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Correspondence to [coatofarms@theheraldrysociety.com](mailto:coatofarms@theheraldrysociety.com)

[www.theheraldrysociety.com](http://www.theheraldrysociety.com)

# THE GREAT COAT OF ARMS OF LITHUANIA: TO BE, OR NOT TO BE?

Dr. AGNĖ RAILAITĖ-BARDĖ, A.I.H.  
Lithuanian Institute of History

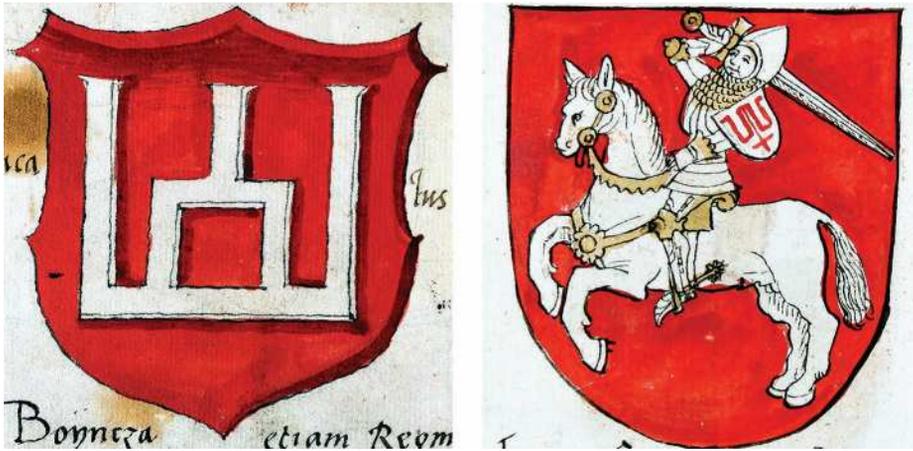
The coat of arms of Lithuania, named *Vytis*, has a long and rich history which begins in the fourteenth century. *Vytis* is a mounted knight represented with his sword raised above his head. In time its representation became more complex, for example, a ducal crown or hat and supporters appeared. The use of the great and small coats of arms of the state is probably best reflected in the sigillography. After Lithuania came under the rule of the Russian Empire in 1795, the heraldry of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which had up till that time been used for several centuries, disappeared from public use. It reappeared during the national revival and when Lithuania gained independence in 1918. During the inter-war period when the state was being revived, national and municipal symbols appeared. The legal bases for these were also being prepared. At that time there was a goal to create a standard form of the coat of arms of the Lithuanian state, following the legal precedents established by Estonia and Latvia. These attempts were fruitless, and the subsequent Soviet occupation demolished Lithuanian heraldry down to its foundations. It was only to rise again with the creation of the Sąjūdis, the Lithuanian reform movement in the latter days of the Soviet Union, and the restoration of independence in 1990. Along with the question of the standard coat of arms for the Lithuanian state, the idea of the great coat of arms, which still pops up sporadically even today, was revisited. To be or not to be, that is the question.

This article presents a short journey through the ages underscoring the key events in the development of the Lithuanian knight as the national arms. It looks back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and to the form that these arms took as recorded in old armorials and seals. The primary focus will be on various attempts to render the great versions of state coat of arms both during the inter-war period, and after 1990, when Lithuania regained its independence. I will examine the message that the designs, some of them only simple draft sketches, might convey.

## **A Brief History of *Vytis* and Lithuanian Dynastic Signs**

The fact that Christianity was not adopted by Lithuania until 1387 resulted in the region lagging behind Christian European cultural trends. One of the most important consequences of this was a delay in the spread of literacy, so that those important monuments of historical memory, politics, culture and writing – the Lithuanian Chronicles – were only written down in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The Lithuanian annals relate that the first Grand Duke of Lithuania was the eldest of five brothers who came to Lithuania as descendants of the Romans. He originally used a Centaur coat of arms, which he left to his brothers, and started using *Vytis* for himself.<sup>1</sup> The imagery of the device is that of a mature ruler who can defend the country with his arms. In a commemorative publication about *Vytis* in 1639 it was stated that “*this coat of arms was first invented by Narimantas, who, on his deathbed, reminded his subjects that they should always choose only a brave man for [to rule] the state, who would lead them*



Left, *Figure 1*: The Pillars of Gediminas, *Recueil d'armoiries polonaises* (1601-1700), Bibliothèque nationale de France. Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Ms-1114, f. 2v; right, *Figure 2*: Coat of arms of Vytautas the Great, Grand Duke of Lithuania, in a German armorial of c.1447-1449, Lambeth Palace Library, MS774, f. 26v.

*skilfully, defend the borders of the Principality bravely and expand their state using the sword.*<sup>22</sup> The arms were also used by the Sanguška family.

