

WEATHER VANES

Of the Sailing Boats on the Curonian Spit

Fishermen's boats in the Curonian Lagoon

The people fishing in the Curonian Lagoon had long had the boats specific only to this water body. The biggest boats were called kurėnai, while the smaller ones received the names of kiudelboats, dragnet boats, hoop-net boats depending on the net they were drawing. All of them had a flat bottom, small draught, oaken hull and steep boards. How can it be the other way: the lagoon waves are wicked! It is they that have been smoothing the boat shape over the centuries. Such boats were first mentioned in the 14-15th century chronicles and state documents of the Order of the Crusaders; their pictures may be traced back to the 18th century. The rule effective till the very World War II allowed fishing only by sailing boats as special focus was given to clean water and fish resources.

Uniqueness and origin of weathervanes

Each kurėnas would proudly carry a "crown" - a coloured weathervane carved of wood - fixed on its main mast. The purpose of a weathervane was not so much to show the direction of the wind, but to identify the vessel. From the creative point of view, it is a unique phenomenon in Lithuanian folk art. Nothing similar is found in the fishing traditions of other European lands. It is true, however, that the knowledge about these weathervanes comes only from the year 1844 marking the adoption of the regulations of the fishing inspectorate set forth by Königsberg administrative unit. The regulations allocated a defined fishing area for each village on the Curonian coastline. Aiming at a more efficient control of observing the boundaries of these areas, Ernst Wilhelm Beerbohm, chief fishery inspector (1786-1865), ordered each boat to have a weathervane of the established size fixed on its mast. The weathervanes of villages located on the Curonian Spit were two feet long and a foot wide, while the weathervanes of villages in the Nemunas delta were twice as big. They had to be painted in rectangles or triangles of contrasting colours indicating the emblem of each village. The villages located on the Spit were assigned white and black colours, the eastern coast of the Curonian Lagoon white and red, and the southern coast blue and yellow. Thus, inspector Ernst Wilhelm Beerbohm, the person having a delicate feeling for art and beauty, standardised the sizes of weathervanes and established the village emblems. He did not prevent the artistic self-expression of fishermen and the ancient tradition.

Decoration of weathervanes

The fishermen from small Curonian villages of Pilkopa, Nida, Purvyne, Pervalka and Preila used to put their weathervanes into a wooden frame and decorate them with openwork carvings. This probably originated from their liking to adorn their buildings - to decorate weather planks and fasten intricate embellishments in the shape of horses or other objects on the roof ridge. And they would carve these vessel decorations during a quiet sail home or during some other long voyage. The further artistic development of weathervanes was undoubtedly encouraged by the holiday-makers' attention and wish to acquire an original souvenir. This way the weathervanes started representing an increasing variety of colours and resort attributes - anchors, seagulls, lighthouses, or moose, but, unfortunately, loosing the symbols of the ancient mythology...

Mythological meaning of a weathervane

The fisherman's fate too often depends on the will of natural forces. No matter how wide his experience is, turns and twists and disasters always remain probable. A man is weak and vulnerable in the vastness of

the Lagoon; for that reason he must look for a spiritual tie with the elements. Hence lots of believes, spells for success and superstitions come to being... The mast represents a symbolic link between the water and the celestial world. The signs in a weathervane highlight this link; their overall composition stands as if a human appeal to the forces of water, winds and skies aiming at developing the feeling of unity, care and safety. The links with natural forces may be also illustrated by the fishermen's phrase "to run to the high sea" - to sail far away from the native shores.

What are the signs telling

Structurally it is possible to point out three parts in the decorations of a sailing boat: the top, the windward side and the lee side. The top decorations most often picture the hexagonal star or a circle with a cross - the symbol of the sun. It is interesting to note that in the later weathervanes, this sign of hierarchy is replaced by the state emblem or the heart, which is the symbol of hope and prayer. It is quite common that the symbol of the sun is encircled by the ribbon reminding of the grass-snake Žilvinas, ruler of waters, from a fairy-tale. The antithesis is thus made between the sky and the waters. This part reminds the ethnographers of the traditional distaffs of a spinning wheel.

The windward side often includes rhombuses - the symbols of land. Six rays of the star placed closer to the mast represent the yearly cycle divided into seasons following the outside bearings of sunrise and sunset (during solstices and equinoxes). Usually a silhouette of a house is carved above this world structure: only a fisherman knows the dangers to be coped with on the way back to the native shore and his missing home...

The lee side pictures the symbols, which may be attributable to daily household activities. It might be that this way fishermen tried to depict the plenitude of their life: farm buildings, large family, number of boats owned, etc. Each Curonian weathervane is sort of the story about the owner of a kurėnas and his hopeful life "under the sun".

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