

Letter to the editors
Lithuanian Ruler Gediminas—Grand Duke or King?
Will We Restore the Rightful Historical Titles of Lithuania’s Rulers?

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As Lithuania celebrates the anniversary of the city of Vilnius, which was first mentioned in written sources seven hundred years ago, it is only fitting to remember ruler Gediminas, the founder of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. It is also worth remembering the titles of Lithuanian rulers before and after Gediminas. Were they titled only grand dukes of Lithuania? Or did Lithuania have more kings? These are not new questions. They have come up every now and then.

Though the title of Mindaugas is not disputed, the status of the other rulers is. Back in 2009, on the occasion of the millennium of Lithuania, Dr. Rasa Gečaitė published a bold documented article “Išniekinta Lietuvos karalystė ir karaliai” [The Desecrated Kingdom of Lithuania and the Kings].¹ Over the last decade alone, a lot of information has been accumulated on this issue. On October 4, 2013, the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences organized a seminar, entitled “Lietuvos karaliai, arba Lietuvos valstybės statusas XIII–XIV a.” [The Kings of Lithuania, or the Status of the State of Lithuania in the thirteenth–fourteenth Centuries]. On that occasion, historian Auksė Ūsienė prepared a well-reasoned ten-page booklet in which she discussed the status of the Lithuanian rulers.² In 2018, Prof. Alvydas Butkus published an article “Lietuvos valstybingumo pobūdžiai ir jų interpretacijos” [The Nature of Lithuanian Statehood and Its Interpretations], which also examined the issue of the titles of the Lithuanian rulers.³ Incidentally, the article was prepared on the basis of the lecture delivered at Daugavpils University on the occasion of the awarding of an honorary doctorate to the author.

In the same year, a solid work was published on the subject, Dr. Algimantas Bučys’ sizeable book *Lietuvių karaliai ir Lietuvos karalystė de facto ir de jure Viduramžių Europoje* [Lithuanian Kings and the Kingdom of Lithuania de facto and de jure in Medieval Europe], which was reprinted the following year. The conclusions of research, which the author committed to the analysis of the historical titles of the rulers of ancient Lithuania until the early fifteenth century, refuted the outdated myth of Mindaugas as the only king of Lithuania. It is also interesting that in his book, Bučys mentions that Saint Boniface of Querfurt baptized the Lithuanian king Netimeras in 1009.

One can find many more articles and opinions on the question under consideration. However, it should be noted that Lithuanian historians in the United States (Jonas Dainauskas,

¹ *Atgimimas*, February 27, 2009. <http://www.delfi.lt/archive/print.php?id=20758150>.

² See kam.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/lietuvos-karaliai.pdf.

³ See <http://alkas.lt/2018/05/05/a-butkus-lietuvos-valstybingumo-pobudziai-ir-ju-interpretacijos>.

Rimantas Kunčas-Žemaitaitis, Violeta Rutkauskienė, etc.) unambiguously have stated the opinion that Lithuania was ruled by kings until the early fifteenth century. Although there seems to be enough research and sources on the issue, the academic community is still dominated by the “traditional” point of view. In school textbooks, students learn about the rulers of Lithuania—the grand dukes. Why? A long time ago, during my fellowship in Chicago in 1998, historian Jonas Dainauskas (1904–2000), who took pride in the fact that he “had been studying Lithuanian-Polish relations for forty years,” tried to provide an explanation. The explanation was not the most pleasant. He said that Lithuanian historians have been strongly influenced by Polish historiography, when referring to senior Lithuanian scholars. In order to better understand what the Lithuanian-American historian meant, we have to examine the question again, and refer to the texts of the above-mentioned authors.

Not every person interested in the history of ancient times is satisfied with the opinion that has prevailed in Lithuanian historiography that Lithuania had only one king, Mindaugas (1200 (?)-1263), and that the Kingdom of Lithuania under his rule lasted for about seven years. Moreover, it seems odd that the Lithuanian state is probably the only European state that did not collapse after the death of its ruler Mindaugas but instead, grew in territory and strength. But somehow, and by someone, this kingdom was “renamed” as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (hereafter referred to as the GDL), and its rulers as grand dukes.

