

Lithuania's Millennium – Millennium Lithuaniae
Or what Lithuania can tell the world on this occasion
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What can we remind the world about from Lithuania's recent history?

Let us hope that the almost thirty member states of the European Union have been aware of Lithuania as a member of the EU and Nato since 2004. Lithuania is an ordinary small country with its capital in Vilnius, the easternmost capital of all EU states. A walk through the city at first glance will reveal nothing extraordinary: an ordinary city in the post-communist sphere, with Stalinist symbols and Soviet architecture, which is now defined as the “aesthetics of boredom”, next to Baroque church towers. On the other hand, it seems that the world knows about the confrontation between Georgia and Russia and other tensions in Eastern Europe: the fate of democracy in Belarus, the issue of Transnistria in Moldova, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the problem of gas supplies to the West. This is the reality of the post-communist sphere, the legacy of breaking out of the Communist empire. And then, mention must be made of the “parade of sovereignty”, when the world heard not only about Latvia and Estonia, the other two Baltic States, but also about more than ten other countries that were little known or completely unheard of in the post-communist sphere, that started in Vilnius. It was here that the decision to leave the KGB and Gulag systems created by Lenin, Stalin and Dzerzhinsky was made. The singing revolutions in the Baltic States, the declaration of Lithuania's independence, the tragic events of 13 January 1991 when protestors were killed, these dramatic events attracted the world's attention to Vilnius like a falling meteor. The Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova wrote at that time: “For all of us, even for determined liberals and cosmopolitans, Lithuania was and still is the centre of the world. During recent months, however, it has become the focus of the world for others too. Never in its history has it been as important for mankind as it is today ... Lithuania has become one of the essential symbols of freedom for all time.” Is this just the poet's rhetoric? But it really was Lithuania that was the first to challenge another colonial empire, the first to break out of the communist citadel, which, according to the historian Edvardas Gudavičius, was “not an ordinary brick in the building of velvet revolutions, but its supporting column”. Therefore, the declaration of independence on 11 March 1990 was the beginning of a chain reaction which demolished the Soviet empire. This was recognised not only by historians. In 2000, on congratulating Lithuania on the tenth anniversary of the reestablishment of its independence from the former Soviet Union, the US Congress said in its resolution: “... the declaration on March 11, 1990, of the reestablishment of full sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Lithuania led to the disintegration of the former Soviet Union.” Then followed the August 1991 coup in Moscow (which turned into a revolution across the whole of Russia), which was first of all based on Lithuania's experience, and which made further changes to the balance of power in the world. World democracy won a great victory. This was the first time that Lithuania found itself at the centre of the world's attention and became a factor in world history.

The demise of the communist empire not only opened the way to the east for the enlargement of the European Union and Nato. It also made it possible for Lithuania to take a different look at its history, to discover the Lithuania of 1009, which in its turn led to Vilnius becoming the 2009 European Capital of Culture. One of the most important reasons for granting the city this honour was that Lithuania is marking its thousandth anniversary this year.

What happened in 1009?

In the *Annales Quedlinburgenses*, an eleventh-century German chronicle, there is an entry about an event that took place in 1009: “*Sanctus Bruno, qui cognominatur Bonifacius, archiepiscopus et monachus, XI suae conversionis anno in confinio Rusciae et Lituae a paganis capite plexus, cum suis XVIII, VII. Id. Martii petiit coelos.*”

The English translation reads: “St Bruno of Querfurt, who is known as Boniface, archbishop and monk, eleven years after becoming a monk, on the border of Russia and Lithuania, was hit on the head, along with his eighteen companions, and departed to heaven on 9 March.”

This sentence contains the first mention of Lithuania’s name. For a long time, only the mention of the country’s name in this record was considered important. It was thought that St Bruno’s mission was not to Lithuania, and that Lithuania was mentioned by chance. This determined that a modest formula was chosen from the start (as early as 1990): “the thousandth anniversary of the first mention of Lithuania’s name”.

