

The Tertiaries in the Early Stages of Christianity in Lithuania: their Attributes in the Light of Archaeology

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The conversion of Lithuania to Catholicism was followed by the inauguration of related forms of Western European culture. The impact of Christianity is also evident in the Lithuanian archaeological materials. Medieval burial grounds of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries reveal various grave goods not known here before Christianity. Among them there are pouches bearing symbolic marks. The aim of the present paper is to investigate the typical features of the ornamentation and symbolism of the marks of such pouches.

On ascending the Polish throne, Jogaila pledged himself to introduce Christianity into Lithuania by the Lithuanian-Polish Union of Krewo in 1385. The introduction of Christianity as a state religion proceeded rapidly, in its turn radically changing the political, economic and cultural situation in Lithuania. Baptism itself progressed peacefully without any violence. Early in 1387 Jogaila arrived in Vilnius with a large retinue. After the baptism ceremonies his first privileges were proclaimed with the aim of protecting the newly introduced Catholicism against Orthodoxy, which by then had already taken root and was spreading in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. By the privilege of February 17, 1387 the bishopric of Vilnius was established, and it was endowed with lands. That was a sign of an official recognition of the new religion and the granting of full immunity to the Catholic Church of Lithuania.

Samogitia remained unbaptised, and its juridical status was a matter of great concern. The region was returned to Lithuania by the peace treaty of Toruń in 1411. Shortly afterwards Jogaila and Vytautas initiated a political demonstration directed against Western Europe –

the baptism of Samogitia. In 1414 this campaign was presented at the ecumenical Council of Constance as a great movement of converting the pagans.

The solution of the political and legal issues of the Catholic Church in Lithuania was followed by the construction of churches and the establishment of parishes. Under favourable conditions Catholicism was spreading quickly in the country.

The baptism of Lithuania seems to have been implemented effectively and resourcefully. Judging on the basis of various sources it can be surmised that it was the Franciscans who should be given credit for that situation. In the GDL they were among the leading orders. At the end of the fourteenth and in the first half of the fifteenth centuries their monasteries and churches outnumbered other orders. Their monasteries functioned in Vilnius, Kaunas, Ašmena, Lida, Drachicyn, and Pinsk. The Franciscans administered three churches in Vilnius alone. The contribution of the Franciscans to the initial conversion of the Lithuanians is evidenced by the fact that the first bishops of the Diocese of Vilnius were the Franciscans Andrius Vosylius (1388–98) and Jokūbas Plichta (1398–1407), whose activity was crucial in establishing a privileged position of the Church. On the initiative of bishop Andrius the Lithuanian vicarage was founded under the aegis of the Franciscan province of Bohemia-Poland. Numerous fifteenth-century documents, wills, donations and privileges extended to the Franciscan monasteries, clearly evidence a lively and successful activity of the Order among the population.

In all the countries one of major tasks of the Franciscans was to organise people into reli-

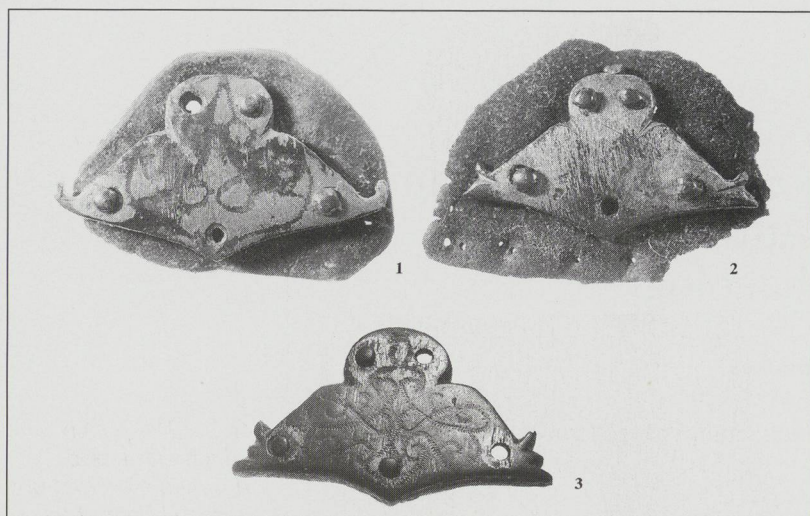
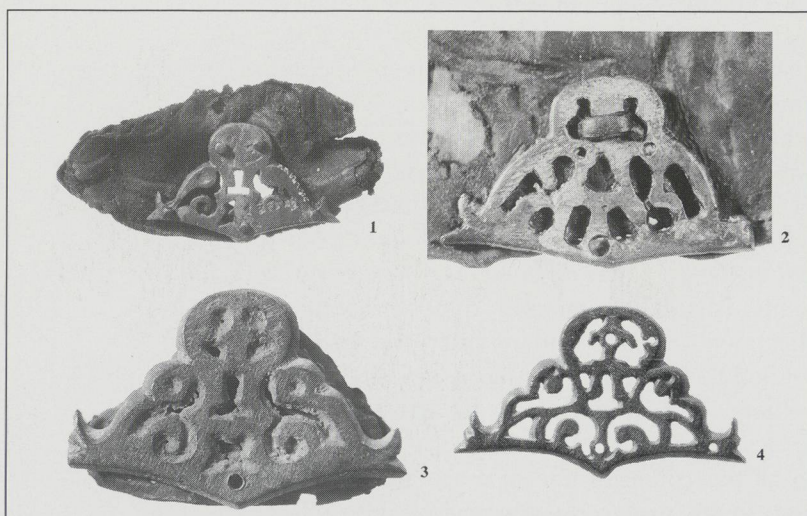