As some historians point out, in the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries (before the beginning of Vytautas’s reign), there is not a single written document (except for the Slavonic chronicles) that attests to the existence of the GDL. All the documents of that time (letters of Mindaugas and Gediminas, their treaties, letters and bulls of the Popes, the Livonian Chronicle, and the Chronicle of the Land of Prussia by Peter of Dusburg, etc.) mention the Kingdom of Lithuania and its kings (Latin: *Rex*, German: *Kunig*). Only Jogaila, who married Queen Jadwiga, changed the title of King of Lithuania to King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. This is the first evidence of such naming.

So why do historians continue calling the rulers of Lithuania grand dukes (Russian: *velikij kniaz*)? The answer may be short: There was a strong belief that only Christian rulers endorsed by the Pope had the right to be called *kings*. This tradition dates back to the eighth century when the Pope gave his blessing to ruler of the Franks, Pepin the Short, father of the future emperor Charlemagne. Unfortunately, however, this argument does not stand up to criticism, as it is contradicted by the writings of the popes themselves, which refer to the rulers of Lithuania as kings and Lithuania as a kingdom. For example, in the early fourteenth-century chronicle of Peter of Dusburg, Lithuania is repeatedly referred to as a kingdom, and Vytenis and Gediminas are referred to as kings of Lithuania. Peter of Dusburg writes about Pope John XXII’s wish to baptize

Gediminas, “the famed king of Lithuania and of many Russians” in 1324. Despite Gediminas’ refusal, he is still referred to as a king in the Dusburg’s chronicle.

In addition, Peter of Dusburg also mentions the Lithuanian king Pukuveras, whose son is Vytenis. He also mentions Treniota, the son of the king of Lithuania. Thus, even though the hostile military societies, such as the Livonian Brothers of the Sword and the Teutonic Order, as well as the popes who sought to unsuccessfully baptize Lithuania and other officials, certainly had no intention of praising our rulers, they apparently addressed them using their real titles. Therefore, their documents should also be seen as indisputable legal evidence to call Lithuania a kingdom and its rulers kings. This is not a trifle but an essential point, because renaming a kingdom to the GDL “erases” the status of statehood and legitimizes a certain merging of lands and subordination to another state, i.e., a kingdom. But none of the Lithuanian rulers before Vytautas the Great had any other ruler superior to them, they were not vassals or sub-monarchs.

According to one of the most famous contemporary Lithuanian language historians, Prof. Zigmas Zinkevičius (1925–2018), “rulers are of two types”: 1) Rulers who did not have a suzerain over them, and therefore did not belong to anyone, and who considered themselves kings, and were called so by rulers of other countries, even by the Pope (the case of pre-Christian Scandinavians and Germanic people is somewhat similar) and 2) Rulers who were “anointed” as kings by the Pope; like Mindaugas, who in 1251 converted to Christianity and in 1253 was crowned king.

The question is: where did the titles of duke and grand duke come from and why did they become so common in Lithuania? First of all, we do not know how the Lithuanian rulers were titled by the Lithuanians themselves. We have no definite knowledge about that. It is possible that it was *a priest, a commander, a ruler or a lord*, as these are the only ways to translate the title of the Lithuanian ruler, *Hospodar*, which is used in clerical Slavic writings. This uncertainty certainly complicates the work of scholars.

Secondly, one of the reasons why our rulers are called grand dukes could be that from the early fourteenth century, Lithuanians began a successful military expansion to the East, annexing the Slavic-Ruthenian lands, which had previously been subject to the khans of the Golden Horde. The rulers of the Slavic lands were called *kniazi* (dukes), and the Slavs naturally gave the Lithuanian rulers their own titles. However, at that time, this title in Slavic lands meant the khan’s deputy. The khans also appointed a chief deputy, the grand duke (*velikij kniaz*), who was subordinate to the suzerain khan. In Latin it is *Magnus Dux*. Thus, after the Lithuanian rulers were mistakenly referred to as “grand dukes,” they later came to be understood as vassal rulers (?). Slavic chronicles refer to Mindaugas as *velikij kniaz*, even though it is known with certainty that Mindaugas was already a king at that time. Thus, historians, especially Russian ones, consciously or unconsciously gave in to the influence of the Slavonic annals.

