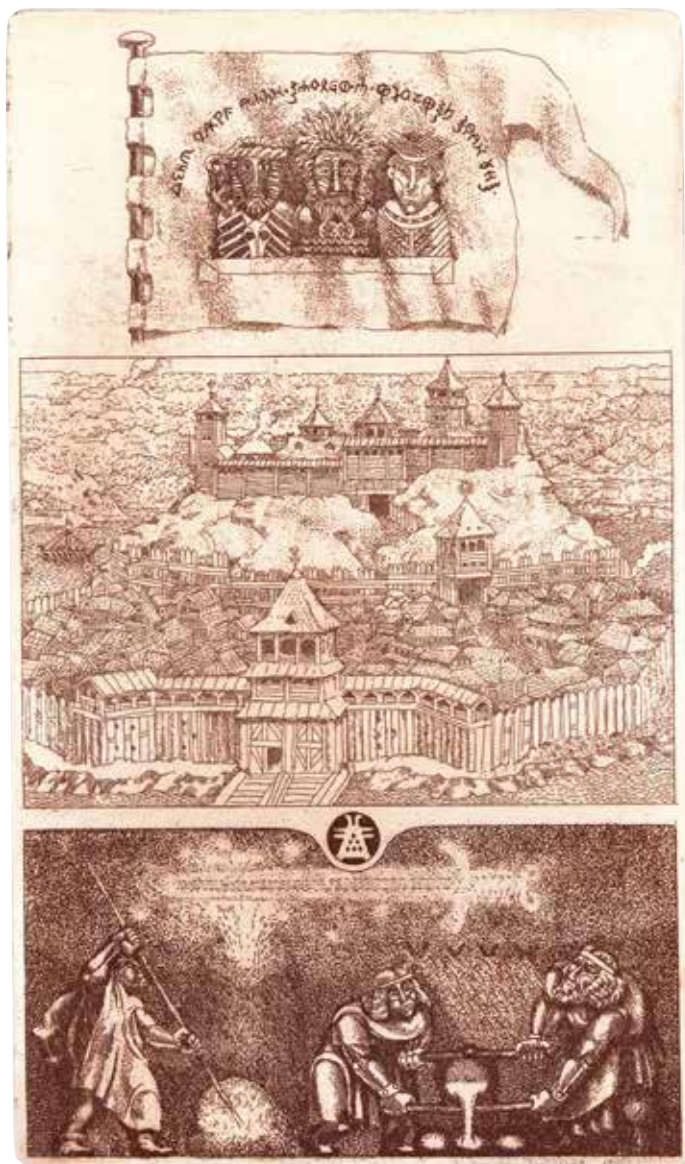


IŠ LIETUVOS KULTŪROS IR ESTETINĖS MINTIES ISTORIJOS



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Symbolism of Roofed Pillars: A Dimension Beyond Aesthetics

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„Not so long ago, the villages of Lithuania were potted with beautifully carved wooden roofs and crosses, the symbolism of which spread the shining sunlight ...“

Marija Gimbutienė¹

The Dzūkija or Aukštaitija parcels, crossroads and town parks are still decorated with a variety of shapes and styles, usually called “sunny” roofs and chapel posts. Although there are a number of studies devoted to their classification, studies of stylistics and character development, it is worth thinking deeper about what is behind this aesthetic and symbolic expression. How does this phenomenon reveal their creator? What do these works say about Lithuanian identity? Most of the phenomena taking place in Lithuania today, and paradoxically, even the search for national Lithuanian identity, often obey externally imposed cultural scenarios. Thus, in this article we will try to understand old authentic traditional Lithuanian values and reflect on effective orientations that would help to preserve Lithuanian identity under the conditions of European integration and globalization. Questions that are relevant to Lithuanian identity are raised in the article: Is it possible to study wooden roof posts and chapels as a phenomenon revealing an old Lithuanian world view? If so, what does their aesthetic appearance tell us, what lies behind the symbolism of roofed pillars, and what are the symbols of the chapel posts about? What is the construction of multi-leveled roof posts and chapels? For reflection on these questions, historical photos of roof poles and chapels are used, as well as research and insights from other scientists.

Keywords: roof poles, chapel posts, The Caregiver, Lithuanian man identity.

