Brass pendant in the form of horseman was found in the 11th - 12th century’s Didviečiai cemetery, Plungė district. Future symbol of the entire Lithuania - Vytis – can be seen in the pendant, although flags with the image of Vytis are only known from the times of Žalgiris (Tannenberg) Battle, but the image of fighting Lithuanian horseman apparently reaches earlier times.
Helmoldus von Plesse was a knight of Brothers of the Sword from the famous Saxon knights’ family, he was a top-ranking knight in the hierarchy of Livonian Brothers of the Sword Order. The date of his death is 1236. Supposedly, he was killed in the Battle of Saulė. The knight is wearing a typical thirteenth century amour and tunic, in his hands – the main weapon of knights – a sword.

A rich top-ranking warrior of the 12th – beginning of the 14th century. Lithuanian warriors were wearing cone-shaped or semicircular helmets and chain-mail coats that could be strengthened by steel plates. Lithuanian soldiers like soldiers of other countries under the amour were wearing special liner from a thick material to absorb the impact. Lithuanian also used round, Norman type (drop-shaped), or “paveza” type shields.

Knights and guests of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword Order had armor, often chain-mail covering the entire body. Steel plates could be added to the armor to protect vital or more vulnerable parts of the body. Heads of knights were protected by solid (covering all head and face) or open helmet, also chain-mail hood. Weapons included swords, spears, axes and others.

Armament of the Western European infantry in the 13th century was lighter than armament of knights. Their heads were protected by open helmet or chain-mail hood. Infantrymen often did not have a shield, their legs and forearms were often unprotected. Infantry also used two-handed weapons: spears, axes also crossbows, and bows.

Semigallian - a warrior with light weapons. Spears were widely used among Lithuanians and many other soldiers of Balts. Especially many types of spearheads are found in graves of Semigallians. In close combat Lithuanians used large spears, for throwing – smaller spears of various sizes were used. Returning after the Battle of Saulė the remaining Brothers of the Sword were destroyed by Semigallians in their lands.

Helmondus von Plesse was a knight of Brothers of the Sword from the famous Saxon knights’ family, he was a top-ranking knight in the hierarchy of Livonian Brothers of the Sword Order. The date of his death is 1236. Supposedly, he was killed in the Battle of Saulė. The knight is wearing a typical thirteenth century amour and tunic, in his hands – the main weapon of knights – a sword.
Tribes of Lithuanians were more or less isolated from contacts with outer neighbours till the 11th or 12th centuries in unlike some other Baltic tribes. Prussian and Curonian tribes who lived along the Baltic coastline had long traditions of relations with Western European nations, developed trade with them, survived ravages of Vikings. Yotvingians had contact and conflicts with Eastern and Western Slavs. Outlying lands surrounded by non-Baltic neighbours’ spheres of influence precluded Lithuanians (tribes) and Samogitians from gaining economic benefit from trade, but gave a more secure life in exchange.

In the 11th century Lithuanian got exposed to a major threat that could destroy ethnus before it created a state. Powerful state of Kievan Rus began staging war campaigns to Lithuanian lands. This force caused more danger than, for example, relatively facultative Vikings’ raids Curonian tribes experienced earlier. Kievan Rus was an organised state that aimed not only at raiding but rather at acquiring possibility to collect regular tribute, to force Lithuanians to accept their superiority, and to embed their rule. Fortunately to the Lithuanian nation, Kievan Rus fell apart and ceased existing as an organised force because of the pressure of Mongol Tatar people and inner conflicts before it drew in Lithuania into the influence of the Old Russian culture and began its assimilation. Nation of Lithuania in its making learned from that threat. It responded by increasing defence capabilities. Lithuanians advanced in structures characteristic to state by creating the most effective model of organisation among the Balts to provide better governance necessary for success of war actions. Such improvement allowed to arrange effective pillaging campaigns to neighbouring lands and thus to counterbalance shortage of income determined by remoteness of lands as well as to ensure partly material base of a state getting born.

