

Klaipėda (/ˈkleɪpɛdə/ *CLAY-ped-ə*; Lithuanian: [ˈklɐɪ̯ˈpʲeːdɐ] [ⓘ]) is a city in Lithuania on the Baltic Sea coast.^[4] It is the third-largest city in Lithuania, the fifth-largest city in the Baltic States, and the capital of Klaipėda County, as well as the only major seaport in the country – the Port of Klaipėda, which is also the busiest port in the Baltic States.

The city has a complex recorded history, partially due to the combined regional importance of the usually ice-free port at the mouth of the river Akmena-Danė.^{[4][5]} It was located in Lithuania Minor, and the State of the Teutonic Order and Duchy of Prussia under the suzerainty of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, then the Kingdom of Prussia and German Empire, within which it was the northernmost big city until it was placed under French occupation in 1919. From 1923, the city was part of Lithuania until its annexation by Nazi Germany in 1939, and after World War II it was part of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. Klaipėda has remained within Lithuania since 1944.

The city continues to experience sustained demographic decline due to flight towards the suburbs and other cities. The number of inhabitants of Klaipėda city shrank from 202,929 in 1989 to 162,360 in 2011,^[6] but the urban zone of Klaipėda expanded well into the suburbs, which sprang up around the city and surrounded it from three sides. These are partly integrated with the city (city bus lines, city water supply, etc.), and the majority of inhabitants of these suburbs work in Klaipėda. According to data from the Department of Statistics, there are 212,302 permanent inhabitants (as of 2020) in the Klaipėda city and Klaipėda district municipalities combined.^[7] Popular seaside resorts found close to Klaipėda are Neringa to the south on the Curonian Spit and Palanga to the north.^[8]

The city is also known for the annual Klaipėda Sea Festival and a nearby Lithuanian Sea Museum.

Names



Memel city seal, 1446
(diameter 200 mm (7.9 in)).
From the Archive of the
Prussian Cultural Heritage
Foundation, Berlin.

The Teutonic Knights built a castle in the *Pilsāts Land of the Curonians and named it *Memelburg*, which would later be shortened to *Memel*. From 1252 to 1923 and from 1939 to 1945, the town and city were officially named *Memel*. Between 1923 and 1939, both names were in official use. Since 1945, the Lithuanian name of *Klaipėda* has been used.

The names *Memelburg* and *Memel* are found in most written sources from the 13th century onwards, while *Klaipėda* is found in Lithuanian sources since the 15th century. The city was initially mentioned as *Caloypede* in the letter of Vytautas in 1413,^[9] and in negotiation documents from 1420, the city was named *Klawppeda*.^[10] In the Treaty of Melno of 1422, the city's name was listed as *Cleupeda*. According to Samogitian folk etymology, the name *Klaipėda* refers to the boggy terrain of the town (*klaidyti*=obstruct and *pėda*=foot). Most likely, the name is of Curonian origin and means "even ground"; it likely originates

from a combination of "klais/klait" (flat, open, free) and "peda" (sole of the foot, ground), as a reference to relatively flat terrain of the original settlement's surroundings.

The lower reaches of the river Neman were named either **Mēmele* or **Mēmela* by Scalovians and local Curonian inhabitants. In the Latvian Curonian language, it means *mute, silent* (*memelis, mimelis, mēms*), as a reference to peaceful flow of the Neman. This name was adopted by German speakers, and also was chosen for the new city founded further away at the lagoon.

The name of the city in the Samogitian language is spelled slightly differently: *Klaipieda*. The most notable non-Lithuanian names include: Latvian: *Klaipēda*; Polish: *Kłajpeda*; Russian: Клайпеда; German: *Memel*.