The legendary part of the Lithuanian annals is a constellation of anachronisms, for example, the names of places in the annals are anachronistic, with cities already in existence being given archaic names. The same can be said about the coat of arms of the state. The equestrian seal was first employed in the fourteenth century. Algirdas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1345 until his death in 1377, might have been the first to depict himself as a knight in the Western manner on his seal. He was the father of the Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland Jogaila, and the uncle of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Vytautas the Great, whose seal has not survived. Jogaila and his brothers had several seals with a knight represented on them. This tends to indicate they inherited this symbol from their father.<sup>3</sup> There is a theory that Narimantas, the brother of Algirdas and Duke of Polotsk, used a horseman on his seal even earlier, i.e., around 1338-1341. It is believed the Duke of Polotsk did not depict himself as a knight, however, but rather as St. Gleb, whose name was given to him after baptism under the rites of the Eastern Church.<sup>4</sup>

The first mounted warriors in full armour on the seals of Lithuanian rulers and their relatives were armed, but did not always carry a shield. The coat of arms was not held by supporters, and neither were there any further additional decorative elements. The tinctures and composition of the arms of Lithuania had stabilised by the beginning of the fifteenth century. Over time, during the reign of the Kęstutis Dynasty (1337-82), the tradition developed for the knight's shield to depict the 'Pillars of Gediminas' (**Figure 1**), and during the reign of the Jogailaitis Dynasty (1377-1572) the double cross. It is interesting to note that in 1382 the seals of Jogaila and his brother Skirgaila were affixed to the Treaty of Dubysa with the Crusaders. Jogaila's red wax seal depicted a knight holding a sword in his right hand, while Skirgaila's green wax seal depicted a knight holding a spear in his right hand and a late Gothic shield with a lion to his left.<sup>5</sup>

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Left, *Figure 3*: Coat of arms of Švitrigaila, Grand Duke of Lithuania, in a German armorial (c.1447–1449), Lambeth Palace Library, MS774, f. 27r.; right, *Figure 4*: Coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, *Recueil d'armoiries polonaises* (1601–1700), Bibliothèque nationale de France. Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Ms-1114, f. 2r.

The coat of arms of Lithuania is depicted in many ways in the old armorials, with differences in the direction that the knight is riding, in the composition of the horse and knight, and sometimes in the tinctures (**Figures 2, 3 and 4**). The most interesting aspect is the variation in what is depicted on the knight's shield, when it is painted. A number of variations of the Gediminas Pillars are seen. The marshalled coat of arms of Steponas Batoras (Stephen Bathory), King of Poland (1575–86) and Grand Duke of Lithuania (1576–86) depicts the Lithuanian mounted knight bearing a shield with the Pillars of Gediminas (**Figure 5**) in a sixteenth century armorial created in Munich.<sup>6</sup> The latter symbol is depicted almost identically to the seal that Vytautas the Great used in 1420–1430, minus the lower connecting line in the middle.<sup>7</sup> Worth noting also is that during the reign of Stephen Bathory the knight's shield actually depicted the three wolf fangs of the Bathory Dynasty.<sup>8</sup> It is obvious that the compiler of the armorial received erroneous information.

One of the most beautiful examples of Grand Ducal crests, of a red eagle wing with the Pillars of Gediminas, is to be found in the Bergshammar armorial (**Figure 6**).<sup>9</sup> The available sources suggest that such a crest was never actually used in Lithuania. Nevertheless, the artist drew attention to the Lithuanian dynastic sign and this crest seems convincing.

Over time supporters began to be depicted on the state's great seals, and numerous types can be noted, including angels, allegorical figures, unicorns, griffins, cupids, and warriors. The first were the angels which came into use during the reign of Aleksandras Jogailaitis (Alexander Jagiellon) at the very beginning of the sixteenth century (**Figure 7**).<sup>10</sup> The large or small ducal crown, later the ducal hat, which came to be placed above

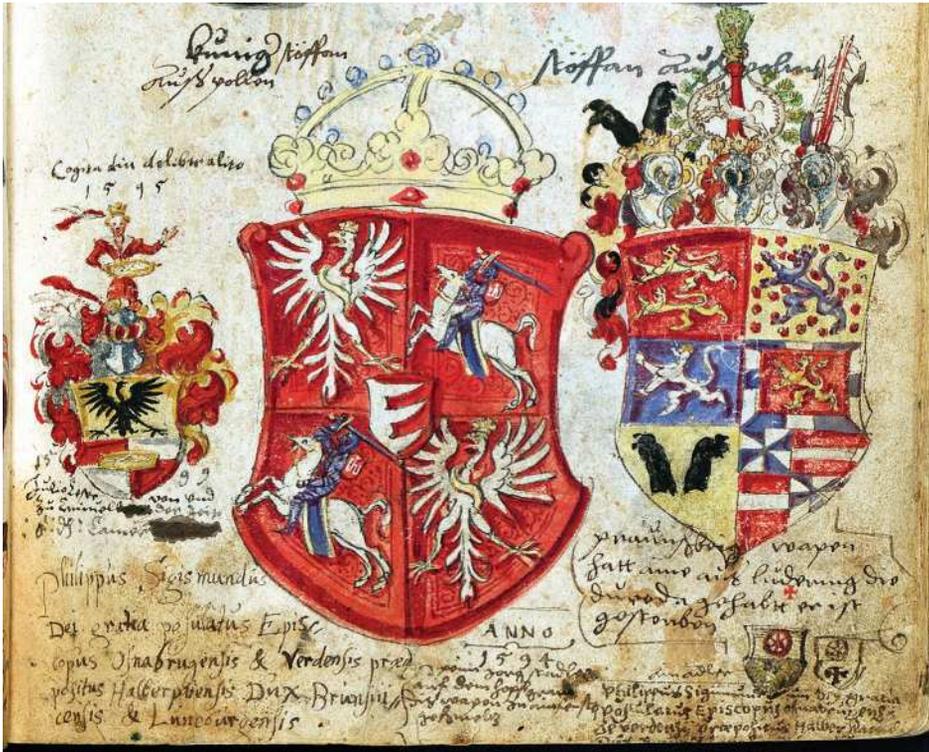


Figure 5: The marshalled coat of arms of Steponas Batoras (Stephen Bathory), the king of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania (in the middle), Hofkleiderbuch (Abbildung und Beschreibung der Hof-Livreen) des Herzogs Wilhelm IV. und Albrecht V. 1508–1551, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 1952, f. 46r.

the heraldic shield, together with the ermine mantle, symbolized Lithuania’s status as a duchy.

