, the Lithuanian nobles would not support conversion, and Mindaugas returned his kingdom to paganism. After this failed Christianization, Lithuania returned to isolation and sporadic raiding. Although the pagan kings occasionally hosted Teutonic or Papal envoys, the idea of a Christian Lithuania was not reconsidered with any seriousness.

Gediminas, whose origins and relation to his predecessor are undocumented, came to the throne of Lithuania in 1315, and set Lithuania on a path of conquest. Under his rule, the kingdom came out of its isolation and began to form tentative alliances, especially with Poland.²⁹ The Lithuanians also gained control over the disputed kingdom of Halych-Volhynia and, in the wake of a weakening of Tartar power, took over a great deal of Russian territory. The ambition of Gediminas and his family was that all of Russia, including the Ruthenians (White Russians) in Halych-Volhynia, would be ruled by Lithuania.

Plans to convert Lithuania to Christianity may have been considered as early as Gediminas' reign. In 1321, Gediminas sent emissaries directly to the Pope, bypassing all of his neighbors including the Teutonic Order. These negotiations came to nothing, but it could be that Gediminas had some idea of the difficulties his kingdom would face were it to remain pagan. Without conversion, Lithuania could

²⁸ Halecki, 93-94.

²⁹ Halecki, 128.

not expect a respite from the advances of the Teutonic Knights, as the Pope and all of Lithuania's other Christian neighbors were religiously bound to support a conversion effort. Moreover, Christian nations could not conclude binding alliances with pagans, so even the "community of interest" with a nation like Poland, similarly threatened by the Teutonic Knights, was a flimsy protection. Without conversion, Lithuania would eventually succumb to Germanic rule.

After Gedminias' death, he was succeeded by his two most prominent sons, Algirdas and Kestutis, who ruled surprisingly well in cooperation.³⁰ Together they continued the rapid expansion of Lithuanian control. However, the death of Algirdas made it clear that the Lithuanian political system was fragile and had relied too much on the characters of the brothers. Without the careful balance between Algirdas and Kestutis, things began to fall apart. Algirdas' son, Jogaila, distrusted his uncle and was distrusted by him. Joint rule between them quickly degenerated into civil war.

Kestutis was eventually captured and killed by Jogaila, but his war effort was continued by Kestutis' son, Jogaila's cousin Vytautas. Both Jogaila and Vytautas flirted with negotiation with the Teutonic Order, but Jogaila, for the moment in control of Lithuania, looked in many other directions for aid as well. He even considered turning eastward, converting to Orthodoxy and allying with the Russian princes.³¹ Whomever he decided to ally himself with, though, at this point his conversion to Christianity was almost certain, and would, at least nominally, bring his people with him.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Halecki, 130.

Conversion to Christianity was necessary for Lithuania for many reasons. Its position was much more precarious than the unprecedented expansion of its power would indicate. This expansion was only made possible by the strength of Lithuania's rulers – first Gediminas then his sons, who were able to cooperate and share power in a way that their successors could not match. Infighting among the descendants of Gediminas weakened their power and made Lithuania vulnerable. Halecki writes, "Lithuania's expansion, almost unique in its rapid success, thus proved beyond the real forces of the Lithuanians along and of a dynasty which in spite of the unusual qualities of many of its members was too divided by the petty rivalries of its various branches to guarantee a joint action under one chief."³² Joint action was necessary to protect against the aggression of the Teutonic Knights, who were deft at playing off the rivalries of the various Lithuanian rulers. Conversion under the auspices of the Order would be a form of religious colonization that might lead to being drawn politically under Teutonic control. Conversion was necessary, but conversion by the Order would spell disaster.

In these circumstances, turning away from the Teutonic Knights meant turning toward Poland. Both Lithuania and Poland were weak, but in different ways, and each needed something from the other, so that they could expect to stand on a somewhat equal mutual footing were they to develop a union. Jogaila's marriage to Jadwiga and the union between Poland and Lithuania, created a very large and very powerful new state and caused enormous change in power in East Central Europe. The events leading up to the marriage and its aftermath are of central importance

³² Halecki, 131.

here, but first discussion of the various historical approaches to this issue is helpful. Historians view the conversion of Lithuania and the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth very differently. These differences are especially pronounced in discussions of the character and motivations of Jogaila. Perspectives on this ruler run the gamut from selfish to pragmatic, foolish to self-sacrificing.

Historiography and Conflicting Visions of Jogaila

Grand Duke Jogaila, who made the final decision to convert his people to Christianity, is a critical figure in the history not only of Lithuania but of East Central Europe in general. Historians' different views of his character and actions depend on their own biases about that larger context. Even when writing a book whose purpose is ostensibly a presentation of fact, historians let these biases slip in and color their respective narratives. Here, I have used the works of three different modern historians from different backgrounds and with different views for my basic historical framework. Their conflicting ways of presenting a single pivotal event beg consideration.

My first modern commentator is William Urban, a specialist in the history of the Teutonic Knights and the Baltic Crusades from the 1960s to the present. I used two of his books, *The Baltic Crusade* and *The Livonian Crusade*. Although Urban has worked and studied all across East Central Europe, his bias toward the Teutonic Knights is clear in all his work. Urban's attitude toward the Lithuanian conversion,

coming as it did through union with Poland, is that this meaningless gesture affected only the ruling family. Urban presents Jogaila as a traitor to his own people and a thoroughly untrustworthy individual.