Later basing themselves on new research, historians came round to believing that St Bruno’s mission had really been to Lithuania, rather than to Prussia or Russia, as other sources had said. In this case, it was possible that it was not by chance that Lithuania was mentioned. In 1009, the first Christian missionary, Bruno of Querfurt (c. 974–1009), the son of a Saxon count, arrived in Lithuania and was killed there. Lithuania appeared on the map of Christian missions. It can be said that Columbus discovered America, while St Bruno found Lithuania, which means that in that year Lithuania was discovered, and this was the first real event in its history. Nevertheless, if other sources are discounted, and if it is overlooked that more than one Christian mission came to a tragic end, the entry in the Quedlinburg Annals is too short to make us feel comfortable. Is it really possible that Lithuania wants to mark a barbarian crime, and remind Europe about it?

Other sources, however, revealed that St Bruno’s mission had a more successful start than what was recorded in the annals. The missionary was taken to “king” Netimeras, who turned out to understand the essence of Christianity, and was even capable of discussing theological issues. Moreover, Netimeras let St Bruno throw his idols into a fire, converted, and was baptised, together with his people. The “king” even intended to delegate power to his son and join St Bruno in his work. However, the mission which had started so successfully ended just as tragically as that of another missionary, St Adalbert. Netimeras’ brother beheaded the missionary and killed almost all his companions. These facts, however, made it possible to claim that the year 1009 was not only the time when a crime was committed and a country was named, but it was also the first case of a baptism in Lithuania.

By modern standards, Netimeras was not a king and not even a duke: he only ruled one of the Lithuanian tribes. He had three hundred men, which is too few for a state, but too many for a tribe. But the first step towards statehood was taken: Netimeras’ rule was hereditary (he intended to transfer power to his son), the area where the tribe lived was his estate (*patria*), and it was clearly defined and guarded, which would show that the right to land of the tribal chief was being established. The house where he lived was called a “palace”, and he had his own idols. Obviously, there must have been a pantheon of gods of a sort, as well as a temple ruled over by the chief. And it was Netimeras himself who talked to the missionaries, not a tribal council. Although he is not to be considered a head of state, he was more than a chief. If his Lithuania was not a tribe, then what was it? Historians call the transitional stage between a tribe and a state a chiefdom. Lithuania, taking a step towards statehood in 1009, stood out in the region which is nowadays called the Baltic area. Therefore, Lithuania was not only discovered; it came into being, and it would be no mistake to mark the thousand years since the first mention of its name, but also its millennium.

The Idea of the Christian Millennium

There is one more respect in which the mission of St Bruno did not take place by chance. It was a part of a series of missions which were directly connected to the idea of the millennium of Christian Europe.

The millennium idea is very important in the Revelation of St John. Over the thousand years since the birth of Christ, only those were born again who were “beheaded for the witness of Jesus”, only they “shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him for a thousand years”. But the rest of the dead “... lived not again until the thousand years were finished”. At the end of a thousand years “Satan shall be loosed out of his prison” and “shall go out to deceive the

nations which are in the four quarters of the earth” and then the Day of Judgement will come and only those whose names are in “the book of life” will be resurrected. Are any other references needed to see where the missionaries’ motivation came from (incidentally, this allows us to look upon the death of St Bruno not as a crime) and where the millennium idea came from?

Therefore, the millennium was a threshold on which to wait for the Day of Judgement. So at the end of the first millennium since the birth of Christ, a millennium movement was born. Christian missions and the baptism of new countries or parts of them spread through the regions of Central, Eastern and Northern Europe. A chain of events may be mentioned: the baptism of Poland’s ruler Mieszko (966), and of Vladimir the ruler of Kievan Rus’ (988), St Adalbert’s mission to Prussia which ended in his martyrdom (997), Norway’s Christianisation started by the country’s ruler Olaf (997), the decision taken by Alting, Iceland’s parliament, to baptise the people (1000), the raising of St Stephen, the first true Christian, to the throne of Hungary (1000), the baptism of the Duke of Southern Sweden Olaf (1008), and, finally, the baptism of Lithuania’s “king” Netimeras (1009).