But Polish politicians and later Polish historians had the greatest influence in this matter. From the time of the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz, i.e., from the late fifteenth century, they started to apply the title of the grand duke to the rulers of Lithuania. The aim of their efforts was to show the world that in the past Lithuania was only a duchy and Poland a kingdom.

Polish historians strictly adhered to this point of view in their publications. For example, the *Codex Diplomaticus Lithuaniae...*, a collection of old documents published in Wrocław in 1845, refers to Lithuanian rulers as kings, but in the commentaries the compiler of the collection, Edward Raczyński, emphatically refers to the same rulers as dukes. Another example, the Polish historian Marian Gumowski in his work on seals also falsified information. Although the seal of any Lithuanian ruler bears the title of king, the historian wrote in the caption that it is the seal of a duke of Lithuania.⁴ Thus, from that time onwards, distorted titles were consistently “coined,” and the public was accustomed to the “dukes” like Gediminas, Algirdas, Kęstutis, Jogaila and previous rulers. In fact, Długosz was probably the first to call Jogaila the Grand Duke of Lithuania, even though Jogaila himself did not use that title. His seals bore the inscription *King of Lithuania*.

When Jogaila became King of Poland in 1386, he gradually handed over power in Lithuania (1392–1401) to his cousin Vytautas as his viceroy. In 1401, Vytautas became grand duke of Lithuania and was only nominally dependent on Poland. The title of the grand duke of Lithuania was consolidated by the Pact of Vilnius and Rodom. Vytautas, seeking full independence for Lithuania, formally sought royal approval from the Pope. He needed to break the de jure treaty with Jogaila in a civilized manner, even though de facto he ruled one of the largest European states. The Burgundian knight and diplomat, Guillebert de Lannoy, wrote in his diary in 1414: “I have come to visit the Kingdom of Lithuania and its king, duke Vytautas.” The king of Lithuania was Jogaila, but he lived in Poland, and duke Vytautas represented the king and acted as one.⁵ It should also be noted that in Vilnius Cathedral, in the Chapel of St. Casimir (seventeenth century), there is a statue of Vytautas with a crown of a king and not a grand duke. The crown is similar to the crown of the statue of Jogaila. They are both depicted and treated as kings. It was the American historian Stephen Turnbull who first pointed this out in his book *Tannenberg 1410, Disaster for Teutonic Knights*.⁶

In conclusion, it is perhaps appropriate to recall Dr. Gečaitė’s words: “One can only speculate when students will be presented with undistorted historical facts from the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, based on authentic documents and not on theories. Or perhaps today’s historians are still repenting for their pagan past and voluntarily carrying the cross of punishment

⁴ See Dainauskas J. *Lietuvos bei lietuvių krikštas ir 1387-ji metai*. Chicago, 1991, 43–44.

⁵ Dainauskas, 44.

⁶ “G. Zemlicko pokalbis su istorike Violeta Rutkauskiene: Kas sieja slibiną ir dvigubą kryžių” [“G. Zemlickas’ Conversation with Historian Violeta Rutkauskiene: What Links the Dragon and the Double Cross”] *Mokslo Lietuva*, April 23, 2009, No. 8, 9.

7 *Atgimimas*. 2009 m. vasario 27 d.: <http://www.delfi.lt/archive/print.php?id=20758150>

over the desecrated graves of the Lithuanian kings. The dead know the truth, and so might the living.”⁷ It should be noted that some historians have come up with a compromise, or a “golden mean”—more often than not, they refer to the rulers and not to the grand dukes of Lithuania. That is some progress. Moreover, history textbooks for schools are constantly being updated, and there is hope that a textbook author will appear who will provide students with titles of our rulers based on documents. Let us hope so!

Translated by Dalia Cidzikaitė