

ONE MORE REASON TO VISIT LITHUANIA:

# PALACE OF THE GRAND DUKES

Thriving 400 years ago, 200 years ago destroyed — Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania in Vilnius has finally opened its doors.

RAMUNĖ HAZIR

A long-awaited opening of one of the most important objects in both Lithuania and Europe coincided with a significant event — beginning of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

It seems to be not an accidental — history tends to repeat itself: from the 14th to the middle of the 17th century Lithuanian rulers ruled the entire European region of this place — Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Livonia, Prussia, Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine, part of Russia, Finland, and the envoys from Turkey, Persia, Spain, Italy and many Central European countries were received in the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. Today once again questions important for the whole Europe are addressed in the palace and hundreds of guests from a wide variety of countries around the world attend the palace every day.



Photos: Vytauta Abramauskas



## A SETTLEMENT TURNS INTO A CASTLE, A CASTLE INTO A PALACE

Prehistory of the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania dates back to 4th-8th centuries — when according to data of the detailed, twenty years long research on the site a constant settlement existed. Over time the settlement became a castle, and in the thirteen century brick construction was began. Researchers associate these construction works to the entrenchment of the Gediminid dynasty in Lithuania. Many Lithuanian rulers —from the predecessors of Gediminas to Vytautas and Casimir Jagiellon were famous for building initiatives, but the radical change of the residence began at the turn of 15th and 16th centuries, with Alexander Jagiellon becoming the Grand Duke of Lithuania, later followed by his brother Sigismund the Old.

The fact that Alexander resided in Lithuania, the growing administrative needs of his vast estate and nation, and his marriage to Helen, the daughter of the Grand Duke of Moscow Ivan III — all necessitated the expansion of his residence to meet not only domestic, but also increasing ceremonial needs.

## BONA SFORZA BROUGHT EUROPEAN CULTURE

Historical sources indicate that the palace was several times ravaged by the fires, and not only for them, but with the advent of each new ruler the palace was increasingly expanded and remodeled. So after Alexander Jagiellon works it was the turn of the Grand Duke of Lithuania and the King of Poland Sigismund the Old, and his wife, the Italian princess Bona Sforza to transform and reconstruct the palace.

Although it is not known who was the main architect of palace rebuilding, some of them were mentioned:

architect and sculptor Bernardino Zanobi de Gianotis from Rome or Florence, architect Bartolomeo Berecci, who was one of the chief architects of the Renaissance Wawel Royal Castle, the stonemason Benedict from Sandomierz (or Benedykt Sandomierzanin), who had worked for Sigismund the Old in Krakow, also worked for him in Vilnius. Both Berrecci and Sandomierzanin could have contributed to the reconstruction of the Vilnius palace. Construction work was supervised by the German engineer and caretaker of the Lower Castle, Ulrich Hosius (Ulricus Hosius).

## THE PALACE WAS BUILT AND INHABITED BY THE HIGH CLASSES

A new phase of expansion of the Renaissance palace is associated with the rule of Sigismund Augustus. In 1544 he was named vicegerent (ruler de facto) of Lithuania by his father Sigismund the Old and in that same year came to Vilnius with his wife, Elisabeth of Austria (Habsburg).

The chief architect of Sigismund Augustus' construction work was the Italian architect, sculptor, and stonemason Giovanni Cini from Siena. He received help from his brother Bartolomeo, a stonemason. Others who worked there for several years were: the Flemish architect Frederik Unstherffe, the Polish stonemason Benedict from Sandomierz, and the architect and military engineer Job Breitfuss, the chief carpenter was Marcin from Poland. The room interiors were decorated by the sculptor Donatus from Hungary. The room friezes and other artwork were painted by the German master Gerhard Sweiger, who lived in Vilnius. Other painters were Anton Wiede, a German from Gdansk, and the Italian Giovanni da Monte.

The palace walls were decorated with expensive fabrics, sandstone from Livonia and Sweden was

*Third Mannerist antechamber returns us to a "golden period" for the palace*



The first tour shows remaining authentic walls, unique and especially vast archaeological findings made of ceramics, wood, metal, glass, leather, bones as well as jewellery



In 1636 – earlier than in Rome or Paris – the first opera in Lithuania was staged in the palace. Today opera sounds in the Palace again

used for flooring, metalwork was brought from Poland and Austria, and glass from France.

