

Lithuanian Commemorative Coins



LITHUANIAN
ETHNOGRAPHIC REGIONS

Samogitia





Samogitia

Samogitia (Žemaitija) gained its status as an ethnographic region in the 19th century after the administration of the Russian Empire prohibited the public use of the term Duchy of Samogitia. "Here I am in Samogitia. Oh how wonderful it is to breathe the air of this land! I know not why it is so dear to me – maybe for these lands fostered me into my youth or maybe that on the other side of Nevėžis I suffered many a dark hour," poetically depicted Liudvikas Adomas Jucevičius. "If we look at the Lithuanian nation as such – highlanders and Samogitians – we will clearly see that it [...] has its own language [...], character, beliefs, housekeeping habits, warfare, trade and money," wrote Simonas Daukantas in 1845. Samogitia faced less severe serfdom, saw the early development of the Lithuanian writing as well as the rise of the so-called gentry democracy and the national revival. The name *žemaičiai* (Samogitians) was first recorded in the Volhynia chronicle, which detailed the 1215 Peace Treaty with the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia, signed among other Lithuanian representatives by two



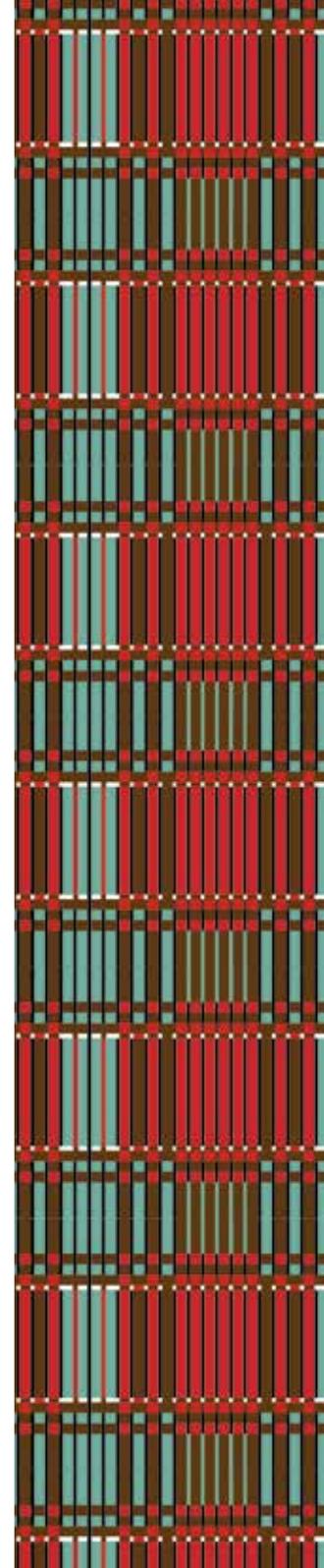
Samogitian dukes. Derived from the Lithuanian words *žemas* (low) or *žemė* (land), the term *Žemaitija* was used to name the western part of Lithuania stretching up to the Nevėžis River. During the Middle Ages, the term Samogitia had several equivalents in Latin, namely *Samaitiæ*, *Zamaitiæ*, *Zamaytae*, *Samathæ* or *Samethi*, in Ruthenian sources it was referred to as *жемотьская земля* (Samogitian land). Later on, Samogitia was called *Żmudź* in Polish, *Sameiten* or *Samaythen* in the Middle High German dialect and *Žemaitėjė* in Samogitian. The region name *Žemaičiai* prevailed until World War II.

The capital of Samogitia ethnographic region is Telšiai (*Telšė* in Samogitian), even though the historic centre of these lands was Medininkai, the current town of Varniai. The Samogitian diocese was established in Medininkai in 1417, when the entire Samogitia became Christian. In 1441, Samogitia gained autonomy within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, received the official status of Duchy and was included in the ruler titles of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (later on – of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth).

Historians, ethnographers and linguists take different approaches in defining Samogitia. The first mention of Samogitia as a region was made in the map remake by Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, dating back to 1507. According to Petras Kalnius, the eastern part of the Duchy of Samogitia, which existed from 1441 to 1795, stretched to the Nevėžis River, while its southern border reached the left bank of the Nemunas River and included quite a large part of modern-day Suvalkija. Unlike the historical ones, the ethnographic borders of Samogitia are drawn along the Šiauliai district boundaries, with the Dubysa River in the east and the Nemunas River in the south. In the north, the territory of ethnographic Samogitia stretches from the Latvian border alongside the Baltic coast up to Nemirseta town, in the south – alongside the former Lithuanian-Prussian border.

