NAMING PRACTICES AND CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF SWASTIKA ORNAMENTS IN LATVIA AND LITHUANIA

Mg. art. **Sindija Anča**
University of Latvia, Latvia

Abstract

A symbol's name, being an important part of the symbol itself, can be crucial in establishing the context. The swastika is a globally recognised yet ambivalent symbol appearing in various cultural contexts. In Latvian, the symbol is commonly known as *ugunskrusts* ("Firecross"), which helps to distance it from associations with Nazi ideology. Alongside *ugunskrusts*, numerous other names such as *Pērkona krusts* ("Thunder Cross"), *Laimas krusts* ("Laima's Cross"), *Laimes krusts* ("*Cross of Luck*"), and others, reinforce the perception of the swastika as a locally significant and benevolent cultural ornament. However, in Lithuania the ornament is mostly called *svastika* and is generally viewed more negatively, despite its frequent presence in archaeological and ethnographic contexts. This study through descriptive, comparative, semiotic, corpus analysis methods, and questionnaires examines the differences in naming conventions between Latvia and Lithuania. Additionally, the research addresses the significance of the researcher's positionality, arguing for the necessity of an emic approach when studying culturally meaningful symbols within one's own cultural framework, despite the inherent subjectivity this perspective can introduce.

Keywords: *Baltic languages, corpus linguistics, semiotics, emic and etic research, cultural identity*

Culture Crossroads
Volume 31, 2025, https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol31.604

ISSN 2500-9974

CULTURE CROSSROADS

Introduction

The swastika is undoubtedly one of the most pronounced traditional Latvian ornaments: starting with archaeological evidence from all tribes inhabiting the territory of Latvia where swastikas often decorate the most valuable possessions [Zemītis 2004: 59–62], and in later centuries it is also present in ethnographic heritage from Lielvārde, Krustpils, Eastern Vidzeme, Southern Kurzeme, and Augšzeme [Rozenberga, Zemītis 1991: 12]. In many parts of the world, swastika represents luck, success, and light, while elsewhere, it is associated with evil and suffering – a cruel and cynical contradiction, given that the word *svastika* in Sanskrit conveys a positive meaning. In the Baltic region, where the swastika has been present since the Early Iron Age and where people suffered greatly under Nazi terror in the 20th century, these conflicting interpretations collide and create ongoing debates. While a part of the society tries to avoid the symbol entirely, some actively seek to restore its reputation through art and research. In this context, various narratives attached to the symbol's different names become particularly significant and exploring the Lithuanian names of swastika for a Latvian scholar reveals previously unseen aspects of an already familiar symbol.

Many researchers avoid addressing the topic of the swastika due to fear of public condemnation. As academic literature on this topic is limited, the void is filled with esoteric interpretations or theories of dubious origin and quality. Lithuanian ethnologist Vytautas Tumėnas emphasises that the vitality of a culture depends on it understanding, translating and describing its own concepts, which also highlights the importance of the emic perspective. Without sufficiently understanding the local symbols and meanings, traditional culture becomes merely a superficial projection of the past onto the present, losing its capacity to inspire meaningful contemporary creativity [Tumėnas 2015: 105–106]. As the practice of traditions within communities has declined, the importance of research in preserving and disseminating this knowledge has increased.

In Latvia the tradition of *latvju raksti* ("Latvian patterns") includes specific terminology and interpretation of traditional ornaments that imbue them with magical power [Ķenga 2024: 30]. In the case of the swastika, terminology also helps to compartmentalize: *svastika* mostly refers to the international or the nazi symbol, while *ugunskrusts* ("Firecross") is used for the local benevolent symbol [Ūdre 2023: 12]. In contrast, Lithuania lacks this tradition; terminology is less emphasized, and the swastika has few alternate names shaping a different perception of the symbol. The aim of this paper is to compile a systematic review of swastika denominations in Latvia and Lithuania for the first time. This task also offers a compelling insight into the importance of linguistic labels in separating symbols and contexts. The emic perspective can be very helpful for formulating culturally grounded questions and uncovering insights that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The emic/etic perspective

