

# LITHUANIAN COLLECTORS COINS

  
LIETUVOS BANKAS

MIX–MMIX

Lithuania's Millennium • Millennium Lithuaniae



## Millennium and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

Lithuania in 1009, its “king” Mindaugas, his and his troops’ baptism have become a historic episode. This event seems to have encoded the entire subsequent destiny of Lithuania – we rose and fell: 12th century Russian sources mention Lithuania among those paying tribute to Russia. In the 13th century, Lithuania as if started everything anew and eventually established a state, which went down in history as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL). Lithuania was the only one to do it out of the three Eastern Baltic nations, and Vilnius later for long became Moscow’s main or even sole (especially after weakening of the Tartars) political and military rival on the wide areas of Eastern Europe.

Today, this stage of the state and of ancient Lithuania’s history and culture is most often remembered in the context of Millennium. Even if we agree with the views that much more important in certain respects are historical processes of the modern times whose impact on today has been greater, i.e. the 20th century stages of Lithuania’s statehood, we will still have to admit that most of the Millennium of Lithuania consists of the GDL history.

On the other hand, this state was so original in its set-up and multiculturalism that there still exist most different opinions as to its national character, the chronology of its “golden ages”, and even the State and the titles (knights or kings) of its rulers. First of all the views



*Lithograph of Vytautas the Great in commemoration of his 500th death anniversary (1430–1930). According to J. Matejko’s drawing*

differentiated depending on where they originated from: the towers of Vilnius and Kaunas, Moscow and St Petersburg, Krakow and Warsaw, or, eventually, Minsk or Kiev. To a Russian historian the GDL often was “the genuine Russian lands” and to a Polish one – a part of Poland’s history. Lithuanian historians attempted to cut off a national slice of the GDL’s history, they were later followed by Belarus historians who were cutting a still bigger slice, appropriating in addition Ukraine’s heritage and leaving to the Lithuanians only the history of Samogitia.

The views on what should be treated as ups and downs in the GDL’s history differentiated too. For the old and equally for a part of modern historians, the essence of the GDL was and continues to be its imperial powers and occupied

territories from seas to seas, therefore for them the “golden ages” was the history of the 14th–16th c.c. with heroic battles against German orders, marches to Moscow, Grünwald and Orsha. In modern times, Christianisation and civilisation progress in the 16th–18th c.c. have been increasingly accentuated, which have led to Vilnius School of Baroque and the 3 May Constitution.

Whatever differences in the opinions, it is agreed over the main events, only their assessments differ. Laconic records of exactly these events and phenomena comprise the contour of the GDL’s largest expansion from the Baltic to the Black Sea in the 15th century on the coin dedicated to the Millennium:

Mindaugas King of Lithuania 1253  
Vilnius the capital of Lithuania 1323  
The Christening of Lithuania 1387  
Vytautas the Great 1392–1430  
The battle of Grünwald 1410  
The battle of Orsha 1514  
The first published book 1522  
The Statutes of Lithuania of 1529,  
1566, 1588  
The first Lithuanian book 1547  
The Union of Lublin 1569  
Vilnius University 1579  
Vilnius Baroque  
The Constitution of 3 May–20 October 1791

### **The state: from “a shadow empire” to Poland’s shadow?**

The GDL expanded its territory far eastwards. At the times of its largest expansion in the early 15th century,

the GDL occupied vast East European spaces from the Baltic to the Black Sea (at that time the State’s area was 1 million sq. km), where today we find the states of Belarus and Ukraine, therefore it is sometimes called “a shadow empire”. First of all it should be noted that Lithuania occupied a sizeable part of disunited Kievan Rus’ heritage following after the Mongol “tiger”, i.e. profiting from Mongol devastations and the old Russians’ aspiration to stick to the less ferocious aggressor. This lesser ferocity was certainly conditional, but actually Lithuanians, similarly to the Franks in Gaul once, did not thrust their culture on conquered lands; on the contrary, they took over the Orthodox tradition of writing and culture thus not reminding the classical empires in behaviour. On the other hand, while the first ruler of Lithuania, Mindaugas alone was crowned King of Lithuania, even Grand Dukes of Lithuania Gediminas and Algirdas, who backslid from Christianity, titled themselves as “kings”, and Vytautas, before his death in 1430, was one step away from royal crowning. Even, supposedly, it would be too strong to call this state an empire, we would still have to admit that in the 14th-15th c.c. the GDL was a super state and an important political power in Central and Eastern Europe. This enabled to withstand the aggression of the German Order and to win, together with Poland, the fatal Battle of Grünwald in 1410. From the late 14th century for 200 years representatives of the Jagiellonian dynasty were ascendants to the Polish throne (and

