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On the Phenomenon of Knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th Century: raising the issue

Annotation: This article deals with a rather narrow problem that is set in a broad peripheral context. The historiography discusses whether knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania could have functioned as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Current historiography argues that the phenomenon emerged and spread in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the end of the 14th century, after the conversion of Lithuania. Meanwhile, earlier receptions of the ideas of knighthood are hardly visible. This article attempts to review three well-known sources relating to the reign of Gediminas in which the importance of chivalry becomes clear. These sources testify that the ruler understood the importance of the phenomenon of knighthood in the first half of the 14th century and updated it. We also know that there were knights in Gediminas' entourage who were personally close to him. Finally, among the members of the dynasty, we can see an awareness of the expression of chivalric culture and ethics. All this suggests that the phenomenon of knighthood was known in Gediminas' surrounding as well as that it was gradually adapted. Further research may reveal the spread of this phenomenon. **Keywords:** Gediminas, 14th century, knighthood, letters of Gediminas, Philippe de Mezieres, Jean d'Outremeuse (Jean des Preis)

Zagadnienie fenomenu rycerstwa w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim w XIV wieku: postawienie problemu

Streszczenie: Artykuł ten skupia się na dość wąskim problemie z szerokim kontekstem peryferyjnym. W historiografii toczy się dyskusja, czy rycerstwo mogło funkcjonować w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim jako zjawisko społeczno-kulturowe. Obecna historiografia podaje, że od końca XIV wieku, po chrzcie Litwy, zjawisko to pojawiło się i rozprzestrzeniło w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim. Tymczasem wcześniejsze recepcje idei rycerstwa są mało widoczne. W artykule podjęto próbę przeglądu trzech znanych źródeł dotyczących panowania Giedy-

mina, w których ujawnia się znaczenie rycerskości. Źródła te świadczą o tym, że władca w pierwszej połowie XIV wieku rozumiał wagę zjawiska rycerstwa i uznawał je. Wiemy też, że w kręgu Giedymina byli rycerze, którzy byli mu osobiście bliscy. Wreszcie wśród członków dynastii widać świadomość kultury i etyki rycerskiej. Wszystko to sugeruje, że zjawisko rycerstwa było znane w kręgu Giedymina i ulegało stopniowej adaptacji. Dalsze badania mogą ujawnić rozprzestrzenianie się tego zjawiska.

Słowa kluczowe: Giedymin, XIV w., rycerstwo, listy Giedymina, Philippe de Mezieres, Jean d'Outremeuse (Jean des Preis)

The question of the extent to which the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was isolated from Western Europe and its traditions in the 14th century remains at the level of primary research. If we know that there were trade and diplomatic contacts, we can talk about the transmission of ideas of one kind or another. In this context, the question arises whether the idea of knighthood could have reached Lithuania before the Act of Krėva and the conversion of Lithuania at the end of the 14th century. It goes without saying that the idea of knighthood has not only a military but also a deep cultural basis and is connected with Christian values. Therefore, it is difficult to discuss the phenomenon of knighthood in a pagan environment.

In 2014, at the conference in Spiš Castle, following Volodymyr Hucul's presentation „Mounted Shock Combat in Medieval Rus'”, a discussion on the use of battering ram technology in Rus' took place. Hieronym Grala stated categorically that it was difficult to talk about the phenomenon of knighthood in Rus' as well as when it came to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Although Hucul provided the examples of military equipment originated from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the middle of the 15th century,¹ the issue of chivalry in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was not resolved and the parties remained unconvinced.

This situation makes it necessary to discuss the genesis of the phenomenon of knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which is not very clear. There are important source-related problems here that cannot be solved in this study and require a deeper analysis. However, when it comes to the phenomenon of knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it must be noted that the field of research is not empty. Research on this issue has been going on for several decades. One of the fundamental publications on the phenomenon of knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was published by Stanislovas Lazutka and Edvardas Gudavičius. It focused on the military and social aspects of the phenomenon of knighthood after the conversion of Lithuania.² Kastytis Antanaitis attempted to take a broader look at this phenomenon by trying to define the expression of knights as a military potential in Lithuania at the end of the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries.³ Jūratė Kiaupienė discussed the concept of the phenomenon of

¹ V. Hucul, *Tarannyj boj v srednevekovoj Rusi*, [in:] *Colloquia Russica, t. 5: Rus' and Central Europe from the 11th to 14th century. Publication after 5th International Conference, Spišská kapitula, 16th–18th Oktober 2014*, eds. V. Nagirnyy and A. Mesiarkin, Krakow–Bratislava 2015, p. 199–215.

