



The General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania

Romas Batūra

Places of Fighting for Lithuania's Freedom

In the expanse of Nemunas, Vistula and Dauguva Rivers



Battle of Tannenberg -
600 years anniversary

Battle of Durbe -
750 years anniversary

*Main battle places of
Lithuanian defensive
war with the Teutonic
Knights lasting for
250 years (1185-1435)*



THE DEFENSIVE WAR OF LITHUANIA

The Triumph in Battles of Durbe and Tannenberg (Ger. Grunwald, Lith. Zalgiris)

Initial battles. The Baltic land between the Daugava and Vistula Rivers was attractive to its neighbours because of its prosperity, economic significance, and strategic value. The neighbouring German Empire expanded its aggression to this land with the help of merchandisers, warriors, and German Orders supported by the Roman Curia. The Baltic tribes (the Aistians) offered fierce resistance, in which the role of Lithuania gradually became essential. In this struggle for freedom, the cooperation between Lithuanians and their kin-nations of Curonians, Semigallians, Yotvingians (Sudovians), and Prussians soon became evident. Some of the Baltic tribes harshly pursued by the German Empire found shelter in the Baltic Lithuanian Commonwealth in the second part of the 13th century.

In 1185, the Lithuanians landed the first blow to the newly established German colony in Iskile near the Daugava River. The Livonian Brothers of the Sword were next repelled in 1208 and 1229, and finally overwhelmed in 1236. Concurrently, starting with 1231, the Teutonic Knights were gathering clout in the vicinity of the Vistula River. Supported by the Polish dukes, they moved on to occupy the territory of Prussia. By 1238-1242, Tatars had depredated Rus, which meant a new threat to Lithuania emerging in the Southeast. In 1250, the Livonian Order attacked Lithuania and moved as far as “the Castle of Mindaugas” in Vilnius. The following year, Lithuania was attacked by troops of Halych-Volyn of Rus. Mindaugas manoeuvred by accepting Christianity in 1251 and becoming King of Lithuania in 1253. However, largely sustained by upholders in Central Europe, the Livonian Knights constructed the Klaipeda and Karaliaucius Castles on the seaside in 1252-1255 and occupied the territory near the Baltic Sea.

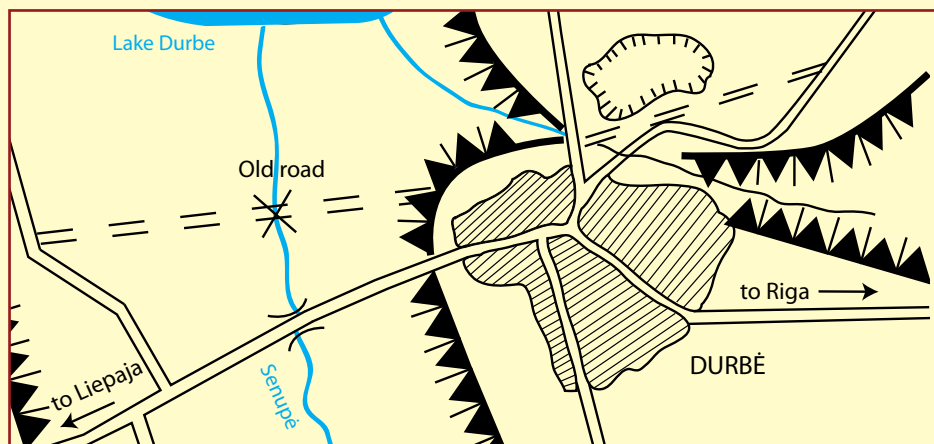
Mindaugas tried to ease the blockade, but in winter of 1258-1259 powerful troops of the Golden Horde supported by troops of southwestern Rus ransacked Lithuania until they reached the source of the Nemunas River and Yotvingians. For purposes of consolidated defence in the Southeast, the Order constructed the Georgenburg Castle in the delta of the Nemunas River near the mouth of the Mituva River. It also embarked on building the Dobe Castle further north, in southwestern Semigallia for further aggression into Lithuania. Lithuanians and Samogitians imposed a blockade on these castles by joint efforts, also engaging Semigallians into the joint effort in the case of Dobe Castle.

