

THE CONVERSION OF LITHUANIA 1387

WILLIAM URBAN*

The foundation of the bishopric in Vilnius in 1387, marked by the presence of Jogaila (1350-1434) to assist in teaching the fundamental tenets of the faith, was a decisive , moment in the history of the Lithuanian people.¹ In the year 1387, however, this was not so clear.

This was not the first time missionaries had congratulated themselves on their seeming success in converting the warlike Lithuanians from their pagan beliefs, and, like all previous conversions, the events of 1387 depended so strongly on unstable political relationships, that skepticism and prayer were more appropriate than congratulation and thanksgiving. No one could forget the apostacy of King Mindaugas (?-1263) in the previous century, nor the failure of papal and imperial efforts during the lifetimes of Gediminas (1275-1341), Algirdas (?-1377), and Kęstutis (1300-1382). In each case, these Lithuanian rulers had found conversion such a political liability that it outweighed the very real advantages it offered in securing their political authority at home and in dealing with their neighbors to the west.²

Although not unified, for generations the Lithuanians had been the dominant military people in the Baltic; they had enriched themselves by taking horses, cattle, and slaves from their Christian and pagan neighbors. When German Christians appeared at the mouth of the Dauguva (Dvina), many natives saw them as less of a threat than the Lithuanian raiders; and Christian efforts to defend newly converted peoples along the Lithuanian frontiers soon became a crusade against paganism itself.³ When the crusades organized by kings of Poland and grandmasters of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia caused the Lithuanians to form a more unified state under a gifted noble family, the Lithuanians were able to offer nearby Russian lands protection against Mongol domination. Once the dukes of Lithuania had acquired vast territories in Russia, they came to see the crusaders as a distraction from their obligations in the east.

The dukes could have ended those crusader attacks by adopting Roman Christianity. However, there were two great problems associated with that: First, most Lithuanians saw the crusaders as the national enemy and looked to their pagan gods for help against them; paganism was thus a guarantee of political and social freedom — not just against the Germans, but also against their own dukes. Secondly, the dukes had to remember the wishes of their many Russian Orthodox subjects. Both pagans and Russian Christians objected to Roman Catholic claims to a monopoly on religious truth. They feared forced conversion so greatly that the dukes had reason to worry that insurrections would follow any announcement of plans to convert to western Christianity.⁴

The Lithuanian expansion into Russia, however, had already the effect of undermining paganism. If pagan rulers could baptise their children into the Russian Orthodox faith without being punished by their ancestral deities, perhaps the gods were no longer worthy of fear and respect.

The Lithuanians had been famed for religious toleration; Roman Catholics enjoyed less freedom of worship there only because of their association with the crusaders. Franciscans had been present at the ducal court during the lifetime of Gediminas, but they do not seem to have proselytized, and they vanished from Vilnius in the year Gediminas died.⁵ Their efforts to persuade the popes and emperors that the Lithuanians were ready for conversion, once the crusade was ended, was refuted by the words of Gediminas himself.⁶ The Dominicans, who preached the crusade, joined with the Teutonic Knights in portraying the pagans as vile servants of evil who had to be resisted (i.e., conquered) by force.⁷

The western Church had sought to undermine the pagan confidence in their gods by sponsoring crusading expeditions from Livonia (modern Latvia and Estonia), Prussia, and Poland. The original defensive purpose of the crusades in the Baltic had deteriorated into a contest of gods. Even in the late fourteenth century the pagan gods were holding their own. Despite the participation of crusaders from Britain, France, and the Holy Roman Empire, the Teutonic Knights had made

but little headway up the Nemunas River. Crusaders had depopulated Western Samogitia (Žemaitija) and burned many of the holy woods and shrines elsewhere, but they found the resistance of the Samogitians to Christianity to grow more fanatical as time passed.[8](#)

The deaths of Duke Algirdas in 1377 and King Louis of Poland in 1382, however, created a situation which was to result in new opportunities for both the crusaders and the Lithuanian dukes. In each country there was a fear that foreign influences (Russian on the one hand, German on the other) were becoming too powerful. In the long run, this caused Lithuanians and Poles to see a dynastic union as a means of escaping this danger; in the short run, it meant that the Teutonic Knights could attack a divided Lithuania without fear of Polish interference.

