



## Easter Egg Symbolism in Lithuania Minor

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Painted eggs had a special meaning for many nations: they symbolized nature's revival, the emergence of life, the awakening of vegetation, its blooming and fertility. They protected from death, from evil spirits, evil eyes, fire, disease, and other calamities. Ancient farmers sacrificed them to the reborn and resurrected deities after hibernation. Hoping for their greater goodwill, they adorned the eggs with meaningful symbols.

In Lithuania, eggs were dyed in spring: for Easter (*Velykos*), the Divine Mercy Sunday (*Atvelykis*), St. George's (*Jurginės*), less frequently – for Pentecost (*Sekminės*), and sometimes between Easter and Pentecost. Still, the biggest Lietuvininkai holiday connected with the ceremonial act of egg painting was Easter: “in Lithuania Minor, we were always looking forward to Easter, it was exceptional“ (*VDU ER* 2482 (b. 1928, Kūgeliai, Šilutė district)). In general, rites of a communal nature dominated in the calendar holidays of Lithuania Minor<sup>1</sup>: attending church on the morning of the holiday, whipping with juniper or birch branches on the first day of Easter (in some locations – on the second), giving of painted Easter eggs and so on. Right up until the end of the 20th century, the custom of going to the seashore on Easter morning survived in some locations within the region: bringing water home from the sea, rivers or creeks in the belief that it had extraordinary powers to help a person. A relatively new custom was also observed – originating in America and some Western European countries, it arrived in Lithuania Minor via German culture: hiding painted eggs in the yard, garden

<sup>1</sup> According to the Ethnic Culture Protection Agency, which determines the range of a given ethnic tradition, in 2003 Lithuania Minor includes the city of Klaipėda/Memel; the Neringa and Pagėgiai municipalities; Šilutė, Rusnė, Kintai, Saugai, Juknaičiai, and Usėnai aldermanships of the Šilutė region; Lauksargiai aldermanship of the Tauragė region; Smailininkai and Viešvilė aldermanships of the Jurbarkas region; and the Dvilai, Kretingalė, Priekulė, Sendvaris, Dauparai-Kvietiniai and Agluonėnai aldermanships of the Klaipėda region. The other part of Lithuania Minor (the Königsberg area, formerly East Prussia, now Kaliningrad) belongs to Russia now (J o k u b a i t y t ė 2014).

and forest, and in Easter baskets. A more archaic layer of Easter customs (the “*ai lalu lalu*” ritual, waking the sleeping by beating them with birch branches on Easter morning and acquiring an egg from each sleeper, ritual swinging on swings and various superstitions, sayings and taboos) disappeared in this territory. In the early 20th century, there were some tendencies at work in Lithuania Minor which led to the disappearance of ritual functions of calendar customs, the development of new functions, and the leveling of traditions. The tendency with unacceptable traditions was to individualize them, i.e., to reinterpret, modify and adapt them to the needs or entertainment of the community, thus destroying the local character of the holidays. An interesting phenomenon, however, came about towards the late 20th and early 21st centuries: residents of the region developed a need to construe an identity based on the old traditions, despite the fact that Lietuvininkai had almost completely disappeared from the region by that point.

It should be noted that from the very first descriptions of the Easter celebration in Lithuania Minor and to the present day, the main holiday symbol has been an egg and ceremonial acts related to it. Thus, the Easter egg and its related ritual actions in the Easter traditions and rites in Lithuania Minor constitute the object of the article.

**The Research Objective** is to examine chronologically the specific Easter customs and traditions of Lietuvininkai related to one of the main holiday elements – the egg and the ritual actions performed with it.

**Tasks:**

1. To single out and analyze the meanings of the main attribute of the Easter celebration in Lithuania Minor – the egg and the ritual actions performed with it – described in old printed sources (from the first citation to the late 19th century);
2. To analyze the main elements of the Easter celebratory model in Lithuania Minor in the late 19th–21st centuries related to egg painting and gathering (gifting and customs of Easter well-wishing) and to compare them with the same holiday elements in other regions, revealing functional changes in these calendar rites.

**Research Data and Methodology**

The main source of data for the article is the material from ethnographic expeditions and field studies carried out between 2007 and 2013. Based on the research problem and tasks formulated, a questionnaire called “Calendar Holidays in Lithuania Minor: A Reconstruction of Traditions” was drafted. Taking into consideration social, economic, cultural, and political aspects, and in an attempt to analyze the adoption and transmission of the ethnic culture and traditions of the Lietuvininkai in historical context, respondents were presented with questions oriented towards comparative historical research. Using the set of questions drawn up by the author, 50 Lietuvininkai were interviewed at length. Ethnographic field studies were conducted at 17 locations within Lithuania Minor (Vėlaičiai, Rusnė,

Kintai, Katyčiai, Klaipėda, Šilutė, Jakai, Priekulė, Ketvergiai, Dovilai, Stankiškiai, Alka village, Kukorai, Lumpėnai village, Viešvilė, Smalininkai and Suvernai village). The method of active participant observation was used for research, where respondents were selected, using directed, intentional selection in order to obtain the most accurate information with the most relevance to the object of the research. Criteria included, for example, whether the potential informant was born and grew up in the location being researched. For a variety of empirical causes (migration, death of old Lietuvininkai) it was often impossible to find the right kind of informants. The search for Lietuvininkai (born and raised in Lithuania Minor) was made by visiting the administrative buildings and ethnocultural centres of the locations listed.