### Attempts at (Re)Creating the State Coat of Arms in the Inter-war Period

During the period between the two world wars the restoration and creation of state and national and municipal symbols took place. A draft constitution and other legislation had to be prepared for this. Unfortunately the legal framework for heraldry was insufficiently developed. The constitution of the Republic of Lithuania adopted in 1922 specified a white knight on a red field as the state emblem.<sup>11</sup> Silver was not mentioned, nor were any other details given for the design of the state coat of arms.

The restoration of independence in 1918 inspired a new search for the definition of individual and national identity, drawing experience from history and applying it to a completely new state system. This period presented an opportunity to publish analytical books about the coat of arms of the state, which, bearing in mind the special circumstances and opportunities of the time, were distinguished by careful work in collecting historical material, and a fairly professional analysis, given the constraints of the time. The artist

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Figure 6: Lithuanian coat of arms (top left corner) in Bergshammars vapenbok (c. 1440), Riksarkivet, SE/RA/720085/Z, f. 112r.

Mstislavas Dobužinskis did invaluable work in this field, not only in publishing, but also in creating a considerable collection of sketches of the state coat of arms of Lithuania.<sup>12</sup>

During this time several commissions were established to determine the state coat of arms. The first commission was established by the cabinet of ministers in 1925. It was also to consider a new national flag. The committee's findings were presented to the Government, but not adopted. The next attempt to accomplish this task came in 1929.<sup>13</sup> It was the commission's opinion that the shield of the state arms should be crowned. In 1929 Lithuanian diplomat and writer Jurgis Savickis made a statement claiming that the head of state endorsed this position, having spoken personally with president of the Republic of Lithuania Antanas Smetona. He reported that it was the President's wish to have two coats of arms: the great and the small.<sup>14</sup> In 1931 the head of the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, the authoritative advisor to the president, participated at the commission's tenth meeting. In his opinion, both the great and small state coats of arms should feature *Vytis*, and the only difference should be in the added details. The advisor felt the great coat of arms should be used exclusively on the flag and seal of the Office of President. It is not known what happened over the next few years, but in 1934 Mstislavas Dobužinskis presented two more drafts for the state's small coat of arms to the commission. Since his proposals were composed solely of



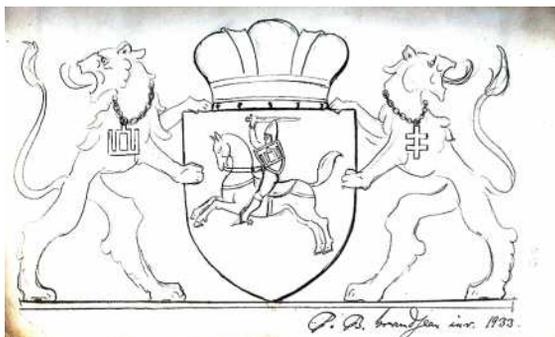
Left, *Figure 7*: Great seal of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the reign of Aleksandras Jogailaitis (Alexander Jagiellon), The Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Manuscript Unit, F6-85; right, *Figure 8*: A sketch for the great coat of arms of Lithuania, Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania Rare Books and Manuscript Unit, F30, ap. 1–2002, f. 33r.

Lithuanian dynastic signs, the commission declined them, and moreover saw no need for establishing a great and a small coat of arms.<sup>15</sup> The commission felt that supporters as decorative embellishments should only be used in the state coat of arms in certain contexts, such as in architecture. “...Angels (*argent*), lions (*gules* or *or*), or a lion and an angel” were considered most appropriate for this purpose.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the commission’s negative attitude towards the great and small Lithuanian coats of arms, Dobužinskis drew a number of sketches for the great coat of arms. Unfortunately none of the existing designs is final, only draft versions have survived, and perhaps final versions never existed. One of the more unusual proposals is for a coat of arms composed of three shields.<sup>17</sup> Besides *Vytis*, the artist incorporated the principal Lithuanian dynastic emblems and accoutrements of the ermine mantle and the grand ducal crown. He also suggested that two angels as supporters be re-introduced, following several centuries of absence.<sup>18</sup> He gave priority to the Pillars of Gediminas which was depicted in the dexter shield, the place of greater honour.

Another of his sketches displaying supporters is even more elaborate. Two lions (the draft is not clear, therefore the sinister supporter could also be a griffin) stand on the compartment and hold *Vytis*. A collar is placed below the compartment from which might be suspended the Jagiellonian cross. The shield is enfolded by the duke’s mantle and crowned with a coronet.<sup>19</sup> The latter detail is inappropriate, because in Polish and Lithuanian heraldry when such coronets were placed between the helm and the crest it indicated that the coat of arms belonged to a noble person. The mantle with ermine is also inappropriate as in Lithuanian heraldry it served to indicate the grand ducal status of the armiger. In essence we might conclude that this attempt to transfer some of the heraldic traditions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the twentieth century lacked balance and was perhaps unduly romantic.<sup>20</sup>

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Left, *Figure 9*: The project of the great coat of arms of Lithuania (1933) by Poul Bredo Grandjean (Denmark), Lithuanian Central State Archives, F923, ap. 1, b. 1600, f. 209r.; right, *Figure 10*: Draft project of the great coat of arms of Lithuania by unknown author (inter-war period), Lithuanian Central State Archives, F. 923, ap. 1, b. 1600, f. 169a.