This distinction was established by the American linguist and anthropologist Kenneth Lee Pike, who differentiated between the phon*emic* and phon*etic* perceptions of language, noting that phonemic perception is characterised by sound contrasts recognised mentally by native speakers, while phonetic perception refers to objective nuances in sound perceivable by external researchers [Markee 2012]. These terms, with slight variations in meaning, are also applied beyond linguistics – in anthropology and ethnology – where *emic* signifies an internal or insider perspective, and *etic* denotes an external or outsider viewpoint. Thus, emic/etic distinctions indicate two different methods of observation and description, depending on the observer's position. Traditionally qualitative research can be seen as emic and quantitative research – as etic. As ethnographic research includes both types of methodology, it is not exclusively emic or etic.

When researching elements tied to national identity, objectivity becomes crucial. An external perspective may aid neutrality by reducing cultural bias, while an insider view offers deeper access to context and nuance. In Latvia, ornament research has typically been emic, relying on local sources such as folk songs (*dainas*) and local interpretations [Brastiņš 1923; Celms 2011]. In contrast, Lithuanian studies tend to follow an etic approach, involving external, perspectives [Beresnevičius 1992; Šimkus 2019].

A global or a local symbol?

Speculating about the meanings of ancient symbols is always problematic – associations are mostly drawn from the current culture which is very different to the culture that shaped the original symbol. Interpretations, strengthened through academic or popular discourse, are still just interpretations therefore relying on them as irrefutable is problematic even though this approach is common [Zemītis 2004: 9]. The swastika could be called a "universal symbol" in the sense that it is can be found all over the world and it can symbolize a wide array of things – light, dynamism, luck, and more. But can the swastika in Nazism be considered the same symbol as the swastika in Hinduism or traditional Latvian art? A symbol is not defined by its visual form alone (representamen); it also includes the underlying original concept it signifies (referent), and the interpretation it evokes (interpretant). When two of these three aspects – the form, the meaning, and the interpretation – differ, it is reasonable to treat them as distinct symbols, even if they look the same.

Along with other traditional ornaments, the swastika is mostly seen as an essential part of national identity in Latvia even if some members of society reject it [Ūdre 2018: 123]. Because the swastika is not unique to Latvian or even Baltic culture, some claim it cannot be categorized as *tautisks* ("folk/national") [Šmits 1937: 52]. But at the same time cultural boundaries are not rigid, and no culture possesses a set

of entirely unique elements that are absent elsewhere. Defining *folk/national* strictly as something found exclusively within a single nation, paradoxically, leaves nearly all cultures without most of their folk symbols.

Previous research

At the turn of the 19th–20th centuries, interest in Sanskrit and Indo-European symbols grew alongside comparative linguistics and semiotics. *Swastika* had become the most widely used term for an equilateral cross with four arms bent at 90 degrees in the same direction. A major global study on swastikas was published already in the end of the 19th century [Wilson 1896] but it did not include Baltic, Finnic and Slavic variants.

In Latvia and Lithuania, interest in traditional ornaments grew notably during the 1920s and 1930s. Latvian scholars can be divided into a "mythological school" (Ernests Brastiņš, Arvīds Brastiņš, Jēkabs Bīne and others) linking ornaments and swastika to mythology, and an "ethnographic school" (such as Eduards Paegle, Arvīds Dzērvītis and Jānis Niedre), which rather focused on its form and usage. These differing approaches led to multiple name variations. In contrast, Lithuanian research emphasized ornamentation as a whole, often overlooking individual names [Anča 2023: 245]. Also, instead of linking swastika to deities, it is mostly seen as a general symbol of light. Swastika has also been explored from an archaeological perspective but the opinions in Latvia and Lithuania vary. Latvian scholars date the first swastikas with the 3rd–4th century and view them as a significant part of Baltic heritage, common among the elite of the society [Zemītis 2004: 62]. There are even claims that Latvia has the world's greatest swastika variety, though without solid archaeological proof [Brastiņš 1923: 72]. Lithuanians view these 3rd–4th century samples as mere Roman-influenced copies, consciously crafted swastikas emerging only in the 5th–7th century. They are considered to be minor in the Baltic art, except in 12th–13th century Latvian textiles [Bliujienė 1999; 2000]. Recent studies on swastika semiotics and national heritage include works by V. Tumėnas [Tumėnas 2015; 1992] and Digne Ūdre [Ūdre 2023; 2018] who also explores swastika as a part of the Latvian folk ornament revival in her doctoral thesis [Ūdre-Lielbārde 2024].