Some of these events received great attention, the closest to Lithuania being Tysiąclecie Polski, Poland’s millennium, which was marked in 1966 and contested by the country’s communist authorities and the Catholic Church. Russia marked its millennium in the nineteenth century, while the thousandth anniversary of the baptism of Kievan Rus’ during the time of perestroika was commemorated with great ceremony. In 2000, the thousandth anniversaries of the baptism of Iceland and the coronation of St Stephen of Hungary were marked.

Modern times have demonstrated that, even though made rather secular, the idea of the millennium is still strong.

In the context of these historic events, Lithuania’s millennium is no less important than the millennium that Austria celebrated in 1996. The Austrian people celebrated the mention of the country’s name Ostarrichi (in a land deed issued by Emperor Otto III) and called the anniversary the Tausend Jahre Österreich (the Millennium of Austria).

All of this makes it possible to claim that it is not so important that the Lithuanian state was not to be formed until the thirteenth century, and that the country’s baptism became an uninterrupted process only in 1387. What matters is that Lithuania’s millennium enables us to recall the millennium idea of Christian Europe, and to consider what has been and what has not been achieved on the threshold of the millennium, and to think of the past, the present and the future. It has even more meaning for Lithuania, as it was on the threshold of the thousandth anniversary that important changes took place: at the end of the twentieth century, the country re-established its independence, returned to Europe and became a member of the Euro-Atlantic community.

The fate of 1009

In the mid-eleventh century, Kievan Rus’ marched into Lithuania, conquered it and made it pay tribute. It seems as though Lithuania’s fate was encoded in the 1009 scenario: we rose, fell and rose again. Two hundred years later, we created a new state, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which, with the coronation of Mindaugas, its first king, in 1253, was a kingdom for a short time. Even though it rejected Christianity, it was the only nation in the Eastern Baltic region to withstand the attacks by the German orders. Later, for a long time, Vilnius was the main, or even the only (especially after the Tartars were weakened), political and military rival of Moscow in the vast expanses of Eastern Europe. During the time of its greatest expansion in the early fifteenth century, it spread from the Baltic to the Black Sea (its area covered a million square kilometres), where today we see Belarus and Ukraine. Having been baptised in 1387, Lithuania finally put an end to the attacks from the West under Vytautas the Great (1392–1430) at the Battle of Žalgiris in 1410 and established itself as part of Eastern Central Europe and Latin Western civilisation. In the sixteenth century, with the growing threat from the east, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania concluded a union with Poland, creating the Commonwealth of the Two Nations, which

existed until 1795 when it was partitioned by neighbouring countries. In the twentieth century, however, the Lithuanian people twice, in 1918 and 1990, created a modern state, the Republic of Lithuania.

What can Lithuania remind the democratic world?

Putting aside the Singing Revolution, we will mention only events about which the world knows very little. Lithuania reached the year 1990 through the long “war after the war”, the armed resistance against the Soviets between 1945 and 1953, which is completely unknown in the West. (Sometimes it is considered Lithuania’s greatest contribution to the history of Europe in the twentieth century.) The freedom fighters fought not only against communism, but also for the country’s independence: Lithuania was an independent state from 1918 until 1940. In its turn, it had been created out of the nineteenth-century uprisings against Imperial Russia, while the Constitution of 3 May 1791 of the Polish-Lithuanian state was the source of these uprisings. The Constitution was defended during the 1794 uprising, which was led by Tadas Kosciuszka, who had fought in the American War of Independence. It was drafted only a little later than the American Constitution of 1787, thus becoming the world’s second, and the earliest constitution in Europe, and it is several months older than the French Constitution. There was a direct link with the latter, as its first draft was written after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, which was adopted during the French Revolution. It turned out that, even though for a short time, the Polish-Lithuanian state, which was oriented towards France, was an island in a sea of autocracy. Several uprisings which defended the Constitution and freedom from Russia gave birth to two phenomena on a European level: Vilnius Romanticism and Messianism, whose greatest poets, Adam Mickiewicz and Julius Słowacki, were two personalities who are important to all nations living in Vilnius, witnessing, at the same time, that poetry and the struggle for freedom walked side by side in the city.