In autumn of 1259, having looted the Curonian lands in order to weaken the enemy, Samogitians beat the Livonian Knights (Kuldiga Knights) in the fields of Skuodas.

The Battle of Durbe on 13 July 1260

The battle near Lake Durbe to the northeast of Liepaja resulted in scores of victims. The fighting was intense, yet Curonians and Estonians later started withdrawing from the battle. This helped the Lithuanians. Many enemies were surrounded, others perished without any attempt at defence. According to the chronicle writer Petras Dusburgietis, as Lithuanians attacked the front lines of the enemy and Curonians pushed on from the back of the enemy positions, the enemy was defeated and the remainder of the enemy troops fled. The troops of the Order panicked because allegedly three to four of its enemies were able to either kill or disperse 100 Christians.

This is how Master of the Livonian Knights, Marshall of Prussia, 150 knights of the Order, and many more warriors were killed on the Curonian soil. This was the victory of Lithuania, western Lithuanians and Samogitians, with the participation of Aukstaiciai (Highlanders) and the part of Curonians who had



Location of the Battle of Durbe (Stepins, 1967)

deserted the enemy army. Despite the officially declared peace with the Order, Mindaugas, the ruler of Lithuania, covertly supported these efforts. The new victory against the Livonian Order near Lielvarde in 1261 meant an open conflict between King Mindaugas and the Order. During the complicated international situation of the time, Samogitians were “the glory of Mindaugas’ kingdom” as they offered intensive large-scale defence and protected the front positions in western Lithuania.

In the context of the defence war against the Teutonic Order’s aggression, the Battle of Durbe on 13 July 1260 was one of the most extensive battles of the Baltic tribes to be waged in the 13th century. This was a battle of global significance, where two joint Teutonic military organizations were concurrently defeated, i.e. the Livonian and Prussian Knights, on the one hand, and Western Knights as their supporters, on the other. The Western Knights had been summoned by the Roman Curia ostensibly for international fight against the Tatars, but were in fact meant to implement the aims of Rome and the Order. After the defeat, the Order abandoned the castles in Georgenburg and Dobe. The previously subjugated Balts arose widely against the Order. The aggressor forces near Dauguva, Nemunas, and Vistula Rivers suffered a fundamental blow.

Durbe was the flagship battle in the continued long-lasting war against the Teutonic Order only surpassed by the victory in the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410.

The Battle of Tannenberg (Ger. Grunwald, Lith. Zalgiris) on 15 July 1410

Jogaila and Vytautas

The defensive battles in 13th - 15th centuries paved the way for the crucial battle in early 15th century. The two states of Poland and Lithuania united their efforts in this battle. The military forces were led by the two posterities of the Grand Duke Gediminas, i.e. Jogaila Algirdaitis, King of Poland, and his cousin Vytautas Kestutaitis, the Lithuanian Ruler.

Preparatory arrangements. The war with Moscow in the East, which took many efforts, ended in early September 1408. In December, Jogaila and Vytautas started addressing the problems in the West regarding the relations with the Order (secret meeting in Naugardukas). Vytautas’ people from

Lithuania began their actions in the temporarily occupied Samogitia. Vytautas was the secret initiator of the Samogitian rebellion against the Order. The rebellion started in May 1409 near Skirsnemune. Rumbaudas, an officer subordinate to Vytautas, together with other noblemen and their troops crossed the river Nevezis in an effort to seize power from the Order on the rebel territory. As a result, the Teutonic Knights were expelled and the Order's fortifications were liquidated.

Later, on 16 August 1409, the Teutonic Order attacked and desolated Poland, destroyed Dobryn and other castles, and conquered the entire territory of Poland. On 8 October 1409, truce was concluded. However, troops sent in by Vytautas attacked the Order's periphery in the neighbouring environs of Soldau and Neidenburg.