My second historian is Oskar Halecki, a Polish historian and expert on the medieval history of Poland and Lithuania. Halecki's *Borderlands of Western Civilization* extends well beyond medieval Poland and Lithuania, dealing with the history of all East Central Europe from the earliest records to his present. In Halecki's narrative, written in 1950s, the conversion of Lithuania by Jogaila is seen as country-wide, and that Jogaila himself was a ruler with the best interests of his realm at heart. Jogaila's conversion was the last resort to protect Lithuania from destructive conquest.

My third secondary framework is that of S.C. Rowell, who works for a center specializing in Lithuanian and Baltic history at the University of Klaipeda in Lithuania. Rowell rounds out my trio of recent historians by representing as central the third of the major players in the conflict among the Teutonic Knights, Poland, and Lithuania. Rowell writes much less about Jogaila than do the other two modern writers discussed here, but does not represent the conversion of Lithuania as a foregone conclusion. In his view, the danger to Lithuania from Teutonic aggression was not great enough to warrant abandoning paganism, and he seems to view conversion as a mistake.

Urban and Halecki, especially, differ on several important aspects of their larger historical problem, most noticeably on how union between Poland and Lithuania had been at issue. Urban, on the one hand, paints the union as a

completely unexpected move fueled entirely by Jogaila's ambition, calling it "a great and hardly suspected ambition on Jagiello's part, because the Poles had been traditional enemies of the pagan Lithuanians."³³ This perspective plays up the history of Polish and Teutonic cooperation against the pagan Lithuanians. Although Urban admits that the Poles were beginning to consider the Teutonic Knights a danger to their kingdom, he calls Jogaila "a new and practically unknown candidate [for] the queen's hand."³⁴ The structure of Urban's chapter on Jogaila's conversion and marriage make it seem as if the latter came out of nowhere to sweep the legs out from under the established European order.

Moreover, Urban's language emphasizes that Jogaila did not care about his own kingdom of Lithuania. Describing the factional fighting between Jogaila and his cousin Vytautas for the throne, Urban claims that Jogaila could have won decisively if he had fought longer, but that he "had his eye on something bigger – the crown of Poland! To obtain that he needed peace, particularly peace with the Church."³⁵ Urban sees Jogaila as sacrificing his hold on Lithuania to gain the better prize of Poland, converting only because "Paris is worth a mass" and making no effort to convert the rest of the Lithuanian people. Thereafter, he calls any action by Lithuanian armies, even those led by Jogaila, a "pagan offensive," making it even clearer that the conversion changed nothing in East Central Europe.³⁶

³³ William Urban, *The Livonian Crusade* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1981), p. 157.

³⁴ Urban, *The Livonian Crusade*, 160.

³⁵ Urban, *The Livonian Crusade*, 157.

³⁶ Urban, *The Livonian Crusade*, 164.

Halecki disagrees with Urban on almost every point of interpretation. In contrast to Urban's pro-German stance, Halecki's anti-German bias is made clear very early in his book, when he describes the "oppression and exploitation of... German masters" and describes "all freedom-loving nations in East Central Europe" being pressured by the twin dangers of Germans to the West and Mongols to the East.³⁷ Halecki's view of the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Union could not be more different than Urban's. As he sees it, this conjunction was long in the making: even as early as the thirteenth century "a community of interest with a Christian neighbor became evident as soon as Poland was threatened by the Order."³⁸ Lithuania and Poland were united by their desire to be free of German influence. Casimir the Great, Jadwiga's great uncle and predecessor on the throne, had married a Lithuanian woman, the daughter of Gediminas. As Halecki suggests, the idea of a political union, or at least alliance, between the two kingdoms first emerged at that point. Such a representation is far from the sudden and inexplicable sea change that Urban sees in the union in 1386.

In addition, Halecki's view of Jogaila's own character and motivations differs strongly from Urban's. He claims that in 1321, Gediminas, Jogaila's grandfather, had realized that Lithuania could not survive without becoming Christian, as the pressure from the Teutonic Knights would continue to grow until his nation was overwhelmed.³⁹ In this light, Jogaila's actions were not those of a king abandoning his country for a better one, but of a pragmatist who must make sacrifices for the

³⁷ Halecki, 82, 86.

³⁸ Halecki, 97.

³⁹ Halecki, 127.

good of his nation. Jogaila, in Halecki's mind, "had realized that the only way to save his country and her proud tradition, as well as his personal position, was to come to an agreement with the only neighbor who could help reorganize Lithuania as a Christian nation without destroying her very identity."⁴⁰ Furthermore, Halecki is at pains to point out that "the conversion not only of Jogaila and his dynasty but also of the Lithuanian people was indeed the first condition which the grand duke [Jogaila] had to accept when on August 14, 1385, he signed the Treaty of Krewo with the Polish delegates."⁴¹ Although Halecki does not make any claims as to whether this condition was put into place immediately, his bringing attention to it indicates that he considered it far more binding and real than Urban did.

