

# LITHUANIAN RELIGIOUS ART

Vol. II: DIOCESE OF ŠIAULIAI

Part 1: DEANERY OF JONIŠKIS

Book 3: Skaistgirys–Žukančiai

## Summary

Book 3 „Skaistgirys–Žukančiai“ of Part 1 „Deanery of Joniškis“ of Volume II „Diocese of Šiauliai“ of serial publication „Lithuanian Religious Art“ is the final instalment on the architectural and artistic heritage of churches and chapels from Joniškis Deanery. The first book dedicated to this deanery covered the cultural and artistic legacy of Joniškis and Gasčiūnai churches and chapels of Balkaičiai, Ivoškiai, Jakiškiai, and Jauneikiai. The second book presented the heritage from Juodeikiai, Kriukai and Rudiškiai churches and Jurdaičiai, Kalnelis, Kurmaičiai, Mergiūnai, Milvydžiai and Pošupiai chapels. This third book includes the history of churches of Skaistgirys, Žukančiai, New Žagarė and Old Žagarė and Raktuvė chapel, as well as the investigations of architecture, altars, paintings, sculptures, liturgical vessels and vestments, processional attributes, bells and other church items and memorial monuments.

The publication retains a catalogue-like structure already used for earlier books of “Lithuanian Religious Art” which is considered by the authors of this book to be the most consistent and convenient way to introduce the heritage of each church and chapel. The book includes all items of arts and crafts with artistic, historical, typological or other value that have been found during expeditions because the authors follow a modern approach to the research of religious art which states that the artistic value cannot be the only and determining criteria of the item’s value. Attention is also focused on the history of parishes, churches and chapels, as well as on architecture of buildings and other context which reveals the exceptionality of the main subject of the book: items of religious art and artistic crafts. The difference in value results in different length and nature of texts: some are comprehensive scientific articles, some are art history analyses, while some others are limited to the description of the main properties. But in any case, all items which have been arranged based on their type and time of creation have a standard list of their main data.

The research of the religious art heritage of Joniškis Deanery published in this book is based on abundant written and iconographic sources which are used for the first time in many cases. The authors also use the sets of documents and photographic materials of state archives and libraries as well as of the chanceries of Šiauliai Diocese and Kaunas Archdiocese, archives of the above-listed churches, Šiauliai Aušra Museum, and Cultural Heritage Centre. In addition, the publication benefits from iconographic and written documents which are significant in the history of both Žagarė parishes and have been accumulated by ethnographers and bright people Romualda and Vytautas Vaitkus in Žagarė. Individual groups of knowledge consist of information found in the old periodicals and data obtained by the method of narrative research.

The book contains 180 articles of various length and 576 illustrations showing each described item of art or architecture including its details, inscriptions and signatures. It also provides the drawings

and situation plans of all church buildings and the reconstruction designs of the Old Žagarė Church that have never been realised but have been preserved in archives. It also includes archive photographs displaying the former views of Žagarė, Skaistgirys, Žukančiai Churches and Raktuvė Chapel and their churchyards, the interior equipment that was completely destroyed during Soviet times and the rectory of the New Žagarė that was demolished during the years of the second Independence period. It also shows how the interior of Raktuvė Chapel was changing throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book publishes photographs which have captured art works that are now damaged, lost or have been moved to museums.

In this book, the parish of New Žagarė particularly stands out due to its rich history and the value of religious art heritage. Its austere-looking brick church with a single tower is the embellishment of the entire Joniškis Deanery. Built in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, it is a typical example of the old architecture of the Northern Lithuania and the neighbouring Latvian region which has already felt the influence of German construction trends as early as in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century. Even though the fire of 1805 destroyed the baroque interior of New Žagarė church, excellent altar paintings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century decorated with artistic metal casings and crowns were preserved. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these paintings were hung in stylish altars with Classicistic and neo-Baroque traits. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their ensemble was accompanied by stained-glass presbytery windows of Art Nouveau style manufactured in Warsaw. The parish managed to preserve a large collection of old liturgical vessels and items, including a particularly beautiful monstrance received in 1755. The church still contains memorable sculptures of the Crucified Christ which demonstrate the mastery of Samogitian artisans of different periods and their loyalty to Baroque. Fragments of wood-carvings and documentary sources found in New Žagarė Church have provided important data allowing to trace some of the activities of Juozapas Jundzilas, a master who worked in Samogitia.

The parish of Old Žagarė is one of the oldest parishes in Samogitia as it has been already mentioned in documents from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it has been known for its unique tradition of piety to God's Servant Barbora Žagarietė-Umiastauskaitė. Unfortunately, the destiny of the Old Žagarė brick church built in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century was not very favourable: it was closed during Soviet rule, its equipment was destroyed and paintings and liturgical items were transferred to the Museum of Atheism or lost. Luckily, several items have been preserved in the neighbouring parish of New Žagarė. Some of the valuables have been returned from the Museum in 1989 and the church itself was restored and re-consecrated. However, its modest artistic heritage poorly reflecting the rich history of the church is an obvious example of losses suffered during Soviet times which was a common destiny of most Lithuanian churches (first of all, in cities and towns).

The basic architectural idea of the brick church of Skaistgirys which was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century most likely derives from other single-towered architectural forms of this region, such as New Žagarė church from the late 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century, catholic church of Joniškis (which was later rebuilt) or Lutheran churches of Jelgava and Bauska. Inside the building, altars with sculptures of high historical and artistic value created in the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century have been preserved, although reconstructed, and are thought to have been transferred to Skaistgirys subsidiary church from New Žagarė church in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when the latter had its interior renovated. Skaistgirys church contains many works of differ-

ent artistic value and level of mastery from the 19<sup>th</sup> century which are significant in one or another aspect including sculptures (a particularly valuable sculptural composition of the churchyard's Way of Cross has been moved to Joniškis Museum), paintings, and liturgical vessels or items.

The architecture and art of the newest building – Žukančiai Church – reflects the essential trends of religious life from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A small but rather stylish church, funded by the local nobility and rebuilt by the parishioner who returned from the USA in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, featuring the combination of Romanticism and neo-Gothic, can boast of a high altar decorated with wood-carving of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and several examples of painting and folk sculpture which are worth mentioning.

A comprehensive research of the history, architecture and artistic heritage of Joniškis Deanery published in the three books substantially adds to the history of this land and its culture – a catholic culture first of all. It allows discerning some general features of historic development and artistic expression typical for this Northern Lithuanian region in addition to the revelation of the unique destinies of each church and chapel, architectural peculiarities and properties of interior ensembles and individual art works. It is the local history and clergymen, parishioners, customers and masters who lived and worked here who essentially determined and formed the diversity of architectural and artistic heritage which has survived in the region. The brick churches of Joniškis and Žagarė dating as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century, wooden chapels of Raktuvė, Jakiškiai, Ivoškiai and Kurmaičiai built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century or parishes of Rudiškiai, Skaistgirys or Gasčiūnai which have expanded in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century – all of them have survived various periods ranging from thriving and prosperity of pious life to destruction or scarcity, they have been affected by social and cultural challenges and have suffered fires, wars and intimidations of the Soviet era. Today, all these sacral places are important as centres of religious life and material reflections of national history. Moreover, many of them are admirable works of art, just like the greater part of cultural values preserved in them, adding to the architectural and artistic history of Lithuania and helping to know the land's culture, local traditions and the identity of local people better.