

Birds of Lithuanian wooden crosses: in the footsteps of tradition

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Abstract

The old wooden crosses of Lithuania are characterized by a variety of forms and decor, which surprised many travelers and explorers of the 19th century. This unique area has been recognized as a UNESCO Intangible Heritage Site because it continues today as a living tradition. Since it is impossible to review all options in one article, this text aims to introduce researchers from other countries to only one of the unique motifs of the decor the representation of birds.

The depiction of birds in old Lithuanian wooden crosses was discussed in detail by the author in 2006,¹ so I will remind you of the essential statements and briefly discuss the situation of today's monuments.

Illustrations

- 1) Cross by road and village, Kretinga district (author's drawing).
- 2) Cross, Prienai district (author's drawing).
- 3) Pillar roof, Zarasai district (author's archyve).
- 4) Croos by road, Zarasai district (author's drawing).
- 5) Cross near the hause, 1883 (M. K. Čiurlionis Museum, A. Varna's collection, 1924 photo).
- 6) Grave monument, Jieznas cemetery, Prienai district (author's photo, 2003).
- 7) Cross, Anykščiai district (author's photo, 2012).

Introduction

Birds on old wooden crosses

Rooster: In the wooden crosses of the end of 19th century and first half 20th century the rooster is found quite rarely. It is more common in Žemaitija² and is placed at the top of the vertical crossbar of wooden crosses, sometimes it is also found in iron tops and their weather vanes, and in double crosses with the instruments of Christ's torture it is placed on the lower crossbar (*Illustration 1*).

In Dzūkija and Aukštaitija³ the rooster is extremely rare in the monuments - only isolated cockroaches have been recorded. Here he is also depicted on high, sometimes, as in Žemaitija, he is composed with the instruments of Christ's torture. However, the regional character of the cross decor differs, so in Aukštaitija and Dzūkija the rooster is more often placed at the top of the vertical cross.

As for the symbolism of the rooster, it can be assumed that its representation on the top of the wooden cross has links with the

¹Zabulytė Jolanta, Lietuviškų medinių kryžių paukščiai: reikšmės interpretacijos“, iš: *Liaudies kultūra*, 2006, nr. 5, p. 22–37; nr. 6, p. 23–35, il., https://tautosmenta.lt/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Zabulyte_Jolanta/Zabulyte_LK_2006_5.pdf; https://tautosmenta.lt/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Zabulyte_Jolanta/Zabulyte_LK_2006_6.pdf;

²Žemaitija – “low land”, region of Lithuania.

³Dzūkija and Aukštaitija - regions of Lithuania, Aukštaitija – “high land”.

meaning of the Sun Bird known in folklore, since such crosses are mostly recorded in homesteads, not in churchyards or cemeteries. In this case, the cross is not only a religious cult object, but also the World axis of human life, so the rooster can be read not only in the Christian sense of the Resurrection of Christ, but also as a bird of the Sun. The Resurrection of Christ is symbolized by a rooster in crosses with instruments of Christ's torture this iconographic scheme has been known in European art since the Middle Ages, in Lithuania since around the 18th century.

The pelican is found more often in the crosses of Dzūkija, less often in Žemaitija. This bird does not live in Lithuania, it is known only from religious art and the principles of composition in crosses are borrowed from church pulpits and altars. The pelican feeding its children with blood symbolizes the sacrifice of Christ's blood and the sacrament of the Eucharist,⁴ and this meaning is quite clear when the pelican is depicted together with the tools of Christ's suffering. However, a related interpretation of the symbolism is also possible, related to the presence of the pelican in the crosses of Žemaitija's homesteads and villages maybe the bird that feeds children with its own blood was close to the village man and as an allegory of the family in a difficult historical time (the oppression of the Russian government, uprisings, wars) with its losses and hopes associated symbol?

In Žemaitija, the pelican is found on farmhouse crosses with the instruments of Christ's torture and is placed at the top of the cross (*Illustration 1*), while in Dzūkija it is more common on gravestone crosses and is composed in various ways. Here it is placed on a vertical cross above the chapel, on the chapel or under the chapel (*Illustration 2*).

Different local variants could have been determined by examples of art from local churches and specific interpretations of village masters and customers. The pelican was not used in the wooden crosses of Aukštaitija.

The cuckoo is extremely rare - so far only several crosses with this bird placed on top have been found: one of them stood in Dzūkija (Prienai district), the other in Aukštaitija (Panevėžys county) and the two in Žemaitija (Šiauliai district). The fact that there is a cuckoo in the Aukštaitija cross is indicated in the metric of A. Varnas's photo, and the presence of the bird in the Prienai cross was confirmed by

⁴*Krikščioniškosios ikonografijos žodynas*, sud. D. Ramonienė, Vilnius: VDA, 1997, p. 263.

local residents.⁵ This is also evidenced by the rather clearly legible shape of a bird in the cross. There is no doubt that it is not a symbol of Christian iconography, because the cuckoo is associated with sin (devil, fornication). In Lithuanian folklore, the cuckoo is “God’s bird, which knows everything, you just need to understand it”, so in various life situations it is a bird a prophet, bringing news from the heavenly and dead worlds.