#### FROM FLOURISHING TO DESTRUCTION

Although by the 17th century the palace had already acquired typical residential features and was flourishing, members of the Swedish Vasa dynasty who at that time ruled Lithuania and Poland were improving and redecorating the palace. Architectural details found during the archeological research at the site indicate that the palace was repaired and decorated in the Northern Mannerist style and later the building acquired early Baroque features. Efforts were led by the Italian architects, sculptors Costante and Jacopo Tencalla who had worked

before with the famous Italian Baroque architect Carlo Maderno.

The 16th and 17th centuries can be referred to as a „golden period“ for the palace. It came to an end in 1655 when Vilnius was attacked by the Muscovite and Cossack army and occupied for six years. During these years, the palace was plundered, ravaged, and burned. It was never rebuilt and never again served as a residence for the rulers of Poland and Lithuania, even though the Lithuanian nobility often urged that the palace be rebuilt. At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, on the orders of the Tsarist administration, all except the eastern wing of the palace was torn down.

#### WHAT DID HAPPEN AT THAT TIME?

During its „golden period“ the palace in Vilnius became not only a political, administrative, and diplomatic center but also a center for culture and the arts, and its influence spread far beyond the Lithuanian capital. The palace contained rich collections of tapestries, paintings, and other works of art, weapons, armour, hunting trophies, and a huge library as well as a collection of treasures and jewels that impressed the papal legate Bishop Bernardino Buongiovanni, who then spread the news of the treasures he saw in 1560 throughout Europe.

In 1636 — earlier than in Rome or Paris — 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 Virgilio Puccitelli, secretary to Ladislaus Vasa, and the music was probably composed by the famous Italian composer and conductor Marco Scacchi.

This palace was witness to the romantic love story of Sigismund Augustus and Barbara Radziwiłł. The Council of Lords and the Parliament of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania met here. The Statutes of Lithuania (the code of laws of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) were compiled and edited here. The Lithuanian Metrica (chancellery records of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) was kept here as well as the treasuries of Lithuania's rulers and of the Grand Duchy.

This is exactly why the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, destroyed and reborn, remains the symbol of nationhood in the consciousness of most of Lithuanians. It is associated with unity and the greatness of one of the most influential European Empire of the Middle and New Ages.

The current exhibitions beyond the gates of the Palace tells this story and much more...

#### THE BEST IN BETWEEN OF ST PETERSBURG, STOCKHOLM AND KRAKOW

Today in the reconstructed Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania two of the four exhibition tour routes planned are available.



The first tour will show the historical and architectural development of the palace by highlighting the ancient ruins still in place and the excavated artifacts as well as by using models and iconographic material. The main part of this exhibition show remaining authentic walls, unique and especially vast archaeological findings made of ceramics, wood, metal, glass, leather, bones as well as jewellery. These are accompanied by written comments and iconographical material. The first exposition commemorates the luxury of the residency and illustrates the everyday life 300 to 600 years ago. The wooden and clay findings are especially valuable for the European heritage context in general as elsewhere such material had degenerated before they could even be found. The collection of the stove tiles is probably the biggest in the world. The exposition is very attractive for one extraordinary feature – all the archaeological findings are presented in the places where they were originally found. It is the Lithuanian Troy and Pompeii at the same time.

The second expositional route mirrors the stylistic epochs and historical interior functions; it is like a walk through representational interiors of different times, from late Gothic to Renaissance and early Baroque through fine and applied arts – furniture, tapestries, maps, works of graphics, portraits of rulers and noblemen, armoury and weapons, valuables of lithuanistics.

Both these tours are meant to complement each other, giving the visitor a well-rounded view of the development of the palace, its role in Lithuanian

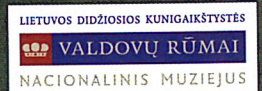


*The organization of international exhibitions from the world's most famous museums, as well as the exposition of jewellery coffret of Hedwig Jagiellon from the Collections of the State Hermitage Museum in the reconstructed Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania serves as confirmation of the integration of this museum into the global museum network*

history and culture as well as its political and artistic ties with the rest of Europe and Asia.

It is planned that the two extra routes will be available to the visitors in 3 to 5 years time when the process of rebuilding the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania will be completely finished.

Whether or not Lithuania will come back to active European politics through the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania is a question for the future. However, even now the palace undoubtedly is Lithuania's tourism gates that many local Lithuanians and foreign countries' visitors want to get through.



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