

Medininkai still remembers the historic road, which lead through it to the Medininkai (Aušra) Gate in Vilnius. The Medininkai Castle is a peculiar and significant monument of the Lithuanian history and architecture, a pearl of the most ancient defensive brick architecture.

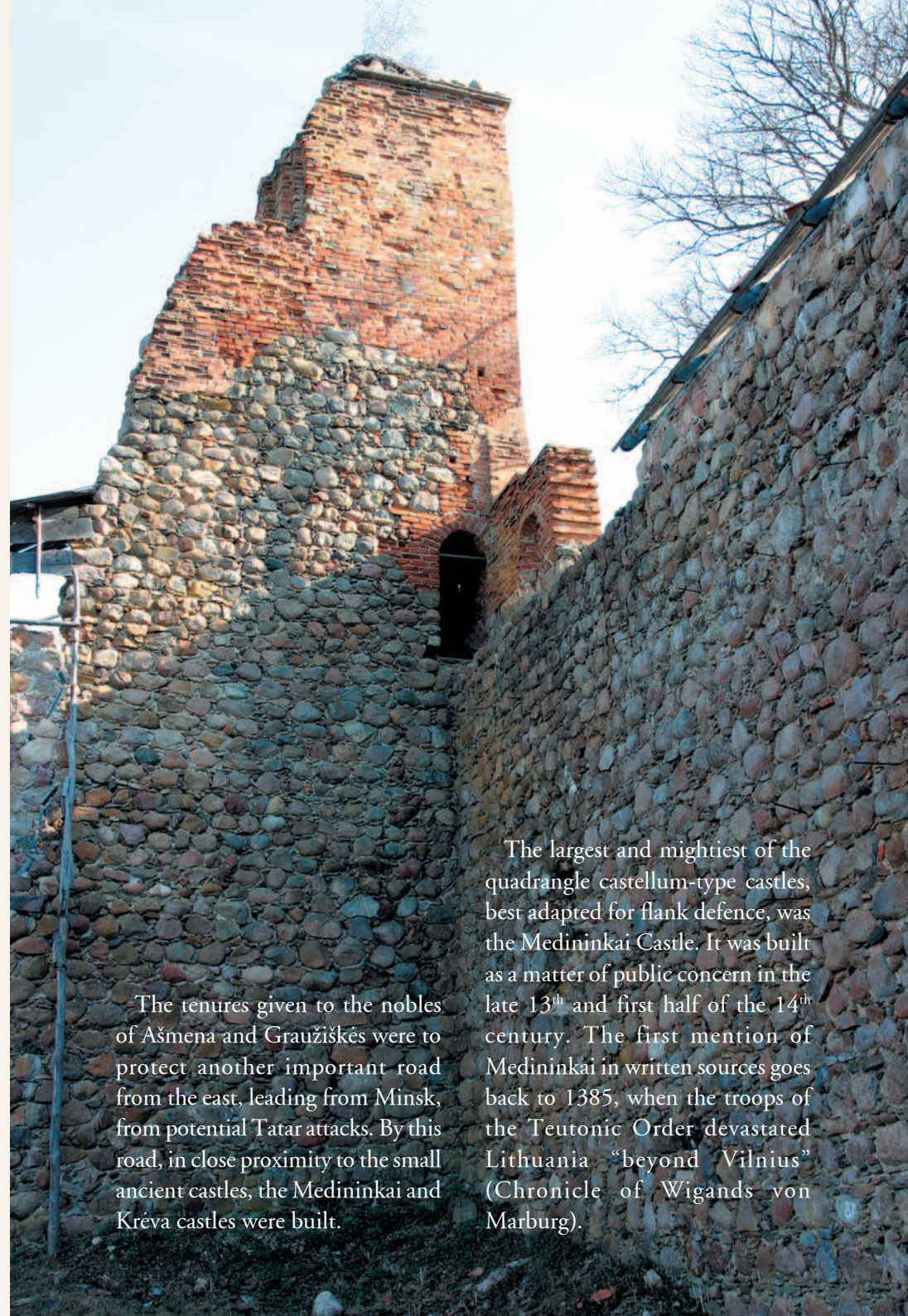
Between the late 2nd and early 1st millennium BC, fortified settlements and smaller and bigger castles were built in the Baltic and Lithuanian lands, constructed on hills and land elevations. With social progress, fortifications (defensive mounds, ditches, etc.) became ever more complicated, mightier, until eventually such castles as those of Apuolė, Pieštė, Veliuona, Merkinė, Utena, Maišiagala and the Castle of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, were built between the 9th and the 13th century.

In the 13th century, Lithuania became involved in a defensive war against the German Teutonic Order that lasted for 250 years (1185–1435). At the same time the country was to fend off the attacks of another aggressor of a global scale, the Tatar Golden Horde, from the south-east.

Lithuanian chronicles provide evidence that after the first offensive of the Tatars, the ruler of Lithuania gave tenures to lords and nobles in the south-east, of which the most important were Ašmena, Eišiškės and Graužiškės. For the defence of this stretch, new, castellum-type castles, adapted for frontal defence and with large yards for summoning abundant troops, were built.

The Eišiškės, Rodūnė, Lyda and Naugardukas castles defended Lithuania's strategic object, Vilnius, in the south.