A third recent historian, a counterpoint to Urban's and Halecki's works, is S.C. Rowell. This author's *Lithuania Ascending: A Pagan Empire Within East-Central Europe 1295-1345*, documents the rise of Lithuania's power before its conversion to Christianity. In contrast to Urban and Halecki, the latter of whom wrote "Lithuania's expansion, almost unique in its rapid success, thus proved beyond the real forces of the Lithuanians alone,"⁴² Rowell did not think that Lithuania's position was dangerous enough to its rulers to warrant conversion. He praises Gediminas, the first great ruler of a united Lithuania, because he "knew how to deal diplomatically with Christian princes," through marriage and by skillfully playing old Christian rivalries against each other. Rowell also praises Gediminas' work within "the historical tradition of his realm," of which paganism was an important part. In

⁴⁰ Halecki, 131.

⁴¹ Halecki, 136.

⁴² Halecki, 131.

Rowell's view, "Christianity was not necessary to the political development of Lithuania," and "the dangers which faced Gediminas' Lithuania were not great enough to require the close union which Jogaila later made with Poland and which demanded the adoption of Catholicism."⁴³ In Rowell's final analysis, conversion was not needed at that particular time, and Lithuania could have survived had Jogaila not converted and joined his kingdom to Poland.

These historians' different interpretations of the same events suggests that they cannot escape their own interests and biases. Comparing their accounts allows me to clarify where those interests and biases come into their writing, and thus to know where my own interpretation and analysis must be careful. Indeed, in comparing the commentary of these modern historians with that of a near contemporary, it seems that there are flaws in each point of view. Jan Dlugosz, the author of *The Annals of Jan Dlugosz*, was a priest, chronicler, and diplomat during the reign of Casimir IV Jagiellon, Jogaila's son and successor, in the mid-to-late 1400s. Dlugosz was appointed by Casimir as an emissary to the courts of the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. It is clear that he was close to the court of the Jagiellonian kings, and in places spends several sentences praising the beauty or wisdom of certain members of the Polish royal family, including Jadwiga herself. He makes no attempt, however, to hide or gloss over the conflict between Jogaila and his uncle Kestutis and cousin Vytautas. nor does he deny that Jogaila had his uncle taken prisoner and killed. However, this act is, in Dlugosz's view, the culmination of a string of treacheries, and a reaction to a sneak attack by Kestutis on Jogaila in

⁴³ S.C. Rowell, *Lithuania Ascending: A Pagan Empire Within East-Central Europe, 1295-1345* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 299-300.

Vilnius. Moreover, in Dlugosz' account, the betrayal started not with a member of the family, but with a cunning advisor to Jogaila, who "does not trust Kiejstut [Kestutis] and is afraid that the latter may harm his career, so he accuses him to Jagiello and makes the latter so suspicious of him, that he comes to hate him."⁴⁴ This effectively takes the blame for being the root of the problem off both Jogaila and Kestutis, while being very honest about the untrustworthy actions of both sides later. Dlugosz understands the actions taken by Jogaila as unfortunate necessities of war.

Dlugosz's closeness to and patronage by the son of Jogaila makes it unlikely that he would write something that would have been considered overtly hostile to that king. This primary source's view of Jogaila, then, indicates that there is no need for either Halecki's glossing or Urban's condemnation: the contemporaries of Jogaila did not see anything particularly out of the ordinary in either Jogaila or Kestutis going to whatever lengths were necessary to prevail in the conflict between them. Indeed, when discussing Jogaila's plan to marry Jadwiga, Dlugosz claims that "though the proposal is scarcely to the liking of Queen Jadwiga, it is very much to the liking of the Poles."⁴⁵ The Polish nobles quickly decided that the queen's other suitors were of little value to the kingdom, and that Jogaila was the best choice. Regardless of what modern commentators think of his treatment of his uncle and cousin, the Polish nobles considered Jogaila the only option to become their king. Their reasons are of further interest here.

⁴⁴ Jan Dlugosz, *The Annals of Jan Dlugosz*, trans. Maurice Michael, (Charlton Mill, U.K.: IM Publications, 1997), 337.

⁴⁵ Dlugosz, 344-5.

Part II: Conversion and Union

The Marriage of Poland and Lithuania and the Conversion of the Lithuanians

During the reign of Wladyslaw Lokietek and his son, Casimir the Great, in the early 1300s, the Polish king was forced to grant a good deal of power to the nobility, the *szlachta*, in order to gain their support and cooperation in the reunification of the kingdom. Thus, a system was begun that would later develop into a noble's republic in Poland: the *szlachta* viewed the king as "subject to supervision by the political nation,"⁴⁶ answerable to meetings of the nobles that would later expand to form the Polish parliament, or *sejm*. The strength of noble power meant there was already a body to make the necessary decisions to find an heir to Louis of Hungary. Louis, who had succeeded his uncle Casimir the Great, died with no sons, only two daughters. The elder was married to a German noble. The younger daughter, Jadwiga, had been betrothed during her father's lifetime to a Hapsburg prince of Austria. The nobility of Poland held and exercised their power to withdraw both the elder daughter's (and her German husband's) right to succession and the younger daughter's betrothal. Jadwiga, twelve years old at the time, was named "king" of Poland in 1382. Though she bore the masculine title, it was expected that whatever husband was chosen for her would rule. This made the noblemen's choice a critical one: a wrong choice would suborn Polish interests to those of a rival nation.

⁴⁶ Daniel Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386-1795*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 5.

