Lithuania: Of Knights and Crooked Castles

1

Tower Of Gediminas (Gedimino) in Vilnius, Lithuania

Icy wind stung the faces of the black-hooded knights as they urged their horses northward across the barren plain. Their next mission field was the vast and mighty empire of Lithuania. The Knights of the Teutonic Order had recently received their new assignment: convert the last **pagan** nation of Europe to Christianity or die trying. This religious mission was a daunting one — Lithuania was the largest and fastest-growing kingdom in Europe during the 13th century. Her pagan roots ran deep out of old tribal customs, Viking terrorism, and **barbarian** beliefs.

The irony of the knights' mission was not lost on these black-and-white-clad knights carrying the emblem of the cross on their **tunics**, flags, and shields. The Teutonic Order was established to save life, not destroy it. These knights were originally sent to ravaged Israel to build hospitals and attend to the wounded by nursing Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike back to health. Yet their new marching orders were clear: convert the pagans to Christianity or destroy the nation of Lithuania. With the recent death of the fierce King Mindaugus of Lithuania, leaving the empire leaderless, the knights hoped their takeover would be swift and the Christianization process easy.

pagan: a person holding religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions

barbarian: lacking social skills and manners; rough or violent

tunics: ancient Greek- and Roman-style clothing that was sleeveless and reached the knees

Present-day version of the coat of arms of Lithuania

Trakai Island Castle

The Teutonic Order: The Teutonic Order began as a military society in the Kingdom of Jerusalem around the year 1190 — a time when many Christians were taking pilgrimages to the Holy Land. This trip was very dangerous, and the knights of this order would often provide protection for the pilgrims. The Livonian Order joined the Teutonic Order and their fight.

After Christians lost control of the Holy Land, the Order began to operate in Central and Eastern Europe. They became embroiled in numerous political battles on and off the battlefield — often working to increase their own power and lands, as well as those who supported the Order.

They also initiated forced Christianization against pagans in these areas. This involved brutal oppression or death, the destruction of pagan sites, and the ruthless wiping out of any pagan worship. Often if a leader chose to become Christian, or was forced to by the knights, all the people in that area also had to become Christian.

Although these efforts brought military, financial, and political power, they did not truly save anyone spiritually. John 6:44 states, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."

A relationship with God cannot be forced. The Holy Spirit woos, or draws us, toward God. True faith comes when we realize our sin nature and choose for ourselves to truly receive Christ's gift of salvation bought by His death on the Cross. Faith forced upon someone doesn't make them believe — it only creates fear, resentment, and false displays of worship.

God doesn't want forced worship — He seeks a personal relationship with us. True faith comes from the heart that believes in Him and seeks to obey God's Word to please and honor Him.

As a military power, the Teutonic Order continued until 1810, when Napoleon Bonaparte took what was left of lands in the region. After this, the Order still existed in areas of Europe, but only as a religious order as part of the Catholic Church. In the 20th century, two world wars, as well as fascist and socialist governments, made things very difficult for the Order, yet it continues its charitable work.

The Teutonic Knights of Germany, along with cavalries from several other European kingdoms, congregated and planned their attack from the medieval fortress of Malbork in the neighboring country of Poland. The plan was simple: The horde of knights would swoop down *en mass* across the Polish plain into Lithuania using the "shock and awe" tactic of complete and utter surprise.

They were wrong. The knights' surprise attack against Lithuania turned into an all-out war, lasting over 200 years. In 1410, after the Battle of Grunwald — one of the longest and most brutal battles in medieval history — Lithuania emerged victorious, spelling the end of the Lithuanian Crusades. Lithuania came out of the war stronger and more confident than ever before. She continued her dominance in the north, conquering the surrounding nations until, ultimately, she became one of the largest countries in Europe.

In the 600 years since the Battle of Grunwald, Lithuania is no longer the largest country in Europe. In fact, she is one of the smallest. Nestled alongside the chilly Baltic Sea between Poland and Latvia, Lithuania is one of only three Baltic states. But while her land may be small, her history and culture are immense.

This great nation is where we begin our journey around the countries of the northern realm of Europe. Each of these places once served as a Viking stronghold during the Middle Ages.

So, lace up your hiking boots, strap on your backpack, and grab your camera. We have much to see and do in the beautiful, historic land of Lithuania. Let's go!

Take a peek out your airplane window. Do you see all those blue lakes? The small country of Lithuania contains over 3,000 lakes, located mostly in the east and southeast regions of the country. The capital city, Vilnius, is located in the southeast corner, where the Vilnia and Neris Rivers merge, and is within easy walking or driving distance of many of these lakes.