Fig. 1: The plate-type bird-like badges.

gious communities – the Third Order of St Francis. In 1221, with the aid of Cardinal Ugolino of Segni, Francis prepared a brief rule of life for the so-called Brothers and Sisters of Penance, afterwards referred to as Tertiaries. The Venice rule of 1228 relates to the attributes of the Tertiaries in this way: “They are allowed to wear leather pouches, only sewn simply, without any silk threads” (Pranciškus Asyžietis 1995, 170–171). The local rules of life of the Tertiary orders vary. Thus, the wording of the same extract in the Polish Franciscan rule of the fifteenth century is: “They must have leather pouches and bags” (Brückner 1904, 112–113).

Even lacking definitive data, the investigators of the Franciscan activities did not doubt that Tertiary orders appeared in Lithuania shortly after the baptism of the country (Kantak 1937, 222–223; Gidžiūnas 1964, 425–428). The rule of life of the Third Order indicates quite unmistakably that the leather pouch was an

Fig. 2: The openwork design bird-like badges.



attribute of a Tertiary. The excavations of the old cemeteries in the dioceses of Vilnius and Samogitia revealed leather pouches (or their metal badges and details of everyday objects) chiefly from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Svetikas 1997b, 13–38). Individual leather pouches with metal badges were found in the excavations not only in the cities and castles of Lithuania but also in Livonia and Greater Novgorod.

In this paper only symbolic badges fastened in the most visible place of the pouch – on its flap – are dealt with, leaving aside utilitarian aspects. In the graves of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries three types of symbolic badges were found.

Bird-like Badges. According to the way they are made, these badges can be divided into two varieties: (1) plate-type (Fig. 1) and (2) openwork design (Fig. 2). With regard to the number of the offsets of the wings, the size and décor, three kinds of plate-type badges can be distinguished, and there are four kinds of openwork badges, differing in size, fretwork décor and the construction of the clasp. The oldest are plate badges, ranging in date from the last decade of the fourteenth century to the first decade of the fifteenth century. They were found only in the Diocese of Vilnius. Openwork badges appeared later – in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, and the emergence of such pouches coincided with the establishment of the diocese.

Bird-like badges consist of two symbolic elements: a bird gliding head down (in the extant parts of the pouch flap the widest part of the badge – the head and wings – is attached to the edge of the flap) and five protruding heads of the rivets (two in the tail, two at the ends of the wings and one at the head). The décor of the surface of the badge and the fretwork most probably signify feathers. One more important detail is a white metal, covering the surface of the badge – in this way possibly an attempt is made to depict a white bird. In Christian symbolism, a white bird is a dove, used as an emblem of Christ, the Holy Ghost, a neophyte, a saved soul, purity, etc. Many theological interpreters treat the dove as a symbol of Christ. Apocryphal writings and legends, which are nearly always related to folk belief, deal with Christ the Dove. Among the numerous symbolic meanings of the dove the five heads of

the rivets in the bird-like badge seem to be the nearest to the representation of Christ, possibly standing for his five wounds suffered on the cross (Ferguson 1989, 15–16; Forstner 1990, 228–232).

Stylised Bird-like Badges. Such badges are few. All of them differ in shape, size and décor, however, there is one detail shared by all of them – a hemisphere in the centre of the ornament. Such badges were found in the dioceses of Vilnius and Samogitia. Some of them still preserve the form of the bird, while others are triangular in shape. It is worth noting that one well-preserved pouch of this type was found during the excavations at the church of the Franciscans in Vilnius in 1998 (Fig. 3). It is one of three Vilnius Franciscan churches of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. A sixteenth-century leather pouch with a symbolic pentagonal badge was found in the excavations on the site of the Franciscan church of St Anne, which had stood in the territory of the Lower Castle of Vilnius. The finds of this kind definitely indicate a direct relationship of the pouches with the Franciscans. Chronologically, the stylised bird-like badges go back to the twenties and thirties of the fifteenth century.

With respect to composition these badges also consist of two parts: a shape imitating a bird or a triangle and a hemisphere as the dominant of the arrangement. It is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the hemisphere. It could be associated either with the dome of heaven or with the circle perceived as a symbol of the Catholic Church and God.