In early December 1409, Vytautas and Jogaila discussed the campaign plan for 1410 at a secret meeting in Brasta, where they also covered the complicated international situation. The Order had managed to persuade the chunk of Europe against the rulers of Poland and Lithuania and secured European support and weapons to implement the Order's policy. Nevertheless, the moral claims by Jogaila and Vytautas against the Order's aggression in Lithuania, already a Christian country by the time, also yielded results.

The threat posed by Tatars also needed to be addressed. Jogaila and Vytautas decided to support Jelal-Eddin, son of Tokhtamysh, as one of the pretenders to the khan throne. The agreement between Vytautas and Jelal-Eddin ensured the support of the Tatar troops to Lithuania in the campaign against the Order the following year.

Campaign. In accordance with the secret agreement between Jogaila and Vytautas, it was planned to engage the Polish and Lithuanian troops into a lasting campaign, which was to be especially long for the troops of Lithuania. The two armies were to join each other by the Vistula River near Czerwinski situated to the South of Warsaw, and attack Marienburg as the stronghold of the Order's power. The Lithuanian troops left Vilnius on 3 June 1410. By the end of June, they reached the source of the River Nareva. On 27 June, a considerable part of the Lithuanian army was also engaged in attack manoeuvres near the delta of the Nemunas River near Skalva. This was done to mislead the leaders of the Order. Next, the ally forces met as planned and moved on to Marienburg. When the Order's army began defending the ford of Drevanta near Kauernik, the united army went the other way seeking to bypass the source of the river. On their way, the joint Polish-Lithuanian army took the Order's castles and confronted the Teutonic knights in the fields between Tannenberg and Grunfeld (Grunwald) villages. The battle occurred in the old Sasna land that had formerly belonged to Baltic (Aistian) and Prussian tribes and lay between Galinda and Pamede.

As a former possession of Baltic and Prussian tribes, the territory between the sources of Alna and Drevanta Rivers and the lands extending further to the vicinity of the Vistula River occupied by the Teu-



Castles of Vilnius in the 15th century (reconstruction drawing by Kitkauskas, Vaicekauskas, 2010)

tonic Order had been the target of Lithuanians ever since their battles with the Order dating back to the 12th and 14th centuries, when the armies led by Grand Duke Gediminas and later his sons Algirdas and Kestutis fought their respective wars. The same lands were the target now, when Gediminas' grandchildren Jogaila and Vytautas led their troops to the crucial battle of the century.

Versions of the sources describing the battle. The victory of the Lithuanian troops led by Vytautas is reflected in the Lithuanian tradition of the 15th century, Lithuanian Chronicles, and Western sources. Most of the German and Russian sources refer to the allies as the key factor in defeating the Order. *The Chronicle of the Conflict* written in the entourage of Jogaila is especially significant in this respect as it was compiled by a person who lived at the time of the events. In the second part of the 15th century, Jan Dlugosz expanded on the apologetics of the Polish victory claiming that the Lithuanians withdrew from battle. He was also the one to author the most extensive description of the battle.

The Battle of Tannenberg was also described in the unbelievably distant for those times German and French lands and the sources of other countries.

Lithuanian army units and flags. There were 40 units representing 18 lands in the Lithuanian army, including but not limited to units from Trakai, Vilnius, Kaunas, Grodno, Lida, Medininkai, Smolensk, Polotsk, Kiev, Brest, and Starodub. Some Lithuanian flags were carried by the troops fighting on the side of Jogaila. The flags of 30 Lithuanian units had an image of Vytis, an armed knight riding a horse. The men in the units came from universal conscription in individual lands of Lithuania. 10 army units had red flags with Pillars of Gediminas (Lith. Gedimainaičiu stulpai). They represented elite troops of the Vytautas estate, the strategic military core of the state. Vytautas had ten thousand saddled horses in his personal armed unit in Trakai. In terms of ethnic makeup, the army consisted of Lithuanians (Samogitians), Ruthenians, Tatars amounting to 2-3 thousand and most probably coming from Lithuania, Valaks, possibly Karaites, and others. The army units coming from the Slavic lands under Lithuania's rule were led by trustworthy Lithuanian commanders. Lengvenis Algirdaitis, Jogaila's brother and Vytautas' cousin, was the commander of Smolensk troops. In the Polish troops under Jogaila's leadership there were also Czechs hired by Vytautas at his own expense.