Evolution of Roofed Pillars

There are a number of theories about the origin and development of roof poles and

chapel posts, and various researchers are developing different theories about the motivation behind the construction of these monuments. It is worth mentioning an interesting version developed by ethnologist Rūta Giedrienė that the spirits of the dead were

¹ Gimbutienė 1994: 7.

flying birds watching their homeland. When the spirit was resting, it wanted to be on land. And so, roofed pillars and chapel posts were built in the fields and in outskirts, often featured bird figures. Eventually, roofed pillars and chapel posts became monuments for the dead.² Secret agreements between a man and God are also mentioned, where one man promised to do certain works as a sacrifice in anticipation of wonders and divine graces.³ There is also a widespread version that these monuments were built at a place of a tragedy or haunting of ghosts.⁴ But all these versions do not explain why they built the roofed pillars and chapel posts. Who made these small architectural monuments? Why did they become an appropriate mediator for the relationship of humans with the sacred, supernatural or deceased world?

The Christian liturgical or Devotional⁵ tradition cannot explain this relationship, since the embellishments of the roofed pillars and chapel posts are rich in the use of pre-Christian symbolism. Usually the sun⁶, moon, stars, birds, plants, flowers and their blossoms and especially trees are at the top of these small architectural monuments. Almost every chapel had symbols of bulls, horses, goats and snakes⁷. The pre-Christian art of Lithuanian tradition in these monuments not only illustrates the formation of this phenomenon before the introduction of Christianity in Lithuania, but also refers to the long and



Adomas Varnas. Set of Adomas Varnas photo collection. Two Roofed Pillars, 1838. Lithuanian Art Museum

rich development of the formation of those wooden sculptures. Most researchers agree⁸ that the custom of building roof posts and chapels is a remnant of ancient pre-Christian tradition. It is worth noting that Lithuanian ethnic culture has coexisted parallel with the official Christian religion for a long time in the most archaic layers of peasant culture⁹. After the introduction of Christianity, there was no sudden change in spiritual culture¹⁰. The introduction of Christianity was carried out, according to Gimbutiene, „with a cross on the sword“. Neither Aukštaitija nor Žemaitija were able to eradicate the relics of

2 Giedrienė 1976: 27.

3 Burinskaitė 2009: 129.

4 Surdokaitė 2010: 51.

5 Personal relation to Jesus Christ.

6 Iron top of the roofed pillar. Stylized cross Zabulytė also proposes to call it “suns”.

7 Dundulienė 2008: 57.

8 P. Dundulienė, P. Galaunė, J. Zabulytė, A. Širmulis and others.

9 Greimas 1979: 14.

10 Vyšniauskaitė 1992: 108.



Adomas Varnas. Set of Adomas Varnas photo collection. Roofed pillar, 1842. Lithuanian Art Museum

pagan culture in the layers of peasant culture. Christianity was introduced by assimilating previous customs and giving them a new meaning.¹¹ The symbolism of the sacrificial pillar and the tree of the world also integrated Christian iconography¹², harmoniously joining it with pagan and vitality-rich mythical symbolism, where the expression of religious syncretism is manifested. This was all due to the intense fight against the Catholic clergy. Those expressions intensively exploit pagan and Christian symbols together. In other words, these symbolic systems exist harmoniously in the plane of sacredness.

11 Girininkas 2012: 207.

12 Dundulienė 2008: 35.



Romuva (temple) depicted by Simon Grunau

But where did the form of the roofed pillars and chapel posts come from? Daukantas writes that Lithuanians „held the idols of their gods covered with roofs in the niches of the great oak and prayed there.“ In other words, the idols of their gods were protected in the hollow of a tree covered with a roof. The use of tree niches for the placement of statues of gods is also confirmed by the illustration of the Romovė Temple in Prussia, published in 1684. In this publication, the images of three gods are placed in the oak trunk hollows. Daukantas also writes that „there were three oaks in the trunk of the oak, in which there were three gods, or tree idols, were standing.“ It refers to an area of deity that is clearly separated from confused secular surroundings. In other words, the roofed pillars and chapel poles, and especially the miniature chapel, form an area accessible through prayer or meditation in which holiness is carefully guarded. Jurgis Baltrušaitis beautifully called them lantern - shaped roof posts¹³, like a candle flame protecting spiritually framed sacral contents from winds of anxiety. It is worth

13 Zabulytė 2013 : 12.

mentioning that such a structure was often developed by means of a three-tier structure, where each level represented a separate sphere. Many researchers¹⁴ associate this multidimensional character with the symbol of the world tree and these areas with the spheres of heaven, the world and the earth.