What can Lithuania remind the Western Christian world?

Sometimes the concept of Europe is determined by the identification of the old member states of the European Union in the twentieth century with the Western Christian space which was formed only in that part of Europe. The origins of Europe are then looked for in the Europe of the Middle Ages, and Charlemagne is considered its symbolic father. Even then, Lithuania occupies an exceptional position: it belongs both to Western civilisation and the easternmost part of Central Europe. Again, Lithuania is different, as it was the last to join this chain.

There is a fresco in the Church of St Pierre le Jeune in Strasbourg depicting the nations of Europe marching towards the cross. It is a personification of Christianisation, and of early-fifteenth century Europe generally. There are several figures in the fresco. Germania is leading the way on horseback (Strasbourg was part of the German lands at the time that the fresco was painted), then come Galia (France), Italy, England, and so on. What interests us most is the end of the column. The last figure on horseback is Polonia (Poland), with two figures following it on foot. Litavia is bringing up the rear, giving way politely to the “Orient”. Here, Lithuania is counted among other European states for the first time. Its conversion to Christianity in Europe between 1387 and 1417 had brought it this place and honour.

This is what distinguishes Lithuania from other countries. Werner Conzes believes that it was precisely about 1400 that the formation of Europe was completed. If we think that Latin Western Europe of that time and Byzantine Eastern Europe were fully formed regions, then Lithuania’s Christianisation is the end of the formation not only of Central Europe, or Western Europe, but also the end of the formation of Christian Europe generally.

What can Lithuania remind the Catholic Baroque world?

Czesław Miłosz, the winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature, said in his acceptance speech: “It is a blessing if one receives from fate school and university studies in such a city as

Wilno. A bizarre city of Baroque architecture transplanted to northern forests and of history fixed in every stone ...” This is what he said about Vilnius University, his alma mater, which was founded in 1579. For several centuries, it was the northernmost institution of higher education in the network of Western universities. Famous professors from across Europe, from Spain to Norway, from England to Croatia and Austria, taught there. The work of Motiejus Kazimieras Sarbievijus of Vilnius was part of the European cultural heritage in the seventeenth century. This tradition of poetry and poetics reached Miłosz through Adam Mickiewicz, and was later the foundation of nonconformist poetry and art throughout the Soviet period.

Although Vilnius has northern masterpieces of Gothic and Classical architecture, it is the Baroque style which dominates its skyline. Vilnius is the northernmost point in the chain of cities of the “Baroque fringes” of Central Europe, begun in Ljubljana and Salzburg in the south. The start of the construction of the Baroque Church of St Casimir on Town Hall Square in Vilnius in 1604 started a period which lasted for two centuries. At the beginning, it was influenced by architects from Italy and other European countries. In the eighteenth century, Lithuanian architects created a form of Baroque which had no rivals in the world. An unusual and independent school of Baroque was formed, whose influence was felt from Samogitia to the Dnieper in Belarus. Johanas Kristupas Glaubitzas, the school’s main architect, left many Baroque masterpieces, which allows us to call him one of the most distinguished European architects of the time, although his work has not been fully appreciated yet, and has not yet entered the context of the history of European architecture.

What can Lithuania remind the whole Christian world?

There is not only a “Western” but also a “Christian” concept of Europe. The latter defines Europe as a geographically larger area, to include the countries of Eastern Christianity, and which is chronologically older. The genesis of Europe is seen in times of antiquity. In this case, the role of the Christian Roman Empire (since Constantine, especially from the end of the fourth century, when Christianity became the official religion of the empire) becomes more important, and the traditions of both Latin and Greek Byzantine civilisations are considered its legacy. Consequently, the capital city of this Christian Europe is Jerusalem. Catholic Rome and Orthodox Constantinople inherited the idea.

