LANDMARKS OF OLD LIVONIA – CHURCH TOWERS, THEIR SYMBOLS AND MEANING

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Church towers are among the most prominent features of landscape and contain both significant architectural and symbolic value. Religion and its various beliefs and ideologies bring symbolism and meaning into the everyday lives of people. This geographical study deals with the iconography of church towers, looking closer into their regional distribution pattern and analyzing their connotation within the former territory of Old Livonia (now encompassed by present-day Estonia and present-day Latvia, except for Latgale) and within the European religious context. The analysis of the distribution pattern of church tower symbols in Estonia shows significant regional variance. In the former Province of Estonia, governed by Tallinn, the cross is a dominant symbol on church towers, whereas the use of the cockerel is more widespread in the former Province of Livonia, the historic capital of which was Riga. A third historical region of Livonia, Kurland (governed by Jelgava), shares similarities in church tower symbolism with the Province of Estonia. We believe that the variance in distribution could be due to the influence of urban centers (Tallinn and Riga) in shaping the use of symbols throughout their administrative borders.

Keywords: cultural landscapes; church tower symbolism; religion; cultural geography; Old Livonia

Introduction

Religion affects the way in which much of the world’s population structures its daily life. Even in Western societies, where many mainstream institutionalized religions have experienced declining membership, religion retains the power to influence systems of ethics and morality (Brace et al. 2006, pp. 28–43; Pacione 2005, pp. 235–55; Proctor 2006, pp. 165–8).
This paper presents an analysis of the iconography of church towers in the context of the geography of religion. The geography of religion studies the geography of specific kinds of practices that have become associated with the historically malleable signs of the religious and the sacred. Its object of study is thus the practices, the signs, and the contestations that emerge around them, in specific places and spaces (Ivakhiv 2006, pp. 169–75). In this article, we analyze the regional distribution pattern and the connotation of church towers within the former territory of Old Livonia by adopting the concept of religion advanced by Geertz: ‘a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic’ (2003, p. 62).

Religion occupies a controversial position in the field of human geography. Scott and Simpson-Housely (1991) contend that the study of religion has been a major domain of human geography. However, Park (1994) argues that even though manifestations of religious experience express themselves with spatial variety on landscapes, the study of religion remains peripheral to modern academic geography. Moreover, despite recent discussions of religion in the Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Geopolitics, GeoJournal, and various international conferences, Proctor (2006) argues that religion has, by no means, reached the prominence accorded it in the popular press over the past several years. Indeed, aside from the relatively small number of geographers actually doing research on religion, it is hard to find evidence that the phenomenon is even on the discipline’s radar screen.

We agree with Buttimer (2006, pp. 197–202) that religion is influencing emerging global patterns of human behavior and that geographers should be able to uncover and find evidence of these patterns. Raivo (1997a, pp. 137–49) argues that studies of religious phenomena, and their manifestations in areas, places and landscapes, have a long tradition within the field of human geography (Heatwole 1989, pp. 63–78; Ruzin 2000, pp. 353–7). Additionally, Brace et al. (2006, pp. 28–43) point to religion’s role in studying the iconography and symbolism of religious landscapes. Religions, of whatever kind, demonstrate their legitimacy and establish their provenance by reference to specific histories and geographies. These references are codified in cultic and banal texts, documents, devices, instruments, protocols, systems of discipline, and landscapes. Therefore, the opportunity exists to understand the history of religious landscapes by tracing religious constructions of time and space, and their different effects, through the study of material cultures and discourse.

Religions construct notions of space and time through their specific ontological commitments. So it follows that in order to understand the nature of religious landscapes, representations, and practices, work must be contextualized within a temporal and spatial framework that is cognizant of these commitments. According to Kong (1990, pp. 355–71), religion is an aspect of life that deals heavily with symbolism and meaning and, therefore, our project is relevant to cultural and historical geography. Ivakhiv (2006) supports the idea that the religious and the sacred should be studied by geographers, as ways of distributing particular kinds of phenomena across geographic spaces.
Religion is imprinted on the cultural landscape through distinctive styles of architecture (Ben-Arieh 1976, pp. 49–69; Della Dora and Sooväli 2009; Ėgrisic 1997, pp. 199–211; Hoare and Sweet 2000, pp. 162–73; Levine 1986, pp. 428–40; Mills 2006, pp. 367–94). Interpretation of landscape, as a product of culture, requires an understanding of how people translate values and beliefs into architectural forms, as well as how their values and beliefs alter their use of space (Park 1994). Numerous churches have changed through time in response to shifting societal needs, opportunities, and architectural trends. These church transformations, with regard to religious convictions and the changing utility of sacred places, have led to debates about the nonreligious exploitation of religious symbols (Anttonen 2003; Pae and Kaur 2004, pp. 123–35).