From this high altitude, you might also notice the many forests stretching beyond the horizon, covering over one-third of the countryside. The forested landscape gently rises and falls along the low rolling hillsides. Most of the country is comprised of low, rolling hills, none of which are very high in elevation. In fact, the tallest mountain in the "highlands" region of Lithuania is a hill at just 965 feet. It is called the Aukštojas Hill. At less than 1,000 feet, Lithuania's tallest peak is shorter than most city skyscrapers and about 100 feet shorter than the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France.

However, none of this compares to Lithuania's arguably most unique geographical feature. You can't see it from here, but soon you will have the chance to see it up close. Lithuania borders the Baltic Sea and half of its coastline sits along the Curonian Spit. A **spit** is a narrow finger of land that projects out into the water. However, this particular spit stretches from the northern coast of Kaliningrad, the Russian **enclave** that is Lithuania's southern neighbor, to the northern coast of Lithuania, forming a **lagoon**. The long spit is covered in white sand dunes — dunes high enough to slide down on sleds. Sandboarding (a.k.a. sand sledding) is a favorite pastime for Lithuanian children and is something you might enjoy as well.

Beautiful lake at Molėtai, Lithuania

Curonian Spit

Sandboarding

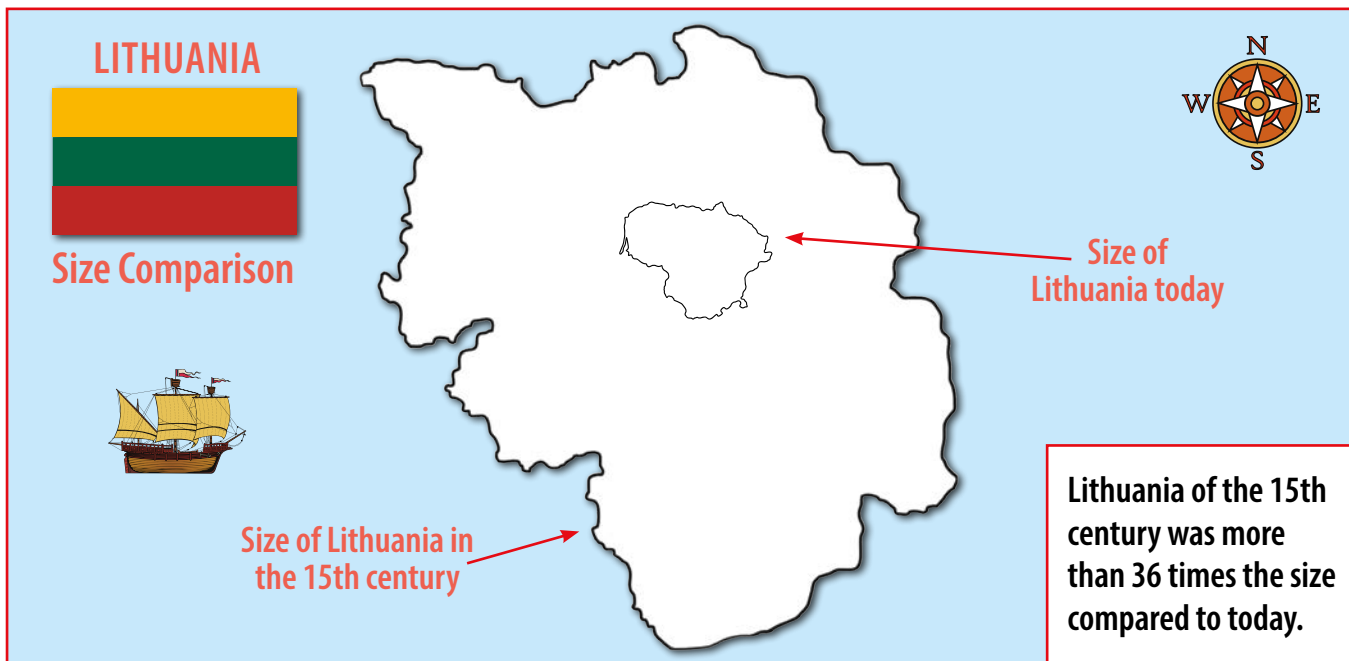**spit:** a narrow point of land projecting into the sea

enclave: a country, or portion of a country, that is entirely surrounded by another country

lagoon: a pool of water that is separated from the main body of water by a reef, sandbar, or other barrier

Time to buckle up and prepare for landing. We'll be arriving in Vilnius in just a few short minutes.