Duke Kęstutis had shared power with his brother Algirdas, Kęstutis being responsible for those western provinces facing Livonia, Prussia, and Poland, and Algirdas ruling the Russian cities on the Mongol frontier in the east. The two had given their brothers individual cities and minor provinces on endangered borders. It was an arrangement which had worked well in protecting the "diarchy" (rule of one country by two men) from Mongols, Poles, Russians, and Germans.[9](#) However, Algirdas' heirs fought for supremacy, and when the eldest son of the first marriage sought Moscovite help, the sons of the second marriage, led by Jogaila, obtained help from the Teutonic Knights.

Once Jogaila had defeated his rivals with the assistance of crusader diplomacy, he sent his brother, Skirgaila, to arrange another secret treaty, promising not to aid Kęstutis against crusader attacks.[10](#) Subsequently, the Teutonic Knights became bolder in their aggression, until at last, when Kęstutis realized what was happening, he arrested Jogaila and made arrangements to bring the full strength of Lithuania against the crusaders.

Unfortunately for Kęstutis, he believed that Jogaila's plea for forgiveness was sincere and set him free. Jogaila then organized a conspiracy involving Rigan merchants (normally enemies of the crusaders), the Teutonic Knights, and the territories ruled by his brothers. Kęstutis reacted swiftly when he heard of this and was besieging Jogaila in Trakai (Tracken) when the armies of the Teutonic Knights arrived from Livonia and Prussia to trap him between superior forces. Kęstutis became Jogaila's captive and died in prison (supposedly a suicide, but probably murdered by Skirgaila).[11](#)

Jogaila made two mistakes at this point: First, though he gave the crusaders Samogitia in the Dubysa (Dubissa) Treaty,[12](#) he did not carry out his promise to become a Roman Catholic. This caused the Teutonic Knights to mistrust him. Secondly, he failed to eliminate Kęstutis' son, Vytautas, who escaped from Jogaila's prison, fled to his relatives in Masovia, and then went to the grandmaster of the Teutonic Knights. When Vytautas underwent baptism in 1383 and promised to convert Lithuania to Roman Catholicism, the grandmaster ignored the spirit of the Dubysa Treaty and gave Vytautas Samogitia to rule as a Christian vassal. War with Jogaila quickly followed.[13](#)

In the ensuing years, 1383-84, the crusaders enjoyed unprecedented victories. By 1384 Jogaila was desperate. But that was a situation where he was at his best: Jogaila was a diplomat, a conspirator. He sent Skirgaila to Poland, where the nobles were very unhappy about their young queen's intent to consummate her childhood marriage with Wilhelm von Hapsburg, thus making German influence predominant in the kingdom. The nobles saw in Jogaila a much better bridegroom (the great difference in their ages was of no importance), a man who could assist their ambitions to expand eastward, who could bring peace to the Lithuanian border, who would fight the Teutonic Knights, and who was not likely to bring German governors (or even Lithuanian ones) to rule over Poland.[14](#)

Jogaila judged the strength of pagan sentiment correctly when he accepted the Polish conditions for the marriage. Paganism had no leader (Vytautas was allied with the hereditary enemy) and nothing to offer, whereas Roman Christianity had Jogaila, rich presents, and feudal privileges.[15](#) for Jogaila, the prospect of governing in Poland made it possible for him to offer half of Lithuania to Vytautas, thus dividing his enemies. After he persuaded Vytautas that victory as a vassal of crusaders was less desirable than undisputed control of his father's lands, he ruined the crusader hopes to dominate Lithuania.[16](#) When Vytautas rebelled against the grandmaster, destroying several castles in Samogitia and making prisoners of their garrisons, Jogaila did not feel obliged to give Kęstutis' lands to Vytautas; instead he presented most of them to Skirgaila. Vytautas complained, but he had no means to make Jogaila act fairly. In 1386 Vytautas underwent baptism in the Russian Orthodox Church in the hope of becoming powerful in the east, but was again frustrated by Jogaila.[17](#) Lacking any alternative, he accompanied Jogaila to Cracow later in 1386 for Jogaila's baptism, marriage, and coronation, and was baptized himself once more into the Roman Catholic Church.[18](#) The alliance was doomed, however. It lasted only until 1389, when Vytautas was able to persuade the Teutonic Knights to assist him in rebelling against Jogaila.