In order to get a more comprehensive picture of the subject of the research, an entire range of materials and sources was used, including written sources, materials from the Phonological Library of the Folklore and Ethnographic Manuscript Collection at Klaipėda University, from the folklore manuscript collection and audio recordings library of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore and ethnographic field studies material preserved in the Ethnology Department of the Lithuanian History Institute. In total, the information from 245 informants was collected on the topic of calendar holidays of Lithuania Minor within the time frame of the late 19th and the early 20th century. Taking into account the topic of the article, the empirical data collected during the analysis of sources and field research are systematized into topics that reflect the object, objective and tasks of this article. For the research 173 ethnographic units (9 of them fragments) were collected on the subject of the main attribute of Easter celebration in Lithuania Minor – the egg and the actions performed with it (painting eggs, gifting them, various games with them, Easter well-wishing of *velykavimas* and *lalavimas*). After systematizing the empirical data, their analysis was performed. After classifying the data, the results have been presented to reflect the real picture of the research phenomenon and the problems associated with it.

Based on the subject and tasks of the research, 11 employees responsible for organizing holiday celebrations at the most active cultural centres in the towns and rural locations of Lithuania Minor were questioned. Since Lithuania Minor is divided into sections corresponding to the city of Neringa, the city and region of Klaipėda, the city and region of Šilutė, and the city and region of Pagėgiai, material was collected at Klaipėda Ethnocultural Centre and Dovilai Ethnocultural Centre; Šilutė Culture and Recreation Centre and Vydūnas Culture Centre in Kintai; the Culture Centre of the municipality of Pagėgiai and Martynas Jankus Museum of the Bitėnai municipality; as well as Jurbarkas Regional Culture Centre of Lithuania Minor. Data were collected based on unstructured interviews and collection of photographic and video images. The collected material is also stored in the article under the VDU ER 2482 code.

**Methods.** The subject and problem of the article defined the methodology, based on the combination of several different methods. The corpus of Easter rituals, customs and traditions in Lithuania Minor was researched using analytical,

interpretative and comparative methods. As empirical data were collected, methods for the analysis and synthesis of the contents of archival sources, academic literature and the news media and periodicals were also applied.

### Review of Research and Sources

With regard to the presentation of information, the sources can be divided into two groups: testimonies of secularly-oriented clerical contemporaries (researchers of the 15th–19th centuries can be distinguished here) and sources providing retrospective information.

Ethnographic data about Prussian Lithuanians and the celebration of Easter have been found since the publication of the first Lithuanian book *Katekizmas* (*Catechism*) by Martynas Mažvydas (1547)<sup>2</sup>. He mentions the remnants of paganism in Prussian Lithuanian customs of the time and writes about a “hymn sent” to the clergy and nobility, instead of the “Easter egg-offering rite” (*BRMŠ* II 186).

The fragmented information on the analysis of the Easter theme is available in the works of German researchers of the 17th–19th centuries: in 1690, Theodor Lepner wrote *Prūsų lietuviai* (*A Prussian Lithuanian*), an ethnographic work in German, where he described Easter games in Lithuania Minor – swinging, egg beating and rolling, as well as examples of Lithuanian wellwishing (L e p n e r i s 2011, 195–196).

Carl Cappeller’s *Kaip senieji lietuviai gyveno* (How Old Lithuanians Lived), published in the book *Lietuviai. Apie Vakarų Lietuvą ir jos gyventojus devynioliktoje amžiuje* (Lithuanians. On Western Lithuania and Its Inhabitants in the 19th century) (1904) is of special value. It contains information about egg painting at Easter, various games with eggs, as well as a description of Easter lulling customs in Lithuania Minor (K a p e l e r i s 1970, 375–377).

Taking into account the objectives of the article, general works were also used to compare the elements of Lithuanian Easter celebration with the festive elements in other regions: *Lietuvių šventės: tradicijos, papročiai, apeigos* (Lithuanian Celebrations: Traditions, Customs, Rites) by Pranė Dundulienė, *Lietuvių papročiai ir tradicijos* (Lithuanian Customs and Traditions) by Danutė Brazytė-Bindokienė, *Lietuvos kaimo papročiai* (Lithuanian Rural Customs) by Balys Buračas, *Lietuvių kalendorinės šventės: tautosakinė medžiaga ir aiškinimai* (Lithuanian Calendar Holidays: Folklore Material and Interpretations) by Jonas Balys, *Kalendoriniai ir darbo papročiai Lietuvoje XIX a. pabaigoje – XX a. pirmojoje pusėje. Jaunimo vakarėliai* (Calendar and Work Customs in Lithuania in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Youth Parties) by Žilvytis Šaknys, and *Tradiciónių kalendorinių švenčių semantika* (Semantics of Traditional Calendar Holidays) by Libertas Klimka.