Linguistic Samogitia does not extend as far east as the historical and ethnographic one. In the west, it takes up almost all of the former Memel Territory where Prussian Lithuanians who spoke the western Samogitian dialect resided. Under the Treaty of Melno, which was signed in 1422, this part of the old Samogitia was separated and given to the Teutonic Knights. It remained part of the Teutonic Order (later on – of Prussia and the reunified Germany) for as long as 500 years. Due to historical, political, social and cultural circumstances, western Samogitians who resided there were called *lietuvininkai*.

Archaeologists and some historians claim that Samogitians formed a separate ethnic group in the 5th century AD. Linguists believe that the geographic-linguistic notion of Samogitians emerged in the 14th–15th century. During the time the Grand Duchy of Lithuania existed, geographic Samogitia was thought to may have also included the ethnographic Samogitian community. In the 15th century, Jan



Długosz wrote that Lithuanians lived in houses called *numai*, were truly hospitable and deeply cared about their land. While describing the lifestyle of the old Prussians in the 17th–18th century, Matthäus Prätorius highlighted their food: *grucé* porridge, oat kissel (*kisielius*), hotchpotch, fermented beet or dock borsch. In the 19th century, Dionizas Poška delved into the intricacies of the Samogitian dialect, whereas Jonas Juška imagined Samogitians as a cultural community speaking in Samogitian and living in Telšiai powiat, on the west side of Šiauliai and Raseiniai powiats, which extended to Viduklė in the south and Baisogala in the

east. Povilas Višinskis claimed that in order to determine the true borders of Samogitia, one must conduct extensive anthropometric measurements, looking not only into the mother tongue but everyday life as well. “The most important occupation of Samogitians is farming. [...] If Samogitians have to go for a visit, they never agree to stay longer – they urge to go home. This attachment to their land, to their native places [...] is clearly felt in the majority of their songs,” he said. The same sentiment is still present among modern-day Samogitians.

Nowadays, the ethnographic region of Samogitia takes up an area of 15,774 square kilometres.



Its landscape stands out for its hills and wayside shrines, whereas both big and small towns, to take Žemaičių Kalvarija for example, are distinctive for their Baroque architecture, parks and arts. Science and tourism here are some of the major priorities. The region is well known for its food, woodworking, oil refinery and textile industries, blacksmithery and pottery trades as well as agriculture. The majority of its residents are Lithuanian Catholics, while others include various ethnic groups professing Lutheranism, Orthodoxy and other religions. Many of its residents speak the Samogitian dialect. Every ethnic group has a different understanding of what the region is. Even men have different everyday priorities than women. A stereotypical Samogitian is diligent, just, stubborn and of a few words. Home, land, language and family are the most important socio-cultural values to



a Samogitian today. A large part of these values were adopted from age-old customs, such as celebrating the holidays or cooking traditional regional dishes, including black bread, cottage cheese, various potato dishes – *bulvynė* (potato soup), *pusmarškone* porridge, *kleckai* (a kind of dumplings) – *kastinys* (dish made of beaten cream), *sriubalynė* (soup of roasted herring heads and onions), *batvinynė* and *rūgštinynė* (beet and dock soups), linseed salt, *spirgynė* (hemp seed meal). The Samogitian twelve-dish Christmas Eve dinner is known for its *cibulynė* (onion soup), hemp kissel and *rasalynė* (herring-beetroot soup). Cultural traditions are fostered and passed from generation to generation, and thus, in the words of Ignas Končius, "a sharp eye will quickly see where you came from and whose child you are".

Dr. Vida Savoniakaitė



Coin dedicated to Samogitia
(from the series 'Lithuanian Ethnographic Regions')

Denomination: €2	On the edge of the coin: LAISVĖ * VIENYBĖ * GEROVĖ (FREEDOM * UNITY * WELL-BEING)	
Outer part: CuNi	Inner part: CuZnNi/Ni/CuZnNi	
Diameter: 25,75 mm	Weight: 8,50 g	
Mintage: 500,000 pcs, of which 5,000 coins are BU quality in a numismatic package	Common side designed by Luc Luycx	
Issued in 2019	National side designed by Rolandas Rimkūnas	

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