

# LITHUANIAN RELIGIOUS ART

Vol. II: DIOCESE OF ŠIAULIAI

Part 1: DEANERY OF JONIŠKIS

Book 1: Balkaičiai – Joniškis

## Summary

First sanctuaries appeared in the present-day territory of Joniškis deanery of the Samogitian diocese in the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the 1st half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: Old Žagarė church was referred to in 1499; Joniškis parish church was granted financial foundation in 1536. The diocese was divided into deaneries in the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century but, since this time, its administrative structure has been improved more than once. In 1636, Bishop Jurgis Tiškevičius rearranged the deanery structure of the Samogitian diocese to establish six deaneries instead of four and to name them after geographical locations; this was the first time when Joniškis deanery was mentioned together with Kražiai, Rietavas, Skuodas, Šeduva and Virbalis deaneries. The boundaries of the deanery have changed multiple times since then. The last change took place in 1997.

Presently, there are nine churches in the deanery: Joniškis, Gasčiūnai, Juodeikiai, Kriukai, Rudiškės, Skaistgiriai, Žakančiai churches and two sanctuaries in Žagarė. In addition to parish churches and chapels of ease, the deanery contains an exceptionally large number of chapels: in Balkaičiai, Ivoškiai, Jakiškiai, Kalnelis, Kurmaičiai, Mergiūnai, Milvydžiai, Pošupės and Raktuvė. Moreover, there are several memorial monuments in Dilbinai, Martynišiai and other locations that are valuable in artistic and historical aspects.

Book 1 “Balkaičiai-Joniškis” of the Part 1 “Joniškis Deanery” of the volume 2, which is dedicated to Šiauliai diocese, aims to describe the religious art and architecture and the history of churches and chapels of Balkaičiai, Dilbinai, Gasčiūnai, Ivoškiai, Jakiškiai, Jauneikiai and Joniškis itself. The book presents about 300 items such as religious buildings, altars, church equipment elements, furniture, paintings, sculptures, liturgical vessels and vestments, ritual articles of various purposes, bells and tombstones. The book comprises 174 articles of varying length and 475 illustrations.

The largest part of the book is dedicated to Joniškis church heritage and the history of the parish reaching back as far as the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Joniškis parish is among the oldest and most significant parishes of the Samogitian diocese, and its church has always been distinguished by numerous equipment items and rich collection of liturgical utensils. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this church has been essentially reconstructed when large-scale works began aiming to enlarge and renovate the sanctuary. Not only the building itself changed beyond recognition but also the decor of its interior: out of the old equipment, only a few paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries remained. The current Joniškis church with its contemporaneous high altar is an interesting and valuable example of historicism architecture even though its interior remained unfinished due to various reasons. Nevertheless, the most valuable part of its cultural heritage consists of artistic works related to the cult of St. Martinian. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Joniškis was famous for still preserved relics of this saint. An enigmatic image of St. Martinian of the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century with especially artistic silver casing and votive offerings of rare style has remained in the altar. Several finely carved sculptures of the Crucified Jesus made in various periods, 18<sup>th</sup> century paintings and images of saints that used to be in altars and that were painted by Th. Tichejeff, an artist from Riga, who intensively worked in the region, are published for the first time in this book. The church has quite rich collection of liturgical vessels, vestments and utensils; unfortunately, only few pieces were created in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and remind of the oldest period of the church history. Most of the items were made in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; they represent the production of Warsaw companies and factories and reflect a general ratio of the liturgical items in Lithuanian churches.

Such works of historical, typological or artistic value are more and more often included in religious heritage studies both in Lithuania and Western Europe. Some of the utensils and vessels from the oldest period of Joniškis parish history survived in Gasčiūnai and in chapels under the parish.

The evolution of wooden Gasčiūnai sanctuary reflects the typical process of chapels turning into churches in Lithuania. A modest rectangular chapel building, constructed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was reconstructed in the 4<sup>th</sup> decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the reconstruction, it acquired a one-steeple structure, typical to sacred architecture of North Lithuania, and a size and appearance more suitable for a parish church. Many valuable utensils from Joniškis are kept in Gasčiūnai sanctuary including an 18<sup>th</sup> century monstrance and reliquaries and the 19<sup>th</sup> century tin candlesticks. An altar with surviving carvings and sculptures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been transferred here from an unidentified but undoubtedly older church. The sanctuary also contains some fairly good examples of works by local carvers of sacred sculptures and small craftsmen.

Folk traditions in sacred wooden architecture are represented by Ivoškiai, Jakiškiai and Balkaičiai chapels which have been under Joniškis parish since the old times and which have preserved authentic structure and some of the old elements and details. The book aims to describe both their present appearance and the losses suffered during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the Soviet times, the chapels were closed; now they are maintained and fostered again but their artistic interior items, that have already been listed as cultural monuments in the Soviet times, have been lost in about 1990. Ivoškiai chapel no longer contains the old altar adorned with decor elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and sculptures and paintings (the major part of these paintings was moved to Lithuanian Art Museum in 1986). Jakiškiai chapel has preserved more of the authentic equipment; the construction of the old altar is still standing there but it has lost its fine 18<sup>th</sup> century baroque carvings that can still be seen in older photos. A Crucifix made by a skilled folk artist, 18<sup>th</sup> century tin candlesticks and some other items are worth mentioning among the old equipment articles of Balkaičiai chapel, which was newly arranged after the Soviet times and has preserved the main elements of the folk-style equipment of sacred buildings. Jauneikiai chapel – another chapel under Joniškis parish with an interesting octagonal structure – had burned down during the war. Its history and architecture is also presented in detail with the help of an article and archival photos.

In the cemeteries of Joniškis deanery, many cross-shaped stone tombstones and metal crosses of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, typical to this region, have been found as well as several tombstones of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century excluded by their quite uncommon artistic elements.

More than two hundred of the cultural monuments, discussed in this book, are published and scientifically studied for the first time. Moreover, it is also the first time when the history and architecture of churches and chapels of Joniškis deanery are discussed in such detail.