World Tree and Life Tree Symbolism

Not only wooden carvings but also the iron crosses that decorate their tops, commonly referred to as „cross-suns“ or „sunny crosses“¹⁵, along with other decorations, speak of the image of the mythological tree of the world.¹⁶ The tree of the world, uniting the underground, earth, and sky - the three universe spheres, encircles the gods of heaven, the sun, the moon, and the birds, the roots of the underworld, the fish and the snakes, the gods of the earth, the animals.¹⁷ That is how those monuments depict the whole. They clearly distinguish the top and bottom, and most importantly, the center where the ritual takes place.¹⁸ The image of the world tree, according to Toporov, is the image of a certain universal concept that has long been the main model of the people of an old and new culture. It was the most important, and in some traditions the only theme of art in the early stages of its development.¹⁹

These monuments not only create the area of the sacred space, a certain crack in the secular space, but also combine the



Adomas Varnas. Set of Adomas Varnas photo collection. Roofed pillar, 1842. Lithuanian Art Museum



Adomas Varnas. Set of Adomas Varnas photo collection. Roofed pillar, 1842. Lithuanian Art Museum

earth, the heavens, the saints, the works of nature and the people. When building a roof top, a person opens the door to the sacred world; he opens up a holy space. This space is opened, not just as a matter of chaotic fact, but in a way and in a sense, which is formulated in the meaningful structure of the roofed pillars and chapel posts (world tree). The attention of the passer-by, for a short time, is transferred from everyday life to eternal being. Roofed construction, like a symbolic vector, directs one's eyes upward. In a sense, a person is moved to another dimension of reality. And then he lowers his eyes back to the world of everyday life. But he is returning differently, and as he returns, he enriches his daily life with sacred divine shades and halftones. The Heidegger concept of the Fourfold (*Geviert*), where the Mortals meet the Immortals between Heaven and Earth, can also help one to understand the principles that appear here.

14 P. Dundulienė, Č. Kontrimas, N. Vėlius and others.

15 Zabulytė 2004: 30.

16 Kontrimas 1991: 22.

17 Vėlius 1983: 163–182.

18 Топоров 1972: 93–94.

19 Топоров 1972: 93.

We could say that the symbolic expression of such a meeting takes a place in the creation of these monuments. In other words, the roofed pillars and chapel poles (the tree of the world) goes beyond the mere dimension of human life, and it includes the reality beyond pragmatic everyday life.

Symbolism of the roofed pillars and chapel posts is like a model of world cosmology, linking man's everyday world with the sacred, defining the place of man. The creator of roof poles carefully combines the heavenly, dwelling and dungeon areas aesthetically, expressing this aggregation movement in the work. However, such a reunion was not always a simple task, and demanded a lot of effort from the creator, especially the care involved, because the artist often had to reconcile and balance the paradoxes of the living world. The concept of worry is essential here, so the forms of roofed pillars and chapel posts are not an accidental feature. The roof structure can also be seen as a type of loft or shelter. The roof not only protects the post itself from rain, but at the same time symbolizes refuge, as the roofs of a farm or residential buildings point to safety. The roofing highlights a certain concern, and reveals its creator as caring, as a caregiver.

The Caregiver

There is a great deal of research on the phenomenon of the Pensive Christ. The sculpture of the Pensive Christ was found in small wayside chapels on the roads, a custom that spread in Germany, Poland and Lithuania. It is also worth mentioning that the movement of the Franciscans and *Devoter Moderna* together with German mysticism



Lithuanian Sacred Art, Volume II. Lithuanian folk art. 17th-20th centuries". (Vilnius, 2003). The publication was collected by Dalia Bernotaitė-Beliauskienė. Published by Lithuanian Art Museum

are associated with the popularization of the devotional image, which stimulated meditation through both internal visualization and realistic images.²⁰ Daukantas also mentioned that even before Christianity, it was common to keep the thoughtful images of gods in the niches of the roof-covered trees. The symbolism of Christ may also be associated with the Christian habit of inheriting old symbols from local cultures. Dundulienė emphasizes that the appearance of a crucifix on the chapel and roof posts is paradoxically related, not to the very meaning of the Christian symbol, but to the prohibition of building roof posts and the adaptation of their creators to changing historical circumstances²¹. The artists used

20 Surdokaitė 2010: 51.

21 Dundulienė 2008: 57.



Picture of a chapel in the village of Skuodas, Kupiškis, Panevėžys County. Photography by Balys Buračas

a variety of symbols that could be used to adapt to indoctrination requirements when constructing a roofing post.