Lithuanians set their targets on other tribes of Balts and neighbour Slavs. Marches to the lands of consanguineous Baltic tribes assumed character of consolidating Balts into a united nation along with original purposes of gain. The new purpose was sought no only by direct war actions but also by involving leaders of other Baltic tribes into land confederations – a kind of war unions. A threat capable of destroying all the Baltic tribes interrupted formation process of a unanimous state. In 1202: the Order of the Sword was established in the territory of present Latvia, the organisation aimed at forcing Christianity on pagan Balts and subdue them to the young state Germany. It was a start of a bloodstained epoch of crusades to the Baltic Sea which resulted in extinction of a great part of Baltic tribes.

Fragment of Illustrations from Morgan (Maciejowsky) Bible, around the year 1240. Infantry of the 13th century Western Europe.
In the 12th century German expansion along the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea became a systematic phenomenon. Pagan tribes of the Oder’s and Elbe’s Slavs were conquered and swept away from the map of nations of the world. At that time merchants of German towns established themselves in the Baltic Sea. German tradesmen settled around the mouth of the river Daugava in the end of the 12th century. By the well-tried system – a monk (missionary) following a merchant, a knight following a monk – local Livs fell under the German rule. Riga Castle was built in 1201. The Pope called for crusades against the Baltic pagans, crusaders and German colonists poured in from Germany. Great and well-organised pressure struck Baltic tribes before they united and so they got conquered one by one.
Forces of the Order of the Sword at the time of the battle, around 2000 German crusaders, mainly came from Saxony, Pskov sent in 200 soldiers. The army was also augmented by neophytes from the lands the Order had already conquered. Brothers of the Order, naturally, fought as well. Brothers of the Order were the commanding chain of the Order who were attended by armed servants. Sources mention that 55 brothers took part in the campaign against Lithuania.

Knights of the Order and guest knights wore armour and, usually, chainmail all over their body on which plates of steel could be attached to add protection to vital or vulnerable parts. Their heads were guarded by one-piece (covering the entire head and face) or open-face helmets, and hoods of chainmails. Their arm array included sabers, pikes, axes, and other pieces of weaponry. Infantrymen had poorer protective outfit, they possibly could have used open-face helmets, pikes, crossbows.

Heavily-armed knights had to fill the role of the main striking force on the field.

The Order of the Sword pursued quite an independent policy; however, in the third decade of the 13th century the Pope imposed more control on the affairs of pagans' Christianisation trying to systemise the coercive process. Teutonic Order deployed in Prussia's vicinity from 1230, later the organisation conquered all the Prussian tribes. Pope's envoys demanded knights of the Sword to wage coordinated actions and military campaigns to the south to give groundwork for occupation of the entire eastern Baltic coastline. Meanwhile, knights of the Sword were more tempted by less complicated campaigns in the north and at the direction of the stream of the river Daugava. However, Volquin, Grand Master of the Order of the Sword, involuntarily conceded to the will of the authorities of Rome. On 19 February 1236 Pope Gregory announced a bull to start a crusade. It was meant to be headed to Lithuanian lands.
Sources do not tell numbers of Lithuanian and Samogitian forces in the battle. But as far as there were 3000 men on the Order’s side, their opponents must have had at least that number of troops or more.

Lithuanians wore chainmail and armour or protective shirts of hard leather. The most common type of Baltic helmet was half-round or conical and taper in shape. Lithuanian forces used battle axes, swords, battle knives, and other weapons. There were several types of spears: long and large lances were used for close fight, smaller ones were used by throwing. Chronicles usually mention that knights of the Order perish from spears of Lithuanian warriors.