The book *Vėlykų rytą lelija pražydo. Verbų sekmadienio, Vėlykų, Jurginių papročiai ir tautosaka* (A Lily Bloomed on Easter Morning. Palm Sunday, Easter,

<sup>2</sup> Mažvydas M. Catechismvsa prasty szadei: 1547. *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai: XVI a., t. II*, 2001, p. 186.

St. George's Customs and Folklore) is also valuable for the topic of the article. The book is based on manuscripts and ethnographic material collected during expeditions. It presents sources accumulated in field research, revealing the differences between Lithuanian ethnographic regions.

In 2012, the atlas *Lietuvos kultūra. Mažosios Lietuvos ir Žemaitijos papročiai* (Lithuanian Culture. Customs of Lithuania Minor and Samogitia) (LK) was published, in which Žilvytis Šaknys discusses initiation and calendar customs of young people in the area under study. However, it should be noted that most of the informants are not Lietuvininkai, but simply young people living in those areas today.

Sources providing retrospective information include the 1990 publication *Lietuvininkų kalba: Mažosios Lietuvos tautosaka: Mažosios Lietuvos etnografija: mokslinių konferencijų pranešimai* (Language of Lietuvininkai: Folklore of Lithuania Minor: Ethnography of Lithuania Minor: Proceedings of Scientific Conferences), which published *Kalba apie kalbą* (Language about Language) conference papers, and in particular – Dalia Kiseliūnaitė's text *Senųjų baltiškųjų papročių pėdsakai lietuvininkų šventėse* (Traces of the Old Baltic Customs in the Holidays of Lithuania Minor) relevant to the topic of the article. It provides material covering ethnographic data on the customs of the spring holiday (Easter) cycle from written sources and provided by modern Lietuvininkai (ethnographic autochthons of Lithuania Minor and Klaipėda region).

Based on this review of research sources, it can be stated that Easter holiday traditions constantly presented interested and were researched, but the information about festive customs and their distinctive holiday elements in Lithuania Minor, especially their regional peculiarity, is very fragmentary.

### **First Mentions of the Easter Egg and Actions Related to It (Archaic Holiday Model)**

From ancient times, almost all Old World nations had a custom of gifting eggs wishing health, happiness, and joy. People believed it would come true. According to Martynas Mažvydas, already in the 16th century in Lithuania Minor this custom was known to clergy and nobles. Judging by the letter Mažvydas wrote in 1549, in which he stated that he was sending a psalm instead of “an Easter egg” (Lith. *Velykų pauto*) (BRMŠ II 186), we can assume that in the 16th century, it was customary for the Lithuania Minor clergy to give Easter eggs as gifts to their fellows; up until the 20th century egg imagery was believed to have magical life-giving powers<sup>3</sup>. It can be assumed that the gift of an Easter egg originated from the rite of offering cattle

<sup>3</sup> In Germany in the late 19th–20th centuries, young women would give eggs as presents to young men who sang serenades to them on the New Year's Eve. The number of presented eggs and its interpretation varied by region. In Kirchweiler, for example, two eggs meant no respect, three – recognition, four – respect, five – love, six – consent to marry (W r e d e 1922, 260).

testicles (Lith. *pautų aukojimo apeiga*), which is related to fertility magic and was supposed to ensure cattle breeding (Balsys 2010, 174–175). According to Pranė Dundulienė, ethnographic data show that the custom of giving an Easter egg as a gift was followed up until World War II and in some regions even later (Dundulienė 2008, 128). During Easter, parents would gift eggs to their children, brothers to sisters, neighbours to each other, etc. A special power was attributed to this gift: Easter eggs were to bring people happiness and all kinds of good things. Such an egg was protected from breaking and was kept all year round. The custom of giving eggs to children was especially widespread. Aunts, neighbours and others would bring eggs for the little ones. Sometimes children would receive them while walking in the yard (Dundulienė 2008, 127–129).

**Games with eggs also had ritual meaning.** In the 17th century, Theodor Lepner described games with Easter eggs in Lithuania Minor: “On Easter Day they hit hard-boiled eggs against each other, paint them with soot or herbs; the egg that gets broken belongs to the one who broke it. Or they roll them on the ground” (Lepneris 2011, 196). Carl Cappeller also gave similar descriptions: “One person was holding an egg, and another hit it from above; the egg that got broken was taken by the winner” (Kapelers 1970, 374). The custom of breaking eggs was known throughout Lithuania. The game of egg hitting was usually played by men. Dyed eggs would break very easily. With agreement between the two, one man would hold an egg with the pointed end up, and the other would hit it with the tip of his own egg. The player whose egg would break had to give it to the player who broke it (Dundulienė 2008, 137).

