



EDITA MILDAŽYTĖ

# LITHUANIA

*on a First Date*

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VILNIUS 2012

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# The Troy of Lithuania

The romantic hill forts of Kernavė evoke the wealth and splendour of the medieval town.

Thanks to the work of archaeologists in Kernavė during the past few decades, the old Lithuanian capital has revealed many secrets. All of Lithuanian prehistory is reflected here, from the hunting and fishing villages of the ninth millennium BC to the thriving town of the Middle Ages.

People made this beautiful and convenient location their home nearly 12 thousand years ago and have lived here ever since. The network of five hill forts is a striking sight. Ancient settlements, remnants of a medieval town and graves of our ancestors can all be found close by.

In 2004, the archaeological site at Kernavė was added to the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites.

Even though today it is a small provincial town less than 35 kilometres from Vilnius, historian Alfredas Bumblauskas claims that in the past it was a symbol of the pagan epoch. Aleksiejus Luchtnas (nicknamed Lithuania's Schliemann after the famous archaeologist) has studied the Kernavė settlement for many years and says there are at least ten historical layers here, one on top of the other: from ancient times to the days of the first capital, which was quite elaborate for the period and had a developed infrastructure.

Fortunately for archaeologists, the entire town had burned down after an attack by Crusaders in the 14th century and was not rebuilt. Its inhabitants moved to nearby locations, while ash and rubble preserved the layers of the past for many centuries.



Kernavė is first mentioned in written sources in 1279 as the domain of Grand Duke Traidenis.

# Worthy of a Coat of Arms

Lithuanians' love and admiration of horses is evident in many folk songs, ancient traditions, and even the national symbol: our coat of arms displays the *Vytis* – a mounted warrior.

The extraordinary relationship between Lithuanians and their horses dates back to prehistoric times. Tribes living on Lithuanian lands in the fifth to twelfth centuries buried their horses in special cemeteries. Sometimes the horses were sacrificed, i.e. buried alive, and assigned mythical roles.

A warrior, military commander or nobleman would be cremated and buried along with his weapons and ornately bridled horse – oftentimes more than one.

The horse motif is frequently found in domestic surroundings. Criss-crossed

horses' heads facing opposite directions decorate fascia boards and rooftop weathervanes. They are also encountered on woven sashes, on *krikštai* (ancient wooden grave markers) in the Curonian Spit, and in many folksongs and folktales. Rocking horses and hobby horses were made as toys for children. Since long ago December 6th, the Feast of St. Nicholas, has also been called Horses' Day, and you can see a horse with a mounted knight at the Shrove Tuesday carnival after Christmas. Night herding was an interesting chapter in the life of a Lithuanian male.

From early spring until late fall, when the fields were dry, the horses of an entire village were herded at night in a joint effort of the villagers, usually by the young men of the village. The night herders lit bonfires, told stories and riddles, played games and pranks. It is believed that a horseshoe fastened to a door brings good luck and protects the household.

There is a well-known Horse Museum in Niūronys, Anykščiai Region.

Singer Mantas Jankavičius boldly galloped onto the silver screen in his debut role in the historical adventure *Tadas Blinda. The Beginning*. (2011, directed by Donatas Ulvydas) – a record-breaking success at Lithuanian cinemas. Tadas Blinda is the Lithuanian Robin Hood – defender of the common man, justice, and freedom.

A 15th-century spur, legacy of the era of the Battle of Grunwald, found in a warrior's grave at Jurgioniai Cemetery (Trakai Region).





*This book is about the Lithuania that I feel in my heart.  
I am truly proud to be Lithuanian, and I love this country very much.*

>Edita Mildažytė

*“Where are you from?” This is a question Lithuanians often  
can’t answer by simply saying “I’m from Lithuania”,  
because it just prompts another question: “What’s Lithuania?”*

*This book can help with that.*

*We hope Lithuania on a First Date will show you that we are a small but creative  
nation, one which has contributed something important to the world.  
We hope that this book, written by prominent Lithuanian journalist Edita Mildažytė,  
will encourage you to get to know and take an interest  
in Lithuania’s past and the present.*

*For many readers this may be a first date with our country.  
We hope it leads to the start of a strong bond – perhaps even love.*

*Lithuania on a First Date includes a compact disc, compiled by musicologist  
Viktoras Gerulaitis, which aims to introduce you to the music of Lithuania.  
Let’s listen to what Lithuania sounds like.*