Christianity dominated the European cultural landscape for centuries with its religious buildings and practices. Various European reigns and their contemporary trends in art have left symbols in landscape. These symbols do not necessarily coincide with political systems, rather they remind us of the historical boundaries of power (Kaufmann 2006). Church towers are some of the most prominent, man-made, eye-catching features of landscape and contain both significant architectural and symbolic value.

Encouraged by Kong (2001, pp. 211–33), our research focuses on the historical symbolism of church towers, looking closely into their regional distribution pattern and analyzing their connotation within the territory of the former Old Livonia in the wider European religious context. This project studies religious cultural variation through physical phenomena in the spirit of traditional cultural geography, following the line of empirical studies of the Sauerian School and mapping the diffusion of cultural artifacts. As religious symbols, Geertz (1973/2003, pp. 61–83) postulates that there is congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (most often implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustains each with the borrowed authority of the other. We believe studying these symbols helps to reveal the patterns of religious traits. We argue that a number of regional landscape peculiarities could derive from the geographic and historic situation of Old Livonia (see Figure 1). This project is an effort to explain the occurrence of similar religious phenomena in Old Livonia. Our study suggests that the geography of church tower symbols may imply past administrative power dominance and reveal interesting provincial patterns.

The Church Tower as a Landmark

Apart from being sacral monuments, church buildings are fixed prominent landmarks that dominate the landscape of many villages, as well as towns (Campe 1955, pp. 1–39; Ohsawa and Kobayashi 2005, pp. 336–49; Pistohlkors 2002, p. 332; Tuulse 1969, pp. 171–87). Churches were meant to be seen from any point of the parish and were commonly located on higher ground. Church towers may designate a cardinal direction. In most cases the tower is located on the west side of the church (see Hoare and Sweet 2000 for more).
Moreover, a church should not only be seen, but heard as well. The use of church bells and tower clocks to call worshippers and mark the time of day has long been used throughout history (Corbin 1999; Johnston 2006, pp. 17–31). Rising heavenward from the roof, church towers served as conduits to God. Nowadays, the steeple may also spread messages other than those of God and can include cell phone antennas and advertisement boards. An intriguing debate has emerged about whether it is moral to install such facilities on top of a sacred building (Sreevidya and Subramanian 2003, pp. 102–8). The practical use of church towers for alternative purposes is nothing new. For instance, they have been used in the past for navigation purposes, observation posts for artillery, scientific experiments, and geodetic surveys.

Churches and towers are frequently associated with power. In Karelian Finland, the Russian military churches were demolished or adjusted for alternate purposes after Finland gained independence in 1917 because the Orthodox cross and cupolas were perceived as symbols of Russification by Lutheran Finns (Raivo 1997b, pp. 327–39). In Estonia, the Orthodox Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (erected in 1900 when Estonia was under the rule of Czarist Russia) situated on Dome Hill in Tallinn, opposite to the Estonian Parliament House and dominating the Tallinn panorama, has been perceived as a clear demonstration of foreign power in the cityscape. Fierce discussion about demolishing the church took place in Estonian society during the 1920s and 1930s (Ilmja¨rve 1929). After World War II, Soviet ideology did not encourage religion, as it was perceived as a challenge to the political regime. Thus, religious symbols were demolished and sacral buildings were desecrated all over the Soviet Union and modified into gyms, circuses, and hay barns (Froese 2004, pp. 35–50).

In the Christian world, multiple symbols are used on church towers, each denoting a particular meaning. The cross is one of the earliest and most widely used Christian symbols, and it is commonly used in sacral architecture, in cemeteries, and elsewhere (Smith 2001, pp. 705–34).

Another frequent symbol, the cockerel, symbolizes light, vigilance, wisdom and hope in many cultures, and its practical function as a weathercock (weathervane)
The early Christians made the cockerel a symbol of their faith because of its role in Peter’s denial of Christ (Luke 22:34). It came to symbolize vigilance, prayer, and, in particular, the Resurrection of Christ and the redemption of all Christians. According to Murray and Murray (1996), the first weathercock on a church tower was recorded in 820 AD. It is believed that it was used as an encouragement of comfort to the faithful, as well as a warning to malefactors to repent.