In the following years Vytautas' forces, supplemented by crusader armies, seemed invincible. When Jogaila saw his Lithuanian base collapsing, he sought to contact Vytautas about a compromise.[19](#)

Although the crusaders watched Vytautas carefully, to prevent his receiving messages, they were not careful enough. In 1392 Jogaila used a Masovian bishop to ask Vytautas to become his vassal; in return Jogaila promised Vytautas the title of grand duke and all of Lithuania to rule. Vytautas accepted, changed sides once again — destroying several crusader castles — and rewarded the bishop with his sister's hand![20](#)

The Teutonic Knights, who had dealt with the cousins personally and been repeatedly betrayed, believed they had good reason to be skeptical about Jogaila's and Vytautas' sincerity in accepting Christ. Jogaila's establishment of a small

bishopric in Vilnius in 1387 had done nothing to dispel their doubts. At every opportunity the crusaders warned the leaders of Christendom that the situation in the east was not what it seemed to be.²¹ Even so, political reality prevailed over anger. The crusaders needed peace as much as did Vytautas — both saw pagans and Poles (i.e., Jogaila) as enemies.²²

Vytautas ended the conflict with the Teutonic Knights by confirming their possession of Samogitia and even assisting their efforts at pacification. In return, the Teutonic Knights helped Vytautas in his wars against Russians and Mongols. War between Lithuanians and Germans became the exception rather than the rule. Part of this is undoubtedly attributable to Vytautas' wish to avoid having to depend on Jogaila for help (as he would in any war) and part to the Polish nobles, who wanted to avoid any conflict with the powerful Teutonic Knights which would hinder their plans to expand eastward. The Teutonic Knights needed no additional war; they had their hands full in Samogitia and encouraging the revolts.²³

To nobody's surprise, the conversion in the Lithuanian countryside proceeded very slowly. Although Polish friars could baptize masses, there were no Lithuanian priests to preach the tenets of the faith until Jogaila's queen established an institute at the Jagellonian (bearing the name of Jogaila) University in Cracow to train them. This university remained the center of the Lithuanian mission until the Jesuits founded Vilnius University in 1579.²⁴ The shortage of priests meant, first, that effective preaching was impossible except in the handful of parishes in the neighborhood of Vilnius. Considering how new and alien the religion was, and how small an impact it made on the daily habits of the masses, western observers were right to conclude that a relapse into paganism was possible. Everything depended on Jogaila and Vytautas.

Christianity was an urban religion in Lithuania, and the country had but few towns. Moreover, churches were not centers of civic life. The cathedral in Vilnius was little more than a burial center for the ducal family, and the churches founded in the castles served the same function for leading noble families.²⁵ Moreover, in the heartland of paganism, the region of Samogitia, no effort to establish parish churches was made before 1417, when a bishopric was founded in Kaunas in response to propaganda spread by the Teutonic Knights at the Council of Constance.²⁶

Jogaila and Vytautas moved slowly in establishing Roman Catholicism in the countryside. Theirs was a practical caution, designed to avoid offending their pagan and Orthodox subjects. They passed laws discriminating against non-Catholics, but they did not seem to have enforced them.²⁷ One must sympathize with this approach. To end polygamy suddenly, to stop veneration of the dead, and to prevent celebration of traditional rites would have provoked massive rebellions. The collection of new feudal taxes associated with Christianity did cause peasant risings, but in the matter of revenue, Jogaila and Vytautas were able to rely on the nobles, with whom they shared the benefits of the new political and religious system.²⁸

It has often been pointed out how much Lithuania benefited from its conversion, especially in the realm of folklore and culture. In the short-run, the peasants were not well able to appreciate the exchange of their old freedoms for new holidays and superior hymns. In the long-run, they would not have been able to maintain their old ways anyhow — history does not stand still. But, even today, people usually do what they think best in the short-run and hope that the long-run works out somehow; moreover, they tend to view innovation with mistrust and are reluctant to change comfortable, time-proven practices. Nothing was different then. Pagan practices persisted, sometimes secretly, sometimes mixed into Christian rites, for many generations.