Beresnevičius' incredibly accurate remark was that the image of the Pensive Christ opens the prototype of the Lithuanian farmer. He writes that „if a farmer is not like the Pensive Christ and does not repeat divine contemplation that binds to the whole, he cannot lay the foundation for the farm, for the homestead, nor for the harvest, because everything spills out. There are a lot of things to manage. After crises, catastrophes, warfare, the Pensive Christ grows, to remind men of their duty to gather the remaining things with together. They work to revive the whole.”²² We see the roots of the Lithuanian way, which are not touched by the changes of time. This insight also explains many things that are happening in our time, and also allows us to deepen our understanding of the worldview expressed in archaic Lithuanian folklore. The role of the Pensive Christ, in spite of the dangers in his homeland, does not fundamentally

22 Beresnevičius 2005.

change. After all the losses, tragedies and stumbling blocks, he rises modestly, but confidently, with Lithuanian simplicity and concern, and restores the essential symbols of the nation. The caregiver is like a Lithuanian prototype- a man who, despite the hardships that attack the country, carefully renews himself, restores his life.

Free artists

The phenomenon of the roofed pillars and chapel posts is undoubtedly related to the phenomenon of an individual creator. As Česlovas Kontrimas rightly observes, they were created by folk artists. If weaving and embroidery work are related to women's activities, wood and metal processing were a masculine activity. Hence, tablecloths overtly represent women's handiwork in Lithuania. They represent women's concern for home order and warmth, and the roofed pillars and chapel posts and crosses point to the male character and his worldview. In fact, in the tradition of Lithuanian peasant culture, men at the farm had workshops where not only were implements and household utensils repaired, but more creative craftsmen also carved. It was more complicated to build the blacksmith. There was a famous blacksmith of Vabalninkis in the Antašava region, Juozapas Tilindis, who found out how the gypsies got their horseshoes. He made a blacksmith on a big stone. His crosses are filled with stylized plant shapes, especially spruce branches and blossoms. According to Kontrimas' writings, there are many pieces similar to that of Tilindis. As our well-known cross craftsman, carver, folk master Stanislav



The folktag created by folk artist Algimantas Sakalauskas is dedicated to commemorating the centuries-old Lithuanian drama theater in Marijampolė

Riauba says, “I am carving, because I cannot not do that. The masters of the roofs and crosses of our days claim that the raised roof essentially changes the living environment. The roofed pillars not only decorate, but also protect.” It can be said that the rooftop pitch phenomenon both today and in archaic times reveals the same Lithuanian tradition.

Nowadays, the tradition of the roof pillars and chapel posts developed in Lithuania reflects the topicalities of today, which have often lost their sacred dimension. Just as Christian symbols were once penetrated into old pagan symbolism, today the process of secularism diminishes the sacred symbols of the roof pillars and chapel posts, but the archetypal principles of their architecture remain unchanged. Roofing topics are extremely diverse, and we can find monuments for Lithuanian heroes such as: Vytautas and Darius and Girėnas. We can also find many commemorative monuments for anniversaries and for housewarming. Monument workers often adapt to the consumer; that in turn extends the forms of this phenomenon,

which reflects the topicalities and concerns of today’s Lithuanian world.

Despite widespread secularism and desacralization processes around the world, Eliade rightly observes that modern secular man has preserved the traits of religious man, because he is the heir of a religious past, its consequence.²³ In other words, the disappearance of religions does not mean the disappearance of religiosity. Secularity is the expression of the same human structure that previously was expressed in sacred acts.²⁴ Thus, in the tradition of roof pillars and chapel posts, desacralization and the processes of worship do not necessarily mean some kind of decline, but rather expression of the same spirit in a safe environment where there is no danger, where it is free to experiment and play creatively with forms., Similar to other art forms, it searches and opens up new enriched ways of expression.

Conclusions

In summary, the monuments of small Lithuanian architecture discussed open up not only the various forms of individual self-expression that are reaching us from the ages of history, but the archaic tradition of pagan culture expresses itself here first. The everyday world of archaic peasant culture was conceived here in the language of mysterious symbols. It can be thought that, like in our day, this phenomenon spread in archaic times. Those monuments for spiritual lifting of the community were erected by the efforts of individual enthusiasts inspired by

²³ Eliade, 1997: 145.

²⁴ Eliade, 1997, 6.

tradition, accessible to ordinary man. From here on, the human scale of these creations arose, their sincere and understandable style, their natural attractiveness. The main features of the Lithuanian way – simplicity, modesty, caring, inclination to holiness, but also extraordinary perseverance, endurance and the ability to reconcile and balance sometimes seemingly incompatible things were revealed in the creations. The phenomenon of roof pillars and chapel posts is very unique

in that it shows that like every other nation which cherishes their archaic foundations, Lithuanians at all times had the type of inspired people who were not activists of the dominant official formal system, but self-motivated individuals who came from the old tradition, the creators and caretakers who cherished the most vital values which were expressed symbolically in their works. They were not only preserving, but also developing the old spirit of Lithuanian tradition.

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