From the Largest Country in Europe to One of the Smallest

Medieval and Middle Ages:
- ✔ Lithuania was previously a Viking stronghold.
- ✔ With the Crusades, the Knights of the Teutonic Order fought paganism.
- ✔ The Battle of Grunwald drastically shrank the land of Lithuania.

Lithuania:
- ✔ Nestled between Poland and Latvia, the Baltic Sea is to the west.
- ✔ The Capital city is Vilnius.
- ✔ Waterways include Vilnia and Neris Rivers, along with more than 3,000 lakes.
- ✔ Landscape is mainly low, rolling hills with the highest altitude being only 965 feet.
- ✔ The Curonian Spit stretches into the sea and is covered in white sand dunes.

LITHUANIA

Size Comparison

Size of Lithuania today

Size of Lithuania in the 15th century

Lithuania of the 15th century was more than 36 times the size compared to today.

Draw a Flag or Coat of Arms

As a person who is part of a family and community, we each have a choice of how we represent who we are and where we live.

In the blank spaces, you will either draw a flag or design a coat of arms.
(Or you may choose both!)

The Lithuanian flag has three horizontal stripes.

Yellow = prosperity and sun

Green = land, hope, and forests

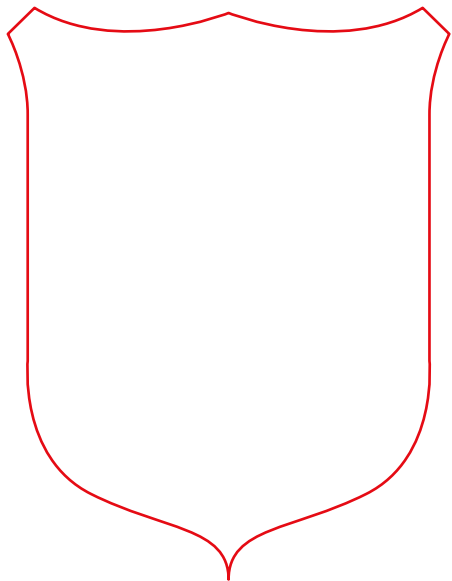Red = courage and blood of those who have died for Lithuania

There is also a Christian flag with a cross that you may have seen in some locations.

White = purity of faith

Blue = baptism waters and Jesus' faithfulness

Red cross = blood that Jesus shed at Golgotha

Draw a flag that represents your community, state, or country. Use colors and symbols. With your parent's permission or guidance, research to label the meaning of symbols and colors.

We learned about the Teutonic Order, a military power during the Middle Ages that sought control through forced religion. Like other armed troops, knights played an important role — Teutonic Knights fought in the Crusades. Influence or power can be used for either good or harm (sometimes even when it is intended to help). A knight's coat of arms — often on their shield, coat, and even horse — was a design unique to the user. It often contained symbols to represent their family. Design your own coat of arms to represent yourself as part of your family's history. Use colors to add to the design and meaning. Be sure to include a motto (saying) on the banner that reflects your family's values!

Share What You Remember About Lithuania

Answer the questions about Lithuania.