² S. Lazutka, E. Gudavičius, *Riteriai*, [in:] *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis 1980, 1981*, p. 105–109.

³ K. Antanaitis, *Riterijos apraiškos Lietuvoje XIV–XVI a.*, [in:] *Darbai ir dienos*, t. 5(14), 1997, p. 125–142.

knighthood in Lithuania as it appears in the texts of Maciej Strykowski.⁴ The works of Rimvydas Petrauskas were also fundamental in examining examples of the expression of knighthood as a social phenomenon in Lithuania.⁵ Yuri Bochan, in his analysis of the development of military and chivalric culture, also highlighted the end of the 14th century in this process.⁶ In Lithuania, there was a conceptual debate between Edvardas Gudavičius and Kastytis Antanaitis and Jūratė Kiaupienė on how the phenomenon of knighthood in Lithuania should be treated. Edvardas Gudavičius insisted that the military aspects of the phenomenon, which distinguished the knightly army from the rest of the nobility, should be addressed first.⁷ However, if one considers the phenomenon of knighthood as a military phenomenon, one cannot fully take into account its social and cultural aspects. For this reason, due to the deeply Christian concept of knighthood, it is very difficult to talk about the phenomenon of knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th century. The aim of this article is to analyse the manifestations of knighthood in Lithuania in the 14th century and to contextualise it. It should be emphasised that this study will not analyse all possible sources: acts, seals, miniatures, etc. It is part of a much broader and more comprehensive study. This work will focus on a few sources from the period of Gediminas' reign that characterise his epoch quite well and indicate what problems of knighthood expression were relevant in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th century.

When military historians in Lithuania talk about the features of the Lithuanian military forces in the 13th-14th centuries, they note that the situation was not static. In their relations with their neighbours, the Lithuanians were adopting experience, and therefore their way of warfare was changing. It is pointed out that for a long time, the Lithuanians fought dismounted from their horses, and that in the first half of the thirteenth-century Lithuanian armies used horses primarily as a means of transport. Obviously, the Lithuanians did not have the opportunity to adopt knighthood technologies, and thus ideas, in that period. On the other hand, from the middle of the 13th century onwards, Lithuanians were increasingly recorded in the sources as fighting on horseback, which was a feature of the nobility.⁸ Certainly, the ability to participate in battle while mounted on horseback is an important feature in moving towards the emergence of the phenomenon of knighthood, but this is not yet chivalry. It requires not only a specific preparation but also a cultural code that was important for this stratum.

As far as the features of knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th century are concerned, it is necessary to draw attention to several well-known sources in historiography, which have been repeatedly used in studies in slightly different con-

⁴ J. Kiaupienė, *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės riterio vaizdinys Motiejaus Strykowskio tekstuose*, [in:] *Kultūrų sankirtos. Skiriama doc. dr. Ingės Lukšaitės 60-mečiui*, ed. Z. Kiaupa etc., Vilnius 2000, p. 117-142.

⁵ R. Petrauskas, *Riteriai Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje XIV a. pabaigoje - XVI a. pradžioje*, [in:] *Istorijos šaltinių tyrimai*, t. 1 ed. Artūras Dubonis etc., Vilnius 2008, p. 91-113; R. Petrauskas, *Knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the Late Fourteenth to the Early Sixteenth Centuries*, [in:] *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, p. 39-66.

⁶ Ju. Bochan, *Vajskovaja sprava u Velikom Knjastve Litouskim u drugaj palove XIV - kancy XVI st.*, Minsk, 2008, s. 287; Ju. Bochan, *Turniryi tradyciji u Velikim knjastve Litouskim u XIV-XVI stst.* Minsk, 2008.

⁷ E. Gudavičius, *Los caprichos. Du tūkstantis devintieji*, Vilnius 2015, p.

⁸ A. Nikžentaitis, *XII-XV a. lietuvių kariuomenės bruožai (organizacija, taktika, papročiai)*, [in:] *Karo archyvas*, t. XIII, Vilnius 1992, p. 6-10.

texts. Three very striking examples can be highlighted where the applications, importance and adoption of ideas of knighthood can be very clearly documented as important for the Lithuanian elite of the time.