The choice of Grand Duke Jogaila of Lithuania was driven by several factors. The two kingdoms had been in conflict in the preceding years over the frontier lands of Galicia and Volhynia. This discord might be eased by a closer relationship. A history of intermarriage and cooperation existed between Poland and Lithuania from the reign of Casimir the Great, who married a daughter of Gediminas. In Stone's view, however, the most important reason for a marriage between Jadwiga and Jogaila was that "Poland and Lithuania faced a common enemy in the Teutonic Knights of Prussia."⁴⁷ Both nations needed an ally against the Teutonic Knights, but one who would not overwhelm its own respective needs and interests. For Lithuania and Poland to unite, however, Lithuania had to accept Christianity, specifically Roman Catholicism. If Lithuania remained pagan, Poland would lose support and legitimacy in the eyes of Rome and the Western Christian world by allying with the other nation, and its position would become even worse.

The Polish regency council, responsible for organizing the marriage of Jadwiga, met Jogaila in August of 1385 at Krewo (now a part of Belarus). There, the marriage was agreed upon and the Treaty of Krewo signed. This agreement established all of the conditions to which Jogaila pledged himself in order to become king of Poland. These included maintaining the rights of the Polish nobles and regaining the territories lost by both kingdoms. Although not explicitly mentioned, the conquests made by the Teutonic Knights are clearly implied in the mention of lost lands.⁴⁸ The most important of the conditions of the treaty, however, was

⁴⁷ Stone, 8.

⁴⁸ Halecki, 136.

Jogaila's conversion and baptism, along with the conversion of the Lithuanian people.

Thus, in February, 1386, Jogaila was baptized and took the Christian name Wladyslaw. On February 18, Jogaila and Jadwiga were married, and Jogaila's coronation as King Wladyslaw Jagiello of Poland, at which he received homage from both Polish nobles and those of his brothers and cousins he had appointed to rule the various provinces of Lithuania, followed immediately. A year later, in February 1387, a bishopric was founded in Vilnius and the church in Lithuania was given charters of liberties modeled on those in Poland and other western Catholic countries.⁴⁹

The conversion of Lithuania thus came from the top down, beginning with Jogaila and his family, and was then enforced on lesser nobles and the wider population. According to Dlugosz, immediately after the founding of the bishopric and building of a cathedral in Vilnius, Jogaila sent Jadwiga back to Poland and spent a year traveling the countryside encouraging his people to embrace Christianity "so that he can rightly be considered the apostle who converted the Lithuanians."⁵⁰ He also put laws into place that forbade Lithuanian Catholics from marrying anyone who did not acknowledge the Roman Church, so excluding both pagans and Orthodox Christians. Modern historians, however, have different views on how quickly Christianity actually spread through Lithuania, and whether the full conversion stipulated in the Treaty of Krewo was ever actually achieved. Oscar Halecki claims that in 1387, when Jogaila returned to Lithuania to oversee the

⁴⁹ Halecki, 137.

⁵⁰ Dlugosz, 349.

founding of the first bishopric there, “the Catholic faith was now accepted without any difficulty.”⁵¹ However, common sense and historical experience would indicate that it would hardly be possible for a ruler to convince an entire population with entrenched pagan beliefs to accept Christianity in only a year, no matter how forceful that ruler was.

William Urban completely disagrees with Halecki on this point. Urban claims that “only Jagiello and his principal lords were baptized.”⁵² This was certainly the excuse the Teutonic Knights used to justify continuing crusades against the Lithuanians. Urban’s assertion that, by the time of the creation of the bishopric of Vilnius, only the nobles of Lithuania had converted is more believable than Halecki’s view. However, since records were weaker in Lithuania than in other Eastern European countries, such as Poland or Prussia, and because the nobles were the only people about whom records were kept at all, it is difficult to know with any kind of certainty how widespread the conversion was. The related political considerations are more clear. Whether all Lithuanians were converted or not, at no point did the Poles complain that the conditions of the Treaty of Krewo had not been met.

One other aspect of the Treaty of Krewo remained open to interpretation – the meaning of the phrase calling on Jogaila to unite all the lands under the control of Poland and Lithuania “*terras suas Lithuaniae et Russiae Coronae Regni Poloniae perpetuo applicare*”.⁵³ The first interpretation was that Lithuania and the

⁵¹ Halecki, 137.

⁵² Urban, *The Livonian Crusade*, p. 161.

⁵³ Treaty of Krewo, quoted in Halecki, 138.

Lithuanian-controlled Ruthenian lands would become fiefs of the Polish crown, and would be under Jogaila's authority by virtue of his holding that crown. However, one of the results of the subsequent rebellions of Vytautas was to change that interpretation and the expected relationship between Poland and Lithuania.

Vytautas' and the Teutonic Knights' Reaction

Vytautas, Jogaila's cousin who had fought against him in 1380 for control of Lithuania, had signed the Treaty of Krewo with Jogaila and his other kinsmen, converted to Catholicism, and paid the requisite homage to the new king of Poland. However, conflict between the cousins was only temporarily submerged, especially given that Jogaila chose one of his brothers as the highest authority in Lithuania.⁵⁴ In response, Vytautas began to consider alliance with the Teutonic Knights, as he had during the years of civil war in Lithuania. In the winter of 1389, Vytautas fled Lithuania and enlisted the aid of the Order, who claimed, likely with some justification, that the conversion had not truly been accomplished and the Crusades in the region had thus not yet ended.

Vytautas and his Teutonic allies were unable to take Vilnius in the face of Jogaila's combined Lithuanian and Polish forces. After two years of fighting Vytautas returned to Lithuania, where he made "tearful... repeated humble requests for forgiveness for himself and others."⁵⁵ Jogaila publicly forgave him and the cousins made peace. The Ostrow Agreement of 1392 gave Vytautas responsibility for the

⁵⁴ Dlugosz, 350, Halecki, 137.

