

Vytis ‘Knight’ and *Gedimainaičių stulpai* ‘Columns of the Gediminas’ Dynasty’ from the Viewpoint of Symbolism

Summary

Two main historical heraldic signs of Lithuania, the so-called *Vytis* ‘Knight’ and *Gedimainaičių stulpai* ‘Columns of the Gediminas’ Dynasty’, are examined here from the viewpoint of symbolism. This means concentrating not on their history, prevalence, or the attributive meaning, but on the very inner structure of one image or the other and the essential ideas presupposed by them.

The first is the figure of the ‘Knight’. It consists of three essential components: the rider, the appropriate relation of colours, that is, a white rider against red background, and the uplifted sword. The exploration, therefore, is accordingly divided into three parts.

In the first part, the symbolism of the rider is addressed. As it, in turn, consists of a astride and a horse, the symbolism of the horse is also involved. Being an animal, the horse is supposed to symbolize the vital force, subliminal animality, and, since in the image of the rider the animal is under control of the human, the whole image implies inner unconscious vitality subjected to consciousness. That is to say, the soul dominates over its body, its instinctive drives, and powers. Therefore, and not conversely, a rider is universally considered noble, the very image of nobility and elevation indeed, both in the worldly and diverse spiritual senses. In the worldly sense, the rider, exactly because of his power over the animal,

the horse, indicates and represents the power as such and, consequently, authority. In the spiritual sense, the image of the rider conveys the idea of vigour, potency and freedom achieved by way of yoking the vital forces and instinctual drives. In various traditions from Lithuania to Tibet, these are also represented by the image of 'the wind horse' and therefore the metaphor of 'wind riding' is invoked in turn. For the soul of the deceased, it is desirable to travel to the otherworld astride on horse too, hence the burials on horse, with a horse, or with a horse's head. In this context, the so-called Thracian rider and some of his names found in inscriptions, *Vetespios* and *Perkōnis*, are briefly considered. The first could be interpreted as a compound of Iranian words meaning 'wind' (*vata*) and 'horse' (*aspa*, cf. Vedic *vātāsva* 'wind horse'), and the second coincides with the Balt name of the thunder god, *Perkūnas*. As it were, the Lithuanian *Perkūnas* is also usually depicted as a white heavenly rider on a white horse with a blazing sword in his raised hand signifying the lightning.

The white horse is universally attributed to celestial gods, and they are usually depicted as white riders. And not only gods: often, a deceased person riding to the otherworld, and even personified Death itself, is also white or whitish. The colour white, especially in relation to red, generally symbolizes the spiritual principle in all its range of connotations, from a white shining deity to a pale ghost, and the red, correspondingly, refers to the living principle with its connotations of blood, fire, fervour, and the like. This symbolic opposition is also recognisable in the heraldic sign under consideration: a white rider (spirit, deity, soul) in a red environment (the bloody battlefield of life). The area beyond the figure (external chaos) could be conceived as symbolically black, and thus we obtain three colours, white, red, and black. These three 'principal colours' and their corresponding symbolism are also universal: the white – bone, seed, essence, mind, consciousness, clarity; the red – flesh, blood, embodiment, body, emotion, passion; the black – excrement, trash, slumber, unconsciousness (as Hindu *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, for instance). Dynamically, white is the beginning, red – the process, and black – the end. In the time circle, white is the morning or day (spring, summer correspondingly), red – the evening (autumn), and black – the night (winter). Of special interest in this

context are these three diurnal periods in the anthropomorphic shape of three – white, red, and black – riders, as they are represented in fairytales. The three Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev 6.1–8), white, fiery, and black, are supposedly linked with this fairytale image, as also the fourth that follows them – pale and with a sword in his hand.