1. Why did the Teutonic Knights invade Lithuania? _____

_____

2. Was the mission successful for the Teutonic Knights when they invaded Lithuania? _____

_____

3. Who won the Battle of Grunwald? _____

4. What is one of the most remarkable geographical features of Lithuania? _____

_____

5. What is a popular recreational pastime people enjoy in Lithuania? _____

Explore Sand Dunes

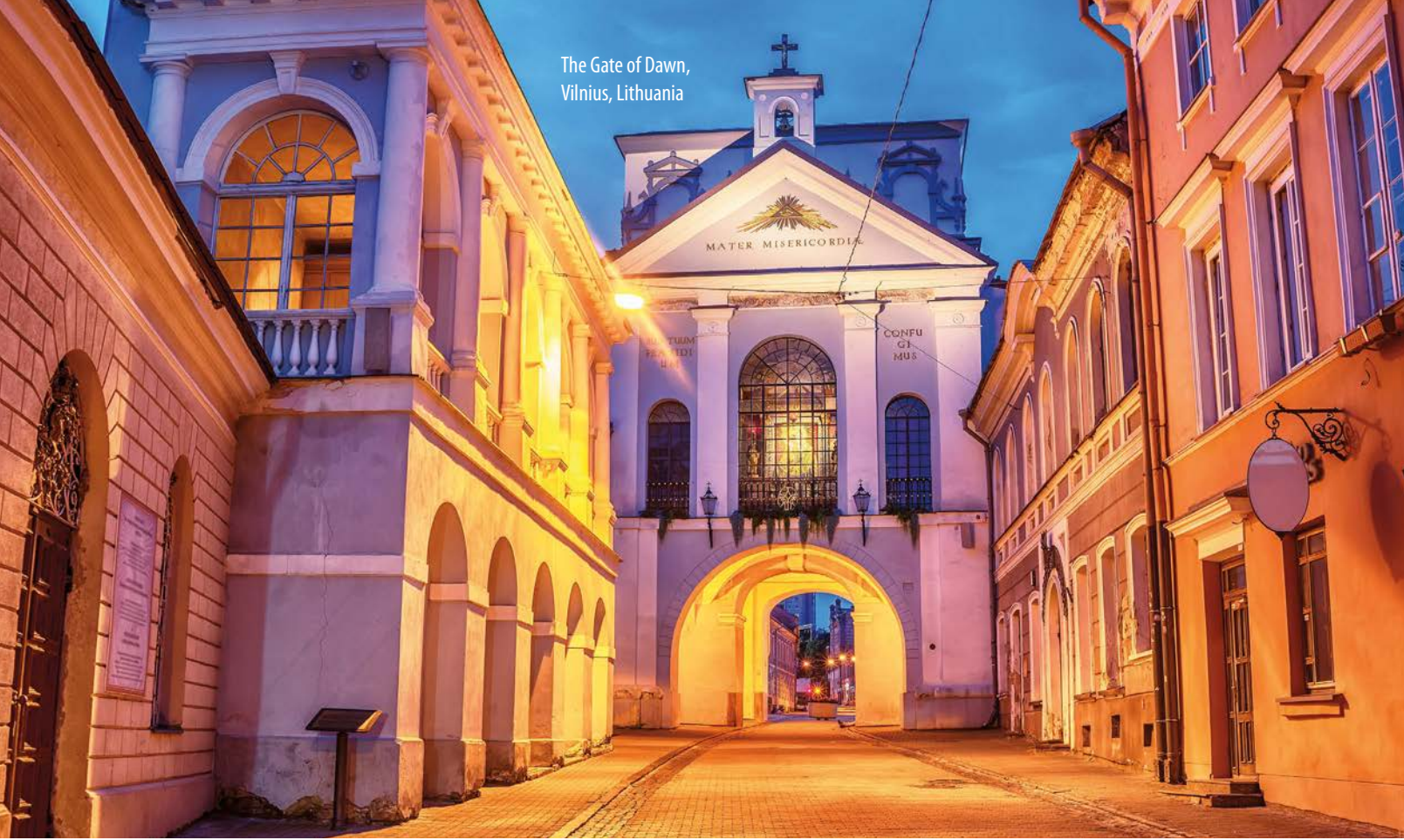**Optional: Teacher's Discretion**   ☐ No   ☐ Yes   Due Date: _____

The Curonian Spit is a protected area with an abundance of sand and forest space along the coast of Lithuania. Sand dunes offer remarkable views. With the permission of your parent, explore books or online resources to learn about the Curonian Spit. Discover more about sand dunes in Lithuania and discover sites with sand dunes in your home country or beyond.

Complete the table by including the Curonian Spit in Lithuania and two locations with sand dunes from your home country or beyond. Complete each row in the table by including the name of the site, the country, and a unique feature that you find interesting.

Sand Dune Site	Country	Unique Feature
Curonian Spit	Lithuania	

The Gate of Dawn,
Vilnius, Lithuania

➔ Our adventure starts in the Old Town of Vilnius. This old medieval center inside the capital city is preserved as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**. This means that the cultural and architectural elements are protected from destruction or misuse so that current and future generations can appreciate what medieval Lithuania was like.

UNESCO World Heritage Site: a place designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as a place of historical or cultural significance

We'll enter through the Gate of Dawn, the only gate remaining of the nine original gates located along the medieval stone wall that once encircled this fine city. Most of the buildings inside the wall are considered new by Lithuanian standards, having been built in the last 500 years. Before that, the town's buildings were made of wood, which meant the buildings were vulnerable to fire. The entire city center burned to the ground twice during the Middle Ages. Now the buildings are constructed with stone to better withstand natural disasters.

Interestingly enough, most of the original buildings had basements or cellars, so while the rebuilt structure above ground may only be a few hundred years old, the basement below is often much older. Many of these cellars have been converted into places where people gather, including casual eateries.

Let's walk to the top of Bleak Hill — also known as the Three Crosses Hill — where Crooked Castle stands overlooking the Vilnia River.