FORCES OF LITHUANIA

Fragment from Henricus de Lettis “Livonian Chronicles” (from the story about the battle of Brothers of the Sword with Lithuanians close to Askarde in the year 1207). Lithuanians were dexterous and more violent than other nations, they were well prepared for the battle, as a result they courageously and for a long time struggled against Christians. […]

Fragment from Henricus de Lettis “Livonian Chronicles” (year 1209) […] Lithuanian authorities tried to control all tribes living in the region, both Christian and pagan, and only some of them dared to live in their farms, mostly Letts (Latgalians (Latvians)) were afraid to stay in their houses. And this was the reason why, when at danger, they left their houses and hid themselves in the forest, but forests did not save them from Lithuanians. Lithuanians chased them in the woods, some were killed, and others were taken captive, and brought to their land. Ruthenians [Russians] ran through the woods and villages from Lithuanians like rabbits running from a hunter, Livs and Letts obediently served to Lithuanians, gave food and fodder, feeling like sheep without a shepherd in a gang of wolves.
Volquin was the second Grand Master of the Order of the Sword. He was reluctant to launch offensive actions against Lithuanian lands. It was probably determined by understanding that the Order of the Sword lacked strength to conquer Lithuanians. Its lack of strength was a result of interior conflicts with Bishop of Riga. On the other hand, he admitted that Lithuanians were organized better than the already subdued Baltic and Ugro-Finnic tribes. Brothers of the Sword still had little knowledge of the lands lying south of the Order’s territory. Will of the Pope’s envoys and enthusiasm of guest knights who had arrived to join a crusade forced Grand Master to head for the land that caused to him anxiety, nonetheless.

The most probable commander to have led Lithuanian forces was Samogitian supreme duke Vyginistas. The Hypatian Codex mentions Vyginistas as the one to blame for the death of numerous brothers of the Order. Vyginistas was among the dukes of the confederation of Lithuanian lands mentioned in Galician-Volhynian Chronicle next to the future Lithuanian king Mindaugas. Battle of Saulė coincided with the process of Lithuania political consolidation peripeteia of which had converged Mindaugas and Vyginistas as allies and rivals.
Volquin delayed starting military actions for an entire summer after announcing the crusades apparently hoping to escape this risky operation into unexplored lands. But numerous guest crusaders called for the beginning of campaign as soon as possible. Finally the march was commenced in autumn in adverse weather. Crusaders cut across lands of Semigallians that were not in their control and invaded the land of Šiauliai. They dispersed for pillaging in the surrounding territory in smaller units. Shortly Volquin massed forces and turned home. It is thought that the knights of the Sword saw Lithuanian forces cutting off their way near the river Mūša. Volquin urged to force their way back to Livonia immediately but insubordinate guests, who were the majority of army, refused to engage in unmounted fight because they did not want to lose their horses in swamps. Knights of the Sword lost time because of disagreements and had to stay for the night.

Fragment from Henricus de Lettis “Livonian Chronicles” about unsuccessful raid of Semigallians and Brothers of the Sword to Lithuania in 1208.

And yet they bravely thrust into Letthonia [Lithuania], divided the army into groups and spread out through villages, but villages were already empty; men and women with children were hiding. Fearing to be engaged in battle Semigallians immediately assembled and without wasting time prepared on the same day to retreat. When Letthonians noticed this, they galloped on agile horses and riding from left to right retreated sharply and attacked, thus wounding many Semigallians by springing up on them with horses and bludges. Germans then formed a salient and by covering the rear of the army let the Semigallians to move forward. Semigallians suddenly started running, squeezing and climbing on each other, others rushed into the woods and swamps, all the burden of battle fell on Germans. Some of them defended bravely and struggled with Letthonians, but due to a small number could not resist the larger army. A lot of brave men like Gervin and Rabod and others were fighting in the battle. After a long persistent battle some were wounded, others were taken captive and brought to Letthonia. Some of them escaped and after returning home to Riga, told the others what happened.
An even more numerous Lithuanian and Samogitian forces arrived to the site during the night. It is hard to determine whether Lithuanians knew about the hostile campaign in advance or were caught at unawares. In any case, they gave an expeditious and relevant response. The enemy was secured in a swampy and unfamiliar location.

The battle began on September 22. Heavy cavalierly of crusaders proved to be useless in swamps, even on the contrary – it became an easy target. Lithuanians destroyed the enemy without much difficulty. As the sources say, only every tenth crusader came home after the battle. A fair part of those who succeeded to escape were killed as they retreated over Semigallian lands adversarial to Germans.
AFTER-EFFECTS

2000 crusaders, 180 Pskovians, 48 brothers of the Order, and Volquin himself died in the battle. After the defeat the Order of the Sword ceased existing as an independent political power. Power of the Order tottered in the entire Livonia - Curonians took the chance to rebel and free themselves. Threat in the north was extinguished for long, however, the danger was not entirely removed. A year after the battle the Order of the Sword was incorporated into the Teutonic Order. Later war actions Livonian forces waged against Lithuania were coordinated from Germans occupied Prussia.