⁵⁵ Dlugosz, 354.

administration of all Lithuanian and Ruthenian lands. Vytautas proceeded to consolidate his power in Lithuanian territory until all the local governors were loyal to him. He also began to pursue his own alliances, secretly concluding his own separate peace with the Teutonic Knights and preparing to attack the Tartars to the East. These plans, while ambitious, ran contrary to the interests of a united Poland-Lithuania. They were also beyond Vytautas' means, and in 1399 he suffered a disastrous defeat against Tartars, so ending his endeavors.⁵⁶

Perhaps weakened by his unsuccessful attacks on the Tartars, or perhaps realizing that Lithuania could not have enough strength alone to defend itself, Vytautas made a new agreement with Jogaila at the end of 1400. Under this agreement, Lithuania was consolidated as its own nation which, though remaining a fief of the Polish crown, had its own ruler, the Grand Duke, who was answerable to the king of Poland-Lithuania alone. As Oscar Halecki points out, this was important because this move gave Lithuania autonomy as well as notional equality.⁵⁷ The union of Poland and Lithuania was codified into laws and charters, so was no longer dependent on the rule of Jogaila or even of his descendants.

The Death of Jadwiga

A watershed moment for the new union came with the death of Jadwiga in 1399. The Queen died without any surviving children, and her bloodline, which could be traced however tenuously back to Wladyslaw Lokietek, died with her. The

⁵⁶ Halecki, 138.

⁵⁷ Halecki, 139.

Polish nobles now faced the choice of whether to continue to consider Jogaila, whose reign heretofore depended on his wife, as their king. More importantly, they needed to consider whether his children with another wife might be heirs to the throne. In the end the Poles remained loyal to Jogaila because he granted further concessions to the nobility.⁵⁸ In order to secure his line, Jogaila agreed to new rights, including the Czerwinski Privilege, which guaranteed nobles court trials if accused of a crime and ensured that their property could not be confiscated or in any way tampered with until the trial had occurred.⁵⁹ Jogaila, as a foreigner in Polish affairs, had previously relied on members of the noble class to advise him, so strengthening the *sejm*, the Polish parliament. Now, with the new rights and privileges granted to the nobles in exchange for supporting Jogaila's heirs, the strength of the parliament was buttressed.⁶⁰

The decisions made after Jadwiga's death had a profound impact on the course of Lithuanian and Polish history. The infant union could very easily have ended at that point, with the Poles refusing to accept a king who no longer had any ties to their ancestral monarchy. However, in the course of the preservation of the union, the *sejm* became a central element in Polish-Lithuanian identity. In time, more and more Lithuanian nobles would be a part of the parliament, strengthening the ties between the ruling upper classes of both kingdoms. Moreover, the authority of the parliament gave Polish and Lithuanian nobles a sense of legitimacy, considering themselves the heirs of the Roman republic. On the other hand, the

⁵⁸ Dlugosz, 360.

⁵⁹ Stone, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Halecki, 139.

king's role not as an absolute monarch but as an executive ruling with the cooperation of the parliament contributed, during the eventual decline of the Commonwealth, to the paralysis of government that made a loss of power inevitable.

Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Conversion

Historians from different perspectives have drastically different opinions on the spread of Christianity through Lithuania, as they do on the character of Jogaila himself. Although Lithuania's continued Catholicism, even up to the present day, would seem to indicate that conversion was effective, the question of how quickly Christianity took hold is critical for an analysis of the political maneuverings of the day. Conflicts between the Teutonic Knights and the Lithuanians suddenly took on an added dimension: the necessity for the Order to justify any attacks or invasions. The Teutonic Knights benefitted from calling into question the sincerity of Lithuania's conversion, because continued paganism in Lithuania would allow the Order to claim its actions a Crusade, so making it easier to win the support – or at least non-interference – of the pope. Thus, the Lithuanians had to convince the world that they were truly Christian in order to deprive the Teutonic Knights of the blessing of the wider Catholic Church. The perspectives and sympathies of historians can be discovered in the degree to which they believe in the Lithuanian conversion.

As is to be expected, William Urban and Oscar Halecki hold diametrically opposed ideas on the sincerity of Lithuanian conversion. Urban claims that the conversion was a sham, that “only Jagiello and his principle lords were baptized,” and there was “little reason to believe that they were sincere or that the people would follow them.”⁶¹ Even the highest-ranking nobles, including Jogaila and Vytautas themselves, who by necessity put on a show of conversion, were in this perspective secretly non-believers. Urban, whose sympathies lie with the Teutonic Knights, believes as they did that even after Jogaila’s baptism Lithuania was not a Christian country; “the country remained pagan in heart and mind,” and the crusades in the Baltic were not finished.⁶² In contrast, Halecki, as a Polish historian, plays up the significance of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, and as such, claims that the conversion of Lithuania was immediate and sincere. He points out that the agreement between Poland and Lithuania called for the conversion of the entire country. While that is true, and universal conversion was a part of the conditions laid down in the Union of Krewo, it seems naïve to believe that, just because conversion was agreed upon, it was achieved. Indeed, Halecki’s later claims that “the Catholic faith was... accepted without any difficulty,” seems improbable; the lessons of history seem to tell us at every turn that bringing a new faith into a country is always difficult.⁶³