Crosses on Three Crosses Hill

Remember, all the hills are gentle here, so it isn't too strenuous of a hike. The castle is called "crooked" because its layout is awkward and misshapen. Back in 1390, Welsh raiders stormed the castle using a demolition weapon known as the **Welsh cat**. According to surviving documents, this wooden weapon was pushed close to a defensive wall and then, with its movable arm, the "cat" clawed away at the castle wall, hence the name.

Not far from here is the surprisingly beautiful Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. While it is magnificent on the outside, the exterior doesn't hold a candle to what you will see inside. If you've come along on our travels in earlier volumes of *A Child's Geography*, then you've seen many cathedrals. After a while, they may all start to look the same. But this one is unique. There is no other church in Europe that looks like this. Let's go inside!

Nave of the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul

What is perhaps most surprising about the interior of this church is its near-blinding whiteness. It almost feels as if you have ascended into the clouds when you enter the **nave**. Most of the decorative elements in the church are white, punctuated by the occasional brightly colored painting. In fact, there are thousands upon thousands of pure-white stucco figures and ornamental finishes decorating the entire interior of the church. The masters who created this incredible artwork were Italian Renaissance artists, both named Giovanni. Although designed by Italians, the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul is considered a Polish-Lithuanian masterpiece of the baroque period.

Welsh cat: similar to a battering ram, only a Welsh cat clawed away at a defensive wall rather than ramming it

nave: the long central part of a church

Exterior of Church of St. Peter and St. Paul

I don't know about you, but I'm famished. The only thing we've eaten today is a little package of cookies on the airplane. Let's step into this sidewalk cafe and order something to eat. We should stop at a bakery and see what delectable creations they have inside. I've heard they serve the best cappuccino in town, but maybe they'll also offer something more substantial for lunch.

The menu board reads that they serve the traditional menu of Lithuanian fare — puff pastries, yeasty buns, **kybyns**, crepes, soups, salads, and pizza. I'll have the pizza. How about you? The seating is limited, so we'll have to share a table with an older couple

who are waiting for their meal. In many cultures, it is not unusual to share a table with people you do not know, especially if the seating is tight.

Kybyns

"You look like a happy lot of adventure-seekers! What's the most interesting thing you've seen today?" asks the woman in a clear British accent.

Surprised that she speaks English, we rattle on about the Crooked Castle and the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul.

She and her husband smile at the excitement we share with them.

"What brings you here to Lithuania?" I ask.

"Oh, our daughter and son-in-law live here, and we have been visiting with them and our grandchildren this past week and a half. We head home to London tomorrow."

After mentioning that we have just arrived, Mr. Scott, a European history professor, asks us if we'd like a little history lesson about the country of Lithuania.

"Yes, please!" we answer in unison as our food arrives at the table. The pizza is piping hot, so it looks like we've got plenty of time.

"Lithuania is a very old country with an exciting past." He smiles and continues animatedly, "Not much is known about Lithuania from the Dark Ages, except that it was inhabited by barbarian Baltic tribes. At that time, a powerful warlord named Mindaugas united the fragmented tribes into one country and was crowned the first King of Lithuania on July 6, 1253. He ruled for only ten years before he was **assassinated**. This was a tragic blow to the Lithuanians, who now found themselves without a leader.

kybyns: a Lithuanian pastry, often stuffed with chopped mutton or beef. However, this versatile pastry can also be filled with mushrooms, vegetables, curd, nuts, or even chocolate.

assassinate: to murder an important person in a surprise attack for political or religious reasons

crusaders: fighters for political, social, or religious causes during medieval times

The Battle of Grunwald

"Remarkably, the situation worsened. After the fall of Jerusalem in 1291, the **crusaders** set their sights on Lithuania, the last pagan territory in Europe, and now vulnerable without a strong leader. The goal of the crusade was to subdue Lithuania and convert her subjects to Christianity. That didn't turn out to be easy. Then, in 1385, almost a hundred years later, Jogaila, a Christian, was crowned king of Poland and grand duke of Lithuania. Now allied with Poland, Lithuania was finally able to defeat the Teutonic Knights at the Battle of Grunwald.