The same coronet is depicted in another design of the great coat of arms created by Dobužinskis. In it, two griffins stand on the compartment and hold the Lithuanian knight (**Figure 8**).<sup>21</sup> The depiction of angels and griffins was historically grounded because the angels which started appearing in the fifteenth century heraldry performed the function of supporters up until the end of the seventeenth century. Griffins have deep roots in the history of Lithuanian heraldry. One example found at the Gate of Dawn in Vilnius has survived to the present day.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding Dobužinskis, it should be noted that, as a member of the commission to resolve the issue of the coat of arms of the state, he cooperated with foreign experts. Dobužinskis personally corresponded with several, including M. Gumowski (Poland), T. Borenus (United Kingdom) and P. B. Grandjean (Denmark).<sup>23</sup> The latter made by far the biggest contribution, and he even made a design for the great coat of arms of Lithuania with supporters (**Figure 9**), which he sent to Dobužinskis on May 8, 1933.

Grandjean's linear drawing depicts two lions rampant regardant standing on the compartment and holding *Vytis* (the Pillars of Gediminas appear on the knight's shield), with the grand ducal crown placed above him.<sup>24</sup> The lions' necks are adorned with collars; the Pillars of Gediminas decorate the lion in the dexter and the Jagiellonian cross decorates the lion in the sinister.<sup>25</sup>

Although the authors of the aforementioned sketches of the great coat of arms of Lithuania are known, and the sketches are interesting, other attempts to create the great coat of arms of Lithuania which have survived to this day are no less intriguing.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately it is not always possible to identify the authors of these other proposals for the coat of arms. One such draft is probably the most unprofessionally drawn sketch (**Figure 10**) of all the coats of arms analyzed in this article. Unfortunately neither the author nor its date of creation are known. Keeping in mind the poor drawing skills employed, it might have been one of the patriotic enthusiasts who proposed certain ideas to authority. The motto comprises lines from the Lithuanian national anthem. The supporters standing on an oak leaves base as drawn are entirely unintelligible, but fortunately the author left us a description which explains what we are seeing. The dexter supporter is supposed



Left, *Figure 11*: Coat of arms of Samogitia (bottom left corner), *Grobes Wappenbuch*, enthaltend die Wappen der deutschen Kaiser, der europäischen Königs- und Fürstenhäuser, der Päpste und Kardinäle, Bischöfe und Äbte bis zu den lebenden Repräsentanten zur Zeit der Regentschaft Kaiser Rudolfs II. und Papst Gregors XIII., Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.icon. 333, f. 14r; right, *Figure 12*: Postcard with the coat of arms of Lithuania, Trakai History Museum, TIM AT 17780.

to be a bear, and that to the sinister is the iron wolf of Lithuanian legend.<sup>27</sup>The story of the iron wolf is well known in Lithuania, and has played an important role in history. It was first recorded sometime around the 1520s in the Lithuanian annals. The legend says:

Once the Grand Duke Gediminas went hunting from his capital, Kernavė, five miles beyond the Neris River, and found in the forest a beautiful mountain surrounded by oak groves and plains. He liked it very much, settled there where the Old Trakai was and moved his capital from Kernavė to Trakai. Not long after, Grand Duke Gediminas went hunting four miles from Trakai and found a beautiful mountain by the Vilnia River, on which he encountered a huge beast, an aurochs, and killed it on that mountain, which is still called by the animal's name. And since it was too late to return to Trakai, he stopped in Šventaragis Valley, where the first princes were burned, and spent the night here. While he was sleeping, he dreamed that on the mountain that was once called Crooked, and is now called Bald, there stood a huge iron wolf, and in it howled, as it seemed, like a hundred wolves. He woke up from his sleep and said to his priest named Lizdeika, who was found in the eagle's nest (this Lizdeika was the prophet of Gediminas and the chief priest of the pagans) "I had a strange dream." And he told everything that had appeared to him in the dream. Then the priest Lizdeika said: "Grand Duke, the iron wolf means: the capital will stand here, and the howling inside means that its sound will spread throughout the world." And Grand Duke Gediminas, not leaving

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anymore, sent people and founded one castle in Šventaragis Valley, the Lower Castle, and a second on the Crooked Hill which is now called the Bald one, and gave the name of Vilnius to those castles. And, having established the city, he moved his capital to Vilnius.<sup>28</sup>

The idea of using the iron wolf in heraldry suggests a digression from the topic. Under the Soviet occupation the Lithuanian Heraldry Commission, which operated for several years before it was banned, tried to approve a coat of arms for Vilnius. St. Christopher, who had been depicted on the coat of arms of Vilnius for centuries, could no longer be depicted under the Soviets, as a religious figure. The idea of the iron wolf was again promoted, and it was one of the suggestions of the heraldic project for the Vilnius coat of arms. It was believed that if the iron wolf was depicted on the coat of arms, then everyone would surely understand that it was the coat of arms of Vilnius.<sup>29</sup> Although in the commission's brief work of several years in the 1960s the coats of arms of 46 localities were created, or recreated, the coat of arms of Vilnius was never approved. Only after Lithuania freed itself from Soviet occupation did St. Christopher return as the symbol of the national capital. The great coat of arms of Vilnius was restored using the old seal of the magistrate.<sup>30</sup>

The popular notion of the iron wolf as a symbol of Vilnius likely prompted the designer of the previously mentioned sketch to use the legendary creature as a sinister supporter of the great coat of arms of Lithuania. Between 1920 and 1939 Vilnius and its surrounding area were occupied by Poland. It is assumed the iron wolf bearing the coat of arms of Lithuania was supposed to show Lithuania's indisputable right to its capital Vilnius.