The cockerel was a commonly used symbol by the end of the first millennium, as Sauer (1964) points out in his discussion of a fire that damaged the tower cockerel of St. Peter’s Church of Châlons, in France in 965 AD. Kodres (2005, pp. 295–314) suggests that the frequent usage of this icon in the eighteenth century derives from Lutheran pietism, which called on people to pursue pro-Christian devoutness.

Today, church towers with cockerels on top are prominent in Nordic and Baltic cultures. It is a common figure in art and literature, as well as folklore. For instance, relations between Riga and the cockerel are expressed in numerous proverbs and sayings (Salve 2008, pp. 28–38). According to folklorist Matthias Johann Eisen (1926), the Lutheran churches in Russia never have a rooster atop the church tower. Russians are known to have made fun of Lutherans for placing a cockerel on a church tower. Russians have ironically called Lutherans the petuhopoklonniki (‘worshippers of cockerels’).

One can encounter several other instances of mocking the towers of Lutheran churches because of the cockerels they sport (see Ilmjärve 1929; Rebane 1933). Sweden provides good evidence of this in that abundant cockerel statues are found throughout the country. There is even a popular annual contest to determine the country’s most beautiful church tower cockerel.

An orb is another frequently used symbol on top of church towers. It represents Christ’s reign (the cross) over the world (the orb) (Murray and Murray 1996). The orb may also have practical historical meaning as it was often used to keep and hide information on the construction or restoration of the church. Our project focuses on the two most common symbols atop Protestant church steeples: the cockerel and the cross.

Church Towers in Old Livonia

Historical background

The first stone churches on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea were erected soon after the arrival of the German Teutonic Order in the areas surrounding the mouth of the Daugava River in the late decades of the twelfth century. The Riga Dome Cathedral is the oldest church building still serving in this area. The first churches on Estonian territory were built in the western part of the country in the first half of the thirteenth century after the territory had been converted to Christianity. By the end of the fourteenth century, the entire territory was covered by an extensive network of stone churches.

Initially, many of the churches were single-naved stone buildings that had no church tower. The tradition of such buildings was influenced by the architectural
requirements established by Dominicans and Cistercians, who possessed extensive power over church life at that time (Löffler 1936, pp. 90–100; Solomókova 1975). Churches devoid of towers were particularly characteristic of the Western Diocese, comprising Saaremaa Island and West Estonia, where even today a number of churches still lack towers (Alttoa 1997). Some of the steeples were constructed much later on.

Regardlesss, steeples were not completely unknown to Medieval Livonian churches. The most active period of constructing church towers was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, consequently, almost all churches had towers by the twentieth century. Still, we have little information on the construction of medieval churches on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. Additionally, contemporary towers may have replaced smaller towers on the ridge of the roofs. Thus, so far, we have no information available about the iconography of the previously existing smaller towers.

**Empirical background**

To examine the historical and regional peculiarities of the iconography of church towers in Old Livonia, we conducted a large-scale study combining fieldwork observations and historical analysis. Fieldwork carried out in 2005 included visits to all Estonian parish churches, as well as to major chapels. Additionally, a number of Latvian churches in Kurland and south Livonia were studied for comprehensive data from the encyclopedia of Latvian churches (Mašnovskis 2005–2007). All these regions were historically part of the same administrative systems (beginning with the German/Teutonic Order in the thirteenth century, followed by Swedish and Russian reigns) included in the discussion of this study and, therefore, were included in the collection of empirical data.

The Estonian churches visited were documented both textually and visually, and the documentation included filling in worksheets with details on each respective church tower symbol. The resulting database contains notes on iconography. For example, in the case of cockerel, color, design (3D or 2D), the tower and church erection dates, and architectural style were all noted. The next step in our research included historical analysis of old photos to identify the symbols of churches that were destroyed or damaged in World War II. Old photographs taken from the archives of the Estonian National Museum and Estonian Literary Museum (the Estonian Cultural History Archives) were used to detect the changes tower symbols have undergone in the past. We also contacted priests of parish churches to gain information about the church tower symbols in their respective sanctuaries. However, we received back less than 10% of the inquiries. Therefore, the results are not representative enough for inclusion in this study.

