



# The ARMIGER'S News

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## CIVIC HERALDRY OF LITHUANIA

*Al (Alydas) Karaša*

The heraldic tradition of Lithuania and her civic coats of arms are a treasure trove of history.

Unlike that of most European countries, Lithuania's heraldic tradition did not develop in the realm of personal coats of arms. What there was of arms bearing nobility, their arms were often of Polish origin. Members of some illustrious Lithuanian families, such as Sapiega, Radvila, and many others, bore arms under Polish registry but not necessarily of Polish origin. Lithuania's royalty and many early noble families had inherited, were granted, or had assumed coats of arms which were of Lithuanian origin. But Lithuania never developed an heraldic tradition of individual coats of arms to the same degree as most other European countries.



Civic heraldry, however, is alive and well in Lithuania as it has been for several hundred years. Stories behind the town and city coats of arms are a treasure trove of Lithuanian history and evidence of early commercial ties to city states and other countries of Europe.

City states, such as Venice, Genoa and Bremen, were participants in their countries' political life. They remained subordinate to the state, paid taxes and obeyed common laws. They eventually acquired autonomy, had their own governing institutions, their own courts, and collected municipal taxes. They could administer lands and form districts as autonomous state units in themselves. Autonomy qualified them for coats of arms granted by the state and civic heraldry was born.

In Eastern Europe, city development took a different turn. Cities did not attain autonomy, remained subordinate to the state in all respects. Those striving for autonomy had to consolidate and hold important position in the political life of the state. It called for development of trade, international exchange of goods and meaningful contribution to the strengthening of state government. Only then could cities aspire to autonomy.

These conditions began to appear in Lithuania after the city system in Western Europe was already established. By mid-13th

century, Lithuanian trade extended to many faraway lands. But lack of large cities delayed the development of city autonomy.

By the late 13-hundreds, however, Vilnius and Kaunas were comparatively large, ready for self government. In 1408 Grand Duke Vytautas granted Kaunas the rights of Magdeburg Law. Vilnius had already had the rights since 1387, granted by Jogaila.

Rights of Magdeburg Law were formulated in the German city after which they were named and recognized political legality of cities which met certain economic qualifications, and their dwellers could create self-governing institutions. It made them autonomous. Magdeburg Law is often quoted in coat of arms grants to these cities.

Following Vilnius and Kaunas, other urban communities gained similar rights as they grew and developed their own autonomies. First of these were Merkinė, Skuodas, Vidytis, Veliuona, Alytus, Biržai, Virbalis, Kėdainiai, Lyda, Lazdijai, Kretinga, Joniškis, and Jurbarkas. Others followed and grants of civic arms spread across the country. Arms were sometimes granted before towns acquired autonomy, such as Akmenė, which was granted its coat of arms in 1792 by Stanislavas Augustas who appears to have been a leading proponent of heraldry in Lithuania.

For our purposes here, let's examine some of the more interesting stories behind these civic coats of arms. Among the most elaborate early designs is the one granted to Vilnius. It was here that the first western style autonomy was established in 1387.

### VILNIUS

Žygimantas Augustas first noted the image of St. Christopher used on the city's seals in 1568. He decreed that all city documents use the St. Christopher emblem. The most enduring version is of the saint carrying the infant Jesus across flowing waters (Lat. *Christophorus*, carrying Christ). This denotes that the saint was a carrier and propagator of Christianity. He had been a noted pagan. When converted to Christianity, he took an active role in disseminating the new faith, for which he was tortured to death. His image also symbolizes conversion of Vilnius itself, which had been the pagan capital before attaining the seat of Christianity in Lithuania. (St. Christopher as patron of travelers is a later notion and has nothing to do with his representation in the Vilnius coat of arms.)

The double cross staff with unequal length bars is attributed to the personal arms of Jogaila who first granted Vilnius the rights of Magdeburg Law. The staff was later replaced by a lance, then a



sword worn by the saint, but returned to the original in 1794 when the Vilnius coat of arms acquired supporters in the form of two goddesses holding a wreath of oak leaves; now tied with a ribbon of national colors. They also hold symbols of Justice (scales), Hope (anchor), and Unity (bound rods), all of which allude to the motto: *Unitas, justitia, spes*. Those are the present arms of Vilnius.