How little true conversion was achieved was shown by sixteenth century reports. In some districts paganism still survived, and everywhere Roman Catholic priests existed in small numbers and were poorly trained. Starting in the second half of the sixteenth century, many Lithuanians adopted Calvinism, a religious doctrine seemingly well suited to independent-minded, puritanical frontiersmen. However, in the contest with Moscow, the Lithuanian nobles learned that they could not obtain Polish help unless they professed Roman Catholicism. Religious belief grew stronger as Roman Catholicism came to represent Lithuanian national feelings during the long struggle against Muscovite Orthodoxy for control of the borderlands. Thus, the final Christianization of Lithuania was accomplished in the era of Jesuit domination.²⁹

1387 was an important date in Lithuanian history, but contemporaries were less appreciative of its meaning than their descendants are: Jogaila and Vytautas had more interest in politics than the afterlife; their nobles were appreciative of an increased authority over the peasantry and a potential influence in affairs of state; the official church made minimal efforts to support priests in what was still a missionary situation; and the Teutonic Knights and many former crusaders were persuaded that the neophyte Christians would soon abandon their lightly-worn baptismal garments and return to paganism.³⁰

For many decades most Lithuanians could hardly be called Christian by an impartial observer, but in those years paganism lost much of its attractiveness. Lithuanians continued to reap harvests, bear children, and win victories without the aid of their ancient gods. When the church did make religious instruction available to the masses, paganism was little more than a collection of folktales and superstitious practices; later generations of priests had an easier task than did the missionaries of 1387.

* William Urban is professor of history at Monmouth College in Illinois. He is a specialist in Medieval Baltic history.

1 Jogaila was the Grand Prince of Lithuania (1377-81, 1382-92) and King of Poland (1386-1434). Victor Gidžiūnas, "The Introduction of Christianity into Lithuania," *Lituanus*, 3 (1957), No. 4, pp. 6-13; Zenonas Ivinskis, "Jogaila," *Encyclopedia Lituanica* (Boston, 1972), II, 534-35.

2 Antanas Kučas, "Kęstutis," *Ibid.*, III, 115-116, blames the failure of earlier efforts at conversion on Teutonic Knights' rejection of the demands for territorial concessions; Marija Gimbutas, *The Balts* (New York: Praeger, 1963), pp. 183-84, indicates that paganism was changing rapidly, especially in the priesthood, which emulated Christian models.

3 For these crusades, see Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades: the Baltic and the Catholic Frontier 1100-1525* (Minneapolis: University of Michigan, 1981) and William Urban, *The Baltic Crusade* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1975) and *The Prussian Crusade* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980).

4 Nicholas Fr.-Chirovsky, *An Introduction to Ukrainian History* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1981), II, 10-11; Oscar Halecki, *From Florence to Brest (1439-1596)* (New York: Archon, 1968), pp. 22-24, for the failure of efforts at uniting the eastern and western churches.

5 Victor Gidžiūnas, *De Fratribus Minoribus in Lituania* (Rome: Fausto Failli, 1950), pp. 31,39.

6 "Hermann de Wartberge," *Scriptores rerum prussicarum* (Leipzig, 1863; reprint Frankfurt/Main: Minerva, 1965f), II, 61-62.

7 The most notorious Dominican was tried for heresy at the Council of Constance. Harmut Boockmann, *Johannes Falkenberg, Der Deutsche Orden und die polnische Politik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975); for the order's propaganda, see Wolfgang Wippermann, *Die Ideologie des Ordensstaat: das Bild des Deutschen Ordens in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung und Publizistik Berlin: Colloquium, 1979*, pp. 58f.