"However, Lithuania's victory did not lead to peace. Surrounding countries, like Norway and Sweden, felt threatened by the Polish-Lithuanian alliance and attacked in 1655. This series of battles became known as the Northern Wars. Less than 150 years later, there was another war — the Great North War — involving many of the same neighboring countries. And this time, Lithuania did not win. The Swedish army destroyed the land and destroyed the economy. A famine followed these two wars, then the **plague**, and then another war. Lithuania's population was reduced by 40%. Nearly half of her citizens died from battle, sickness, or starvation. Lithuania was left weak and vulnerable.

plague: a contagious disease that spreads rapidly and kills many people

"Foreign powers swooped in, divided the territory into thirds, and gave it to Russia, Prussia, and Austria (formerly Habsburg Austria). Most of Lithuania was swallowed up by Russia to the east. Unhappy with their lot, the Lithuanians protested and revolted against the Russian government. Russia fought back by closing Lithuanian schools and banning Lithuanian newspapers. The Russians believed that if they could keep Lithuania ignorant and isolated, they stood a chance at keeping her down. But their attempts to subdue the Lithuanian people failed. An underground network of book smugglers was formed, and Lithuanians began homeschooling their children in secret. How clever is that?"

We smile, because homeschooling is a topic we are familiar with.

30 Lesson 1. Day 6

A Child's Geography. Vol. 5: Explore Viking Realms

"That's really amazing! You know, some of us homeschool as well," I chime in. "It's great to have the freedom to choose how we learn rather than being forced to keep it secret."

"Really? Good for you. Then pay attention, because this is when the ping pong match starts." Mr. Scott smiles, knowing he has captured our attention again. "Lithuania was passed back and forth between Russian and German control for the next 200 years. Yes, that is a long time. It continued right up through the 20th century, the two world wars, and the **communism** of Eastern Europe. This was perhaps the darkest season of Lithuanian history.

"The ping pong match continued until 1990, when East Germany declared an end to communism in their country and the people of Lithuania were encouraged to do the same. After decades — even centuries — of oppression, Lithuania declared her independence on March 11, 1990. The Soviets tried to squelch the succession but failed. Iceland was the first nation to recognize Lithuania's independence, and the United Nations recognized the newly independent nation of Lithuania the following year."

> **communism:** a government in which all property is publicly owned and shared equally

"That's quite a history, now, isn't it?" Mr. Scott sighs, but in a satisfied history professor sort of way. He and his wife begin to stack their dishes.

As they stand and prepare to leave, Mrs. Scott smiles. "I hope you weren't too bored by a couple of old-timers like us! We've certainly got the gift of gab."

We wave goodbye and decide that it's time we too get on our way. We've got tickets to a basketball game tonight. The Lithuanians are world-renowned for their basketball teams, having won several medals at world events, including the Olympics. After the game, we'll spend the night in a small historic hotel in the town square. Tomorrow, we'll take a train west to the coast so we can see those pristine, sparkling sand dunes of the Curonian Spit for ourselves.

→ Chasing away dreams of knights in crooked castles and fanciful pastries, the sun peeks its cheery face over the horizon. We are ready for another exciting day in Lithuania. Within an hour, our packs are on, maps are handy, and stomachs are full of the delicious complimentary breakfast served downstairs. Let's ask for directions from the hotel host so we can make the most of our day.

Before stepping through the door, our host kindly tells us which train to board, which station to get off, and the best place to rent sandboards and sand sleds. Then he wags his finger at us and warns us sternly, "Now keep your eyes and your mouth closed tightly when you sled down the dunes. Otherwise, you will spit sand at the sand spit." He chuckles at his English-language pun, points us in the direction of the train station, and we are off on our next adventure.

Lithuania is a fascinating country of contradictions — old and new, somber and friendly, fiercely independent and yet blending well with the surrounding nations. Lithuania is still actively creating her own identity as a small but free country, with a unique culture and language all her own.

"*Sudie*, goodbye, Lithuania! It has been a pleasure getting to know you!"

A Ping Pong Match of a History

Landmarks:
- ✔ The remaining Gate of Dawn stands as one of the original nine gates around Lithuania.
- ✔ Known as the Three Crosses Hill, the Crooked Castle towers are at the top of Bleak Hill.
- ✔ The entire city burnt to the ground twice in the Middle Ages.
- ✔ Cellars or basements are now casual eateries.
- ✔ The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul stands out among churches in Europe.

Cultural Contrasts:
- ✔ Cuisine includes sweet pastries along with kybyns (pastries with mutton and onion).
- ✔ Although there is pagan history, Christian influences have also shaped the land.
- ✔ The defeat of the Teutonic Knights led to more fighting with the Great Northern War.
- ✔ Lithuania was bounced between Russian and German control for 200 years.
- ✔ Basketball and sandboarding both capture the interests of sports fans.