Commanders. Lithuania's ruler Vytautas was the chief commander of the Lithuanian army, advisor to King Jogaila, chief commander of the Army of the Commonwealth, and leader of the Military Council of the Commonwealth. According to Jan Dlugosz, the Grand Duke of Lithuania Vytautas entrusted his life and security to God alone during the Tannenberg Battle; he was riding through all Polish and Lithuanian troop formations, changing horses frequently with small convoy and without any bodyguards. During the battle, the Grand Duke would frequently re-establish the frayed formations of the Lithuanian troops, restore them to renew the battle, encourage warriors with his loud voice, and replace the tired warriors with new ones. Vytautas is described as a victorious commander.

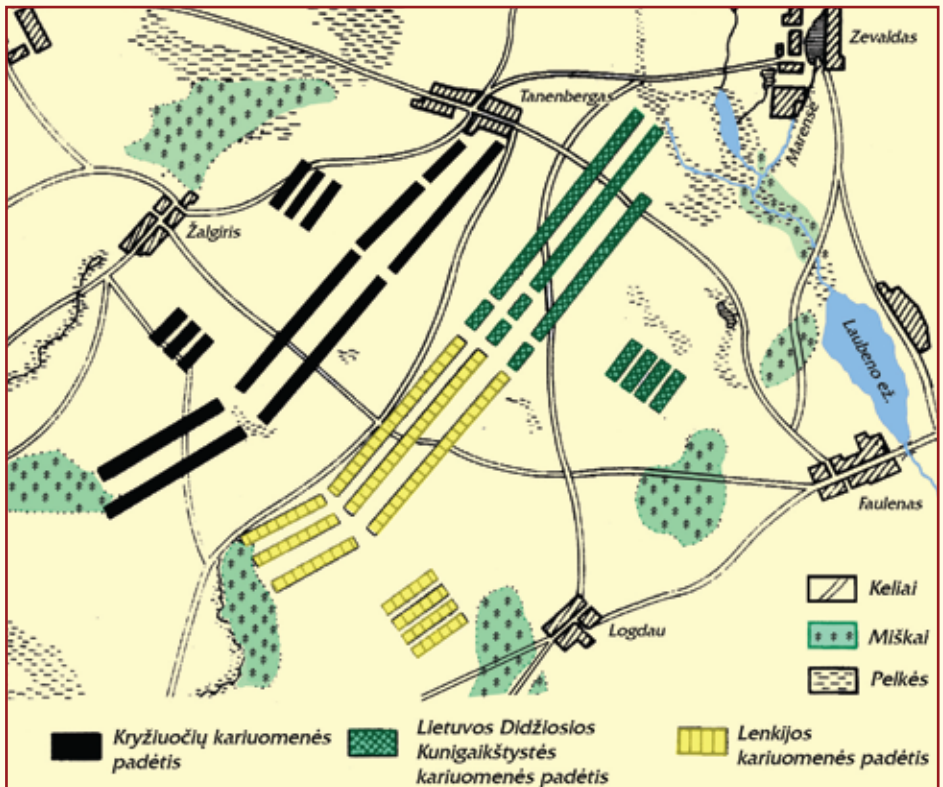
Deputy Chief Commander of the Lithuanian troops was most probably Manvydas, leader of the Vilnius administration. Other commanders included but were not limited to Marshal Ciupurna, Kesgaila from Ukmerge, and Sungaila from Kaunas.

Lithuanian troops begin the battle. In the outset of the battle, while king Jogaila was praying at the Holy Mass in front of the army of the Livonian Order lined up for the battle, the troops of the Commonwealth stood in their battle positions. The Lithuanian troops were in the right wing, and the Polish troops only consisting of some of the front forces stood in the left wing. According to *the Chronicle of the Conflict* compiled by Jogaila's followers, "the bulk of the Order's army consisting of its elite troops was positioned in front of the men under the leadership of the Grand Duke Vytautas". According to Jan Dlugosz and the Lithuanian Chronicle, the Lithuanian troops in the right wing led by Vytautas and marked by St. George's banners and front security flags were the first to begin the battle. The Polish troops were still not ready for the battle; the main part of the Polish army was not yet present in the battlefield.