8 Kurt Forstreuter, *Deutschland und Litauen* (Königsberg: Ost-europa, 1938), p. 9; Jakob Ozols, "Zur Frage der heiligen Wälder in östlichen Ostseegebiet," *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung*, 26(1977), pp. 671-81.

9 Jonė Deveikė, "The Lithuania Diarchies," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 28(1950), pp. 392ff; not all modern scholars agree with this definition of the Lithuanian state, but many do.

10 "Annalista," *Scriptores*, III, 113; Ivinskis, p. 533.

11 "Wigand von Marburg," *Scriptores*, II, 614, 620; "Kęstutis," p. 117.

12 Antanas Kučas, "Samogitia," *Encyclopedia Lituanica*, V, 48; it is this geographic region which best pertains to Constantine Jurgela's *Lithuania in a Twin Teutonic Clutch* (New York: Lithuanian American Information Center, 1945).

13 Wigand, pp. 619-22; Joseph Končius, *Vytautas the Great, Grand Duke of Lithuania* (Miami: Franklin, 1964), pp. 24-29.

14 Norman Davies, *God's Playground. A History of Poland in two volumes* (New York: Columbia, 1983), I, 118; Manfred Hellmann, "Die polsche-litauische Union von 1385/86," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte von Osteuropa*, Neue Folge, 34(1986), pp. 19-34.

15 Christiansen, p. 139.

16 For Vytautas' own description, see *Scriptores*, II, 712-14.

17 Gotthold Rhode, *Die Ostgrenze Polens* (Köln-Graz: Böhlau, 1965), p. 343.

18 Ivinskis, pp. 534-35.

19 Halecki, p. 114.

20 "Wigand von Marburg," pp. 647-48.

21 Michael Burleigh, *Prussian Society and the German Order. An aristocratic corporation in crisis c. 1410-1466* (Cambridge: the University Press, 1984) views this as hypocrisy. The Teutonic Knights provided sinecures for younger sons of the German nobility.

22 It is very important to remember that Polish and Lithuanian historians have very different views of their common past, especially of this era. See Bronius Dundulis, "A Historiographic Survey of Lithuanian-Polish Relations," *Lituanus*, 17(1971), No. 4, pp. 5-34 and Juozas Girnius, "A Glimpse into Polish-Lithuanian Relations," *Lituanus*, 3(1957), No. 3, pp. 9-14.

23 Wilhelm Nöble, "Das Problem der Einrichtung der Ordensvogtei Samaiten," *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung*, 17(1968), pp. 692-97.

24 J.A. Šakalys, "Higher Education in Lithuania, a Historical Analysis," *Lituanus*, 31(1985), No. 4, p. 9.

25 Povilas Rėklaitis, "Die Burgenkirchen in Litauen," *Commentationes Balticae*, 6/7(1959), pp. 9-39.

26 *Codex Mednicensis seu Samogitiae Dioecesis*, part 1 (ed. Paulus Jatulis. Rome: Academia Lituanica Catholica Scientiarum, 1984).

27 Horst Jablonowski, *Westrussland zwischen Wilna and Moskau* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), pp. 49f; Halecki, p. 23.

28 Henryk Lowmianski, *Studia nad Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego* (Poznań: AM, 1983), pp. 386-89; a Marxist interpretation is found in Juozas Jurginis, "Das Christentum in Litauen: seine Einführung und die Answirkung auf die weitere Entwicklung des Landes," *Litauen Heute*, 24(1984), p. 23.

29 Juozas Jakštas, *Aidai*, (1987), No. 1, p. 1, says that the Christianization of Lithuania was a continuous process, brought to a conclusion by the Jesuits in the sixteenth century; see the visitation reports in the *Codex Mednicensis*.

30 Halecki, p. 118; James Muldoon, *Popes, Lawyers, and Infidels* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1979), pp. 99-100; the Teutonic Knights were also extremely mortified that the Lithuanians had accepted baptism at the hands of the Poles rather than from their priests, because that undermined their most important reasons for remaining in Prussia rather than using their resources to defend Christendom elsewhere.