Symbols of churches in Latvian territory were studied with the help of an encyclopedia illustrated with historical photographs of the churches. Data were entered into a database indicating both the current situation, as well as the historical background of church tower symbols. The database includes 130 churches, all parish churches and larger chapels. The map created from the database enabled us to describe the geographical location of different symbols and architectural styles, concentrating primarily on the evidence from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
The empirical study suffers from several shortcomings owing to a lack of sources. There is a dearth of well-grounded data on the introduction of tower symbols as the history of church tower symbols only reaches back to the Middle Ages. Church archival materials date back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and offer modest information about their construction. Some data available in local historical records (see e.g. Ederma and Jaik 1939; Hasselblatt 1898; Köpp 1937) indicate what symbols were placed on towers during various church reconstructions. Information of Brotzes’ drawing collections stems mainly from the end of eighteenth century and is thereby valuable for our study of the historical background of church tower symbols (Broce 1992–2002; Hein et al. 2006).

**Results**

In what follows we present quantitative data drawn from the study and a map of tower symbols of Old Livonian churches. Our map represents the current distribution of church tower symbols. Churches that were demolished in World War II have been indicated on the map by the church tower symbols they displayed before the war. We have also marked on the map cases where we know there was once a different symbol from that of today.

The two most dominant symbol combinations used on church towers in Estonia are an orb surmounted by a cross and a cockerel on top of an orb. Table 1 lists the number of occurrences of each symbol. Seventy percent of all studied Estonian churches sport either of these combinations. The cross and cockerel appear together on eleven churches, usually arranged in an upward sequence of orb, cockerel, and cross. Comparing the use of cockerel symbols across historical administrative units, we find that of 93 churches in former Kurland only 19 (20%) use the cockerel symbol; of 128 churches in Livonia (excluding Saaremaa Island), 64 churches use the cockerel (50%); and of 74 churches in Estonia only 9 are with cockerel (12%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol type</th>
<th>Number of occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orb-cross</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-cockerel</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-weathervane-cross</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-cockerel-cross</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-weathervane-cross-cockerel</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-cross-cockerel</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-cockerel-orb-cross</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-weathervane-cockerel</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-weathervane-cockerel-cross</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orb-morning star</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weathervane-cross</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1 Occurrence of tower symbols (listed in upward sequence) of Estonian rural churches ($n = 130$)
The three photographs in Figure 2 exemplify various symbol types used on towers of Estonian Lutheran churches. From left: St Nicholas’ Church in Laane-Nigula (characteristic of Estonian Province); St Michael’s Church in Rapina (typical in Livonian Province); St John’s Church in Kanepi (exceptional among Estonian churches).

The three photographs in Figure 2 exemplify various symbol types used on towers of Estonian Lutheran churches. From the left are St Nicholas’s Church in Lääne-Nigula (characteristic of Estonian Province), St Michael’s Church in Räpina (typical in Livonian Province), and St John’s Church in Kanepi (exceptional among Estonian churches).

The map in Figure 3 reflects the distribution of symbols on church towers in Old Livonia. All together, 93 churches with cockerels were documented. In addition, eight more churches in Livonian Province are known to have had a tower cockerel that was later replaced by a cross (Broce 1992–2002). For example, the cockerels of Kolga-Jaani and Tarvastu churches in Estonia are kept and displayed inside the church. The most widespread symbol is the conventional Christian cross accompanied by an orb. Apparently, the domination of the cross can be, to some degree, explained by simplicity of its technical design.

Discussion

To explain the history of church tower iconography, we concentrated on the time and space dimensions, with particular attention to the tower cockerel, which is an intriguing symbol in the religious landscape. Cockerels are seen almost everywhere in the North-European Lutheran culture. Areas of the former Livonia play a vital role in maintaining the cockerel tradition on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea.

Our analysis of the history of church tower symbolism faced several difficulties. The first was a lack of sources. Much research that has been conducted so far is based on preserved buildings. Moreover, medieval architectural history in Old Livonia is, to a great extent, undocumented. Our study of the archival documentation in Estonian church archives did not reveal the causality of the regional pattern of the symbols.
The church tower symbol is little or completely undocumented, compared, for instance, to the reconstructions of church steeples and altars. We suggest this symbol did not have major significance in religious iconography. Therefore, it is not possible to explain the spread of various symbols (foremost the cockerel symbols) to the east shore of the Baltic Sea.