Therefore, according to old written sources, it can be said that in the 17th–19th century Lithuania Minor, games were played with eggs painted one colour. Most popular colours were black, red and green. Indeed, it is noteworthy that for many centuries our ancestors painted eggs with natural dyes obtained from plants and swamp minerals. Oak, hornbeam or black alder bark, onion shells, rye sprouts, moss, hay litter, chamomile, cumin, etc. were used for this purpose. Only in the late 19th century eggs started to be painted with chemical dyes. In addition to dyeing, decorating eggs with patterns was widespread – eggs were patterned with wax and scraped with a knife (Galaunė 1930, 256–259). Lietuvininkai scraped painted eggs or decorated them with wax, painting them with ornaments, dots, rue leaves, and stars, or writing names, household names, and greetings on them: “As our mother had beautifully painted Easter eggs – red or yellow, or blue – we, children, did not know where to dance. <...> Kits painted dots on his Easter egg. When the egg was painted, he thawed some tallow and inscribed his name, his household around it with a stick, then left that egg in the salt water with boiled leaves for a couple of hours. When he took it out, the acid was somewhere smeared with tallow, making it white again, and he could read everything” (Kapelers 1970, 376–377). In general, the custom of dyeing and painting eggs for spring festivities is ancient. Ornamental ostrich egg shells dating back to the 3rd



millennium BC were excavated in Asharia (Arabian Peninsula). Later, egg dyeing was mentioned by Ovid (1st century BC – 1st century AD) (G a e r t e 1956, 28). Egg painting was apparently supposed to reinforce the symbolism of life-giving power. Archaeological data show that eggs have long been widespread in various lands. They were discovered in the 4th century in Germany and in the 10th–12th centuries in Poland in cemeteries. A stone egg was found on Gediminas Hill in Vilnius, and one made of bone – near the castle on Kreivoji Hill. Knowing that an egg contains a living embryo, people easily believed that the power of life, fertility and abundance was concentrated in it. Wishing to strengthen it, the eggs were painted (black for earth, red for sun, etc.) with the signs with symbolic meaning (Č e p i e n ė 2008, 226). Thus, until the end of the 9th century, eggs were painted not only to meet aesthetic needs, but also patterns and colours had symbolic and magical meaning. It was believed that all living things originated from the earth, so by sacrificing earth-coloured eggs farmers hoped to magically make the earth fertile and fruitful.

### **Easter as Observed by Lietuvininkai in the Late 19th – 20th Centuries**

In the late 19th – early 20th centuries, in Lithuania Minor, the ritual tradition associated with egg gifting, painting and certain other ritual actions noticeably loses its existential significance; rituals become customs that have acquired new symbolic meanings, and ritual functions are replaced by traditions that form regional ethnic identity, i.e. hiding eggs in the nests in the garden, etc. It can be said that this happens due to the growing urban cultural influence of the early 20th century and the resulting transformation of ceremonial ritual functions into entertainment.

**Egg Painting on Great Saturday.** Egg painting in Lithuania Minor households would take place on Great Saturday. As mentioned above, in the early 20th century, in Lithuania Minor, people started dyeing eggs using not only natural, but also chemical dyes: “Egg dyeing was a feminine job. Older children were also able to do it. Mother had dyes she had bought, used onion shells, sometimes scraped the eggs as well” (*KUTRF* 1125/ *KUTR* 210 (b. 1933, Šūdnagiai village, Priekulė area)). On Great Saturday, people of Lithuanian Minor dyed eggs with various colours (usually with chemical dyes or onion shells), but not with dotted patterns as in Major Lithuania: “We take a simple bucket, add iron, black alder, bark that turns red, then at last more black alder, leave for one or two weeks and then pour that liquid into wooden pots, put Easter eggs in there, soak them. Then boil them in onion shells” (*KUTRF* 1080 / *KUTR* 201 (b. 1936, Timsriai village, Natkiškė)). For comparison, it should be said that Samogitian eggs were characterized by dark or black colours, Suvalkians used lighter colours, predominately red and purple, and Dzūkians liked greyer colours. From ancient times, Samogitians patterned eggs with wax, with their favorite motifs of daisies, and less frequently – of rue and fir trees. Egg scraping is rare in Samogitia. In Aukštaitija, eggs were not painted,

they were evenly dyed one colour or the egg was covered with onion shells or grass blades – so the colouring would be spotted (K u d i r k a 1992, 29, 36).

It is of note that some families in Lithuania Minor did not paint eggs, because dyeing was associated with the suffering of Christ: “It was at Easter, well, children didn’t paint eggs very much, they said, that is a pagan custom, those painted eggs, those colours: blue, green, yellow, that is the suffering of Christ. It was like when the Jews tortured and beat Christ, his body was turned such colours. My grandmother used to say that you mustn’t paint eggs” (*KUTRF* 408 / *KUTR* 66 (b. 1906, Antšvenčiai village, Tilžė-Ragainė district, lives in Smalininkai since 1950)). Balys also recorded a similar story: “The eggs themselves are reminiscent of Christ, and their colouring is the suffering of Christ. When Christ went to Mount Golgotha, he met Cirinėjus who was carrying a basket of eggs, and his son. Cirinėjus left the eggs and helped Christ carry the cross. When he came (back), he found all the eggs beautifully painted” (B a l y s 1993, 137). It can be argued that egg painting apparently had to reinforce the symbolism of life-giving power.