The sword is universally a weapon of light over the darkness. In the literal sense, a raised sword glistens, glitters and thus resembles lightning. And, indeed, it is one of the traditional weapons of the thunder god Perkūnas. In the figurative sense, the sword is a metaphor of a sharp differentiating intellect penetrating all the layers down to the very naked truth, just like the lightning penetrates dark clouds. In the words of the Tibetan Buddhist Chögyam Trungpa (1973: 177) on the spiritual wisdom, *prajñā*, ‘Prajna is traditionally symbolized by a sharp, two-edged sword that cuts through all confusion’. Significantly, the lightning also is a universal metaphor of sudden enlightening. Thus, the image of a white knight on a white horse with a raised glittering sword (Perkūnas, supposedly) itself acquires corresponding spiritual connotations and could be seen as a spiritual symbol of the supreme, divine enlightenment. That refers to the visible manifestation of the thunder god, the lightning, and its audible manifestation, the very thunder, would in turn involve revealing speech, the Word of God. Albeit an acute word, speech, or a sharp tongue are also often conveyed by the metaphor of a cutting tool such as an axe, a knife, or a sword – as in the case of the rider with a sword protruding from his mouth in the famous image of the Book of Revelation (especially 1.16; 19.1–16, 19–21). As it were, In India, another ‘apocalyptic’ rider is known, the so-called Kalki avatara of Viṣṇu: in the shape of a white rider on a white horse and with a sword raised, exactly like our ‘Knight’, *Vytis*. Consequently, we have an archetype here, the archetype of the Victory of Light over Darkness. Therefore all these lofty connotations may not be excluded from the image of the Lithuanian *Vytis* either. Indeed, factual evidence can be provided that confirm such elevated symbolism of the image, as in the revelations of St Casimir in the seventeenth century and later, in the paintings by Čiurlionis, Žmuidzinavičius and others, in poetry, in fairy tales, and so on.

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The second heraldic emblem belongs to the dynasty of the Lithuanian king Gediminas and became definitely established from the times of his grandson Vytautas in the late fourteenth century. The sign is of quite a peculiar graphical shape, so first of all it is essential to identify what it supposedly signifies and only then it will be possible to associate it with appropriate notions.

For this reason the research is divided into two parts. In the first one, attempts are made to identify the signified – the adequate material object that might be graphically represented by the shape. First, some earlier conjectures are briefly surveyed. Then the association with ‘columns’, evident from the very denomination known since the sixteenth century, is analysed taking into account such samples as the ancient Indian *bráhman* (primarily some wooden construction in the form of an arch or a gate, such as *bráhma-doāram* in Maitrī-upaniṣad IV.4; VI.28 etc.), the Greek *dókana*, the Roman *porta triumphalis*, the Old Prussian paired columns devoted to the legendary twins *Worskaito* and *Iszwambrato*, and so on. Finally, it is maintained that the whole figure represents the primeval archetypal temple *en face* with the altar and the fire on it in the centre, and the two portal pillars on either side, or the poles of its circular enclosure in profile (the vertical section). As representing the vertical section of the archetypal temple, the shape corresponds to the principal maṇḍala, which, in turn, amounts to the horizontal section, or the ground plane, of the same archetypal temple. The circle depicts the enclosure with the inscribed square representing the altar and its central point – the fire on the altar. As a matter of fact, the facades of many temples of different religions, such as Christian churches, Islamic mosques, Buddhist shrines, etc., coincide in their structure with the shape of the ‘Columns’.

In the second part of the study, the symbolism of the three mentioned geometrical components of the principal maṇḍala (the circle, the inscribed square, and the central point) in their interrelation is analysed, including such cases as the vault of the Sky covering the Earth with the Fire, or Human, in the centre; God the Father, the Mother Goddess,

and their Son (the primal, archetypal Trinity); the Father embracing the Mother with the Child in her lap (the archetypal Holy Family); the Egg consisting of the shell, the white, and the yolk; also, the plum consisting of the peel, the pulp, and the stone, namely *centrum*; in the mental sphere, the structure amounts to the Aristotelian great premise, the small premise, and the solution; the Hegelian thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, and the like.

As the figure of the 'Columns' with its thus distinguished three components represents the vertical section of the same spatial object, that is, the archetypal temple whose ground plane (the horizontal section) constitutes the principal maṇḍala with corresponding structural components, so the very same symbolism as that of the maṇḍala, applies also to the 'Columns' in the final analysis. Its essential meaning could be summarised as 'the principal pattern of fecundity, productivity, and plenitude' in the widest and deepest sense.