We believe that the tradition of using the cockerel as a church tower symbol in Livonian Province copied the practice applied in Medieval Riga, the most important economic and political urban center on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea in Medieval times. The significant role of Medieval Riga in the architectural history of the Baltic Sea has been confirmed by several researchers throughout the twentieth century (Alttoa 1999, pp. 31–50; Löfler 1936, pp. 90–100; Vaga 1960, 2004). In understanding the history of the Medieval churches in Estonian territory, Alttoa (1999) defines Dome Cathedral of Riga as a key object. Various architectural elements that occur in Dome Cathedral of Riga occur in numerous medieval sacral buildings on

**Figure 3** Church tower symbols of Old Livonian churches. Churches where the symbol has changed are marked with squares.
the east shore of the Baltic Sea, and therefore we believe the symbol on top the church
tower is no exception. Examination of the chronology of church construction in Riga
shows that the tower of St. Peter’s Church was mounted with a cockerel in 1491 at
the latest.6

The earliest artistic depiction of Riga, the xylograph by Sebastian Münster from
the first half of the sixteenth century, also supports this aspect (Ärends 1944). First
records on the cockerel of the Riga Dome Cathedral were noted in 1595, and major
churches of Riga feature the cockerel symbol on the tower tops in 1612 (Campe
1929; Neumann 1892, 1912).

In Riga, the cockerel symbol was adopted in the Hanseatic Era when the ruling
trading alliance in northern Europe was the Hanseatic League. In addition to active
trading in the Hanseatic League, this union had an impact on cultural-architectural
forms in northern Europe (Mühlen 1985, pp. 29–62; Schildhauer 1988). According
to a number of scholars, we may talk about a unitary cultural region (see for example
Bialostocki 1976; Bonsdorff 1993). The design of St. Mary’s Church (which displayed
a cockerel on its towers) in Lübeck, one of the central Hanseatic cities, had an impact
on the sacral architecture of urban centers of the Baltic Sea region (Lößler 1936, pp.
90–100; Lohf 1943).

The use of the cockerel in church tower symbols seems to confirm the unitary
cultural region concept in the Baltic Sea region, while at the same time retaining its
local peculiarities. In Riga, the use of cockerels on the medieval churches is prevalent,
whereas in Tallinn only one cockerel on top of St. Olav’s Church has been recorded.
The earliest record that mentions the cockerel on top of the St. Olav’s Church in
Tallinn dates back to 1651 (Rickers 1820). After the church was damaged in the fire
of 1820, the tower cockerel was never replaced. Restoration works were partly
funded from the state budget. Czar Nicholas I of Russia, the head of the state at that
time, insisted that the new tower had to be of the same height as the previous one but
the cockerel had to be replaced with a cross (Hein 1981, pp. 167–79; Konsap 1966).
The Orthodox Church did not accept the use of a cockerel on a church tower, which
may have had some impact on the switch to a new tower symbol (Eisen 1926, pp.
351–8). Other medieval churches in Tallinn were not decorated with tower cockerels.
Comparing Broce’s data with symbols common today partially confirms that cockerel
symbols have been changed to crosses (Broce 1992–2002).

Generalizing from our findings, the Estonian Province historically had more
contact with the Russian Empire than the southern Livonian Province, and was
therefore more independent (Stackelberg 1992; Wittram 1954). This may have
impeded the potential dominance of church tower cockerel usage throughout the
territory. Nonetheless, it would be imprudent to draw conclusions based solely on
these random records. It may be that the placement of cockerel statues on top of rural
church towers started in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in association with a
surge in construction of church towers. However, there were towers that were
equipped with cockerel statues, especially in Livonia, following the example of the
churches in Riga.

As seen on the map in Figure 3, one can clearly identify a line of church tower
symbols distributed along the former administrative border between the old Czarist
Russian provinces of Livonia and Estonia. This frontier border area began to develop
in the thirteenth century, along with the Christianization of areas of present-day Estonia. The mouth of the Daugava River, where the town of Riga was founded, became the base of the German Crusades. Tallinn was invaded by Danes and, concurrently, the counties of north Estonia belonged to Denmark in the thirteenth century. The result of these two conquest routes was a line through central Estonia, which formed an administrative border dividing Estonian settlements into two provinces. Riga was designated the capital of contemporary southern Estonia, while Tallinn ruled the north. This old boundary still denotes regional differences of several geo-cultural aspects (see for example Pae 2006; Pae et al. 2009; Schmidt 1991, pp. 500–21).