**Festive breakfast and egg eating on Easter morning.** After coming home from church, people of Lithuania Minor would have breakfast: “For Easter breakfast hay is put on the table, then it is covered with tablecloth, and an egg is put on it for each person” (*KUTRF* 847 / *KUTR* 149 (b. 1923, Jokšai village, Priekulė area)). It was quite usual to start with eating an egg, but in some families they would leave eggs for the second day: “We would not eat Easter eggs on Sunday. They would be left for Monday, when the relatives and neighbours would come to visit, and children from the village would come to do egg gathering” (*VDUER* 2482 (b. 1927, Aukštumala, Šilutė district)). It is interesting that in some parts of Lithuania Minor the festive breakfast would start with drinking warm milk: “When we would all gather at the table, we would first be handed bowls with warm boiled milk – no one would use cups or anything – we would drink from the bowls, each and everyone” (*KUTRF* 100, 102/ *KUTR* 32 (b. 1909, Pažvelsis village, Klaipėda district)). It should be noted that in Lithuania Major, first the whole family would eat one egg, which was usually “peeled by the lord of the house himself, cut into as many parts as the people at home, and given to everyone – first to wife and children, then to the whole family – wishing health and good luck” (D u n d u l i e n ė 2008, 122). Eating started with eggs. First, people would check the strength of the egg shell with their teeth, then the egg would be hit against someone else’s: the one whose egg is stronger was destined to live longer (V y š n i a u s k a i t ė 1993, 64–65).

**Easter greetings – *velykavimas* – and whipping with juniper or birch twigs.** People of Lithuania Minor started expressing Easter greetings – *velykauti* – mostly on the second day of Easter (sometimes on the first), saying: “I am a child as small as a bean pod, I went to the manger, picked a flower, threw it on the road, lilies bloomed, but not just because of me. Let everyone be happy, and give me Easter eggs, hard-boiled and painted with writings” (*KUTRF* 403 / *KUTR* 65 (b. 1933, Kažemėkai village, Šilutė county)). Similar Easter oratories were recorded by Balys, but those ones were pronounced not only at Easter, but also on Palm



Sunday, whipping the family members with a juniper twig (B a l y s 1993, 114). It is noted that people of Lithuania Minor beat eggs with a birch twig: “We would only go velykauti at Easter. We would bring the twigs early, they had to be full of leaves, and then we would go, tell a poem, and then give Easter eggs. Then you had to whip your legs with those birch twigs and say, “Šmok Oster, band Oster” (which means “colourful Easter”). I was told: “Take out the basket” and 20 raw eggs, 10 painted eggs, two kilos of lard, and half a pie would be put there. I could barely lift it, I was still little. And if you went to strangers, you could get two eggs each, but we didn’t go, mother wouldn’t let us” (VDU ER 2482 (b. 1927, Aukštumala, Šilutė county). “On the second day of Easter, when children wanted to get eggs, they would run with juniper rods, if they ran into a house and whipped someone, they would get an egg. “Easter greeters” – *velykautojai* – would pull on a white shirt over all their clothes, wrap themselves in paper, and put on paper hats. They would soak birch twigs in water beforehand and then carry those verdant birch twigs around. It meant nature’s revival. When they entered the house, they had to read from the holy book, then they would receive eggs” (LII, file Nr. 60 (b. 1897, Šyškrantė, Šilutė county).

Lithuania Major had a custom of being whipped with an Easter palm<sup>4</sup>. However, there was no such tradition in Lithuania Minor. On the first day of Easter (in some parts – on the second), people would whip one another with juniper or birch twigs: “A few weeks before Easter, we put birch twigs in bottles and kept them in a warm hut, and their buds exploded with green leaves, thus turning into lively, fragrant Easter whips for my mother and aunts, to greet them with the Easter holidays” (LŽ 1995, 57). Everyone tried to get up earlier and whip those still asleep or neighbours. Juniper twigs – called *verbos* (sg. *verba*) – were also used for whipping: “We picked only green ones. Usually, they weren’t as they are now, coloured, well, an occasional flower could be tied in, but we picked everything ourselves, those *verbos* from juniper” (KUTRF 1080 / KUTR 201 (b. 1936, Timsriai village, Natkiškės). For comparison, in Samogitia, in Radviliškis and Kėdainiai districts, it was also common to whip family members or neighbours with *verbos* in the morning of the second day of Easter (K u d i r k a 1992, 68).

According to the testimonials from the 20th century, the custom was the same as it is nowadays – to try and catch the members of the family that were still asleep and whip them with birch twigs while chanting: “I am whipping you on Easter morning with a green birch twig, I demand 5 eggs, a piece of lard and I’m leaving satisfied” (KUTRF 203/ KUTR 43 (b. 1909, Šyša village, Šilutė district).

<sup>4</sup> Ethnologist Balys explains the custom of juniper whipping as follows: “*Verba* is a magical green twig which, when used for whipping, gives a person or animal the power of growth and life while also protecting them from disease. Spring time is best for that. So the older view holds that whipping brings growth, health and beauty. Under the influence of Christianity, the power to scare away or cast out evil spirits, especially with its smoke, was later attributed to *verbos*. Finally, out of the serious rites performed by the adults only a fun means of awakening sleeping children was left, informing them of the approaching Easter” (B a l y s 1993, 115).