to the Czech and Hungarian in the early 16th c.) of Lithuanian origin, who mostly ruled both Poland and Lithuania. As the Russian state became more active on the political scene in the mid-16th century, Lithuania was obliged to form a stronger union with Poland. In 1569, a Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Republic of the Two Nations was created, in which the GDL, having lost Ukraine, still retained sovereignty, though limited. On the other hand, it should be born in mind that in European historiography the Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth is often erroneously held a solely Polish state and is referred to as Poland. And yet even in the late 18th century, trying to implement reforms and to strengthen the State while adopting the 3 May Constitution, the dualism of the Commonwealth was still perceived, which was revealed by the clarification of this Constitution of 20 October 1791. These reforms were fiercely opposed by



*State emblem of the GDL, Vilnius, ca. 1555*

local conservative opposition and the neighbouring countries Russia, Prussia and Austria. They carried out the last partition of the Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth and most of Lithuanian lands went to Russia.

### **Civilisation: from pagan uniqueness to the earliest constitution in Europe**

West European countries started their cultural tradition in the times of Antique Rome or Charles the Great Empire, Central European countries stepped into Christian civilisation at the time when their right to independent baptism was still recognised (9th–10th c.c.), whereas the Lithuanian State originated with a delay and therefore it had to withstand Crusades. Western civilisation did not already recognise Lithuania's right to independent baptism. While Lithuania's first ruler, Mindaugas got baptised and even had a royal crown put on his head in 1253, it was turning out that the baptism put the existence of the State at stake. Therefore Lithuania backslid from baptism remaining for another 150 years a pagan state – the last in Europe! The cultural values provided by paganism were not high and therefore a particularly significant role in the State was played by the culture of annexed Orthodox lands. In addition, there was not a single pagan ruler of Lithuania who would not have aspired for baptism and some of them would not have invited merchants and artisans from the West.

In 1387, baptised Lithuania turned towards Western culture. A 15th c. fresco



*Fragment of a picture of Orsha Battle (1514)*

in St. Pierre le Jeune Church in Strasbourg has become a symbol of Lithuania's joining Christian civilisation – in it, the march of the nations towards the cross ends with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The last to have adopted baptism, over a century it made a unique cultural jump, which not a single European country had to make while adopting the values of Western Christian culture. The most evident and at the same time probably the most essential part of this cultural jump was mastering of writing. Already in the early 16th century, writing (“Agenda” by Martinus, published in Gdansk in 1499) and printing (“A Small Travel Book” by Franciscus Skorina, printed in Vilnius in 1522) of books began and the ideas of the Renaissance and Reformation were taken over, which paved the way for the appearance of the first Lithuanian book (“Cathecismus” by Martynas Mazvydas, 1547). On arrival in Lithuania in 1569, Jesuits included the territory in the Catholic Reform region, and in 1579

Vilnius University was established. In the 17th century, Lithuania not only studied from European books but our books began spreading in Europe too: suffice it to mention the poetry of Mathias Casimirus Sarbievius, crowned by the pope with a royal wreath of the poet, and “The Great Art of Artillery” by Kazimieras Semenavičius (the first edition “Magna ars artilleries” in Amsterdam, 1650), which followed in a great number of editions and translations in the West. The process of Europeism also manifested itself in Lithuania's learning to create Gothic and Renaissance architecture. Already in the early 16th century, a true masterpiece of Gothic architecture, St Ann's Church was erected in Vilnius. European architecture flourished mostly during the times of Baroque, when an original and independent school of Baroque formed in Lithuania, which had no analogue in Europe in the area of its impact from Samogitia to the Dnepr in Belarus. Its main architect Johan Christoph Glaubitz, who created in the



*Panorama of Vilnius. Unknown artist of the 17th century*

mid-18th century, has left a great number of masterpieces of Baroque architecture, which allows assigning him to the most outstanding European architects of the time. His creation has not been duly appreciated yet in the history of European architecture. Anyway, his creation is to be considered as top “diplomacy” of Lithuanian culture – baroque towers of Vilnius today allow every guest to recognize Lithuania at first sight as a land of Western culture.