Even though the courses of administrative and church construction history were similar, it has been suggested that the difference in church tower symbolism between north and south Estonia may date from the end of the sixteenth century (beginning of the seventeenth century) when the territories of Old Livonia were divided up between different European powers and religions. Although the Reformation took place simultaneously in north and south Estonia, the Livonian War (1558–1583) that followed it divided the Estonian territory in two. From 1561, north Estonia was under the rule of Lutheran Sweden, whereas south Estonia was lost to the domain of Catholic Poland in 1582, where a Counter Reformation took place. The Polish Era ended in 1629, when the whole Estonian territory became the domain of the Swedish Kingdom (Talve 2004). In Sweden it is common to have a cockerel atop the church tower, whereas in Poland and in Lithuania the cockerel is nonexistent. Thus, we can conclude that the differences in provinces do not stem from Estonia’s division between two great European powers of that time.

The majority of the cockerel symbols are found in the southern part of Estonia and northern part of Latvia; that is, in the areas of the former Livonian Province. In the former Estonian Province, in the northern part of the country, a cockerel is a rare symbol. In coastal areas of northwest Estonia, a cluster can be recognized in which there are a number of churches with a cockerel atop the towers. Ethnic Swedes inhabited these areas from the Middle Ages until World War II. As the cockerel symbols are widely in use in Sweden, it would seem that they had some impact on church-building traditions in remote overseas Swedish settlements. However, Ruhnu Island and the Islands of Pakri (the ethnic composition of which was almost entirely made up of Swedes) contradicts this argument, as cockerel symbols are not found there.

Within the Estonian part of Livonia, the cockerels were more widely used in the eastern part. In western areas (e.g. in Pärnu County) only a few cockerel symbols have been identified; and on Saaremaa Island, there is only one. However, the tradition of using the cockerels is not completely absent in Pärnu County, as two major churches in Pärnu, St. Elizabeth Church and St. Nicholas Church (demolished in World War II), had a cockerel symbol atop their towers (see Figure 4).

The absence of cockerels on Saaremaa Island is presumably related to the historical peculiarity of the region. Despite being formally part of the Livonia Province, Saaremaa had its own knighthood and administrative bodies. In analyzing the relative lack of cockerel symbols in the southern part of Livonia, we believe that one of the reasons behind it could be the wars that destroyed the churches several times.
The River Daugava has been a significant frontline in numerous wars that damaged many churches.

Fieldwork and our analysis of the text of the encyclopedia of Latvian churches reveal that the cockerel symbol is not completely unknown in Kurland territory; however, it is less represented than in Livonia. Kurland’s history and church system differ from those of the two other provinces studied (Mašnovskis 2005–2007). Kurland was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and was unified with Czarist Russia only in 1795 (Pistohlkors 2002, pp. 266–435; Thomson and Thomson 1962). The churches of Jelgava, in the capital of Kurland Province, have most likely never been as influential as the capitals of the provinces to the north. The major churches of Jelgava are represented by both cross and cockerel atop the towers. St. John Evangelic Lutheran Church is topped with a finial, a rare symbol in Old Livonia.

Another factor that might have played a role in church tower symbol usage is the administrative system of the church. As a rule, the churches were subordinated directly to the geographically closest estate patron and Baltic-German estate owners had substantial influence over pastoral appointments and church repair (Rosenberg 2006, pp. 279–316). This allows for the possibility that estate owners could have influenced what type of symbol was placed atop a church tower. For example, the church of Kanepi was under the patronage of Ungern-Sternberg of Erastvere estate, and since a star was a symbol of this kin, it was placed on top of the church steeple as in Figure 4.

**Conclusion**

As a means of expressing power relations, a sense of belonging, and personal (as well as collective) attitudes, symbols have always been important in people’s lives. At times, they have been used by rulers to give people a sense of pride and identity, and
at other times symbols have been condemned or prohibited by the state. Our study has reviewed the symbols used on church towers, analyzing their meanings and examining the geographical distribution of different symbols, with a special emphasis on the tradition of steeple cockerels in Old Livonia.

The historical administrative division and power relations of Europe have had significant impact on the various cultural expressions within Europe. The territories on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea shared the same administrative practices with Germany for several centuries. Consequently, it may be surmised that a number of cultural characteristics and monuments from different periods in the history of Western Europe are expressed on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. The iconography used in the areas around the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, which were incorporated into the Western European cultural life during the German Crusades of the thirteenth century, is to a great extent compatible with that of Western European countries. Being related to religious traditions of Protestantism, the former Old Livonia represents one of the easternmost areas where a cockerel has been used on church towers. Thus, we may claim with some certainty that the cockerel tradition became more prevalent following historical administrative borders. At the same time, the eastern border of Estonia demarcates the eastern edge of this cultural phenomenon, since culturally significant symbols used in Russia derive from Byzantine culture.

The origins of the cockerel as a church tower symbol in Old Livonia have not been dated precisely, but it was most likely an integral part of the overall expansion of sacral architecture. The first data recorded on cockerel symbol usage in Old Livonia are from the fifteenth century. Its usage was most evident in urban centers and its roots can be traced to north Germany. This suggests that the usage of cockerels on church towers might have also expanded with the Hanseatic movement.

The analysis of distribution patterns of church tower cockerels in Estonia shows significant regional variance. The use of cockerels on church towers is more widespread in the former Livonian Province, the historic capital of which was Riga. The cockerel is a rare symbol in the former Estonian Province, administered by Tallinn. Evidently, the leading urban centers had an influential role in the use of symbols all over the country, as the cockerel of the St. Peter’s Church has been the unofficial city symbol for centuries and most medieval churches of Tallinn lacked tower cockerels. From this study, it is apparent that the former administrative border between the historical Livonian and Estonian provinces formed a distinct line, marking regional patterns of various geo-cultural phenomena.

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Notes

1 Old Livonia comprises Estonian Province, Livonian Province and Kurland – three historical Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire. In this article, Estonia refers to present-day Estonia. By Estonian Province we mean the northern part of present-day Estonia while the Livonian Province consists of the areas of south Estonia and north Latvia.

2 This imposing Orthodox church is one of the most photographed tourist sites in the old town of Tallinn, affording a clear contrast with its grandiose Byzantine architecture to the Gothic churches and the overall medieval look of the old town. An intriguing discussion arose in the Estonian media in 2007 on the front cover photo of the Estonian language-learning book published by Routledge (Moseley 2007). The onion-shaped cupolas, representing Orthodox culture, shown on the cover photo were considered inappropriate to introduce the language of a nation with mostly Lutheran background (see Schultz 2007).

3 In Gothic architecture, the finial is a common adornment on steeples. The most famous finials embellish the towers of the Cologne Cathedral. The finial of original size stands also in front of the cathedral. Several church towers, like that of the St. John’s Church in Kanepi in Estonia, are decorated with the star referring to the morning star that has been used as a symbol for Jesus Christ. A ship, symbolizing seafaring, adorns the reformed church of the city of Leer in northwest Germany. A whole variety of alternate symbols may be found. A crown together with an orb and weathercock cap the tower of the Tallinn Dome Church. The weathercock of St. Anne’s Church Shandon in Cork, Ireland, displays a giant golden salmon indicating the historical importance of fishery and seafaring (see http://www.thefour-facedliar.com/history/history.html). A Rusalka (mermaid) is another lesser-known steeple symbol, for example topping the Königsberg Dome Church. Many churches in northwest Germany and Holland carry a statue of a swan atop the tower. In addition, one can encounter emblems such as patron saints, dragons, galleons, violins, beggars, falcons and fetterlocks (Friar 2003).

4 An orb topped with a cross is known also as globus cruciger.

5 As a rule, the use of church tower symbols in Estonian territory is rather conservative, i.e. the earlier symbols are often reproduced (oral comments by Juhan Kilumets, art historian and restorer, September 2007).

6 A cockerel on the spire of St. Peter’s Church in Riga is depicted on the reverse side of the one Latvian lat coin. http://www.bank.lv/eng/main/all/lvnaud/coin/1lats/1ls6/


8 The cockerel of the Pärnu St. Nicholas Church (suffered in the fire of 1944 and exploded in 1954) survived the explosion and was rediscovered in 2002 in a private yard and taken to the Pärnu Museum. Commanded by Baltic Germans with roots in Pärnu, the statue was repaired. Since the church had served the German community until the resettlement of Baltic German people in 1939, the later restoration support by Baltic Germans can be regarded as a kind of symbolic act. The cockerel is currently displayed in the Pärnu Museum in front of the last pre-war aerial photograph of Pärnu, as if representing the remembrance of the pre-war Pärnu city centre that was largely destroyed.
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