The most popular activities with painted eggs – **breaking** and **rolling**<sup>5</sup> – were a great part of the ancient spring celebration rites. There are many stories of how all members of the family were involved in trying to break each other's eggs to see which one had the strongest one: "On the first Easter morning, you had to do the egg hitting, whose egg is stronger will live longer and be healthier" (*KUTRF* 5/ *KUTR* 3/ 5 b (b. 1924, Žygaičiai village, since 1942 lives in Trūkiškė village, Šilutė district). "During Easter, children would roll eggs. Everyone would run to our house, we would roll those eggs all day long – and we would lose, and win, and all that. We were looking forward to Easter..." (*VDUER* 2482 (b. 1951, Rusnė). The Easter custom of egg breaking and rolling also exists in Lithuania Major. When hitting, everyone tries to have a stronger egg. The person whose egg is stronger and breaks the other egg will live longer (B a l y s 1993, 139). This custom has survived to this day throughout Lithuania.

**Easter Bunny.** In Lithuania Minor, Easter eggs would be hidden in the garden or near the barn, in the stacks of hay or various herbs or nests made of moss. Children were told that they were left there by the Easter bunny: "We believed so much in that bunny, our parents would tell us "children, behave, or else the bunny won't bring you eggs", and then we would go and try to find those eggs! There were so many nests: red ones, and white ones, and violet, green...then we would count who found the most eggs. And now I put a box with eggs under a tree for my grandchildren, then we make nests and in the morning they find eggs" (*VDUER* 2482 (b. 1927, Aukštumala, Šilutė county). It should be noted that the first information about Easter bunnies appeared around 1678 in Heidelberg (the custom of Easter bunnies originated in Pfalz and the Upper Rhine area). "In Zurich, there is a bunny, too, – the bearer of Easter eggs – godmothers would invite the children as guests to scare away the bunny and find his painted eggs. Painted eggs were attributed to a rabbit because hens do not lay such. And the image of a cute, gentle bunny leads many children to believe he really comes over every Easter. However, the bunny<sup>6</sup> is not the only bearer of Easter eggs. In other areas,

<sup>5</sup> In Germany in the late 19th – early 20th centuries eggs were also rolled, and hitting egg against egg also happened: first with the sharp and then with the blunt end. The opponent kept the broken egg. One of the favorite games of adult boys since as early as the 16th century was a game called *Eierlesen* (S p a m e r 1935, 114). 100-200 eggs were placed in two rows at a certain distance from each other. They had to be collected in a basket – the one who collected them first would be the winner. It is of note that girls performed spells with eggs – they threw an egg over the threshold into the path and whoever passed by it would become their husband (S p a m e r 1935, 114). In the 20th century, eggs were replaced by oranges in games.

<sup>6</sup> There may be another explanation for why a bunny brings eggs during Easter. In the tales and records of many nations, the moon is believed to be a hare, or a hare is considered to be a light and dark spot on the moon. The habit of hiding between the furrows connects the hare with Mother Earth, therefore it is also considered a symbol of constant renewal of life. A playful story of an egg-laying Easter bunny reinforces this fertility symbolism with another fertility symbol – an egg. Accompanying the Greek goddess Aphrodite and the Germanic god of Spring, a bunny humbly hides among the wild beasts at their feet (J a s u d i e n ė 2004).

such duty is performed by a stork, a cuckoo, a rooster, a fox, or a bell that heralds Easter morning<sup>7</sup>.

In Lithuania Major, eggs were brought to children by the *Easter Granny*: “Easter Granny arrives before sunrise. Her wheels are made of beetroot, her horses made of wax, her reins are beggar canes. When she arrives, she puts eggs for children by the bed, on the windowsill, or in a tree growing near the house (Eržvilkas)” (B a l y s 1993, 138). In the Šakiai area, she was called the *Easter Queen* (K u d i r k a 1992, 49), and *Karabija* in the Raseiniai area (D u n d u l i e n ė 1990, 84). In the areas of Pasvalys, Panevėžys and Ukmergė, the terms *Velykis* or *Velykius* are used instead of *Velykės* (K u d i r k a 1992, 49).

Thus, based on the written sources recorded in the territory of Lithuania Minor and on modern ethnographic narratives, it becomes obvious that the interpretations of Easter celebration provided by the informants are related to the social and cultural environment in which they live. Therefore, the data about Easter in Lithuania Minor obtained from surviving descriptions and living witnesses are interesting and studied as a monument of history and ethnography, a testimony to the evolution of spiritual values of the area’s population.

### **The Modern Easter Model of Lietuvininkai**

The modern model of Lithuania Minor holidays tries to combine ethnic traditions with the needs of the consumer-oriented modern society. Easter in Lithuania is unimaginable without Easter eggs. Of course, the techniques of egg decoration have slightly changed, but the activities remain identical – Easter eggs are given as presents and various games are played with them – rolling and trying to crush the opponent’s eggs.

A week after Easter, the Divine Mercy Sunday (*Atvelykis*)<sup>8</sup> is celebrated. It is also called Children’s Easter (*Vaikų Velykėlės, Velykikės, Mažosios Velykėlės*). Since ancient times this was the final day of a long Easter celebration, which was dedicated to children. Women dyed eggs, but only children played the games. *Atvelykis* was the end of festive visits of relatives and neighbours, as well as the

<sup>7</sup> In Germany in the late 19th and 20th centuries, children believed that Easter eggs were brought by a bunny, but sometimes also by other animals: a rooster in Upper Bavaria and Schleswig-Holstein, a stork in Franconian Thuringia, a fox in Hanover, Westphalia, and Saxony, as well as a cuckoo, a crane, a capercaillie, etc. Thus, adults would hide eggs in gardens, forests, and homes, and children would search for them (*WDDV* 1936, 558).