TIMELINE

1253 ▶	King Mindaugus of Lithuania crowned the first king of Lithuania.
1291 ▶	Lithuanian Crusades begin.
1390 ▶	Welsh raiders stormed the Crooked Castle using a weapon called the Welsh cat
1395 ▶	Jogaila, a Christian, became king of Poland and grand duke of Lithuania.
1410 ▶	Battle of Grunwald takes place in Lithuania.
1655 ▶	Sweden attacks Poland and Lithuania.
1795–1990 ▶	Two hundred years of back and forth between Germany and Russian occupation of Lithuania.
1990 ▶	Lithuania declares her independence.

Build a Dome

The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Vilnius, Lithuania, is unique in its design of awe-inspiring beauty and decor. It also shares a characteristic of some other famous churches with its dome feature. In the center of the dome at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, God the Father is represented, which shows us that He is omniscient, meaning He can see all. The artistic placement of God in the center of the dome reminds us to place Him in the center of our lives above all else.

Although there are different variations of domes, they share architectural features that rely on engineering and math. Where have you encountered domes in photos or travels? Let's build a dome! With your parent's permission, follow the step-by step instructions about how triangles are used to construct a dome (adapted from Science Museum Group).
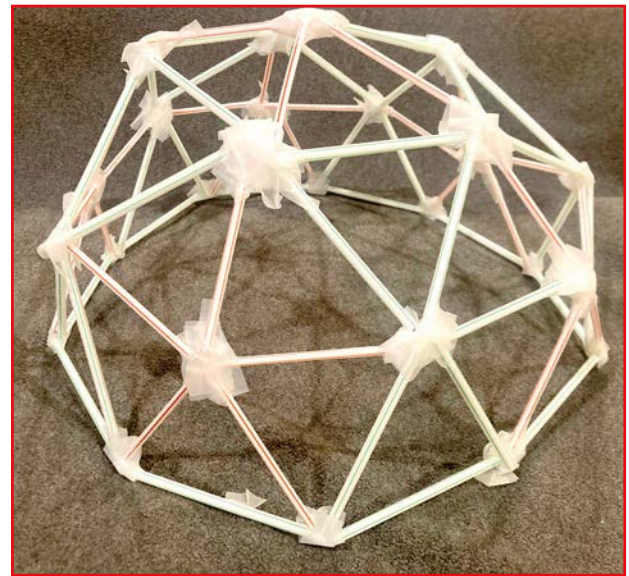
Materials needed:

☐ 65 straws

☐ Scissors

☐ Tape

☐ Ruler

Step 1:	Cut 35 straws to be 13 cm each. Cut 30 straws to be 11 cm each. Discard any straw scraps from workspace.
Step 2:	With tape, attach 10 of the longer straws together to form a round shape.
Step 3:	With tape, build triangles up from the base by alternating between short straws and long straws until all straws are used and a dome is formed.

Dome on the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Vilnius

Dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome

Fill in the Blank

Fill in the answers.

1. In 1655, Sweden attacks _____ and Lithuania.

2. Two hundred years were endured of back and forth between _____ and Russian occupation of Lithuania.

3. In 1990, Lithuania declares her _____.

4. King _____ of Lithuania was crowned the first king of Lithuania.

5. The year _____ was when the Lithuania Crusades began.

6. Welsh raiders stormed the Crooked Castle using a weapon called the _____ _____.

7. Jogaila, a _____, became king of Poland and grand duke of Lithuania in 1395.

8. In 1410, the Battle of _____ takes place in Lithuania.

9. Write a question about Lithuania and answer it.

    Question: _____

    _____

    Answer: _____

    _____

Share What You Remember About Lithuania

Answer the questions about Lithuania.

1. What makes the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in the city of Vilnius so different from the "average" cathedral? _____