The dimension of Eastern Christianity in the definitions of Europe makes the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania very important: it was the only European state which was faced on a large scale with the issue of confronting and integrating two cultural traditions in the Middle Ages. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Vytautas the Great, the ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, raised the issue of a union of the Church. Gregory Tsamblak, the Orthodox metropolitan of the grand duchy, whom he sent to the synod in Constanta in 1417, celebrated an ecumenical Mass. Therefore, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a state which tried to find a compromise between the two traditions, forming not only a union of the Church but also of civilisation, Greek Catholicism and Byzantine Gothic. It even proposed the idea of a common house of worship for both liturgies.

On the whole, Vilnius became the only European capital in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries where the border between the Greek *civitas ruthenica* and the Latin city went through its heart. So Vilnius, with its Gothic and Baroque Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches, is a symbol of the intersection and interaction of the two traditions of European civilisation, with saints of over ten different religions.

The legacy of Lithuania and Vilnius as a mosaic of European culture

There is an old maxim that not only Christianity but also Roman law and Greek philosophy are the foundations of European culture. The Judaic tradition is also seen at the heart of Europe, which is important for Islam, and this in turn allows us to imagine even non-Christian regions in Europe.

In the eighteenth century, because of its role in world Jewish culture, Vilnius was called the Lithuanian Jerusalem. Even today, however, Jerusalem is not only the city of Judaism, but also of various Christian religions, as well as Islam. So Vilnius can be called the Jerusalem of the North not only because of its role in Jewish culture, but also because the interaction and attraction of civilisations gave it a multi-religious character that no other European capital had. In the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and in Vilnius, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were over ten religions. In the “Greek” space of Vilnius, Uniates or Greek Catholics and Old Believers appeared, while in the “Latin” space there were various branches of Protestantism (Lutheranism, Calvinism, anti-Trinitarianism, as well as Armenian Catholics and Jews, with Karaites and even Muslim Tartars in the suburbs (the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Vilnius was historically the northernmost Islamic region). Religious tolerance was documented as early as 1563, when religious hatred dominated Western Europe (the St Bartholomew’s Day massacre in Paris occurred in 1572). In different religious communities, individual thinkers who were known across Europe appeared. In the sixteenth century a book written by the Karaite Izaokas Trakiškis was known to the authorities of tolerance in Europe. The leaders of the anti-Trinitarian and Calvinist schools of thought in the grand duchy participated in discussions with John Calvin. The grammar written by the Russian Orthodox Meleti Smotritsky was known across the whole Slavic world; while students in some English universities studied the Catholic Martynas Smigleckis’ *Logics*. Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, a great scholar of the Torah and spiritual authority, who earned himself the name the “Vilna Gaon”, brought considerable fame to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Vilnius.

Here it is also worth mentioning Oskaras Milašius (Oscar Milosz de Lubicz), the twentieth-century French poet of Lithuanian descent, who predicted that Vilnius would become the Athens of the North. The variety of the cultural life of Vilnius is a miniature of European culture, at the same time as making it a European capital of culture. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Czesław Miłosz also said: “It is good to be born in a small country where Nature was on a human scale, where various languages and religions cohabited for centuries. I have in mind Lithuania, a country of myths and of poetry.”

What can Lithuania say to the world of art and freedom?