Lithuanian manoeuvre. *The Chronicle of the Conflict* claims that “both armies, including the royal army and the troops under Vytautas’ command, fiercely clashed with all the enemy troops. The men under Vytautas were fighting with the Teutonic Order’s elite troops. After many hours of fighting, there were scores of victims on both sides and the men of Vytautas were forced to withdraw. This was when the Order’s army, believing to have won the victory and to have chased the enemy away, pulled away from its flags and formations, and found itself withdrawing from the Vytautas’ forces it had previously forced to retreat. When the army of the Order wanted to come back to its former positions, it was separated from its men and flags by the Royal Army which enslaved the men of the enemy and destroyed their flags.”

This describes the Lithuanian retreat from the battle, the ensuing move in the same direction of a part of the Teutonic Order’s army, and a counter-attack on the enemy. As soon as the remaining part of the Commonwealth Army was involved into the battle, the enemy was enveloped and defeated. This manoeuvre led to victory in the entire battle.

However, much later in his description of this delusive retreat and counter-attack, the Polish historian Jan Dlugosz wrote that Lithuanians withdrew “till they reached the territory of Lithuania.” This was how he wanted to showcase the Polish role as the more prominent one in the battle. There is still confusion in historiography about this episode and persisting derogation of the role of the Lithuanian troops. However, the bulk of historiography largely considers this episode to have been a manoeuvre. In particular,



Formation of the Battle of Tannenberg (according to Voigt, 1836, and Jucas, 1999, 2009)

Lithuanian language editor - Jolanta Budreikiene
Designed by Laima Adlyte

this opinion was upheld by the Swedish historian Sven Ekdahl who found an anonymous letter to the Order's Master in the archives of the Order. The letter warned the Master of the Order against possible disaster and urged to resist the temptation of pursuit of the delusively retreating enemy, as this would disarrange the formation of the troops of the Order. This was what eventually happened at the Battle of Tannenberg (Ekdahl, 1963, and others).

The retreat of a part of the Lithuanian men during the battle aimed at disarranging the formation of the enemy troops was a manoeuvre foreseen by Vytautas, known to Jogaila, and leading to the victory in the battle (Jučas, 1999). Notably, the victory was won when the Lithuanian army came back to the main battlefield (Nadolski, 2003). However, some still uphold the opinion that the Lithuanian retreat was unintentional and consider that the only possible manoeuvre was related to Tatars (Blaszczyk, II, 2007).

The delusive withdrawal as part of the tactics of the Lithuanian and Prussian armies can be observed in their battles waged back in 1208-1279 (see Aizkraukle Battle in 1279, described in the poetry lines of the *Livonian Chronicle*, *Mindaugas Book V.*, 2005, p. 317-318.).

The delusive retreat of the troops was a manoeuvre also used in the 14th century. While the troops of Algirdas and Kestutis were devastating the territory of the Order in Barta near Reshel in 1353, the incoming troops of the bishop and komtur killed many Lithuanians and forced them to run away (Ger. *in die flucht*). "When the attackers went too far from the rest of their army in pursuit of the Lithuanian forces, they were surrounded by Lithuanians, forced to dismount [their horses] and killed; therefore, the remaining warriors ... soon turned homewards" (Schutz. SRP, II, 520; Vyg. Marb., 1999, p. 229). Here we can also observe the delusive retreat of the Lithuanian forces aimed to splinter the enemy army and kill the chasing Teutonic Knights. Kestutis and Algirdas knew about this practice. Thus, they might have imparted it to their sons Vytautas and Jogaila. Therefore, the delusive retreat tactics used in the Battle of Tannenberg might have resulted from imparted knowledge of tactics known for a century or even more.

Both the Lithuanian and Polish troops won a full victory during the Battle of Tannenberg after continued fight with the splintered enemy troops. The battle was ended by overtaking the Order's camp, a hideout for the part of the Teutonic Knights who had run away from the battle.