The Eišiškės Castle has a quadrangle (100 × 85 m) yard surrounded by a high mound of soil with wooden walls above it; there must have been a tower in a corner. The Rodūnė Castle is similar yet somewhat smaller (85 × 60 m). Both castles protected the road to Vilnius from the direction of Naugardukas, Kiev, Brasta, the Black Sea, and Crakow. The brick Lyda Castle built in the early 14th century enhanced these castellum-type castles built of wood.



The largest and mightiest of the quadrangle castellum-type castles, best adapted for flank defence, was the Medininkai Castle. It was built as a matter of public concern in the late 13th and first half of the 14th century. The first mention of Medininkai in written sources goes back to 1385, when the troops of the Teutonic Order devastated Lithuania “beyond Vilnius” (Chronicle of Wigands von Marburg).

The tenures given to the nobles of Ašmena and Graužiškės were to protect another important road from the east, leading from Minsk, from potential Tatar attacks. By this road, in close proximity to the small ancient castles, the Medininkai and Krėva castles were built.



The main building material of the Medininkai Castle was stone: about 18,600 m³ of field boulders were used to build it. Stone walls enclosed an almost rectangle yard of 1.85 hectares. The construction surpassed other castellum-type castles of Lithuania and Livonia in space.

The Medininkai Castle defence complex, apart from castle walls, also comprised two wide and deep ditches (up to 5–8 metres) and a mighty mound between them, as well as a smaller mound outside. There were wooden barrages of vertical logs on the mounds. The defence facilities were particularly solid on the most accessible southern side. This entire defence complex occupied an area of 6.5 hectares. The walls of the Castle

were 15 metres in height and 1.9 metres in width at the bottom, narrowing towards the top.

The Castle had four towers. The main big tower was at the north-eastern corner, the western and eastern walls each had a tower inside, on the yard side. Three towers were erected together with the walls; the fourth one was added outside to the southern wall later.

The big almost square (14.2 × 15.4 m) tower had five storeys, about 30 metres high, and dominated in the entire architecture of the Castle. It served for the defence of the northern gate and wall, watching of surrounding areas, and could be the place to convey (or receive) a message of danger. The first four storeys of the tower had wooden floors and the fifth one was covered with a stone vault with protruding brick decorations. The



three upper storeys with large pointed arch-like windows were meant for residence. The lower storeys the light in which fell through small narrow windows were meant for household premises. The stairwells were formed in brick inside the walls. The walls on the first storey are 3 metres, higher – 2.6–2.4 metres thick. There was an exit to a shooting gallery on the fourth storey which extended along the walls on the yard side (fragments of it have survived).

The northern and southern gates with pointed arch-like apertures were arranged in the defence walls at the height of approximately 5 metres. The way to them was by lift bridges and long bridges across a small lake (in the north) and defence ditches (in the south). The eastern and western gates were on the ground level.

On the outer side of the northern and eastern defence walls, at the height of a few metres above the ground level, strips of brick approximately 1.5–2.5 metres width decorated a high, plain wall built of stone. This strip of brick was in compositional harmony with the other elements formed in brick: the parapet, shooting apertures, wall corners and reveals.

In the Castle of the period of transition from Romanesque to Gothic architecture, simple massive long walls and quadrangle towers prevailed. The pointed arch-like apertures of the gates and towers also reflect the initial Gothic period in Lithuania. The brickwork is done in the Baltic way.

The brick Medininkai Castle is also mentioned in the list of south-east and east European castles of the late 14th century. However, with the strengthening of the means of besiege, such castellum-type castles with thin walls did not meet the demands of time and in the war against the Teutonic Knights were sometimes even abandoned (this happened with the Lyda Castle in 1394). In the early 15th century and the late 15th and early 16th century, the wooden constructions and the yard buildings of the Medininkai Castle caught fire. This could have happened as a result of attacks of the Teutonic Knights and subsequently of the Crimean Tatars. The neglected Medininkai Castle was mentioned in the early 16th century.



Around the mid-16th century wooden buildings of an estate were built in the yard of the Castle. Following their decay, there was an estate vegetable garden and a garden in the yard of the Castle. Unattended, the Castle's brick walls fell into decay.

In the layer of the Castle and in the neighbouring cultural layer of the area of the old town, which was investigated in 1960–1963 (under the guidance of K. Mekas), items of thrown glazed and unglazed ceramics, tiles, household goods were found (late 15th–19th century).

According to the project by the architect S. Lasavickas, the walls and the remains of the towers were

conserved. In 1970–1973, the finishing of the eastern wall was conserved, part of the walls (northern and southern) were made higher, and a house for a museum was built according to the project of the architect E. Purlys. The 1976 conservation project by the architect S. Lasavickas envisaged smoothing the surface of the walls and placing them under a roof. Some of the works were completed.

In 1991–1992, the works of conservation, partial restoration and investigation of the Castle were resumed. The Medininkai Castle has been given over to the Trakai Island Castle Museum. Preparations are under way for the conservation of the Castle, especially of its main tower.

The Medininkai Castle is again to become the State of Lithuania's representational and historic stronghold and a museum at the eastern gates of the State.

After the Medininkai tragedy on 31 July 1991, when peaceful officers of the border crossing point were murdered by enemies of the independence of Lithuania, this place, along with the ancient Castle, gained an even deeper meaning in terms of the statehood of Lithuania.

Assoc. Prof. Dr Romas Batūra

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LITHUANIAN COLLECTORS COINS

Medininkai is the castle of giants, a symbol of the statehood of Lithuania, a peculiar and significant monument of Lithuanian history and architecture, a pearl of the most ancient, brick defence architecture.