The first case related to the phenomenon of knighthood is from Gediminas' diplomatic campaign. A letter to German cities in 1323 invited representatives of various professions to come to Lithuania: „*Insuper terram, dominium et regnum unicuique bone voluntatis patefacimus: militibus, armigeris, mercatoribus, rurensibus, ferrariis, carpentariis, sutoribus, pellificibus, pistoribus, tabernariis, artis mechanice cuiusque.*”⁹ This part of the letter has already been emphasised in the historiography in terms of isolation and lagging behind the technologies of the time. A particularly important issue was that of trade and communication. However, the issue of knighthood has not been adequately addressed here. Gediminas first invited knights and armourers to come to Lithuania, and only then merchants and craftsmen. This neglect of the problem in historiography is particularly interesting.

One can only hypothetically raise the questions about the content of Gediminas' diplomatic campaign and his letters. The first question that arises is what knowledge did Gediminas have of the phenomenon of knighthood in Western Europe? Was he aware that there was a very serious problem of younger sons who had been trained to fight, but who, because of the inheritance situation and the functioning of the majorate principle, had been deprived of the possibility of making a better life for themselves and of securing their own landed property? The ruler in Lithuania, as the nominal controller of all land ownership, could offer the knights landownership,¹⁰ granting it and thus strengthening his military position by mobilising foreign representatives in his army. It can be understood that the monks who came to Gediminas' court could tell him about the situation of the free knights in Western Europe, which gave Gediminas the prospect of attracting them.

Of course, there is no doubt that as early as the middle of the 13th century, the Lithuanian elites, both in their interactions with Christians (the episode of the baptism of Mindaugas) and in their warfare and other forms of communication, could have realised the superiority of a knightly army and the principles of the knights, and understood that this was a phenomenon of Christian culture. However, Gediminas was the first to formulate the idea that knights should be invited to Lithuania and incorporated into the military and court structures. Thus, the ruler and his entourage had to accept this idea. It should be pointed out that one of the stated aims of Gediminas' diplomatic campaign was the conversion of Lithuania, so there was no problem in going beyond isolation and inviting Christian knights to Lithuania, since Gediminas' proposals to the Pope had their ultimate goal of incorporating Lithuania into the group of European monarchies.

Another important question is whether Gediminas' diplomatic enterprise could have had any effect in attracting knights to Lithuania and the court from Western Europe. We do not have the reliable sources to answer this question directly, but other data allow us to talk about the breaking of Lithuania's isolation in the 14th century, as well as the spread of knighthood as a phenomenon and an idea.

⁹ *Chartularium Lithuaniae res gestas magni ducis Gedeminne illustrans. Gedimino laiškai*, ed. S. C. Rowell, Vilnius 2003, p. 60–61.

¹⁰ E. Gudavičius, *Aukščiausia žemės nuosavybė „barbarinėje“ Lietuvoje*, [in:] *Istorija*, 1983, t. 23, p. 3–12.

Two Western European sources presenting a cross-section of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania should be emphasised in this respect. As for the structure of Gediminas' court and its participants, it is clear that there were not only Lithuanians. Its council could have been composed of both Ruthenians and newcomers, including those of knights.

The historiography introduces a story from Philippe de Mezieres's „*Songe du Vieil Pelerin*“. It describes an anecdotal situation, which the author claims to be true to life. It concerns the funeral of the ruler of Lithuania and its circumstances. Philippe de Mezieres tells that there was a great battle between the Lithuanian and Prussian armies in which a knight got prisoner and lost his eye. This knight became a close friend of the King of Lithuania who kept him in his entourage giving him great wealth and rewards. When the King died and was going to be buried according to Lithuanian custom, the closest person should have accompanied the ruler to the underworld. Despite the fact that the mentioned above knight was to do so, the absence of his eye and as a result – improper physical condition – prevented him from accompanying the king. He was relieved of this duty by other subordinates.¹¹ Although this story by Philippe de Mezieres seems to be intended to amuse the ladies, he claims to have heard it as a true tale in Prussia.

It is very important for us to point out here that this is not new knowledge in historiography. Kiparsky linked this knowledge to Vytenis and his funeral.¹² After analysing this story, Nikžentaitis tried to link this description to Gediminas and his reign. His argument was that Philippe de Mezieres came to Prussia in 1364. Since the source contained the description of a ruler's funeral and the last ruler to die at that time was Gediminas, it is likely that it was Gediminas to have been referred to in the narrative, especially in the context of Philippe de Mezieres' emphasis on the fact that those events were recent.¹³ Nikžentaitis questioned whether this could be an authentic account, as a great deal of the information concerning Lithuanian rites and burial practices was unique. His analysis led him to assume that this information is not only unique, but also reliable.¹⁴ This is a very important statement that sets the tone for the analysis of the expression of the status of a knight.