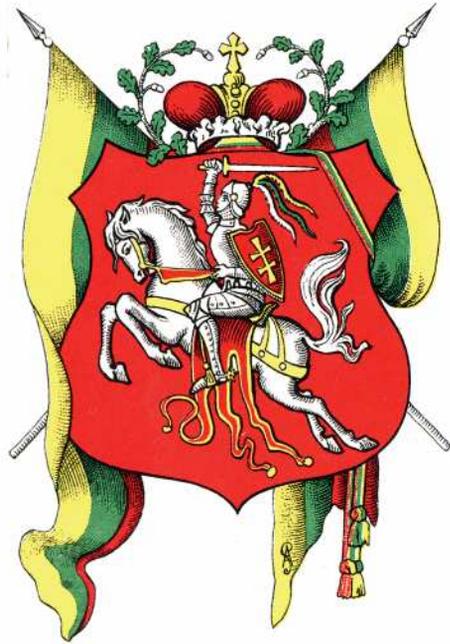
The dexter bear supporter symbolizes the region of Žemaitija (the historical Samogitia), an important territorial administrative unit of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from 1411 to 1795. The bear of Samogitia is one of the oldest coats of arms in Lithuania, and is known from the sixteenth century.<sup>31</sup> It can be seen in certain old European armorials (**Figure 11**), in the great seals of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and even in the seals of Lithuanian nobles.<sup>32</sup>

Regarding the representation of the iron wolf in the coat of arms in the inter-war period, one can examine the quite rare example of the Lithuanian state coat of arms used in the period of 1918–1940 in the town of Jurbarkas. A Lithuanian knight is displayed in a wooden cartouche, but there are a few more elements at the base, namely the castle (or tower) of Gediminas with the Lithuanian tricolor flag flying above, and a howling iron wolf. They are depicted against the background of the rising sun.<sup>33</sup> It was discovered unexpectedly among museum virtual exhibits, lacking any provenance, and so unfortunately we know nothing more about it. Perhaps it was a décor element, or an effort by some local artist to imagine how the state coat of arms should look for use by some local institution. One thing is clear: although the legend of the iron wolf was not widely used as a motif for the coat of arms of Lithuania, we do find sporadic manifestations of it in heraldry.

There is another group of sources depicting greater versions of the state coat of arms that deserve mention: posters and heraldic postcards. These feature the shield with the Lithuanian knight in combination with various flags and other elements. An unofficial great coat of arms was displayed on one such inter-war poster. It is richly decorated with two griffins as supporters, symbols of Vilnius, Samogitia, Gardinas, various antique weapons, and the ducal hat.<sup>34</sup> The same coat of arms was issued as a postcard in New



*Myliu aš Tėvynę myliu ir mylėsiu!  
Nors ir dėl tos meilės daug ko nukentėsiu.*



Postcards with the coat of arms of Lithuania. Left, *Figure 13*: Trakai History Museum, TIM AT 17792; right, *Figure 14*: Dating to 1910s, Trakai History Museum, TIM AT 17782.

York (**Figure 12**).<sup>35</sup> Another example shows a quite different proposition. It contains floral elements and an interesting attempt at displaying a musical instrument placed above the shield. This is the *kanklės*, the Lithuanian national folk music instrument. This coat of arms contains two mottos, the upper translates as “May freedom, science and morality make Lithuania more beautiful” and the lower as “Whatever is going to happen will happen, but Lithuania will not perish” (**Figure 13**).<sup>36</sup>

Another example shows an early Renaissance shield with two Lithuanian tricolor flags, the ducal hat and two oak branches with acorns on either side (**Figure 14**).<sup>37</sup> On another postcard the tricolor flag of Lithuania Minor (green, white and red), a halberd and a red flag bearing the image of the Lithuanian knight are crossed behind the coat of arms. The motto “God save Lithuania!” is embedded under the shield. This postcard was issued in Latvia.<sup>38</sup>

As can be readily seen, public interest and activity regarding state heraldry was high during the inter-war period. State symbols were not only the care and subject of individual citizens of the country, but specially-created commissions, foreign specialists and companies were also involved. Despite all this activity no official coat of arms of Lithuania, either great or small was adopted.

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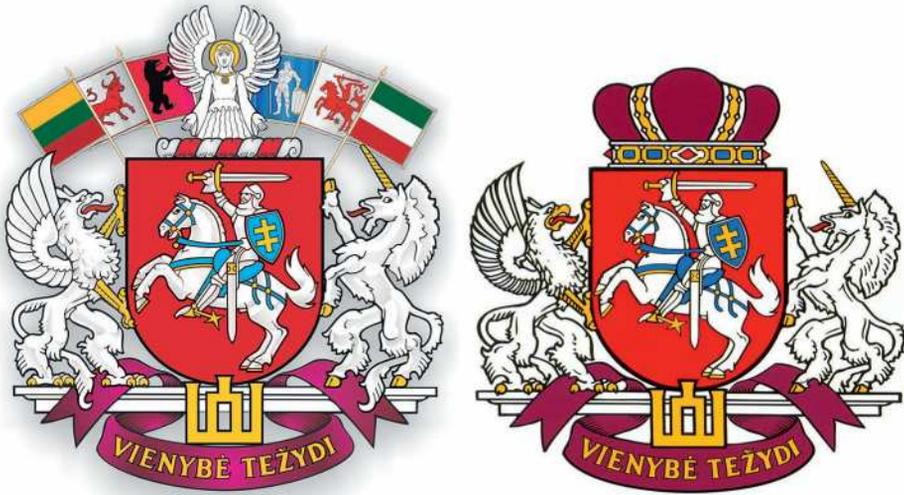
Left, *Figure 15* and right, *Figure 16*: Two of several proposals for the great coat of arms of Lithuania (1991) by artist Arvydas Stanislavas Každailis, published with the kind permission of the artist.