Another interesting perspective comes from two Lithuanian historians writing in *Christianity in Lithuania* in 2002. Darius Baronas and Mindaugas Paknys

⁶¹ Urban, *The Livonian Crusade*, 161.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Halecki, 137.

both stress the material evidence that the nobles of Lithuania and Poland during the late 1300s and early 1400s were making every effort to, at the very least, make the conversion of Lithuania look convincing. Baronas, in particular, claims that “the erosion of paganism had already advanced far,” and that Lithuania was primed for the destruction of pagan temples, the construction of Christian churches, and the mass conversion of the Lithuanian nobility.⁶⁴ Paknys points out that the new see of Vilnius had an unparalleled zeal for founding parishes, and that though the very first church endowments were made by the Jogaila and Grand Duke Vytautas, by 1430, twenty-seven new parishes had been founded, of which only three were the result of patronage from the royal family.⁶⁵ Most of the ecclesiastical founders were members of the gentry and nobility, who were apparently eager to prove their devotion to the new church.⁶⁶ The Poles, as well, wanted to demonstrate the strength of Christianity in Lithuania. When Jogaila died, Pawel Vladimiri, rector of Krakow University (which had been reinstated by Jogaila’s queen, Jadwiga, and which educated large numbers of Lithuanians in addition to Poles), compared the king to Constantine, who converted the Roman Empire.⁶⁷ For the Polish-Lithuanian Union, which frequently justified itself by falling back on classical comparisons, framing Jogaila as another Constantine lent both legitimacy and importance to the conversion of the Lithuanians and their entry into the world of European Christendom. This visible demonstration of Christian fervor in Lithuania was a protection for both Lithuanians and Poles.

⁶⁴ Darius Baronas et al., *Christianity in Lithuania*, (Vilnius: Aidai, 2002), 46.

⁶⁵ Baronas, et al., 50.

⁶⁶ Baronas et al., 52.

⁶⁷ Baronas et al., 48.

Whether or not baptism and church-founding by the wider nobility of Lithuania masked secret pagan feelings cannot be resolved, and does not need to be. The records remaining from the time were mostly treaty documents or historical annals, not sources useful for demonstrating the inner thoughts of Lithuanian nobles, to say nothing of ordinary people. With the Lithuanians willing to play the part, they could interact as fellow Christians with the rest of Western and Central Europe. The only party for whom the sincerity of the conversion mattered was the Order of Teutonic Knights, for whom it would make the difference in justifying further war with Lithuania. However, Polish and Lithuanian cooperation meant that the Union's star was on the rise, and after the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410, the power of the Teutonic Knights could no longer compete. For all intents and purposes, regardless of the secret feelings of its leaders, Lithuania was accepted as a Christian kingdom.

Part III: The Aftermath and the Landscape of Power in Europe

Prelude to Tannenberg: Clashes in Samogitia

Lithuania and Poland had been strong enough to preserve their existence, but both kingdoms had been under constant threat from the Teutonic Knights. Alone, neither had the strength to change this balance of power. However, the union of 1386 allowed Poland and Lithuania to combine both military and economic force. Throughout the late 1300s and early 1400s, Polish-Lithuanian power grew. The two

kingdoms were able to occupy and keep control of the kingdom of Halych-Volhynia, as well as parts of the Ukraine, Latvia, and Estonia. Moreover, the Polish-Lithuanian Union experienced a massive increase in prosperity during that period, due to combining income from both countries' production and exports as well as those of the lands they had conquered. This in turn led to population growth, which contributed to even greater military and economic potential. The balance of power in East Central Europe was changing, with the star of the newly created Union on the rise. The events of 1410, culminating in their defeat of the Teutonic Order at Tannenberg, illustrated the importance of this power shift. Even before the Battle of Tannenberg, however, a renewal of fighting over the fate of the Samogitian peoples presaged its outcome.

In signing the Treaty of Sallinwerder in 1398, both Jogaila and Vytautas agreed to the occupation of Samogitia by the Teutonic Knights, who in this case were exercising their military power to attempt to convert the religiously pagan and ethnically Lithuanian region.⁶⁸ Although the nobles of Samogitia accepted baptism in 1401, and though the Order could point to no breaches of the Christian faith by Jogaila or Vytautas, the Teutonic Knights still distrusted the Gediminid rulers, Vytautas especially. This mistrust came to a head with the first Samogitian revolt, later in 1401. The Samogitians had always been proud and resistant to any form of outside rule, even by people who shared a language and ethnicity. They chafed particularly against German control. From its beginnings, revolt spread quickly, and

⁶⁸ William Urban, *Tannenberg and After: Lithuania, Poland, and the Teutonic Order in Search of Immortality*, (Chicago: Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, 2002), 87.

the Samogitians captured several castles from the Teutonic Knights, including the important fortress of Kaunas.