Lithuania’s legal thought was probably still more important in its impact on further generations. As early as in the 16th century, codification of law was carried out (the Statutes of Lithuania of 1529, 1566 and 1588), which surpassed the legal systems of Central European countries in its systemization level. Legal thought reached further heights in the late 18th century ending up in the May 3rd 1791 Constitution. It was adopted only a little later than the United States Constitution of 1787 and thus has become the second constitution in

the world and the earliest in Europe – a few months ahead of the French Constitution. There was a direct link with the process of creation of the latter – the first outlines of the draft Lithuanian Constitution were written following the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 adopted during the French Revolution. Thus Polish and Lithuanian reformers obviously oriented towards the Great French Revolution. To some purpose, in the summer of 1791 the ruler of Poland and Lithuania, Stanisław August Poniatowski wrote to the French Constituent Assembly that, apart from France, “...there was one more nation in Europe”.

Both this Constitution and the state in general have been destroyed. However in Lithuania, even with Russia impeding, a modern civil society was formed and Independence was restored twice (1918 and 1990) in the 20th century. All this can be considered the heritage of Lithuania’s old law and of the noble civil society determined by it.

## The farthest east Latin culture country and a bridge between the East and the West at the same time

In the GDL, a juncture of European civilisations was clear. Not only across the middle of the GDL but, in a sense, across its capital Vilnius extended a boundary between Europe's Byzantine and Latin civilisations. Therefore until today in Vilnius and equally in Belarus one can come across the farthest north and east heritage of Catholic culture, which is relevant to an Italian, Spaniard, Latin American or even Philippine, as well as westernised heritage of Orthodox culture important to a Russian, Ukrainian or Bulgarian. Vilnius, with its Gothic, Baroque and Orthodox churches, is a symbol of the juncture and interaction of two European civilisations.

Moreover, Vilnius and the GDL took part in the split of Latin civilisation into the Protestant north and the Catholic south. In the 17th–18th c.c. the GDL and Vilnius became a global centre of the Jewish culture. The prominent citizen of Vilnius rabbi Eliyahu ben-Shlomo Zalman (1720–1797), the greatest connoisseur, disseminator of and commentator on the Talmud, spiritual authority of Lithuanian Jews, known as the Gaon of Vilnius (the Genius), was the main contributor to such Vilnius' coming to the fore.

Exactly from the 18th century Vilnius was named "Jerusalem of Lithuania" (Jerušolaim de Lite) due to its role in the Jewish culture. However, Vilnius can be called Jerusalem of the North not



*Fragment of a tile from the territory of the Crooked Castle in Vilnius*

only due to its significance for the Jewish culture but also because the juncture and allure of civilisations determined such multiconfessionalism which did not exist in any of Europe's capitals – over ten confessions coexisted side by side: Catholics, Orthodox believers, Greek Catholics or Uniates, Old Believers, Armenian Catholics, Lutherans, Evangelical Reformers or Calvinists, Arians, Tartar Muslims, Karaites and Jew Judaists. This multiculturalism of the GDL and of its capital Vilnius, having no analogues in Europe, today is the most topical aspect of the old culture. In this, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is, by paradox, closer to the today's idea of Millennium than Lithuania's culture of the modern times' nationalism epoch.

*Prof. Dr. Alfredas Bumblauskas*

100 LITAS COIN FROM THE SERIES DEDICATED  
TO THE MILLENNIUM OF THE MENTION  
OF THE NAME OF LITHUANIA

*Gold Au 999.9*

*Quality proof*

*Diameter 22.30 mm*

*Weight 7.78 g*

*The words on the edge of the coin: LIETUVOS VARDŲ TŪKSTANTMETIS*

*(Millennium of the name of Lithuania)*

*Designed by Liudas Parulskis and Giedrius Paulauskis*

*Mintage 10,000 pcs*

*Issue 2008*



*Fragment of a fresco from St. Pierre le Jeune Church in Strasbourg. The 15th century*

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On the cover: Sigismund Augustus' tapestry with the state emblems of Poland and Lithuania, ca. 1560

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