### The Concept for a Lithuanian Great Coat of Arms Today

The Soviet occupation shook Lithuanian heraldry to its foundations, but it was restored again following independence in 1990. Alongside the issue of the standard for the Lithuanian state coat of arms, the idea of a great coat of arms, which has arisen sporadically over the years, is being revived.

Following independence in 1990, a system of Lithuanian state symbols was designed as follows: the national flag (tricolor), the flag of state (with a mounted knight displayed), the coat of arms, the great coat of arms, and the presidential flag, which was a derivative of the great state coat of arms. Unfortunately the constitution of the Republic of Lithuania adopted in 1992 named only the tricolor as the state flag and *Vytis* as the state coat of arms. A presidential flag depicting the *Vytis* with a griffin and unicorn as supporters was subsequently introduced in the Law on the President of the Republic of Lithuania adopted in 1993. The old flag of Lithuania (a red cloth with the Lithuanian knight on it) was only introduced into the legal framework in 2008 following great efforts, and was enshrined as the state historical (armorial) flag of Lithuania. Lithuania is thus a unique country possessing two flags of state.

Although the process of creating the great coat of arms was underway at that time, it was not completed. Some proposals for the great coat of arms of Lithuania were made by Arvydas Stanislavas Každailis, the author of Lithuania's contemporary state coat of arms. In one of them (*Figure 15*)<sup>39</sup>, *Vytis* is depicted on a Renaissance shield. It differs from the *Vytis* in use today, who is placed on a late Gothic shield. In Každailis's design two angels were chosen as shield bearers, which are among the oldest supporters in the state's heraldry. They not only hold the central shield, they also bear smaller shields in their hands. The dexter angel holds the bear of Samogitia, while the sinister one holds the symbol of the land of Trakai. Samogitia and Trakai were important lands in the state. During the reigns of Algirdas and Kęstutis a sub-monarch even resided at Trakai. The shield supporters stand upon the motto where the last two words of the Lithuanian



Left, *Figure 17*: The newest version of the great coat of arms of Lithuania created by Arvydas Stanislavas Každailis (post-2015), published with the kind permission of the artist; right, *Figure 18*: A version of the same with the grand ducal crown, source, with the kind permission of the artist.

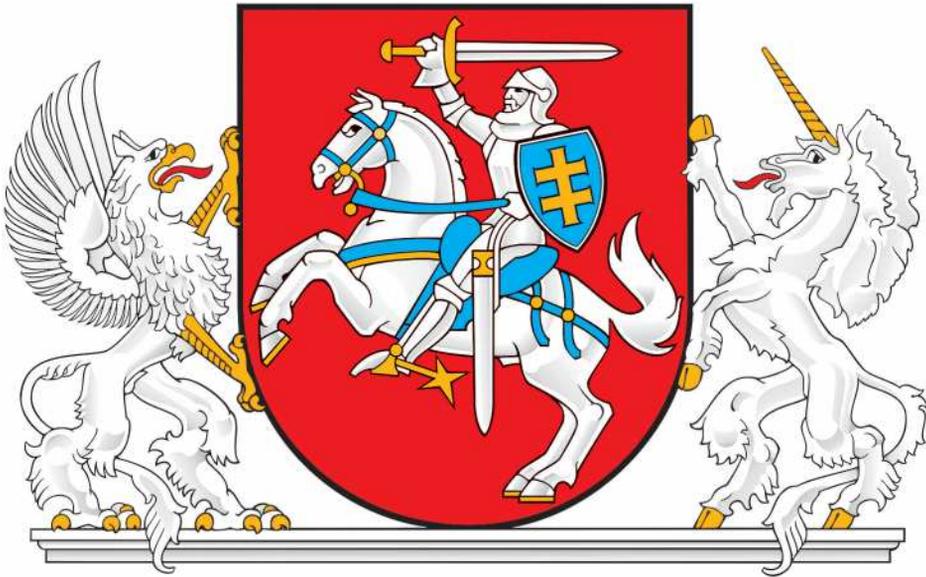
national anthem are written: *Vienybė težydi* (Let unity blossom). Additionally, an oak wreath with acorns is depicted above the shield. Oak is called the national plant of Lithuania, and its symbolism is widespread. Oak leaves were especially popular in inter-war Lithuania. The oak leaf is currently also one of the most popular motifs communities aspire to display on their local coats of arms. Inside the wreath we see the initials L.R. which stand for *Lietuvos Respublika*, or, the Republic of Lithuania.

Another proposal for the great coat of arms is very similar (*Figure 16*)<sup>40</sup>, but this time the shield supporters are not angels but armored warriors. They hold in their hands the same symbols of the lands, but now depicted on a completely different type of shield which is atypical in Lithuanian heraldry. Above the main shield is an oak wreath with acorns, while behind the shield are two pennons with swallowtail flags, each flag being charged with a highly stylized (one might say archaic) horseman holding a sword and shield.

The next proposal is quite different. The supporters are the representatives of the mythical world, a griffin on the dexter and unicorn sinister. Again, they stand above a motto with a line from the national anthem. The very important historical symbol of the Pillars of Gediminas is displayed both on a shield of the same shape as the main shield, and at the bottom of the achievement. Tribute is thus paid to the Gediminas dynasty from which the Jagiellonian dynasty later arose. In this project we see another novelty: three flags with the symbols of Vilnius, Trakai and the Samogitian lands<sup>41</sup>.