Vytautas claimed he had in no way been party to the beginning of the revolt, and offered to assist the Knights in putting it down. He did nothing, however, to aid either party in any way, and even “retook” Kaunas only to remove the weapons stored there to Lithuania for himself.⁶⁹ While the Teutonic Knights were able to overcome their initial defeats and defeat the uprising, the Grandmaster, Conrad von Jungingen, determined that Vytautas needed to be dealt with, either by driving a wedge between him and Jogaila, or by defeating him outright.⁷⁰

The Grandmaster first pursued war with Lithuania when Svidrigaila, Jogaila’s younger brother and Vytautas’ enemy, came to the Teutonic Knights proposing an alliance. Svidrigaila had been the first to be placed in charge of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, before that honor, in an effort to keep Jogaila’s powerful cousin from continuing rebellion, had gone to Vytautas. In 1402, this out-of-favor brother appeared in Marienburg to offer a deal to the Knights: if they supported his claims to be Grand Duke, he would honor their right to rule in Samogitia and not interfere or offer aid to the Samogitians.⁷¹ Placing all of his hope on Svidrigaila to solve his problems with Vytautas, the Grandmaster declared Svidrigaila the only legitimate Grand Duke and invaded Lithuania. However, Vytautas acted quickly to eliminate enemies within his own strongholds, so that the Teutonic Knights were denied the

⁶⁹ Urban, *Tannenberg*, 93.

⁷⁰ Urban, *Tannenberg*, 94-95.

⁷¹ Urban, *Tannenberg*, 95.

swift victory Svidrigaila had promised would be assured by his supporters.⁷² Vytautas' counteroffensive against the Knights was able to push them back to Ragnit, where the Order had placed its seat of government in Samogitia, and only stopped because Vytautas had been informed that the Teutonic Knights were waiting for him with a massive crusader army if he should attempt to go any further. Negotiations were begun to end the conflict, but not until two years later, in 1404, was peace declared. All forces then retreated behind their pre-conflict borders.⁷³

The political maneuverings did not end with the military conflict. The relationship among the three rulers – von Jungingen in the Order, Vytautas in Lithuania, and Jogaila in Poland – remained complicated, and the Grandmaster of the Order, his ambitions of triumph by main force having come to nothing, still sought to use the historic mistrust and conflicts between the Gediminid cousins to his advantage. Conrad von Jungingen died in 1407 and was succeeded by his younger brother, Ulrich who, though he was not a young man, “has always reminded historians of the teenaged hot head.”⁷⁴ Ulrich, even more than his predecessor, sought to divide Jogaila and Vytautas, and made every attempt to reach out to Vytautas and encourage any resentment felt by Lithuanian nobles toward their Polish counterparts. However, despite von Jungingen's efforts, Jogaila and Vytautas began to work closely together again, and the Grandmaster's plans were put to a final end by a second Samogitian revolt in 1409.

⁷² Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 98.

⁷³ Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 101.

⁷⁴ Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 105.

This uprising was precipitated by a poor harvest in 1408 leading to a grain shortage and widespread famine. The starving Samogitians knew that the only way to get any food would be to take it from the Order's castles. In Lithuania, meanwhile, Vytautas, whose country was also experiencing famine, was becoming dependent on grain ships sent by Jogaila and Poland, making it even less likely that the Teutonic Knights would be able to convince Vytautas to turn against his cousin or help in regaining control over Samogitia.

Ulrich von Jungingen's actions during the crisis certainly did not help the Order's position. The Grandmaster suspected that Vytautas was secretly supporting the rebels, and ordered all ships carrying grain from Poland to Lithuania stopped and searched. On the pretext of having found weapons aboard, the cargo of the ships was confiscated, and Jungingen issued an official declaration that all future shipments would be stopped until the uprising in Samogitia was over. In this case, as in many others to follow, Jungingen misjudged Jogaila's and Vytautas' likely responses: instead of being intimidated and ceasing whatever aid they were giving to the rebels, the King and the Grand Duke were outraged. The Grandmaster's blockade only caused Poland and Lithuania to become closer, as well as more sympathetic to the Samogitians. Vytautas "accused the Teutonic Order of having made war on Christian Lithuania and of oppressing the Samogitians without making any effort to Christianize them; he compared the Teutonic Knights to serpents masquerading as doves."⁷⁵ Any hope of wooing Lithuania away from Poland was, for the moment, lost. With his blockade of Lithuania backfiring and the Samogitians

⁷⁵ Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 128.

striking major blows against Teutonic strongholds, Jungingen made the fateful decision to give up on completely subduing the Samogitians and, instead, to attack what he saw as the source of the problem: Jogaila and Poland. According to the chroniclers, Jungingen thought Jogaila would not expect an attack on his soil, and would be too fearful of war to do much more than sue for a quick peace.⁷⁶ However, Jungingen's plan was a short-sighted one, with no idea of how to achieve ultimate victory, and one that failed to take into account the rise in Poland-Lithuania's power, especially when Jogaila and Vytautas were working together.⁷⁷ It would have disastrous consequences for both Jungingen himself and the Order of Teutonic Knights.

The Battle of Tannenberg

The change in the European balance of power wrought by the Polish-Lithuanian alliance had its most powerful illustration in the Battle of Tannenberg, between the Teutonic Knights and the opposing kingdoms' combined forces, in July of 1410. The Teutonic Knights fully expected to win this battle. Their confidence was, however, based on outdated conceptions of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, as Willam Urban points out. The Teutonic Knights believed that Jogaila and Vytautas, who had feuded and made up over and over again for years, would be unable to put aside their differences and cooperate in raising armies for a joint war effort. The leaders of the Order also believed that the Poles did not trust Jogaila and would fight

⁷⁶ Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 130.