In this case, we deal with a knight who did not arrive but was captured in the battle. This cannot be seen as the result of Gediminas' diplomatic campaign. What is his status? He is close to the ruler of Lithuania, is included in his court, and is decorated by him. We cannot in any way assume that this knight performed any military functions, as the source is silent on these aspects of his activities. However, it is worth noting why the nobles of his entourage decided that it was the knight who should accompany the ruler on his posthumous journey during Gediminas' funeral. The reasoning in the source is that the ruler loved this knight more than others from his entourage, which is why he was given the favour of accompanying Gediminas. It should be pointed out that the relationships between the ruler and the knight were very close, which was considered as exceptional in the court environment at that time. In this case, we have to go back to

¹¹ Philippe de Mezieres, *Le Songe Du Vieil Pelerin*, ed. G.W. Coopland t. 1, London 1969.

¹² V. Kiparsky, *Philippe de Mézières sur les rives de la Baltique*, [in:] *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, Bd. 41, 1940, p. 61-67.

¹³ A. Nikžentaitis, *Gediminas*, Vilnius 1989, p. 100.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 103-106.

Gediminas' letter that also shows that the ruler understood the importance of chivalry. By elevating a foreign knight in his entourage, Gediminas testified to this once again. This situation lets us assume that knighthood and its accompanying phenomena were well understood by the Lithuanian elite and that the phenomenon of chivalry was a part of the ruler's court. The question is to what extent the Lithuanian nobility was aware of the significance of knighthood, but they saw that a unique relationship was developing between the lord and the knight and tried to consolidate it by transferring it to another dimension, or rather, by trying to adapt this relationship to their own customs and rituals. This situation indicates that for the nobility the realisation of their own customs was more important than the adoption of the military and customary technologies of Western Europe, but this decision can also be interpreted in another way. What if he was not the only knight in Gediminas' circle, and the attention paid to him was related to the unique relationship between Gediminas and the knight, whom he trusted and respected greatly and whom he elevated in his entourage. This question is particularly important as it allows us to try to distinguish at least two sections of society: in Gediminas's environment, a multilayered nature was at work, where the ruler understood the significance of knighthood and other technological and cultural phenomena of Western Europe, but his nobles were unable to appreciate this phenomenon. An alternative to this might be that knighthood as a phenomenon was part of the ruler's court, and therefore it was not very difficult for the nobility to sacrifice one of the knights at the court. In order to answer the question which alternative is more realistic in the first half of the fourteenth century, it is necessary to pay attention to one more source that is related to the phenomenon of chivalry in Lithuania.

In 1329, in a Belgian chronicle by Jean d'Outremeuse (Jean des Preis), the information about the participation of King John I of Bohemia in the crusade to Samogitia appears. The chronicle depicts the King as a warrior besieging a castle with the Teutonic Order during the crusade. The Duke, who led the defenders, and John I were the first to agree on a duel between them. As the duel progressed and the Lithuanian duke lost the fight, people from his entourage intervened to prevent the duel. Due to the violation of the terms of the duel, the Lithuanian duke surrendered and paid a ransom to the King of Bohemia.¹⁵

This episode has been treated in different ways in historiography. Nikžentaitis considers it credible, highlighting various details (the ransom in coins of the Holy Roman Empire, a powerful prince in Samogitia, etc.) that corresponded to the situation in the international context and in the internal social relations in Lithuania at that time. According to this historian, the Lithuanian prince mentioned in this episode was Margiris who committed suicide after failing to defend the castle of Pilėnai in 1336. According to Nikžentaitis, due to the high status of the Lithuanian prince in Samogitia and his connections with the court of Gediminas, this prince should be regarded as Gediminas' brother.¹⁶ Stephen C. Rowell finds this hypothesis unreliable and doubts it, and he does not argue it further.¹⁷ The most extensive criticism of this hypothesis has been made by

¹⁵ *Ly Myreur des Histors. Chronique de Jean des Preis dit d'Outremeuse*, ed. A. Borgnet etc, t. 6, Bruxelles 1880, p. 416.