In the old monuments of Aukštaitija, *small stylized birds* predominate, expressing not a specific bird, but its idea. Such four small birds on the roof or at the bottom of its supports are also found on the roof pillars⁶ of this region (Illustration 3).

In the wooden crosses of Aukštaitija, their number varies extremely rarely one bird is perched on top of the monument, more often two are perched on top of the chapel columns or six to eight birds are composed in the upper part of the chapel (Illustrations 4&5).

The representation of birds on the top of the monument in different types of wooden monuments of the same period in Aukštaitija shows a former local tradition. In terms of symbolism, such stylized birds could mean small wild (forest, homestead) birds, which, like Christian angels, expressed their role as mediators between God and man.

Birds are depicted in various genres in Lithuanian folk art. We usually see specific birds roosters, hens, storks, ducks/geese in the painting of dowry chests, they are also found in spinning tools, window decoration, on top of the roof. Stylized small birds are also found in the aforementioned objects, and dowry chests express meanings related to marital success and fertility. In the cavities of the building the birds depicted in the decoration of the windows and roof had protective functions of boundaries and the roof/sky. In folk art, birds are variously composed with the Tree of Life: one or two they perch at the top, in the middle, at the bottom and in many cases express the symbolism of the sky above. So maybe the birds on the roof pillars and crosses also express what is high - the sky, the world of God? Because in folklore they are not only in the form of repentant souls, but also inhabitants of the heavenly gardens of God/Sun/afterlife. However, it is clear that this is a feature of the local tradition that has no concrete equivalents in church art.

Are birds depicted on today’s crosses?

Lithuanian cross-making is recognized as an object of intangible heritage by UNESCO, so it is worth seeing if the current masters continue the former local traditions of depicting birds.

Today’s creation of crosses has undergone many transformations, because its direct continuity was affected by Soviet ideology for a long time crosses were unwanted as monuments of the religious domain. During the period of Soviet occupation, craftsmen were looking for new forms, so monuments that were not characteristic of the old tradition appeared.

Most of the crosses in the Soviet period were built only in the territory of churches and cemeteries, while decorative wooden monuments spread in public spaces. The content also changed religious symbols were replaced by characters from literature and folklore depicted village people, plant motifs, relief inscriptions began to be used. The structure of the monuments also changed sculptural pillars with canopies appeared, which only partially resembled the old

⁵Author’s archive, 20 July 2003.

⁶Roof pillar - a specific type of wooden monuments built in Lithuania. It is considered by many researchers to be the oldest form of religious monument, consisting of a tall pillar and a canopy with an ornamental top.

roof pillars and chapel pillars. Sculptures are also more often used in crosses, they are combined with rays and plant ornament. When the direct continuity of the tradition was broken, the regional features also changed.

In 1990 after regaining independence, the construction of crosses took on a huge scale old ones were rebuilt, new ones were built in villages, roadsides, places where partisans died, near schools, and other public buildings. However, regional features remained very insignificant only individual masters tried to continue the former local traditions of cross decoration.

The available visual material testifies that the pelican and the rooster are not favored by today’s masters. The reason for this may be a change in the iconographic treatment of crosses Christian symbols associated with these birds (such as instruments of Christ’s torture) are rarely used. In some cases, monumental crosses use the symbol of the Holy Spirit a dove, which was used extremely rarely in the old tradition. Water birds (duck? goose?) are sometimes found in decorative wooden poles, which are combined with folklore motifs. This feature is related to the fact that very few masters directly follow the local tradition, and when copying, they recreate the compositions in their own way.

Stylized birds are used more, but not only in Aukštaitija - they are found in decorated wooden crosses built throughout Lithuania. For example, in Dzūkija, crosses typical of this region are still built today with the attributes of Christ’s suffering spears, but they are diversified with small birds characteristic of Aukštaitija. Another example from Dzūkija in the tombstone stylized chapel pillar, two birds are carved in the pillar part (Illustration 6).

However, in Aukštaitija there is a lot of continuity of the forms of the old tradition, but the birds are often replaced by angels. Two stylized birds are sometimes placed at the top of the horizontal bars of the cross (Illustration 7).

Less often one at the top of the monument. Some masters of Aukštaitija also use stylized small birds on roof posts by assembling them in traditional places, but these are few and isolated examples. Sometimes they change the former places of the birds. The creators of today’s crosses pay the main attention to decorativeness, plant ornament, rays, in order to create an ornate monument. Other winged creatures angels are popular in current crosses throughout Lithuania, but this is the topic of a separate article.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be said that the former old tradition of depicting birds is barely alive in today’s monuments religious symbols of roosters and pelicans are not used in Žemaitija and Dzūkija, stylized birds are rarely found in monuments and are perched on monuments regardless of regional features, relying instead on creative interpretations. The traditional features are sometimes preserved by the masters of Aukštaitija, but more often the figures of angels, which were characteristic of this region, are found, instead of birds.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.