<sup>8</sup> In the neighbouring Slavic lands, this day is called the same as in Dzūkija or Eastern Lithuania – *Pravadais*. This is related to the “going away” of the dead, the custom of seeing them off. It was believed that the spirits of the dead who returned home for Easter would leave the living at *Atvelykis*. In Belarus, in the evening, women would prepare bundles with food, and on Sunday would go to the cemetery and eat at the graves of their kin. 3–4 eggs would be left on the grave. Church service would also take place in the cemetery, after which the eggs from the graves would be given to the beggars. Similar *Atvelykis* customs existed in Russia and Ukraine (M a r c i n k e v i č i e n ė et al. 2006, 233).

time of rest. It was basically the repetition of folk Easter customs but only without the ceremonial symbolism.

It is of note that the analyzed material from the 20th century Lietuvininkai had no mention of the *Atvelykis* celebration. However, after ethnocultural centres had started to organize this celebration, the tradition also became popular in Lithuania Minor after 1991. The annual celebration of the Divine Mercy Sunday holds a children's fair (children sell their handicrafts, dye and roll eggs, play various games), people swing on swings and play old games that were played by children shepherds. Educational activities – teaching people to dye eggs, to make nests from hay, to mold birds from clay etc. – become more and more popular. Performances by folklore ensembles and an egg rolling competition also take place during this festival. Thus, some forms of this celebration may claim not only to continue the old Easter traditions, but also to create the new ones.

Since 1992, the holiday of *Atvelykis* has been the tradition cherished by the ethnocultural centre of Klaipėda city municipality, which invites Klaipėda residents to meet in the Old Town. Painted egg contest takes place at the festival, we are invited to swing as high as possible to be healthy and happy all year round, traditional folk games are played, and craft fair is organized (*VDU ER 2482* (Ethnocultural Centre of Klaipėda City Municipality)). Since 2005, Children's Easter celebration has been organized by the educational program and the Dvilai Ethnocultural Centre (*VDU ER 2482* (Dvilai Ethnocultural Centre)). Nida's Culture and Tourism Information Center "Agila" also organizes *Atvelykis* celebrations, where folklore ensembles perform and egg rolling competitions take place. However, instead of the Easter bunny, a character typical for the whole of Lithuania emerges – the Easter grandmother. Pagėgiai Municipality Cultural Centre has also celebrated *Atvelykis* since 2006; here a children's fair takes place – children from schools sell their handicrafts, paint and roll eggs, play various games (*VDU ER 2482* (Ethnocultural Centre of Klaipėda City Municipality)). So all forms of this celebration can claim to be a continuation of the old Easter traditions.

## Conclusions

1. The archaic model of the Easter celebration in Lithuania Minor is characterized by the elements related to the symbolism of the egg, which include the ritual function and archaic semantics of egg painting, the custom of Easter egg gifting and well-wishing, and various games with eggs (breaking, rolling). Rituals with this main holiday attribute – the egg – played an exceptional role, so custom and tradition in Lithuania Minor changed very slowly.
2. In the late 19th – early 20th centuries, in Lithuania Minor, the ritual tradition noticeably loses its existential significance; rituals become customs, and ritual functions are replaced by traditions that form regional ethnic identity. The magical meaning of egg gifting is gone, the tradition of Easter greetings is gaining popularity, and a new element is emerging – hiding eggs in the nests

made in the garden and telling children that they are brought by the Easter bunny.

3. If we compare the late 20th and early 21st century ethnographic data from Lithuania Minor and Lithuania Major, we can see that egg-related Easter customs have a lot in common: painting specifics, various actions with eggs (gifting, games). The interpretations of specific traditions provided by the informants are always related to the social and cultural environment in which they live. Thus, having compared the structure and ritual actions with the main holiday attribute – the egg – in Lithuania Major and Lithuania Minor, it can be stated that customs of this type are fundamentally identical, occurring variations are rather minor, related more to the social familial environment and religious aspect.
4. At the crossroads of the 20th and 21st centuries, cultural and educational institutions became the most important factor in supporting the vitality of symbolic ethnic cultural forms. Although the officially organized Easter festivals follow a more or less pan-Lithuanian scenario, typical regional holiday elements of Lithuania Minor are still distinguished, and so the centralized activities organized by the cultural centres can be favourable for upholding the local traditions of Lietuvininkai.