¹⁶ A. Nikžentaitis, *Gediminas*, Vilnius 1989, p. 10-11.

¹⁷ S.C. Rowell, *Lithuania Ascending: A Pagan Empire within East-Central Europe, 1295-1345* (Cambridge

Darius Baronas who has argued that this fragment of the Chronicle was based on isolated fragments from the medieval literature and that the Lithuanian prince and his duel with the Czech king were more a composite literary representation than a reflection of real facts.¹⁸ This position is possible but it is considered to be quite artificial. At the same time, Nikžentaičs' hypothesis, though flawed, is well founded.

First of all, the image of King John I of Bohemia himself in medieval historical sources should be presented. He was shown as a hero of his time, a standard-bearer of chivalry and a ruler who enjoyed battles more than statecraft. It was in battle that John I shone, right up to the final battle of Crecy.¹⁹ This ruler agreed to duel with the Lithuanian prince, considering him noble enough to fight against him, which was entirely in keeping with his character. Such a fragment of the chronicle both reflects the general realities and adds the individual details and knowledge about Lithuanian society at the time.

The first thing that can be found in this description is that the Lithuanian duke and the King of Bohemia could agree on a duel and follow its rules. If one loses and the rulers intervene to break up the duel, the loser surrenders, thus showing that he not only adheres to the principles of honourable combat but also knows the rules of the duel. From this situation we can understand that John I considers not only himself as a knight but also the Lithuanian duke. What is more, the Lithuanian duke not only shows confidence in John I, but also behaves in a chivalrous manner. This suggests that the phenomenon of knighthood and the code of chivalry may have been known to Gediminas' brother.

If these three sources are integrated into the question of the phenomenon of knighthood, it is already possible to speak concretely about it in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the fourteenth century, and even more precisely during the reign of Gediminas. These sources clearly show the situation as it should be treated. First of all, it can be emphasised that for Gediminas and his entourage chivalry was a known phenomenon and they were aware of its importance and valued it. It is perhaps too bold to say that he was aware of the issue of younger sons in Europe, but he was well aware that he could invite knights into his service in return for a land grant. The following example shows that knights were present at Gediminas' court were close to the sovereign, and were rewarded by the monarch. We have no data on the participation of the knights in the military campaigns, but they can be seen as advisors to the ruler, perhaps on military equipment and technology, or perhaps as a kind of „informants about Western Europe“. Finally, it can be noted that a certain understanding of chivalric behaviour was introduced among the elite of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which manifested itself in the knowledge of the rules of combat and the rudiments of chivalric honour. This behaviour was recognised by the opponents who considered the representatives of the ruling dynasty of Lithuania as suitable duel partners. However, certain reservations must be made here. It is unlikely that the understanding of knighthood was very deep in Lithuania. It was primarily an element of the ruler's entourage and his closest relatives' field of ideas. As we can see from the above example, it was the Lithuanian prince's entourage

Studies in Medieval Life and Thought: Fourth Series, Series Number 25, Cambridge 1994, p. 240.

¹⁸ D. Baronas, D. Mačiulis, *Pilėnai ir Margiris: istorija ir legenda*, Vilnius 2010, p. 86-92.

¹⁹ R. Cazelles, *Jean l'Aveugle: comte de Luxembourg, roi de Bohême*, Bourges 1947.

who interfered in the duel without understanding its essence. Thus, the phenomenon of chivalry in Gediminas' time was only perceived among the members of the dynasty.

To summarise, although the suggested topic is a rather problematic field of research its study can show interesting results. In order to better understand the phenomenon of knighthood in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it would be useful to study the chronicles of the Teutonic Order that describe Lithuanian battles against Teutonic knights. Here one can find the descriptions of the battles, duels and dialogues between Teutonic Knights and Lithuanians, which can give an idea of how deeply this phenomenon had penetrated into the Lithuanian society. This is not only a field of military history but also a field of cultural history, in which patterns of behaviour can be recognised. On the other hand, the specific source research problems related to the Teutonic Order chronicles need to be addressed. They were written in a chivalric cultural environment, that is why the historical events were seen through this prism and the dialogues could be stylised or transmitted in the way the author imagined them, thus giving these descriptions an element of chivalric culture. These examples cannot therefore be simply analysed but must be studied in the context of medieval literature in order to discover which elements of the description are literary and rhetorical clichés and which may be the reflections of real events. Such an objective should be formulated for future research.

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