Coat of arms

The coat of arms of Klaipėda is also used as the coat of arms of the Klaipėda city municipality. The modern version was created by the designer Kęstutis Mickevičius. The modern coat of arms was created by restoring old seals of the Memel city (analogous with those used in the years 1446, 1605 and 1618). It was affirmed on 1 July 1992.^[11]

History

A settlement of Baltic tribes in the territory of the present-day city is said to have existed in the region as early as the 7th century. Klaipėda is the oldest city which is in modern Lithuanian territory. The Balts initially established Klaipėda as a trading centre for the storage of goods and annual fairs with the Germans.^[12]

Teutonic Knights

In the 1240s, Pope Gregory IX offered King Håkon IV of Norway the opportunity to conquer the peninsula of Sambia. However, after Grand Duke Mindaugas of Lithuania, the Teutonic Knights and a group of crusaders from Lübeck moved into Sambia and accepted Christianity. These groups founded a fort in 1252 called *Memele castrum* (or *Memelburg*, "Memel Castle"). The fort's construction was completed in 1253, and Memel was garrisoned with troops of the Teutonic Order, administered by Deutschmeister Eberhard von Seyne. Documents for its founding were signed by Eberhard and Bishop Heinrich von Lützelburg of Courland on 29 July 1252 and 1 August 1252.



Preserved historic timber framed architecture

Master Conrad von Thierberg used the fortress as a base for further campaigns along the river Neman and against Samogitia. Memel was unsuccessfully besieged by Sambians in 1255, and the Sambians surrendered in 1259. Memel was also colonized by settlers from Holstein, Lübeck and Dortmund. Hence, Memel also being known at the time as *Neu-Dortmund*, or "New Dortmund". It became the main town of the Diocese of Curonia, with a cathedral and at least two parochial churches, but the development of the castle became the dominant priority. According to different sources,



Seal of viceregent in
Klaipėda, 13th century



Seal of Klaipėda as of
1409 depicting bell
towers of the Churches
of St. John, St. Mary
and St. Nicholas

Memel received Lübeck city rights in 1254^[13] or 1258.^[14] Following it Klaipėda's status was quite extraordinary as only three cities in the State of the Teutonic Order had Lübeck city rights.^[15]

In the spring and summer of 1323, a Lithuanian army led by Grand Duke Gediminas came up the Neman and sieged the castle of Memel, while later he marched to other Prussian, Latvian, Estonian territories controlled by the Order, eventually forcing the Order to sue for a truce in October 1323.^[16] While planning a campaign against Samogitia, Memel's garrison of the Teutonic Order's Livonian branch was replaced with knights from the Prussian branch in 1328. Threats and attacks by Lithuanians greatly slowed down the town's development; the castle was sacked by Lithuanian tribes in 1360, and in 1379 the reconstructed castle and town were both sacked once again.^[17] In 1409, the castle was rebuilt and in 1422–1441 the strengthening of the castle's fortifications continued when eventually its ramparts reached 7 meters height.^[17]

After the Battle of Grunwald, the dispute between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Teutonic Order on Samogitia started.^[18] Vytautas the Great wanted the border to be the Neman River, while the Teutonic Order wanted to have Veliuona and Klaipėda in the right side of the river.^[18] Both sides agreed to accept the prospective solution of Emperor Sigismund's representative Benedict Makrai in 1413. He decided that the right side of Nemunas (Veliuona, Klaipėda) were to be owned by Lithuania. Makrai is known to have stated:^[19]

We find that the Memel Castle is built in the land of Samogitians. Neither Master, nor the Order was able to prove anything opposing.

Nevertheless, no agreement was concluded and fighting continued until the Treaty of Melno in 1422 stabilized the border between the Teutonic Order and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania for the next 501 years. However, two miles of Lithuanian territories, including Klaipėda, was left for the Order.^[20] In 1454, King Casimir IV Jagiellon incorporated the region to the Kingdom of Poland upon the request of the anti-Teutonic Prussian Confederation.^[21] After the subsequent Thirteen Years' War (1454–1466) the city became a part of Poland as a fief held by the Teutonic Knights,^[22] and thus located within the Polish–Lithuanian union. The rebuilt town received Kulm law city rights in 1475.^[17]