### Abbreviations

*KUTR* – Klaipėdos universiteto tautosakos rankraštynas (Folklore Manuscript of Klaipėda University)

*KUTRF* – Klaipėdos universiteto tautosakos rankraštyno fonoteka (Folklore Manuscript sound archive of Klaipėda University)

*LII* – Lietuvos istorijos institutas (Institute of Lithuanian History)

*LLTI* – Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore)

*LTR* – Lietuvių tautosakos rankraštyno duomenų bazė (Lithuanian Folklore Archive's Database)

*VDU ER* – Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto etnologijos rankraštynas (Ethnology Manuscript of Vytautas Magnus University)

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## **Kiaušinio simbolika Mažosios Lietuvos Velykų šventėje**

*S a n t r a u k a*

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** *Velykų kiaušinis, Mažoji Lietuva, ritualas, kalendoriniai papročiai.*

Straipsnyje, pasitelkiant autentišką lietuvininkų medžiagą, chronologiniu aspektu analizuojami Velykų papročiai ir tradicijos Mažojoje Lietuvoje, susijusios su vienu iš pagrindinių šventės elementų – kiaušiniu ir su juo atliekamais apeiginiais veiksmais: dovanojimu, dažymu, daužymu, ridenimu, velykavimu.

Lietuvininkų Velykų šventės archajiškajam modeliui būdingi su kiaušinio simbolika susiję elementai, kuriems priskiriama apeiginė funkcija – tai archajišką semantiką turintis kiaušinių dažymas ir velykaičių dovanojimo paprotys bei įvairūs žaidimai su juo (daužymas, ridenimas). Ritualai su šiuo pagrindiniu šventės atributu – kiaušiniu – atliko išskirtinį vaidmenį, todėl lietuvininkų paprotinės tradicijos kaita buvo lėta.

XIX a. pab.–XX a. pr. Mažojoje Lietuvoje galima pastebėti, jog lietuvininkų ritualinė tradicija praranda turėtą egzistencinę svarbą, ritualai virsta papročiais, o apeiginių funkcijų vietą užima tradicijos, formuojančios regioninę etninę tapatybę. Nebelieka kiaušinio dovanojimo maginės reikšmės, išpopuliarėja velykavimo tradicija bei atsiranda naujas elementas – kiaušinių slėpimas sode padarytuose lizduose vaikams pasakojant, kad juos padėjęs Velykų zuikis.

Sugretinus Mažosios Lietuvos ir Didžiosios Lietuvos XX a. pab.–XXI a. pr. etnografinius duomenis matyti, kad Velykų papročių, susijusių su kiaušiniaus, bendrybių yra daug: marginimo specifika, įvairūs veiksmai su margučiais (dovanojimas, žaidimai). Informantų pateikiamos tam tikrų tradicijų interpretacijos visuomet susijusios su socialine ir kultūrine aplinka, kurioje jie gyvena. Taigi sulyginus Didžiosios Lietuvos ir Mažosios Lietuvos Velykų šventės struktūrą ir apeiginius veiksmus su pagrindiniu šventės atributu – kiaušiniu, galima teigti, jog šie papročiai iš esmės yra tapatūs, pasitaikantys pakitimai yra gana smulkūs, daugiau susiję su socialine šeimų aplinka ir religiniu aspektu.

XX–XXI a. šimtmečių sankirtoje kultūros ir švietimo institucijos tapo bene svarbiausiu veiksmu, palaikančiu simbolinių etninės kultūros formų gyvybingumą. Nors instituciškai organizuojama Velykų šventė vyksta pagal daugiau ar mažiau visai Lietuvai būdingą scenarijų, tačiau išskiriant tipiškus lietuvininkų regionui būdingus šventės elementus, centralizuotas kultūros institucijų veiklos organizavimas gali būti palankus puoselėjant vietines lietuvininkų tradicijos formas.

## Kristina Blockytė-Naujokė

### Easter Egg Symbolism in Lithuania Minor

#### *S u m m a r y*

**Keywords:** *Easter egg, Lithuania Minor, rites, calendar holidays.*

The biggest Lietuvininkai holiday connected with the ceremonial act of egg painting was Easter. In general, rites of a communal nature dominated in the calendar holidays of Lithuania Minor: attending church in the morning of the holiday, whipping with juniper or birch branches on the first day of Easter (in some locations – on the second), giving of painted Easter eggs and so on. It should be noted that from the very first descriptions of the Easter celebration in Lithuania Minor and to the present day, the main holiday symbol has been an egg and ceremonial acts related to it. Thus, the Easter egg and its related ritual actions in the Easter traditions and rites in Lithuania Minor constitute the object of the article.

The archaic model of the Easter celebration in Lithuania Minor is characterized by the elements related to the symbolism of the egg, which include the ritual function and archaic semantics of egg painting, the custom of Easter egg gifting and well-wishing, and various games with eggs (breaking, rolling). Rituals with this main holiday attribute – the egg – played an exceptional role, so custom and tradition in Lithuania Minor changed very slowly.

In the late 19th – early 20th centuries, in Lithuania Minor, the ritual tradition noticeably loses its existential significance; rituals become customs, and ritual functions are replaced by traditions that form regional ethnic identity. The magical meaning of egg gifting is gone, the tradition of Easter greetings is gaining popularity, and a new element is emerging – hiding eggs in the nests made in the garden and telling children that they are brought by the Easter bunny.

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Thus, based on the written sources recorded in the territory of Lithuania Minor and on modern ethnographic narratives, it becomes obvious that the interpretations of Easter celebration provided by the informants are related to the social and cultural environment in which they live. Therefore, the data about Easter in Lithuania Minor obtained from surviving descriptions and living witnesses are interesting and studied as a monument of history and ethnography, a testimony to the evolution of spiritual values of the area's population.

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