Vytautas the Great was held in great esteem in Lithuania during the inter-war period as he personified the golden age of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania thus in the heraldic sphere there was strong promotion of the Pillars of Gediminas. There was a natural desire

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*Figure 19:* The coat of arms of the Lithuanian presidential flag, published with the kind permission of the artist.

to emphasise the most ancient roots of independence, so that the Pillars easily won out over the double cross of Jogailaitis.

We see six flags on the newest version created by Každailis (**Figure 17**).<sup>42</sup> These are the flags of Lithuania's four ethnographic regions (Sūduva, Samogitia, Dzūkija and Aukštaitija), with the Lithuanian tricolor and the historical flag of Lithuania Minor on either side. A completely unexpected element is the torse which is atypical of Lithuanian heraldry. At the current time this element is being used to create commoner's heraldry. The female angel as crest is also a novelty. As mentioned earlier, angels were used in state heraldry for a very long time but they were usually depicted as male, and functioned as supporters. In truth it must be admitted that the head and wings of the angel were occasionally displayed above the shield, but never as a crest, which was never present in state heraldry.

One of the best-known proposals for the great coat of arms of the state (**Figure 18**) comprises the main elements as previously described, but drawn in a more restrained manner. An absolutely new, although historical, element is the grand ducal crown encrusted with precious stones.<sup>43</sup> This coat of arms is sometimes referred to by non-Lithuanians as the great or parliamentary version, probably because the draft project remained visible on the parliament's website for a significant period of time. The coat of arms of the presidential flag (**Figure 19**) is a derivative of this, but the great coat of arms was never approved. The biggest stumbling block was the grand ducal crown, which was not felt to be suitable for the arms of a modern republican state. The coat of arms displayed on the flag of the President of the Republic of Lithuania could be employed as the great coat of arms of the state of Lithuania. If it were to be legalized as the great coat

of arms, a gap which appeared in the system of state heraldry three decades earlier would be bridged. The Lithuanian Heraldry Commission has made the proposal to do so.<sup>44</sup> The inter-war heraldry commission submitted its conclusions regarding the standard for the state coat of arms, but it was never adopted. What fate awaits the proposal by the current commission? It is necessary to reiterate: to be, or not to be, that is the question.

<sup>1</sup> *Lietuvos metraštinis: Bychovco kronika*, [Annals of Lithuania: The Chronicle of Bykhovts], translated, introduction and explanations by R. Jاسas (Vilnius, 1971), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Tomasz Dygon(ia), *Przemiana koni poszonymcz pod lektyke Jaśnie Oświecone Xiążęcia Jego Mści Simeona Samvela Lvbartowicza Sanguszka y Kowlia wojewody Witepskiego starosty Suraszkiego [...]*, Zakonu Franciszkas. Deobservantia gwardzana konwentu Orszanskiego (Vilnius, 1639).

<sup>3</sup> Analogously Vytautas, the future Grand Duke of Lithuania, inherited the symbol of a foot soldier from his father Kęstutis who was second in importance as ruler of the state. His headquarters were the Duchy of Trakai. The foot soldier was the symbol of Trakai as well. It is not known if Kęstutis had another seal when he became Grand Duke of Lithuania, but after his assassination, Kęstutis's son Vytautas began using a mounted knight instead of a foot soldier on his seal, thus showing his intention to occupy the throne as the Grand Duke of Lithuania. See: Edmundas Rimša, *Lietuvos didžiojo kunigaikščio Vytauto antspaudai ir žemių heraldika*, (Vilnius, 2016), p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> Edmundas Rimša, *Heraldry: Past to Present* (Vilnius, 2005), pp. 59–60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60; Juozas Galkus, *Lietuvos Vytis. The Vytis of Lithuania* (Vilnius, 2009), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Hofkleiderbuch (Abbildung und Beschreibung der Hof-Livreen) des Herzogs Wilhelm IV. und Albrecht V. 1508–1551 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, 1952), f. 46r.

<sup>7</sup> Published seal of Vytautas the Great. See: Edmundas Rimša, *Lietuvos didžiojo kunigaikščio Vytauto...*, p. 153–154.

<sup>8</sup> Small coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1579), The Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Manuscript Unit (hereinafter WLLAS MU), F301-1; Greater coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1580), Vilnius University Library, F48-32774.

<sup>9</sup> Bergshammars vapenbok (c. 1440), Riksarkivet, SE/RA/720085/Z, f. 112r.

<sup>10</sup> Great seal of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the reign of Aleksandras Jogailaitis (Alexander Jagiellon), diameter 95 mm. Legend: ALEXANDER DEI GRACIA MAGNVS DVX LITHWANIE RVSSIE SAMAGITHIE Q(ue) (et) C(etera) D(omi)N(u)S ET HE(re)s, WLLAS MU, F6-85. For further reading see: Edmundas Rimša, Aleksandro antspaudai – naujas etapas valstybės sfragistikoje, *Lietuvos didysis kunigaikštis Aleksandras ir jo epocha*, Vilnius, 2007, p. 152–165.

<sup>11</sup> *Vyriausybės žinios*, No. 100, Kaunas, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ignas Jonynas, *Vytauto ženklas*, 1930; Mstislavas Dobužinskis, *Apie Vytauto ženklą*, Kaunas, 1932; Mstislavas Dobužinskis, *Vytis: Didžiosios Lietuvos Kunigaikštystės herbo istorinių variantų bruožai*, Kaunas, 1933; Jonas Ilgūnas, *Lietuvos valstybės ženklo kilmė* (Kaunas, 1938).