Lithuania was not an officially centralised state at the time of the Battle of Saulė, but it defended its lands as one. This battle at the dawn of a new state proved that a coordinated defence system was already there and it was effective.

Victory in the Battle of Saulė allowed Lithuania not to resign its interest in the northern Baltic lands in the future, as a formed state. The subject of a unified Baltic state in the air among Lithuanians, Semigallians, Curonians and other Baltic tribes at the time was yet to be brought forward in the Battle of Durbė, Aizkrauklė, and other posterior battles.

Livonian chronicle by Hermann von Wartberge is the story about the Battle of the Saulė and its after-effects for the Livonian Brothers of the Sword Order.

After a number of famous and successful battles with Lithuanians Master Volquin with his army marched to the land of worthless Lithuanians together with Hasseldorp and Count of Donnerberg. At the land of Sun (terram Sauleorum) in the day of St. Mauritius and his friends sufferers the Lithuanians killed 50 brothers of the order and many Christians. When the Bishop of Courland Engelbert and the clergy of that church with the entire congregation were totally destroyed, the Curonians relapsed into former disbelief. After such a sad event the soldiers of brotherhood of Christ who remained alive together with bishops of Ryga, Dorpat and Ezel wrote pleading letters to the Pope Gregory IX, repeating the request to provide them hope that after joining with Crusaders the enemy forces will be destroyed. And so the Pope Gregory together with the Council of Cardinals made a decision to unify the brothers. [...].
In the 13th century knights in Western Europe were wearing chain-mail coats, which often covered the entire body of the knight. By the second half of the 13th century helmets covering the entire head and face were popular, they had small observation holes (in German tophelm, if translated literally "helmet-pot"), in spoken language referred to as "bucket helmets". Triangle shields or Normanic type shields with rounded upper corners (drop-shaped) were used.

In the 13th century infantry of Western Europe were lighter armed than the cavalry. Their heads were protected by simple helmets or chain mail hoods. Infantry often did not have shields, their legs and forearms were often unprotected. Infantry often used two-handed weapons: spears, battle axes etc, as well as crossbows or bows.
Bibles of Morgan (Maciejowsky), known as "Crusader Bible" (around the year 1240, supposedly issued on the initiative of Louis IX, King of France). Illustrations perfectly reflect the thirteenth century Western European military weaponry. Books known as Gothic art masterpiece reflect the Biblical scenes, but all details described are specific to the era when these paintings were created. Similarly, like soldiers depicted in these illustrations looked the Livonian Brothers of the Sword and their guests who raided into Lithuania 1236.

ISBN 978-609-412-017-6

Illustrations:
Vytautas the Great Museum collection, Lithuanian Rulers Palace collection
Batūra R. Karvelis D. Kovų istorijos I knyga: Nuo seniausių laikų iki XX amžiaus. V., 2009,
Bumblauskas A. Senosios Lietuvos istorija 1009 – 1795. V., 2005,
The executive editor and author of the text Karolis Zikaras
Graphic designer Inga Dambrauskiene
Translators Skirmante Andrašiūtė, Asta Matusevičienė
Photos of soldiers figures by Giedrė Maksimovicz, Alfredas Pliadis, Karolis Zikaras and
Ancient Baltic Warrior Brethren Vilkatlakai
Thanks to Ancient Baltic Warrior Brethren Vilkatlakai, Living History Club Kovarnis
and Brethren of Free Knights.
Layout by General Affairs Department of the Ministry of National Defence
Totorių str. 25/3, LT-01121 Vilnius, www.kam.lt
Edition: 3000 units. Published by Military Cartography Centre of the Lithuanian Armed Forces
Muitinės str. 4, Domeikava, LT-54359 Kaunas District.