In 1809, the eagle became the imperial autocratic symbol and Vilnius was the first Lithuanian city to have its heraldry abolished. During independence between the two World Wars, St. Christopher was returned and the coat of arms recreated. Soviet occupation of 1940 banned its use because of its religious content.

### KAUNAS

The Kaunas coat of arms is much simpler in design but no less interesting in development. First seen as a silver wild ox (*tauras*) on a red field, it was a depiction of the most revered game beast which only dukes were allowed to hunt. It symbolizes strength, honor, and nobility. It was well suited to represent a city with important role in the life of the country.

A knight's cross later appeared atop the ox's head to commemorate German community influence of the population. It then took the form of the Latin cross to mark Bona's (Queen of Poland and Grand Duchess of Lithuania) opposition to Germans in Lithuania. This rendering of the Kaunas coat of arms survived until 1831. It suffered many changes during Tsarist occupation and was replaced by various imperial symbols of the time.

In 1969 the wild ox was replaced by a bison without the cross, and in Lithuanian SSR flag colors. Banned in 1970, the coat of arms was revived in its original form in 1992 and confirmed by the President of Lithuania the following year.



### KAZLĖ RŪDA

Vilnius and Kaunas are, of course, the two most important cities in Lithuania. But others also have interesting stories connected to their coats of arms. One is Kazlė Rūda, a town in the forested Marijampolė region. According to first mention in 1737, a village sprouted around the ore smelting industry started by six brothers — all of them blacksmiths. Their name was Kazlas, and *rūda* means iron ore. Due to the success of their enterprise, the village grew into a town during the 19th century and acquired city rights in 1950, when it was granted a coat of arms.

Black is the appropriate color for coal used in the smelting of iron ore. The silver horns are symbolic of the roebuck which ranged in the large forests where the Kazlas brothers based their craft. The six golden stars represent the sparks caused by the six brothers when hammering the smelted iron.



### ZARASAI

An unusual rendering of arms is found in Zarasai, a district of forests in the extensive lake region of north-eastern Lithuania.

It is among the more recent coat of arms designs, created in 1969, and confirmed by the President of Lithuania in 1996.

Zarasai, however, already had a coat of arms in 1836, granted by Tsar Nicholas I who named it Novoaleksandrovsk after his son Alexander. The shield was divided, with the upper part displaying the double-headed eagle (symbol of Russia) and the lower charged with a phoenix fronting a building. The arms were changed after the revolution to commemorate a newly built road. This was typical of Soviet symbols alluding to manual labor by the proletariat.

After Lithuania gained her independence in 1918, the name was changed to Ežerėnai (Lit. *ežeras*, lake). Ten years later the city was called Zarasai. We don't know why it took so long to discard Russian symbolism and design new arms, but the result of the 1969 rendering is impressive.

Representing the lakes and forests surrounding Zarasai is a fabulous beast composed from a deer and a fish. Among the multitude of fantastic beasts in heraldry, this one is very rare if not unique. It resides in a blue field charged with a full moon, also claimed to be the sun. In view of traditional heraldic rules, it must be the moon. Blue, of course, can also signify waters of the lakes or the sky in daylight, in which case it could be the sun. The heraldic sun, however, is always ringed by its rays — notably absent here. The sun is also the ancient symbol of Samogitia — the western part of the country — nowhere near Zarasai.

The wavy sword in the black base was later abolished.



### PALANGA

Many other coats of arms were granted in our own time. Among those is the one for Palanga, which may not have had a coat of arms until the 1970. Palanga is Lithuania's largest resort. But during the Teutonic Order occupation of Klaipėda in the Middle Ages, it was the country's only port. It gained autonomy in the late 18th century.

The 1970 design of arms for Palanga is representative of its ancient amber trade and the legend of Princess Juratė's and the fisherman Kastytis' ill-fated love. Perkūnas, the god of heaven and earth, disapproved and destroyed Juratė's amber palace. According to legend, amber fragments from this destruction still wash up on Palanga's beaches today.

Amber, arranged in necklace form, and the silver crown above it in a blue field represent these sentiments remarkably well.

### KĖDAINIAI

Kėdainiai is another city with an interesting heraldic background, full of history. Its coat of arms is derived from two armigerous families after a marriage of their members. In 1590, the ruler Tigmantas Augustas granted Kėdainiai the rights of Magdeburg Law and its