<sup>13</sup> Agnė Railaitė-Bardė, Mstislavo Dobužinskio heraldinis ir veklologinis palikimas. Mstislavas Dobužinskis's Heraldic and Vexillological Legacy, *Mstislavo Dobužinskio heraldika: ne tik mokslas, bet ir menas. Mstislavas Dobužinskis's Heraldry: Not Only a Science, It Is an Art* (Vilnius, 2018), pp. 38–39.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes of the second meeting of the Commission for the Establishment of the State Symbol, Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania Rare Books and Manuscript Unit (hereinafter MMNLL RBMU), F30, ap. 1–1991, f. 1r.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the twenty second meeting of the Commission for the Establishment of the State Symbol, Lithuanian Central State Archives (hereinafter LCSA), F923, ap. 1, b. 1600, f. 431r.

<sup>16</sup> Commission's opinion regarding supporters, MMNLL RBMU, F30, ap. 1–1999, f. 51r.

<sup>17</sup> Sketches of the great coat of arms of Lithuania, MMNLL RBMU, F30, ap. 1–2002, f. 27r.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 32r.

<sup>20</sup> Agnė Railaitė-Bardė, Mstislavas Dobužinskis's Heraldic..., p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> A sketch of the great coat of arms of Lithuania, MMNLL RBMU, F30, ap. 1–2002, f. 33r.

<sup>22</sup> Edmundas Rimša, *Heraldika. Iš praeities į dabartį*, Vilnius, 2004, p. 63–64.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes of the meetings of the Commission for the Establishment of the State Symbol, MMNLL RBMU, F30, ap. 1–1991, f. 22r–23r.

<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that this element is not depicted in the traditional way. The bottom of the grand ducal crown is decorated with an ermine fur, which is typical of the ducal hat rather than crown.

<sup>25</sup> Commission for the Establishment of the State Symbol activities file, LCSA, F923, ap. 1, b. 1600, f. 209r.

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to Ronny Skov Andersen, it was discovered that Poul Bredo Grandjean did not himself draw. As a result, the artist of the Danish version of the great coat of arms of Lithuania remains unknown.

## THE GREAT COAT OF ARMS OF LITHUANIA

- <sup>27</sup> Draft project of the great coat of arms of Lithuania by unknown author (inter-war period), LCSA, F. 923, ap. 1, b. 1600, f. 169a.
- <sup>28</sup> *Lietuvos metraštis: Bychovco kronika*, [Annals of Lithuania: The Chronicle of Bykhovts], translated, introduction and explanations by R. Jاسas (Vilnius, 1971), pp. 71–72.
- <sup>29</sup> Minutes of the fifth meeting of the Permanent Commission on Architecture and Aesthetics of the Vilnius City Council of the Deputies of Working People (August 9, 1967), Cultural Heritage Conservation Library of the Cultural Heritage Center, F.2, ap. 1, b. 240, f. 41r.
- <sup>30</sup> *Lietuvos heraldika*, compiled by E. Rimša (Vilnius, 2008), p. 493.
- <sup>31</sup> Coat of arms of Žemaitija, Lithuanian State Modern Archives, Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania (hereinafter LSMA, LRPK), F. 1, ap. 15, b. 396, f. 3–4r.
- <sup>32</sup> In the representation of rulers, the bear was a direct reference to Samogitia, but in the heraldry and sigillography of the nobles, the bear could be an allusion to the noble's legendary self-consciousness, i.e. alleged family origin from Roman patricians who came to Lithuania. The bear used as a supporter (or supporters) in the noble's armorial seals could also be a reference to the officials who carried out activities in Samogitia. See: Agnė Railaitė-Bardė. *Origo et arma. Kilmė ir herbas Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje XVI–XVIII amžiuje*, Vilnius, 2020, pp. 288–289, 320–321, 324.
- <sup>33</sup> Vytis used in Jurbarkas area (1918–1940), Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, photo: Renata Bugvilionytė.
- <sup>34</sup> Unofficial great coat of arms on an inter-war poster, MMNLL, NPDAF V764908/1919.
- <sup>35</sup> Postcard with the coat of arms of Lithuania, Trakai History Museum (hereinafter THS), TIM AT 17780.
- <sup>36</sup> Postcard with the coat of arms of Lithuania, THS, TIM AT 17792.
- <sup>37</sup> Postcard with the coat of arms of Lithuania (1910s), THS, TIM AT 17782.
- <sup>38</sup> Postcard with the coat of arms of Lithuania (early 20th century), THS, TIM AT 17786.
- <sup>39</sup> One of several proposals for the great coat of arms of Lithuania (1991), artist Arvydas Stanislasas Každailis.
- <sup>40</sup> One of several proposals for the great coat of arms of Lithuania (1991), artist Arvydas Stanislasas Každailis.
- <sup>41</sup> One of several proposals for the great coat of arms of Lithuania (1992), artist Arvydas Stanislasas Každailis.
- <sup>42</sup> The newest version of the great coat of arms of Lithuania created by Arvydas Stanislasas Každailis (post-2015).
- <sup>43</sup> One of the best-known proposals for the great coat of arms of Lithuania created by Arvydas Stanislasas Každailis.
- <sup>44</sup> Minutes of the 568th meeting of the Lithuanian Heraldry Commission (2020), LMSA, LRPK, F. 1, ap. 16, b. 46.