Role of the Lithuanian troops. As evidenced in the *Chronicle of the Conflict*, by the end of the battle it was clear that a large portion of the Polish Royal Army had not participated in the battle altogether. The conclusion one may draw from the description of the battle by Jan Dlugosz is that Jogaila



Anniversary Medal for the Anniversary of the Battle of Tannenberg (sculptor Kalinauskas)

was procrastinating in order to provoke the enemy leave its positions. It might also have been the case that not all of the universal conscription soldiers were ready for fight nor hardened in battle compared to the Lithuanian troops who were experienced in fighting in various fronts in the large fields of Eastern Europe and had waged long lasting battles with the Order, Tatars, and Rus. Even Jan Dlugosz in his writings expressed surprise at the fact that as few as 12 noble knights were killed in the army led by Jogaila. This could only have happened provided other troops had been fighting in the front lines, not the Polish ones. Vytautas and the army of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania played the crucial role in the Battle of Tannenberg. Many Lithuanian warriors were killed. After the battle, the Commonwealth Army passed the Order's former possessions in Pagude, Nerija Lake, Zirguna, Kalva, Trapeiniai, and other locations and assailed the remains of the army of the Teutonic Knights who had assembled in Marienburg.

Aspiration to recover the Aistian lands occupied by the Order. Vytautas aspired to recover all of the occupied Baltic territories. In 1413, long after the Battle of Tannenberg, during the negotiations with the Teutonic Knights he said to the Knights in no uncertain terms, "Prussian land was my father's land and I will claim its territory till Osa [i.e. all the Prussian lands until the Vistula River, including Pamedel], because this is my inheritance". In 1421, the Lithuanian representatives emphasized the territorial and cultural links between Lithuanians, Sudovia, and old Yotvingian lands. Nevertheless, the Order continued to enjoy the support of the Roman Empire, Dukes of the German lands, as well as kings of England and France.

Importance of the triumph. The global scale victory in the Tannenberg Battle emphasised the significance of the international role of Lithuania and Poland and the role of their rulers Vytautas and Jogaila as allies. The triumph undermined the power of the Teutonic Knights and liquidated any possibility of the Order's aggression. In 1422 the Peace Treaty was signed in Meln as a result. This ended a hundred years of fighting, prevented the Baltic heritage from suffering huge further losses, and stopped the world-scale aggressor at the western Lithuanian and Samogitian lands for centuries. In addition, a free seaside strip and Palanga with the symbolic Birute Hill was preserved.

The centre of the freedom fights was the Nemunas River basin, in particular, the right bank downstream from Kaunas, and the Lithuanian ethnical lands with Vilnius, Trakai, Kernave, Kaunas, Veliuona, Medvegalis, and other centres. The entire Baltic region between the Daugava and Vistula Rivers was the region where strategic military battles took place.

The Livonian Order, which did not participate in the Battle of Tannenberg, was defeated in 1435 in the Battle of Sventoji – Pabaiskas. This ended the 250 years of the challenging war for freedom.



Marienburg Castle was built in the location of the former Baltic Prussian Castle: 1276 – 15th century, rebuilt in 18th-19th centuries, restored and preserved in 1794-1994 (Zamki panstwa krzyzackiego (2009))

THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE DEFENSIVE WAR OF LITHUANIA THAT LASTED 250 YEARS

In commemoration of Tannenberg and Durbe



EXPLANATIONS

- X Places of the fights and battles
- X in a square Main battles
- X in a circle Baltic Lithuanian castles
- X in a square Castles of Teutonic Knights
- X in a triangle Lithuanian castles, restored by Vytautas after the Battle of Tannenberg
- Lithuanian military cordon
- Directions of the campaigns and attacks:**
- Balts and Lithuanians in 12th-14th centuries
- Troops of Great Duchy of Lithuania in 1409-1410
- Polish troops in 1410
- Commonwealth troops
- ◉ camps of the Commonwealth troops
- Teutonic Knights
- Gizycko the shortest road to the memorial of the Battle of Tannenberg