⁷⁷ Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 132.

only for the emergency defense of their homeland, not as part of Jogaila's retribution for Teutonic actions. However, Jogaila had been king of Poland for over two decades by that point. The Poles had become accustomed to him, and they "were more confident now that Jagiello [Jogaila] was their *king*, not simply a Lithuanian out for the main chance."⁷⁸ In December of 1409, meetings took place among Jogaila, Vytautas, and several important Polish lords and bishops, preparing for a united war effort. Although there were nobles who remained neutral and refused to send troops, many others supported Jogaila.

Jogaila's Polish forces joined with Vytautas' Lithuanians on the east bank of the Vistula River, where the Teutonic Grand Master was not expecting them. Ulrich of Jungingen was so sure that the Poles would attack from west of the Vistula, and that the Lithuanians would not attack at all, that for several days he refused even to believe his scouts when they told him where their enemy was coming from.⁷⁹ Although the exact stages of the battle are unclear and different primary sources give different accounts, historians are in agreement that the Order's men were surrounded by a Polish-Lithuanian flanking maneuver, and suffered an enormous defeat.⁸⁰ The Teutonic Knights' underestimation of the cooperation within the Polish-Lithuanian Union had cost them the battle, which also claimed the life of Ulrich von Jungingen.⁸¹

The significance of this battle cannot be denied. The Order was never able to recover and reach its former strength. Although the Knights were able to expel the

⁷⁸ Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, p. 134.

⁷⁹ Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 147.

⁸⁰ Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 152.

⁸¹ Halecki, 141.

Polish and Lithuanian knights from their territories not long after, from 1410 on the power of the Teutonic Knights continued to decline, until they met their end during the Thirty Years' War. Placed in its historical context, however, the Order's defeat was part of a broader ongoing trend. The power of the Polish-Lithuanian Union was rising. Its lands had become wealthy and populous enough that the Teutonic Knights could not have prevailed against them for long in any case. The Battle of Tannenberg took an extensive toll in men and supplies for the Teutonic Knights, and "subsequent grandmasters were never again able to regain the power or prestige they had enjoyed in the past."⁸² The Battle is remembered as a turning point for the politics of East Central Europe because it was a story that could be told and retold, built up into a legend for the nations involved, and imbued with drama and significance. This specific event illustrated the direction of the change in power in East Central Europe.

This shift marked of the success of the policies of Lithuania and Poland, which depended on Lithuania's conversion. Both Lithuania and Poland sought to escape the control of the Teutonic Knights, whether that control came in the form of influence or conquest. The medieval practice of colonization through conversion of a pagan nation by a stronger Christian nation ensured that Lithuania had to find a way to avoid being converted by the Teutonic Knights. Urban and Halecki agree, despite their differences of approach, that Lithuania's conversion through a union with Poland was a way to deprive the Teutonic Knights of a reason to crusade against them without putting themselves under the Order's power. The Battle of

⁸² Urban, *Tannenberg and After*, 135.

Tannenberg was a tangible demonstration of the achievement of this goal: the combined force of Lithuania and Poland were able not only to remain free of Teutonic influence, but they were able to break Teutonic control over East Central Europe and become the region's dominant power.

Conclusion

The kingdoms of East Central Europe in the 1300s were poised in a balance that could not last. The Teutonic Knights were swiftly gaining power over the Baltic peoples, the Poles were not strong enough to keep themselves free of Teutonic interests, and the pagan Lithuanians found themselves in the midst of a Christian world with no allies and an increasingly indefensible position. These concerns drove the conversion of Lithuania and made the union with Poland possible, desirable, and important to the history of the region.

The concept of conversion colonization, one power's gaining control or influence over another by bringing Christianity, was demonstrated in the swift conquest of Livonia by the Teutonic Knights. By taking over the Christianizing mission of the destroyed Order of Swordbrothers, the Knights gained the support of the papacy for their presence and rule over the Livonians in order to ensure their conversion. The Teutonic Knights considered the campaigns in Livonia a crusade, and gained many recruits in German lands by describing it as such. Pagan Lithuania, on the borders of their lands, was a thorn in the side of the Knights, both because it indicated that the crusade was incomplete, and because the Lithuanians frequently

attacked and raided into Livonia. For both practical and spiritual reasons, the Teutonic Knights set their sights on Lithuania as their next conquest.

The motivations of the Lithuanians tended more toward the practical. A union with Poland, such as that created when Grand Duke Jogaila married Queen Jadwiga of Poland, would strengthen both nations, allowing them to pool their resources and noble armies to resist conquest by the Teutonic Knights. Conversion to Christianity was necessary for Lithuania in order for Poland to be able to ally with them without the censure of the rest of the Catholic world, but also because, with Lithuania joining the ranks of Catholic nations, the Teutonic Knights would no longer have the excuse of crusade to attack them. Poland was not strong enough to subdue Lithuania entirely. Conversion through union with Poland was the only way for Lithuania to avoid conversion through the military action of the Teutonic Knights, and was necessary for Lithuania to maintain its own culture and sovereignty. The Polish-Lithuanian Union fulfilled its goal, dealing the Teutonic Knights a momentous defeat at the Battle of Tannenberg and becoming a new power in East Central Europe.

In the Middle Ages, religious actions often had as much to do with earthly power as spiritual salvation. The conversion of Lithuania to Roman Catholicism was no exception. Regardless how widespread the conversion was at first, or how firmly-held the Christian beliefs of Jogaila and his nobles, conversion and union with Poland was necessary for stopping the advance of the power of the Teutonic Order and for the very survival of Lithuania.

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