

# THE BAROQUE PALACE OF THE VASA DYNASTY

Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland Stephen Bathory (1576–1586) spent most of his time in Hrodna (now in Belarus). Nevertheless, he received the papal nuncio, Ippolito Aldobrandini, the future Pope Clement VIII (1592–1605) whose 1602 Bull proclaimed the canonization of St Casimir, in the luxurious Vilnius palace.

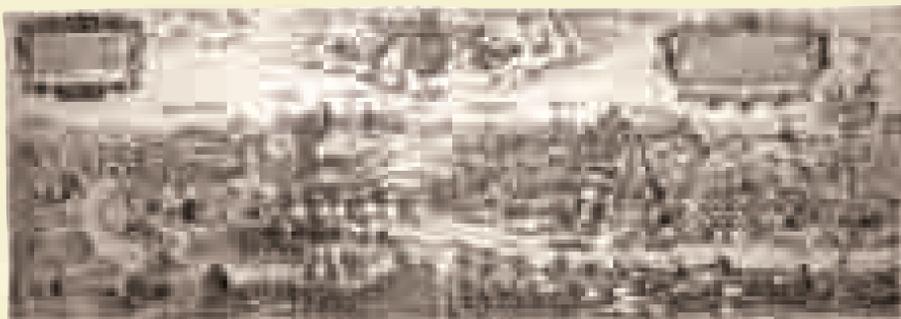
After the fire of 1610, new construction initiatives were undertaken by the Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland Sigismund Vasa (1587–1632). The palace was rebuilt in Northern Mannerist style. The repairs were overseen by the Vilnius castle caretaker Peter Nonhart and the architect and carpenter William Pohl.

The second phase of reconstruction work at the Vilnius residence during the reign of the Vasas, when the palace took on the features of the early Italian Baroque, coincided with the construction of the mausoleum chapel dedicated to St Casimir (1458–1484) adjoining the Vilnius Cathedral. Work was initiated by Sigismund Vasa in 1624 and completed by his son Ladislaus Vasa (1632–1648), whose heart was buried in the Vilnius Cathedral. The rulers of the Vasa dynasty justifiably held Prince Casimir as their relative and went to great efforts to have him canonized and in spreading his cult. St Casimir's Chapel also functioned as the palace chapel, and the cathedral and residence were joined by a specially-constructed gallery. Historical sources show that the Italian brothers, architects Costante and Jacopo Tencalla, who had worked in Rome with the famous Carlo Maderno, oversaw the reconstruction of the palace in the first half of the 17th century and the construction of St Casimir's Chapel. Up until the turn of the 18th–19th centuries, whereupon the palace was demolished, the residence and cathedral had comprised a uniform architectural ensemble with the same artists usually working on the two structures simultaneously. Architects always considered the shapes and volumes of the cathedral and palace in terms of one another, thereby creating a harmonious complex taken in its entirety.

During the time of the Vasas, the palace became a centre for the dissemination of Baroque culture and art among the nobles of Lithuania. Preceding anything similar in Paris or London, in 1636 the first opera in Lithuania was staged in the palace – *Il Ratto di Helena* (*The Abduction of Helen*). The libretto was written and published in Vilnius by Virgillio Puccitelli, secretary to Ladislaus Vasa, and the music was probably composed by the famous Italian composer and conductor Marco Scacchi, who was working in Vilnius at the time. Carnivals, masquerade balls, and hunting with hounds all took place in and around the palace. Envoys from other countries were received at the representational residence, vassal oath-giving ceremonies of the Courland dukes were held here, the Vasa dynasty's policies and military activities in the East and North European regions were modelled, and of course, military triumphs were celebrated here.



Portrait of Sigismund Vasa, the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, Martin Kober, 1590–1595, KHM



View of Hrodna, Mathias Zündt (ca 1498–1572), based on a life drawing by Johann Adelhauser, painter from Sigismund Augustus' court, Nürnberg, 1568, donated by Dr. Tomasz Niewodniczański, LDKVR



Portrait of Ladislaus Vasa, the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, with a view of Khotyn in the background, from the studio of Peter Paul Rubens, after 1625, PZKW-PZS



Facade of the Vilnius Cathedral's St Casimir's Chapel, LDKVR



Interior of the Vilnius Cathedral's St Casimir's Chapel, LDM



Monstrance of bishop Jurgis Tiškevičius (Jerzy Tyszkiewicz) from the Vilnius Cathedral Treasury testifies the luxury of the Vasa times, Western Europe or Vilnius, Lithuania, 1649–1655, BPM



The Vilnius castles, fragment of *Panorama of the city of Vilnius* by Tomasz Makowski, 1600, LDKVR



Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania from the southwest, Pranciškus Smuglevičius, ca 1797, MNK



Tapestry *The Offering of Cain and Abel* (from the set *The Story of the First Parents*), workshop of Jean (Jan) Leyniers (?), after cartoons by Michiel I Coxcie (Coxie) (Mechelen, 1499–1592), Brussels, Flanders, 1640–1660, LDKVR



Title page of the libretto of the Italian Baroque opera *Il Ratto di Helena*, text author Virgillio Puccitelli, Vilnius, 1636, BL



Plan of the defensive wall of the city of Vilnius, Friedrich Getkant, 1648, LDKVR



Flat stove tile with the House of Vasa coat of arms, early 17th century, LDKVR



Piece of a pediment (?) with the Vasa coat of arms encircled by the chain of the Order of the Golden Fleece and a pleated robe, after 1610, LDKVR