2. Lithuania is world famous for which sport? _____

One generation will praise Your works to another.
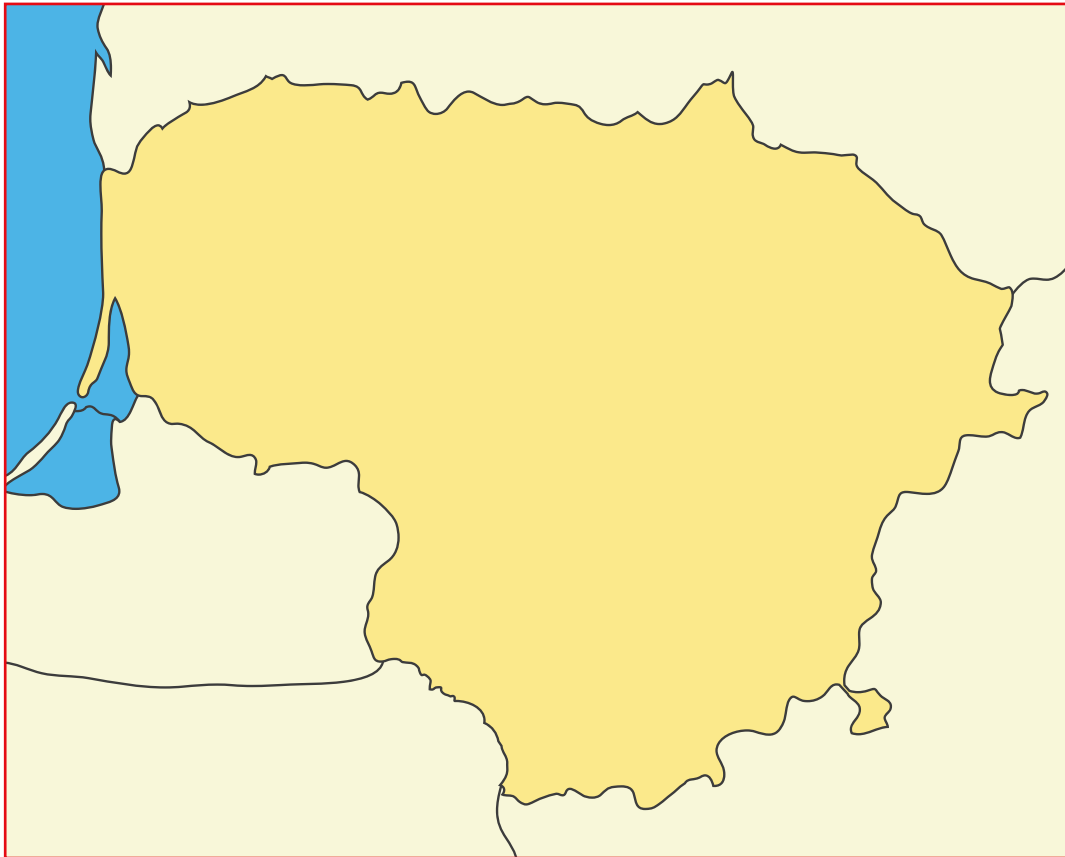
And will declare Your mighty acts.

– Psalm 145:4

Mapping It Out!

Complete the map of the country of Lithuania in the box below. Refer to the map on page 381.

Label the following places on your map. You can use colored pencils to shade areas of land or water, draw rivers and mountains, etc.

☐ Lithuania

☐ Baltic Sea

☐ Curonian Spit

☐ Lake Galvė

☐ Add a star ★ for the capital city of Vilnius.

Lithuanian hound

Flashcards

Make flashcards of the bolded glossary words from this lesson. Then, add drawings of the terms. Be creative!

A Tasty Tour

[optional]

Crepes

Ingredients:

1 cup all-purpose flour

2 eggs

½ cup milk

½ cup water

¼ teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons butter, melted

NOTE: This recipe requires adult supervision and participation.

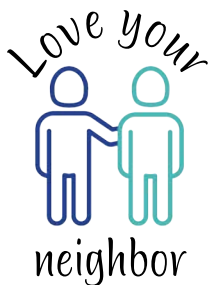**Optional: Teacher's Discretion**
☐ No   ☐ Yes
Due Date: _____

Directions:

1. In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the flour and the eggs. Gradually add in the milk and water, stirring to combine. Add the salt and butter; beat until smooth. (Alternately, combine all in a blender.)

2. Have an adult heat a lightly oiled griddle or frying pan over medium-high heat. Pour or scoop the batter onto the griddle, using approximately ¼ cup batter for each crepe. Tilt the pan with a circular motion so that the batter coats the surface evenly.

3. Cook the crepe for about 2 minutes, until the bottom is light brown. Loosen with a spatula, turn, and cook the other side. Serve these right away, taking care not to burn yourself as you add a filling. Fill with jelly, pie filling, or fresh fruit. Top with a drizzle of chocolate sauce and whipped cream.

Learn Geography Terms

Page 342 is a reference page for understanding the terms geographers use to describe landforms.

Love Your Neighbor

We learned about the use of power that caused devastating harm during the Teutonic Order and Crusades. Let's pray for people today who have been hurt by forces in the name of religion. Let's also pray for people to experience a relationship with the One true God. Lord, please draw us closer to you. Psalm 145:21a: "My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD."