

# The textuality of diagonal ornamentation: Historical transformations of signification from the Baltic perspective

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**Abstract.** This paper deals with textual aspects of the geometric diagonal linear ornamentation that appears on traditional woven Lithuanian bands. Taking into consideration diachronic, local as well as universal perspectives, it aims to determine and classify the basic elements of the ornament that relate to the development of textuality. Previous investigations of Baltic and Lithuanian textile ornaments have been based on a purely geometric analysis of ornamental form, or on creating linguistic inventories of folk pattern denominations. This paper describes a unique, elaborated, interdisciplinary method for studying such ornaments based on historical-typological comparative analyses, the classification of patterns with regard to their form and meaning, and the semiotic interpretation of mythopoetic images of patterns names. Further, the paper discusses whether an authentic folk classification and a tradition of typology based on the forms of patterns and names can be detected. From the traditional point of view the main meaning-carrying element of this ornamentation is the type of pattern. Therefore, reconstructions and interpretations of the semantic field of patterns' signification may be based on the mythopoetic context of folk culture.

**Keywords:** symbolism of geometric ornament, traditional Baltic textiles, script evolution, runic script, ornament cognition

## Introduction

The main feature of the Lithuanian folk textile pick-up woven belts consists in geometric diagonal linear ornament (Figures 1, 5e). In the Baltic countries the evolution of this traditional ornament can be traced back to the Middle Ages. In prehistoric times, this type of ornament was popular in Neolithic southeast Europe. The

weaving tradition of this diagonal ornament is also popular in Northern and Eastern European folk textiles, and is spread across Eurasian, Latin American and North African cultures. This wide spread means that it has scores of international aspects. At the same time, this ornament also has regional features, as from the 19th century onwards it began to be interpreted as a fundamental element in the national identities of many modern countries. Therefore, the semiotics of this kind of visual signs-patterns may be strongly linked with regional subjectivism, because the folk-cultural context of patterns' explanation and classification may differ in various cultures and languages. This is why I will advance a regional perspective on this problem.

Geometric diagonal linear ornament has more than just national and technical-aesthetic values. The most important questions are about how it should be understood and interpreted (culturally, magically, scientifically and artistically) from an evolutionary perspective of human visual abstract thinking (especially a cosmological world explanation) as part of a cultural memory mechanism and as a system of communication. The interdisciplinary art historical and ethnographic-folkloristic-linguistic approach to this ornament reveals a paradigm of textuality and intertextuality. It raises questions about the evolution of script and linear reading, cultural polyglotism, and the multilayered nature of ornamentat as a cultural text. A semiotic analysis would pose the following questions: What is the message of this ornament and how it is created? Does this ornament consist of eclectic collections of signs, or is it a particular sign system associated with a proto-script or a script? Is it associated with signs of property, heraldry, or magic? How is it linked with visual signs of romantic nationalism, or signs of contemporary personalism and rationalism? Does the ornament have a relationship with language or with mythopoetic images of folklore? This approach would also indicate whether we should treat the signs of this ornament system as icons, indices or symbols, and consider what aspects of this ornament may be seen as sign, text and code according to the modelling system defined by Thomas Sebeok and Marcel Danesi (2000: 20–37).

It is important to examine which position this ornament as cultural text occupies in the levels of internal organization of semiosphere as conceptualized by Juri Lotman<sup>1</sup> (Lotman 1984). The aim of this approach is to describe the traditional Lithuanian diagonal linear ornament as a sign system and to determine its basic

<sup>1</sup> Lotman defined *semiosphere* as a systemic totality of semiotic objects such as signs and languages that constitute meaning for a given culture. Without semiosphere language does not exist. He considers the division between the centre and the periphery as a law of the internal organization of the semiosphere. What is beyond the border of the semiosphere of a given culture, should be treated as non-real, non-semiotic, or simply another culture. Along these borders a mechanism exists for translating foreign "texts" coming from other semiospheres. Because of contact with the latter, the peripheries, as the most dynamic parts of a semiosphere, are generating new meaning, structures and texts that subsequently reach the structural centre.

elements: (a) what is its signification (the relation between form and meaning) strategy; (b) is the system relatively stable or does it have dynamic, mutable elements and creative aspects; (c) what is the interconnection between unique (national) and universal aspects from an evolutionary perspective. This approach thus explains the central meaning-carrying elements of Lithuanian textile ornamentation. It also analyses the names of patterns as sources for academic classification and symbolic interpretation as related to mythopoetic images in the semiosphere of folk culture. Finally, the paper reviews historical traces of pattern form and textuality, as well as the semantic vitality of ornaments, in modern interpretations in Baltic cultures.

### The main features of traditional diagonal ornament

In the 19th century, woven decorated bands were a distinct aesthetic element of Lithuanian folk costume. This section considers the syntax, pragmatics and semantics of these patterns and the objective background for the semiotic classification of the patterns.

In traditional folk culture, this type of decorated textile was believed to have magic and mediating functions (according to ethnographic data). They played the apotropaic role in rites of passage and daily life. Textile artefacts displaying this kind of ornamentation served as offerings to living relatives or domestic spirits, ancestors, divinities and other mythical beings (Tumėnas 2002: 124–146). Hence such ornament may be treated as an agent, conveying cultural messages or magic power.

The textuality of Baltic woven band ornamentation (directed equally left and right) is evident in the same kind of linear ornamental “text” of multi-patterned bands (called *šimtaraštės* – “hundred-patterned”) in particular local traditions. Their ornamentation is composed of a large number of different patterns that are arranged in regular or irregular combinations. This tradition existed in the 19th century in western, central and northern Lithuania (Figure 1b). It was also very sophisticated in central and western Latvia. A related tradition is known from eastern Sweden. The irregular order of the patterns in this kind of ornamentation is similar to the aesthetic impression of runic inscriptions. There are suggestions that this “hundred-patterned” geometric folk ornamentation (the totality of specific signs or ideograms) served in funerals as prayers for deceased relatives in order to help them reach Paradise (Tamošaitienė, Tamošaitis 1988: 74).

How is this related to the text and metalanguage of the ornamentations? Is it possible to read the patterns as letters, icons, signs or codes?

The modern forms of ornamentation that were introduced into traditional band decorations at the end of the 19th century strongly support the idea of textuality. The

traditional ornamentation was transformed into Latin-script poetical citations from folk songs of love and courtship. For example, girls wove sentences such as “Please look Jon” (Figure 1b) and “The northern wind blows terribly and billows up the sea. Without you, young lady, I will spend the days in sadness”.<sup>2</sup> These examples suggest that textuality was probably inherent in the earlier tradition of band ornament, which is why it was so well understood and so easily transformed into modern 20th century decoration of a script-like style (Figure 1a, c). Hence, the traditional metatexts of ornamental symbols were transformed into the modern script of literal language.



Figure 1. Woven bands with texts: (a) band with interwoven text. Traditional crafts festival in Vilnius, 1983 (archive of the author); (b) a multipatterned band with text, Raseiniai region, 19th c. (Tamošaitienė, Tamošaitis 1988: 73); (c) a band with ornamentalized text, Klaipėda region, early 20th c.

### The typology and semantics of diagonal patterns

The traditional diagonal ornamentation is based on the double nature of its pattern: it is built of two types of interconnected patterns – the background consists generally of dark woven patterns that are mainly red, green, and blue, while the foreground consists of light, mainly white patterns. Observing the ornamented belts from a horizontal position their lines follow three directions: vertical and diagonal (a 45-degree

<sup>2</sup> Marijampolė r. 1920, Šiauliai, “Aušra” Museum, EO, 2519.

angle): ↑, ↖, ↗. These lines form diagonal crosses, diamonds, triangles, zigzags and meandering figures, as well as vertical, diagonal and other similar geometric forms (Figure 1; Figure 2; Figure 5e).

Formal geometric analysis helps us to outline the basic elements of this ornamentation. The smallest geometric component of this diagonal ornament design is the simple dot. The general line construction is based on a vertical cross formed by five dots: +. The vertical cross is basic for the evaluation of almost all of the geometric figures and signs in this ornamentation. The simplest figures are the square, the triangle, and diagonal or vertical lines. These simple figures are used to form different signs or patterns. This form of ornamentation is based on various combinations of simple or complicated patterns of this kind.

In the first stage of investigations, which were made purely from the point of view of ethnography and art history, only two kinds of basic distinct classifications were elaborated: (a) the formal pattern classification, which was based on a purely geometric analysis of design form, composition and symmetry; and (b) inventories and lists of names of patterns. Only later did general, integrated typologies of particular pattern names associated with their form emerge.

The first purely formal analysis and classification of East Prussian folk textile ornaments was provided by Konrad Hahm (1937). He analysed the diamond, star and cross-like patterns. Several classifications of Lithuanian band ornamentation were suggested by the Lithuanian art historian Paulius Galaunė (1930: Tab. 29–30). He classified pattern forms in tables on the basis of key characteristic forms (archetypical, primal), and their diversity and sophistication. However these classifications were more like interpretative collections of particular examples than explanations of the pattern's evolution and variety.

A more elaborated formal classification was given by Galina Klimova, who sought to outline the total variety of this type of pattern as an ornamental system. Klimova conducted a comparative analysis of a wide collection of East European textiles, including Baltic ones (Klimova 1994).

Another branch of initial investigations was focused on pattern names. East European folk art ethnographers, linguists and folklorists of the 20th century have created a huge non-systematic collection of traditional names of folk textile patterns. These inventories, however, suffer from a major confusion that is the result of a mistaken understanding of the semiotic nature of the ornaments. Most collections of these names are simply words, denominations without accompanying patterned icons, signifieds without signifiers, references without objects; or *vice versa* – signs without folk denominations. Such partial, fragmented sets of scholarly classifications have no reference to the traditional conception of ornament. They do not raise the question of the existence of an authentic folk classification and typology tradition related with pattern forms, names and their significance. Investigations that present

folk terms and real images of particular patterns in one complete unit are very rare and are the most valuable.

Latvian researchers A. Dzērvītis (1925), J. Niedre (1930), E. Paegle (1944), Mirdza Slava (1992) have considered the patterns with their name complexes and have ascertained some of the most popular textile pattern types as well as their distinct authentic names. Similarly, Russian (E. Kletnova 1924, B. Kuftin 1924, N. Grinkova 1928), Udmurtian (S. Vinogradov 1967), and Permian (Gribova 1975) ethnographers have linked the images of some diagonal textile patterns with their authentic folk names. A concise generalization of the names of Russian textile patterns was provided in the historical-ethnographic atlas *The Russians* by M. Shmeleva and L. Tazyhina (1970). However, in these cases, the analyses did not consider ornamentation in its total variety of patterns as an entire system.

The approach taken by Lithuanian textile researchers P. Galaunė (1930: 263–266), J. Balčikonis (1961), J. Balčikonis and A. Mikėnaitė (1969), S. Bernotienė (1974), and A. Tamošaitienė and A. Tamošaitis (1988) was to focus on the diversity of ornamentation forms, investigated separately from the names of particular folk patterns (as a branch of folk poetry), but it neglected the complex associations of the patterns.

Marja Znamierowska-Prüfferowa (1934: 5–7) was one of the first ethnographers to initiate complex analyses of south Lithuanian textile ornamental forms and their folk denominations. More recently, T. Jurkuvienė (2001) and V. Savoniakaitė (1996) accomplished primary typologies of some Lithuanian textile pattern forms with their most popular names included. A precise ethnographic correlation of different forms of band pattern and the variability of their folk names is given by I. Nėnienė (2010: 115–127).

In the past decade, the most important semantic folkloric-linguistic classification of names of Byelorussian textile patterns has been carried out in the framework of a project by an ethnologist group led by Galina Nyachaeva (Nyachaeva 2004). The study provides a detailed picture of the abundant diversity and variety of authentic names of patterns collected. The patterns' names are related to their particular visual images and ethnographic metrics. However, the research does not cover issues regarding the classification of forms. Again, the authors have not perceived the complexity of words and images in an interdisciplinary manner.

It should be noted that a mere folkloristic analysis of the poetic images of the names of patterns is too limited since it neglects the syncretism of the ornament forms and their names. Therefore, further semiotic analysis of this ornament system should be carried out by uniting the complex exploration of pattern forms, names and meanings, as well as considering the principles of traditional folk classification that cover them.

Investigations into ornamentation forms and folk name complexes in Lithuania and elsewhere face the challenge of a lack of systematic, solid and integral research

methodology. Researchers face the following problems: (1) when signs are explored, variants of their forms and names are ignored; (2) the analysis of sign (pattern) names is frequently limited to drawing up their lists, and no special emphasis is laid on their links with the forms of signs, that is, the names of signs are not related to their forms; (3) the classification of forms of patterns differs from the way their names are systematized (Patterns are customarily classified focusing either on their forms or names. These two types of classification are usually provided not in a complex but in a parallel way.); (4) the classification of signs ignores the correlation between the faster evolution of the forms of signs and their greater variability in comparison with the lesser diversity and more stable nature of their names; and (5) each author seeks to create a unique classification of ornaments, which means that the terminological meta-language in this area lacks universality.

Searching for a deeper understanding of the traditional band ornament system, I have been developing (since the 1980s) a precise, typological classification of patterns covering their total diversity and polysemy, considering them as a combination of sign forms, names and symbolism. This approach acknowledges that the complex conception of the sign is in accordance with correlations of the objects, symbols and signs in culture.

Further analyses raise questions concerning the inner structure of patterns and their interconnection in ornament system. Exploring the syntagmatics, I suggest that a pattern with its name is the minimal constituent meaning-carrying element in particular linear ornamentations. Exploring pragmatics by comparing all of the patterns found in this ornament tradition, I have found that according to folk perception, the differentiation of pattern meaning is based on the pattern types or groups that include all similar pattern derivations from the same meaning-carrying prototype. Analysing the self-descriptions of culture, generalizing the *emic* data, *i.e.* the ethnographic accounts of authentic explanations of traditional designs, I have discovered that there exists a strong folk tradition of giving the same name (often based on mythopoetic images) to various particular geometric patterns belonging to the same group or type. This strategy has the features of classification. An analysis of this tradition has revealed the folk concept of typological classification of geometric patterns and has helped to evaluate the original scholarly one, proceeding from traditional folk perception.

The popular cultural memory in Lithuania has preserved a huge inventory of names of traditional patterns of folk textiles from the 19th to the 20th centuries. I have collected the names based on studies of accession books in the main museums and institutional archives (Lithuanian National Museum, Lithuanian Art Museum, National M. K. Čiurlionis Art Museum, Archive of the Dept. of Ethnology at the Lithuanian Institute of History), and in ethnographic fieldwork expeditions over the last 20 years. Other researchers' recorded data is also included. The richest variety

of Lithuanian ornaments can be found in the decoration of woven bands from the 19th and 20th centuries. They are usually decorated with two, three or four different ornamental motifs/patterns/signs. After analysing the structure of naming of various similar patterns I found that, according to the traditional concept of folk weavers, they are grouped in definite types. Twenty-five traditionally named pattern types can be distinguished among Lithuanian band ornaments. Moreover, considering these from the evolutionary perspective of the form, and also from the logic of the folk tradition, it is possible to distinguish 14 basic signs, which can be classified as archetypes. However, it should be noted that these archetypes are not explicitly distinguished by tradition as the precursors of many types. It is evident that in such a scheme it is impossible to expose in totality all the possible sign variants included in particular types. In Figure 2, the most popular names (ignoring rare variants) are presented.

Akutė Varnos akutė Būrtukė	Langučiai Kryžian- gėlis	Pelėdos akutės	Roželė Erškėtėlis Snaigė Būrtukė su grėbliukais Žvaigždutė	Varylūtė Vėželis Voras Keturkėla	Obelėlė	Panievalia Krūmutis	Plačia- kojis	Eglutė Šiuotelė	Liktoriu- kai	Liktoriu- kai	Kryžiukas Krikštėlis	Gvazdikas		
Arkljo galvukė	Žirgeliai Puserškėtis	Žirgeliai	Žvaigždutė Roželė	Obuolukas Vilko gerklė Žušiažarnis	Žušiažarnis Danteliai	Grėbliukai	Dvilypas grėblalis Sulaužtinis grėblėlis Vėželis	Katpėdelė Roželė	Žaltinėlis Zuikutis	Sulaužtinis grėblėlis	Ožkapėdė Ožkanagutis			

Figure 2. The complex typology of Lithuanian band patterns and their folk names.

In scholarly terminology the 14 basic signs are: diamond; diamond with horns; lozenge with hooks; herring bone; cross-like star; diagonal cross; triangle with hooks; star; zigzag; comb; chess; serpent; swastika; heart. The most popular pattern names have a mythopoetic nature. In grouping the forms of the patterns, the Lithuanian folk names and the meanings, I have classified all these signs into 25 main types: (1) *Eye, Crown eye, Magic*; (2) *Windows, Cross window*; (3) *Owl eyes*; (4) *Rose, Wild rose,*



*Snowflake, Quadrangle with rakes, Star, Sun*; (5) *Frog, Cancer, Turtle, Spider*; (6) *Apple tree*; (7) *Bush*; (8) *Spraddled legs*; (9) *Pine tree, Broom*; (10) *Candelabra* (star-like); (11) *Candelabra* (cross-like); (12) *Cross, Baptism sign*; (13) *Dianthus*; (14) *Horse head*; (15) *Horses, Half of wild rose*; (16) *Horses*; (17) *Star, Rose*; (18) *Apple, Wolf mouth, Goose intestines*; (19) *Goose intestines, Teeth*; (20) *Raker*; (21) *Double raker, Broken raker, Cancer*; (22) *Cat's footmark, Rose*; (23) *Grass snake, Hare*; (24) *Broken raker*; (25) *Goat's footprint, goat's claw* (Figure 2).

These signs, representing the main pattern types of the traditional diagonal ornament, have an international nature. Some of the names are similar to mythopoetic images of folklore not only in Lithuanian, but also in the Latvian, Belarussian, Russian and other cultures. The double nature of patterns can be considered as the combination of the sign form, which plays the role of the signifier, and the meaningful sign name – poetic image, which plays the role of the signified. Analysis of the perception of ornaments in traditional culture suggests that some of these patterns have an iconic aspect: as their names derive from associations of their geometric form with fauna and flora: *Diamond – Crown eye* – resembles a geometrized crown eye circle; *rhombus with horns – Rose* – resembles a rose flower that has spine; *billet pattern – Wolf throat* – resembles a wolf throat with sharp teeth; *Horse head* resembles the silhouette of a real horse's head; *Grass snake* resembles the serpentine silhouette of a snake; *Frog* resembles the peculiar posture of a frog; and *Cat's footmark* and *Goat's footprint or claw* resemble the footprints of these animals, etc. The forms and names of other patterns are associated with artefacts of the human environment: the *Raker* pattern resembles the artefacts of a rake and a comb; and the *Candelabra* pattern resembles the central symmetry of the artefact of the same name.

On the other hand the names of these pattern types often refer to more than one object and the objects may be from very different spheres. For example, the *Rose* sign refers to a rose (the floral world), the sun and a star (the astral world), and a snowflake (the atmosphere). Similarly the *Cat's footmark* sign refers to a cat (fauna) and a rose (flora).

In a way, it could be claimed that this ornament has notational scheme [according to Nelson Goodman, a notational scheme consists of a finitely differentiated, semantically disjoint symbol system, in which only one item in the realm corresponds to each symbol (Goodman 1976[1968]: 128–134)]. Moreover, the names of these patterns derive not only from their form associations with objects of reality as at the same time they refer even more strongly to mythopoetic images of folk culture. However, because of the variety of applications and reuse of the same pattern name, this system of ornament names may qualify as denotational (such systems lack complete and strict articulation). This is also characteristic of natural languages (Goodman 1976[1968]: 128–134). According to Vyacheslav Ivanov, the need to use one sign to refer to many different objects may be a result of quantitative limitations

of language. Such objects are linked to one another by associations that are far from being logical. The linkages are similar to the associative “complex thinking” of a child (Ivanov 2008: 191–192). Consequently this common feature may indicate that the diagonal ornament is a sign system that is related in structure to natural language. It must be stressed that this coexistence of two semiotic systems in semantic complexes of visual signs (patterns) and their names has a very archaic background. It is compatible with other ancient languages, such as hand gestures with their verbal affiliates (Hindu *mudras*; finger counting signs). Since the earliest periods of history, not only linguistic diversity but also the coexistence of different semiotic systems seems to have been very important for humankind (Ivanov 2008: 193).

The logic of associations of pattern names with objective reality may be explained by mythical thinking. This means that the significance of pattern names has a more conventional, symbolic and metaphoric than iconic nature despite the fact that they denote only objects of the material world, and have no relation to other abstract concepts such as feelings etc.

To classify Lithuanian textile patterns and reveal their symbolism, we should elaborate new, specific methodologies and interpret pattern names as part of the semiosphere of the culture. Francis Boas (1955) looked at the symbolism of Native American ornament, but his method was based on collecting ethnographic data without analysing the patterns’ names in the context of a mythic world outlook. An outstanding ethnological study on the semantics of patterns of Siberian tribes by Sergei Ivanov (1963) was of a similar kind. A deeper contextual analysis and interpretation of the symbolism of ornament can be based on the methodology of archaeologists, folklorists, ethnologists/anthropologists, art historians, and semioticians who are interested in the links between the form and decoration of artefacts as well as the folklore images and mythological world-view (R. Eisler 1910; J. Basanavičius 1912; M. Gimbutas 1958; M. Gimbutienė 1996; B. Rybakov 1965; A. Ambroz 1966). Researchers from the Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics (Toporov 1971; Ivanov 1989; Ivanov, Toporov 1977) and scholars adopting a similar approach (Gribova 1975; Rusakova 1989; Baiburin 1995), or elaborating similar concepts (Barbatti 2008), link and compare local ethnological and art history data with material from a wider area and from a longer time perspective, and interpret them from a mythological point of view.

One of the most fruitful ways to interpret the ornamental elements in folk art, relating pattern names to the narrative in a folkloric-mythologic context, was initially introduced by the Latvian archaeologists Edvards Brastiņš (1923) and Jekabs Bīne (1936). In the same vein, Maria Gimbutas elaborated a contextual and comparative interpretation (related to Joseph Campbell’s approach to mythology) of Lithuanian folk art and European prehistoric art. They looked at inscriptions and signs as the symbols or attributes, or the hypostasis, of mythic beings, and as

codes of cosmology. A precisely elaborated methodology for studying the mythopoetic images that pervade folk art, folklore and language, and their interpretation in the broader context of mythology, has been presented by Vyacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov.

The representative of the Moscow School of Semiotics Svetlana Ryzhakova (2002) generalized the ideas of other authors. She provided a symbolic classification of Latvian textile pattern symbols, summed up previous investigations into the genesis of their types and diversity of their forms and names, and extended the analysis of folkloric-ethnocultural context of later poetic images.

An exhaustive study of the swastika sign from prehistoric art through the folk art of Slavic and Finnic cultures (from the 19th to the early 20th centuries in the area of the former USSR) was accomplished by Pavel Kutenkov. The author paid serious attention to the analysis of these pattern names in folk textile and their etymological and ethnological interpretations. However, sometimes he mistakenly confused the swastika with other types of signs, such as crosses, lozenges, spirals and serpents (Kutenkov 2008: 262–265; 269).

In comparing and applying different aspects of the methods used by various semioticians, I am elaborating a particular methodology based on the contextual links of the folk names of patterns (given to them by the weavers) with mythopoetic symbols and images from the folk tradition, as well as with mythology. Wider contexts and typological similarities in other cultures help us to understand better the meaning of mythic symbolism. Toporov (2000: 127–129) has stated that the principal myth in any tradition is attested by having many applications in very different fields and aspects of folk memory and customs. The results of such a multiple codification of mythology are found in various aspects of culture, operating both in everyday life and in spiritual practices. According to Baiburin (1989), owing to the subordination of world elements into one global semiotic structure in a traditional world-view, a network of various correspondences exists between objects of different types, for example between heavenly luminaries, elements of clothing, the landscape, the biosphere, etc. In examining the possible involvement of folk ornament in the archaic strategy of mythical codification, we should thus search for links between the pattern names and mythopoetic images in traditional culture. The folk names of the signs have some distinctive features. The same name sometimes refers to different patterns, which suggests similarity in their symbolism. On the other hand, one pattern usually has several different names. These peculiarities represent connections between the different forms and names of patterns, which reflect sophisticated associations of various mythopoetic images. They also suggest another way to analyse systematically the mythological world pointing to patterns as attempts to understand the meaning and logic of archaic associative thinking. For example, the semiotic associations among an apple, a star, a wolf, a swan, a duck, a bride and a heart, based

on the mythical world system, reveal the logic and meaning of symbolic associations of the toothed lozenge sign in Lithuanian and neighbouring traditions.

The toothed diamond/star sign (Figure 2: 18) bears the names *Star* and *Apple*. In Lithuanian folklore an apple often stands for the symbol of fertility, matchmaking and marriage (Basanavičius 1912). In Indo-European mythical poetry golden apples are associated with eternal youth and immortality. The sign also has another important name, *Wolf's mouth*. In Lithuanian dream symbolism, wolves signify matchmakers and bridegrooms (Tumėnas 2002: 204). On first entering a bathhouse after childbirth a woman was called *a wolf* (Urbanavičienė 2000: 90). The wolf appears in fertility magic: if you want your bees to steal the honey from other bees, you must let the swarm of bees fly through the open mouth of the wolf (Elisonas 1932: 128). The mythological wolf's mouth symbol is probably similar to the *vagina dentata* image, well known in the European, Latin American and Asian traditions, which serves to make boys fear sexual interaction with girls without a special initiation. It is based on the archaic that every virgin carries a certain deadly element which starts to act against the first man possessing her (Lévi-Strauss 1997[1962]: 125; Eberhard 1969:134). The teethed vulva often represents the mouth of chthonic Mother Earth in initiation ceremonies having to do with symbolic death – return to the womb and rebirth in a superior state (Eliade 1965. 62–63).

Other names for the toothed diamond are *Goose's intestine* and the Belarusian name *Swan* (Nyachaeva 2004: 84), associated with water birds. In Lithuanian folklore, water birds (geese, ducks, swans and others) are popular bridal and marriage symbols. Traces of this tradition can be found in numerous East Baltic Stone Age artefacts depicting water birds, especially on Mesolithic scoop handles (Rimantienė 1995: 158). The images of water birds or goose, duck, swan feet symbols were popular in the Bronze Age Baltic jewelry. In archaic singing dances at weddings, the limping steps of the woman resemble the way water birds walk. The goose image is related to the wedding fertility symbolism known in Lithuanian birthday/baptism folklore (Šaknys 1996: 149). In the folk songs of courtship and matchmaking a young girl is compared to a water bird: “Roll, oh duck,/ Swimming fast/ – Pause, oh girl/ Before wedding with me” (Kazlauskienė 1983: 348). Another wedding song compares a duck hen, swimming and diving in a lake, with a young girl, who cries because of the inappropriateness of the chosen boy (Burksaitienė, Krištopaitė 1990: 353–355). Advent songs present direct parallels between a duck, who builds a nest and hatches her chicks, and a young bride, who walks in the rue garden of a palace (Valiulytė 2000: 62–63). In other songs, a boy catches some ducks with snares and sends them to his beloved as a clear symbol of romance and matchmaking (Ūsaitytė, Žičkienė 2007: 116–118). A similar symbolism is evident in the belief that if a duck jumps on a fence, a wedding will take place (Elisonas 1932: 66). In the context of these matchmaking images, it is easy to understand another Belarusian name, the

*Heart* (Nyachaeva 2004: 160). Thus we can see how the notion of a star is associated with local flora and fauna, and with the idea of a wedding.

Looking more thoroughly into the water bird imagery and the meanings of its associations, we should analyse these in the context of a hypostasis of mythical beings and their symbolism. M. Gimbutas has linked the Lithuanian folkloric image of water bird with the folk deities *Laumės* and traced this image back to the Old European Bird Goddess that was associated with fertility and life-giving mythology (Gimbutienė 1996: 152, 179–182).

This way, the links between the ornaments studied and the semiosphere of traditional folk culture and the mythopoetic world reveal the patterns as a kind of metalanguage of mythical codification, although, unfortunately, today we can only deal with the fragmented remains of this system of symbols. Thus, pattern names as an element of ornament language may be treated as signs. The poetic images rendered by them imply a message, and the symbolism of poetic images, related with mythologemes, stands for mythologic codes.

### **The evolutionary perspective of patterns**

In searching for basic aspects of the investigated ornament language from an evolutionary point of view, we should speak not about ornamentation, but about discrete magic signs or scripts. These distinct signs are popular in many other cultures worldwide. A wider diachronic and synchronic perspective, a cross-cultural, comparative historical and typological investigation into the evolution of this type of ornament patterns from the Neolithic period reveals that the basic message-carrying elements are particular signs. Their development was relatively independent from the technique (weaving, woodcarving, and writing on clay, tattooing, bread marking), but the weaving techniques were essential for the patterns' elaboration up to the present day.

These signs are found in the oldest formal issues of East European geometrical ornamentation – in the proto-script, symbols and ornamentation of the Old European civilization (Vinča and Cucuteni-Trypillian cultures, contemporary Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, Moldova and Hungary). They were used on ceramics as separate signs of proto-script (Winn 1981), or as decorative patterns, or as elements of ornamentation (Tumenas 2009, 2011). Sometimes they are present in depictions of clothing ornamentation or tattoos (Figure 3a,b). Harald Haarman (1996) indicated a very close connection between the Neolithic European proto-script or script and Etruscan writing. The Roman alphabet evolved from ancient Mediterranean alphabets, and replaced local Italic varieties (Looijenga 2003: 101–102). On the other hand, Etruscan script, together with the old provincial north Italian variety of the Latin alphabet, is thought to be a precursor of the runic alphabet.

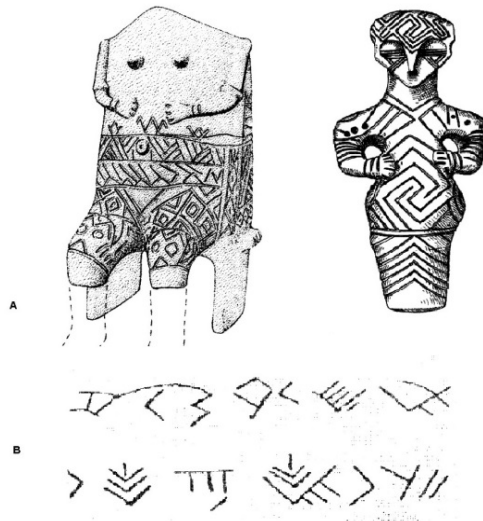


Figure 3. Signs, ornaments and linear writing in Old Europe, 5300–4000 B.C., Tisa and Vinča cultures: (a) patterns; (b) script signs (Gimbutienė 1996: 49; 180; 223).

Many basic signs of the textile ornament investigated are very similar to signs of the Germanic (Elder Futhork, Futhork) (from the second century to the 16th century) and the Lithuanian runic calendars (17th century) (Figure 4d). They have the same construction of vertical-diagonal lines (without horizontal lines). For example the *Elder Futhork* runic letters F, A (Figure 4b) are similar to the *Raker* sign (Figure 2: 20, 21); the runic letter K is similar to *Goat's foot* sign (Figure 2: 25); the letter G is similar to *Diagonal cross* signs (Figure 2: 12, 13); J, AE, S are similar to the *Serpent* sign (Figure 2: 23); the letters Z, T are similar to the *Herringbone* sign (Figure 2: 9); NG letter is similar to *Lozenge* signs (Figure 2: 1, 2, 3); the runic letter O is similar to the *Apple tree* sign type of the *Frog* archetype (Figure 2: 6). The Anglo-Saxon runic *Futhork* letters NG, OE and G (Figure 4c) are similar to the *Frog* and *Apple tree* signs (Figure 2: 5, 6) from the Lithuanian band ornament. The Swedish *Rök Runestone* artefact with Scandinavian runes (9th century) is decorated with *Frog* patterns (of textile origin) on the top of a memorial stone linked with the runic script underneath (Figure 4e). These *Frog* signs are identical to the ones popular in Lithuanian folk textiles (Figure 4a, Figure 2: 5–6).

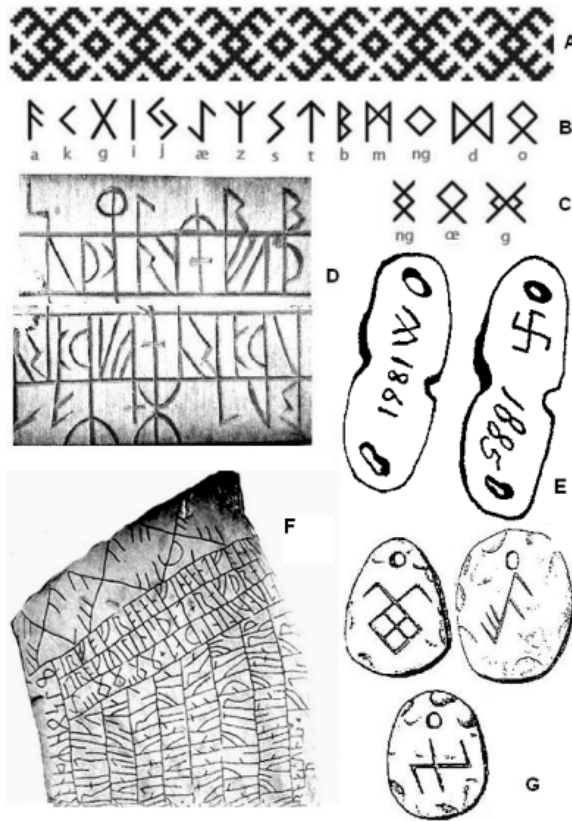
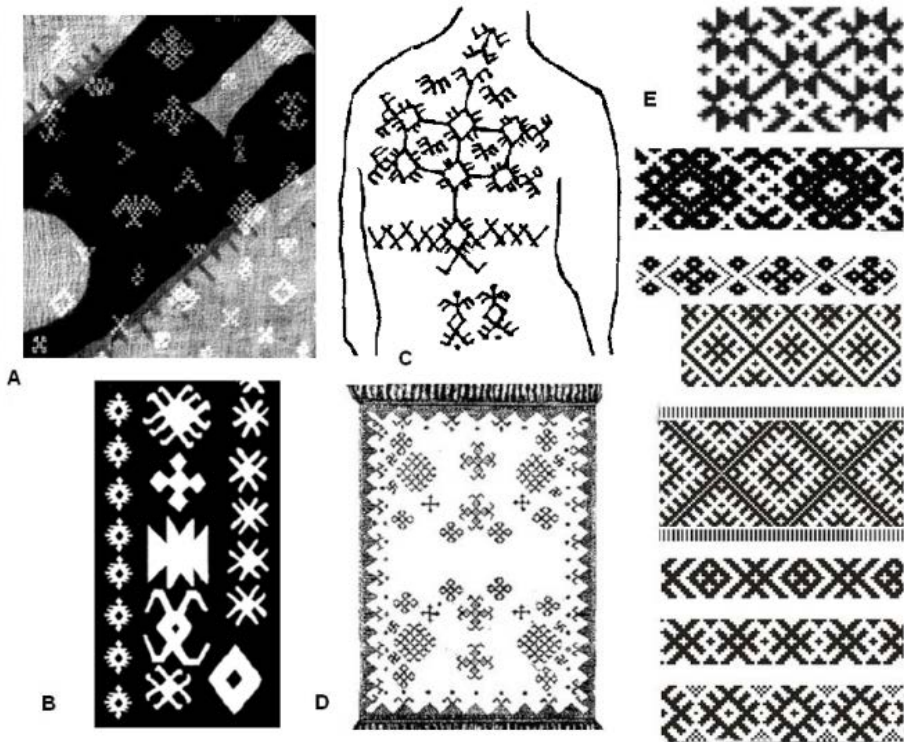


Figure 4. Similarities between textile ornament, runic script and signs of property: (a) a woven band patterned with *Frog* and *Rose* signs; (b) letters of the runic *Elder Futhark* alphabet; (c) letters of *Futhork* alphabet; (d) Lithuanian wooden runic calendar (two fragments, 17th c., Lithuanian National Museum); (e) Estonian fishing bobbers, 19th century, Estonian National Museum; (f) the *Rök Runestone* stone with Skandinavian runes (Sweden, 9th century); (g) fishing bobbers from Riga, Latvia, 12th–14th cc. (from Caune 1989).

The textile pattern archetypes investigated played the role of property signs and landmarks in East European folk and medieval cultures. For example, triangles with hooks/horses, a half swastika, herringbone, a diagonal cross, a diamond with a cross inside, hooks, and comb-type signs are found on fishing boats in Riga (Latvia, 12th–14th centuries) (Figure 4g), and were popular in 19th-century Estonian (Figure 4f) and west Lithuanian Curonian folk cultures as well. Signs such as cross-like star, frog, diamond with horns (rose), horses, toothed star and raker are characteristic of the Moroccan Berber textile magic signs and body tattoos (Figure 5a,b,c). A very strong and elaborated tradition of the same geometric ornament system is known in

Medieval textile ornamentation from Latvia (Dzērvītis, Ģinters 1936; Zariņa 1999) and Finland (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984) at the beginning of the 2nd millennium. (Figure 5d).



*Fig. 5. Similarities between Moroccan, Medieval Livonian and Lithuanian ornaments: (a), (b), (c) Moroccan Berber textile magic signs and body tattoos (from Damgaard 2008: 58; Barbatti 2008: Fig. Ill. 11.9.; Van Dinter 2000); (d) Livonian wrap decoration, 11th-13th cc., Latvia (from Dzērvītis, Ģinters 1936); (e) Lithuanian band ornaments.*

In modern times, bands with this type of decoration became an important part of the national costume, and also a separate popular gift for respected people, and folk craft souvenirs. This ornamentation serves as an aesthetic, social and cultural agent, expressing an association with local, regional and national communities, and in modern times also an association with the tradition of folk and national culture (Figure 1). During the national revival at the beginning of the 20th century decorated woven bands started to be exhibited and investigated as symbols of Lithuanian art and national identity, and as an example of the aesthetic tradition. They served as



an important element of the national costume at National Song Festivals, and were represented in the first exhibitions of Lithuanian art in Vilnius and abroad (Paris, Milan, Malmö). The modern actualization of the phenomenon of this ornament as a living tradition can be recognized in contemporary art and cultural life as an interpretation of Baltic sacred geometry. These aspects are strongly emphasized in Valdis Celms' (2007: 236–266) designs for Latvian festivals.

An interactive multimedia project „Laima's net“ carried out by M. Tenisons, A. Strazds and V. Tumėnas for the Kaunas Biennale 2013 represents the universal creative interpretation of this type of ornamentation by means of digital technology (Stirbytė [2013]: 116–117).<sup>3</sup> The project was inspired by investigations in pattern symbolism and the logic of I-Ching geometry. It was based on the algorithmic transcoding of personal identity data and chosen location coordinations from the world map into a unique sign. Thus, it is compatible with signs of the property tradition.

In modern times the traditional transmission of folk cultural capacity of patterns' mental associations with objects, signs, symbols and codes has probably become completely lost. Therefore this kind of self-communication of culture becomes replaced by pure scientific interpretation or reconstruction. Even various pseudo-scientific, popular and artistic interpretations of ornaments are trying to rely on the results of scientific research and to draw inspiration from them. Consequently, scholarly investigations into sign symbolism are starting to exercise a fundamental influence on further evolution of this meaningful tradition. In our day the structure and popular semiosis of ornament language are shifting towards simplicity from the previous sophisticated complexity of pattern associations: an iconic resemblance with an object of reality; pattern perception as sign, magic sign or script; a pattern name' s linking with mythopoethic images; a pattern name' s interpretation as a symbols related to mythological codes. These changes are caused by a simplified popular perception of the patterns' symbolism. Consequently, their referential aspects have lost their iconic and nominal nature. Modern people reduce the associative character of ornaments to a narrowly defined mythologic or national symbol, or even transform it into the contemporary alphabet as evidenced, for example, in the popular explanation: “The swastika is the Baltic symbol of the god Perkūnas”. This means that the contemporary mind refuses denotational features and enforces a notational character on the ornament language. Despite these changes, textuality remains a fundamental feature of this ornament tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.bienale.lt/2013/lt/katalogas-i-dalis/>.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the diagonal ornament consists of patterns classified into 25 types. This investigation into the links between pattern forms and name complexes within the wider context of the semiosphere helps us to characterize the traditional ornament as a metalanguage involved in an archaic strategy of mythic codification. In the first stage of the traditional perception, the patterns with folk names can be treated as icons referring to various objects of the biosphere, heaven, and human artefacts. On the second general level, they stand for particular visual-poetic ideas. Only in a deeper analysis of mental associations do we find that most folk names of geometric patterns are contextualized in the traditional folk culture as ideograms of mythopoetic images (mainly of a cosmological nature).

This mutable tradition of ornament has certain constant characteristics. The main stable meaning-carrying element of this ornament is the different pattern types. Originally, not only textiles, but also woodwork, ceramics and tattoos were fundamental media for their conservative elaboration, which occurred relatively independently from technology across the ages. Their evolution started from separate sign-ideograms, magic sign-symbols, or proto-scripts as part of the mythological world in the Old European Civilization. The diagonal geometry of this form of ornamentation is also compatible with later runic scripts. Originally these signs were separate; afterwards they underwent a transformation into elements of interconnected linear ornamental composition, representing the iconic and the symbolic aspects of the trichotomy of signs. In modern times these patterns have been reconceived as a symbol of national identity, or they have been unrecognizably transformed into letters. Such a contemporary “alphabetization” of ornament eliminates traditional referential iconic and associative nominative aspects and simplifies its symbolic meaning, as well as leads to the reduction of multilevelled denotational language of ornament and conversion into the notational one. On the other hand, this modern alteration may be treated as an iteration of this ornament’s ancient function as a script.

The present revival of interest in this ornament and the vitality of its artistic tradition in the Baltic countries are influenced not only by popular traditionalism, but also by scientific reconstructions and interpretations of this object as an integral, universal phenomenon of sacred language, symbolic thinking and mythology. Alteration in the meaning of archetypal signs is strongly associated with transformations in the world outlook over the course of time. Consequently, I conclude that their iconicity, signification, symbolism and textuality (which remain a fundamental characteristic of this ornament tradition) are mutable due to the changing cultural context, which, as noticed by Sebeok and Danesi (2000: 30), conditions the meaning of text. Hereby, following Lotman (2001: 241), we can qualify the tradition of geometric ornamentation as carrying the function of archaism in the self-communication of Baltic cultures.

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### **Текстуальность диагонального орнамента: исторические изменения сигнификации из балтийской перспективы**

В статье рассматриваются текстуальные аспекты линейного геометрического диагонального орнамента, встречающегося на традиционных литовских вязаных изделиях (поясах). Исходя из диахронической, местной и универсальной перспектив, определяются базовые элементы орнамента, связанные с развитием текстуальности. Предыдущие исследования текстильных орнаментов Прибалтики основывались на геометрическом анализе лишь орнаментальной формы или же на составлении лингвистических каталогов народных названий узоров. Данная статья знакомит с уникальным, тщательно разработанным междисциплинарным методом изучения орнамента, который основывается на сравнительном исторически-типологическом анализе, на классификации узоров с учетом их формы и значения, а также на семиотической интерпретации названий конфигураций узоров. В статье обсуждаются вопросы о наличии аутентичных народных классификаций и традиции типологии, основывающиеся на форме и названии узоров. Главный смыслообразующий элемент такого орнамента – тип узора. Таким образом, при конструировании и интерпретации семантического поля сигнификации узоров можно исходить из мифопоэтического контекста народной культуры.

### **Diagonaalornamendi tekstuaalsus: signifikatsioonid ajaloolised teisenemised Balti perspektiivist**

Artiklis käsitletakse Leedu traditsioonilistel ribakudumitel esineva lineaarse geomeetrilise diagonaalornamendi tekstuaalseid aspekte. Lähtudes nii diakroonilisest, kohalikust kui ka universaalsest perspektiivist püütakse määratleda ja liigitada ornamendi baaselemente, mis on seotud tekstuaalsuse arenguga. Balti ja Leedu tekstiilornamentide varasemad käsitlused põhinesid üksnes ornamendaalse vormi geomeetrilisel analüüsil või rahvalike mustriimetusete lingvistiliste kataloogide moodustamisel. Käesolevas artiklis kirjeldatakse ornamendi uurimise ainulaadset, viimistletud ja interdistsiplinaarset meetodit, mis tugineb ajaloolis-tüpoloogilistele kõrvutatavatele analüüsidele, mustrite klassifitseerimisele nende vormi ja tähendust arvestades ning mustrikujundite nimetusete semiootilisele tõlgendamisele. Lisaks vaadeldakse artiklis, kas on võimalik, et on olemas autentne rahvalik klassifikatsioon ja tüpoloogiatraditsioon, mis tugineb mustrite kujule ning nimetusetele. Sellise ornamendi peamine tähendus kandev element on mustritüüp. Seega võib mustrite signifikatsiooni semantilise välja rekonstrueerimisel ja tõlgendamisel lähtuda rahvakultuuri mütoloogilisest kontekstist.