Nowadays, the rock band Enigma introduces old polyphonic Lithuanian folk songs into its music. Mikalojus Čiurlionis, the most famous Lithuanian painter and composer, also considered them a source for his work. The world knows about Enigma, but very little about Čiurlionis, although he worked in Vilnius at almost the same time as Chaim Soutine and Jacques Lipchitz. Although some encyclopaedias credit Čiurlionis with painting abstract pictures several years earlier than Wassily Kandinsky, it seems that his work is more important in another respect: for the synthesis of art and music, or the attempt to express music through painting. Is not the Fluxus movement a later version of such a synthesis? This New York-born anti-abstractionist movement used different artistic and social means of expression at the same time, trying to unite art, music and wit. The movement’s theoretician, and one of its most important creators (besides Joseph Beuys and Dick Higgins), was George Maciunas, who was of Lithuanian descent, and whose work is returning to Vilnius, just like the work of another American Lithuanian, Jonas Mekas, who is known as a maker of alternative cinema. Čiurlionis, Fluxus, and, paradoxically, big politics, were brought together by Vytautas Landsbergis, the main researcher into Čiurlionis’ work, who is now known to the world as one of the architects of Lithuania’s independence. Nam June Paik, one of the most outstanding Fluxus artists, said in 1993 that Landsbergis was a true “fluxist”, that the Sajūdis movement, which led Lithuania to independence meant “fluxus”, and that it was Fluxus that demolished the Soviet Union. This could be taken as a joke, and oversimplifies the cause of the greatest event in the world at the end of the twentieth century, the demise of the communist citadel. But the so-called rock marches in 1987 and 1988 paved the way for Sajūdis, and the songs performed then became the movement’s spiritual expression. What was

probably the greatest cultural event to take place in Vilnius since 1990 sounds like a joke, which arose out of the spirit of rock or jazz. Everyone expected a monument to M. K. Čiurlionis, but it was Frank Zappa, the American rocker, who never visited Vilnius, who had a monument erected to him, adding a witty joke that he was going to write a new anthem for independent Lithuania. In only a short time, the memorial became one of the signs by which Vilnius is most often recognised.

The “ideal Lithuania” or the scattered names of the country’s millennium

Lithuania was not able and had no time to attach much importance to the names of those whom waves of emigration took far into the world, but whose names are better recognised than that of Lithuania.

Let us imagine an “ideal Lithuania”, where those who came from here or whose parents had emigrated work and create here. Business empires were created by the descendants of those who learned business in the Lithuanian markets: Michael Marks, the founder of Marks & Spencer, Eli Broad, who is ranked forty-fifth among the richest Americans, or Montague Burton (Moshe David Osinski), the founder of Burton’s (which dictated men’s fashions in Europe in the inter-war period), William Lawrence (Jehuda Leiba Wolf Ziv) and David Frank-Kamienecki, Robert Oppenheimer’s assistants in the Manhattan Project, **who participated in constructing the atomic bomb** and not only Vytautas Sirvydis, who transplants hearts, but also the surgeon Christian Barnard of Cape Town, who was the first to do it. Next to them are the Nobel Prize winners in medicine Bernard Lown (Boruchas Lacas), Gertrude Elion and Sydney Brenner, while other winners of the Nobel Prize, Aaron Klug and David Lee, made discoveries in biochemistry and biophysics.

Our imagination takes us further: Arvydas Sabonis and the pioneer of women’s basketball S. Berenson-Abbott represent Lithuania, the boxer Jack Sharkey (Juožas Žukauskas), the star of American soccer Johnny Unitas (Jonas Jonaitis), and the tennis player Vitas Gerulaitis in sport. Chaim Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz and George Maciunas all have exhibitions of their work. Then there is the designer of the American cent, the sculptor Victor David Brenner, and Vytautas Kasiulis, who made his name in France. There is Oscar Milosz and Romain Gary, Emmanuel Levinas and Algirdas Julius Greimas.

Let us go on: not only Eimuntas Nekrošius, but also Robert Zemeckis directs plays and films, starring Sir John Gielgud and Charles Bronson (Karolis Bučinskis), Laurence Harvey and Joanna Shimkus, Norma Shearer and Ruta Lee. Bob Dylan plays a guitar made by Toni Zemaitis. There is also Leonard Cohen, and Anthony Kiedis of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

These are just some of the discoveries of the millennium. More may follow.