Rosette Badges. They also comprise two varieties. The badges of the first type are composed of the Greek letters *I* and *X* with a stylised lily at the ends of the letters. In the centre there is a convex oval. The oval contains a round plate with five pits or a trefoil (Fig. 4:1–2). The second variety consists merely of a badge in the form of an octagonal rosette, in the centre of which there is a filigree flower with a cone in the middle (Fig. 4:3). Rosette badges are peculiar only to the diocese of Vilnius, and they date back to the last decade of the fourteenth and the first quarter of the fifteenth centuries. The rosette badges of the first type show the monogram of Christ, made up of the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ *I* and *X*. Such a monogram is also called *gwiazdisty*

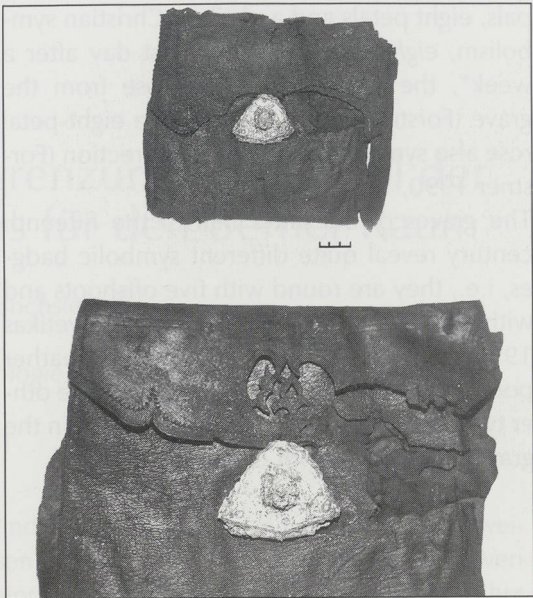
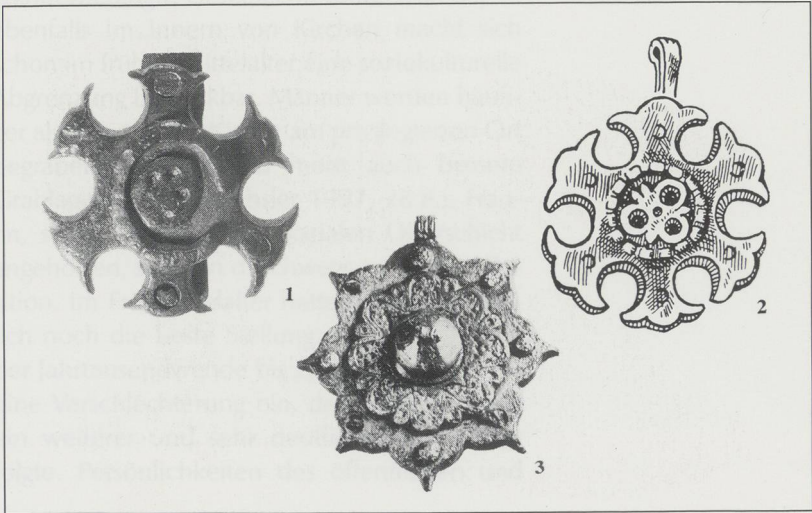


Fig. 3: The pouch which was found during the excavations at the church of the Franciscans in Vilnius and the stylised bird-like badge.

“starry, star-like” (Forstner 1990, 34–35). The three-petal fleurs-de-lis at the ends of the letters probably signify the Trinity; they could also symbolise Christ because “His body was free of any blemish and therefore resembled a lily” (Forstner 1990, 188). The five pits in the oval plate in the middle of the badges of the first type are a symbol of the five wounds of Jesus. Sometimes the same symbol is expressed differently. Thus, in one badge the five pits are replaced by a clover, the three leaves of which symbolise the Trinity; in its corners there are four small offshoots – two in one corner (the wounds of the feet) and two in the other corners (the wounds of the palms), and the fifth wound is represented by a dot in the centre of the clover (Fig. 4:2).

The badge of the second variety is a Gothic rosette (Fig. 4:3). It is composed of eight se-

Fig. 4: The rosette badges.



pals, eight petals and a pistil. In Christian symbolism, *eight* stands for "the first day after a week", the day when Christ rose from the grave (Forstner 1990, 48–50). The eight-petal rose also symbolises Christ's Resurrection (Forstner 1990, 191–193).

The graves of the latter half of the fifteenth century reveal quite different symbolic badges, i.e., they are round with five offshoots and with a lion or a rose in the middle (Svetikas 1997a, 20–29). Besides, a number of leather pouches of the Tertiaries, exhibiting some other types of symbolic badges, were found in the graves of the sixteenth century.

The familiarity with the circumstances of the introduction of Christianity into Lithuania and with the meanings of the symbolic marks of the badges in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries make the related archaeological data more informative. The cemeteries of the Middle Ages did not contain any leather pouches with symbolic badges prior to the very end of the fourteenth century; they started to appear only after the baptism of Lithuania in 1387. Furthermore, the manifestation of this aspect coincided with the activities of the Franciscans, who treated the establishment of the Third Order as a way of disseminating Catholicism.

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