The process and criteria of name selection

For the purpose of the present study, swastika denominations were extracted from publications and analysed in language corpora, considering frequency and connotations, with survey data supplementing the findings. Sources include Latvian and Lithuanian periodicals that were available online, academic works and monographs from the late 19th century to today.

Only the terms clearly referring to the swastika – either as synonyms or as captions under identifiable images – were included. Latvian and Lithuanian terms

were analysed separately due to differences in their perception, usage, and origins. The analysis used two balanced and comparable corpora: the Latvian Balanced Corpus (LVK2022) and Vytautas Magnus University's Corpus of Contemporary Lithuanian Language (DLKT), both of which are approximately of the same age, size and composition, therefore they are comparable. Corpus excerpts helped to identify the connotations of each name. Because these terms are relatively rare, a manual review was manageable.

As an illustrative example this study also includes surveys that were conducted in spring 2024. They targeted Latvian Baltistics students (19 respondents), Lithuanian Baltistics students (11 respondents), and international respondents (22 in total) from Czechia, Japan, Ukraine, Germany, USA, Canada and more. Participants identified synonyms and attributed names and connotations to six swastika shapes. Survey results can be viewed in Figures 4–5. Due to the small sample size, they should not be considered as primary data.

Corpora results

The most common names for swastika found in publications were: *svastika*, *ugunskrusts* ("fire cross"), *pērkonkrusts* (also *Pērkona krusts*) ('thunder cross'), *kāškrusts* ("hook cross"), *zaru krusts* ("cross of branches"), and *Laimas krusts* ("Laima's cross") or *laimes krusts* ("cross of luck") in Latvian, and in Lithuanian – *svastika*, *sūkurėlis* ("little whirl"), *ugnies kryžius* ("fire cross"), *saulės ženklas* ("sign of sun"), and *kablių kryžius* ("hook cross"), but not all of the names found in publications were also present in the corpora. As the Latvian corpus LVK2022 demonstrates (Figure 1), *ugunskrusts* is by far the most popular. Even excluding the 60 cases when it was used to name a political organization and not the symbol, *ugunskrusts* is still the most frequently used, followed by *svastika*. It is also visible that in most cases these names have been used neutrally. A negative connotation was concluded when words related to antisemitism, Nazism, hate, crime, violence etc. were found in the excerpt provided by the corpus.

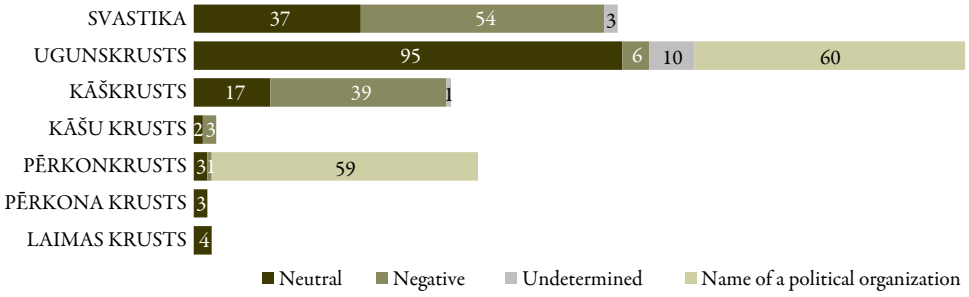


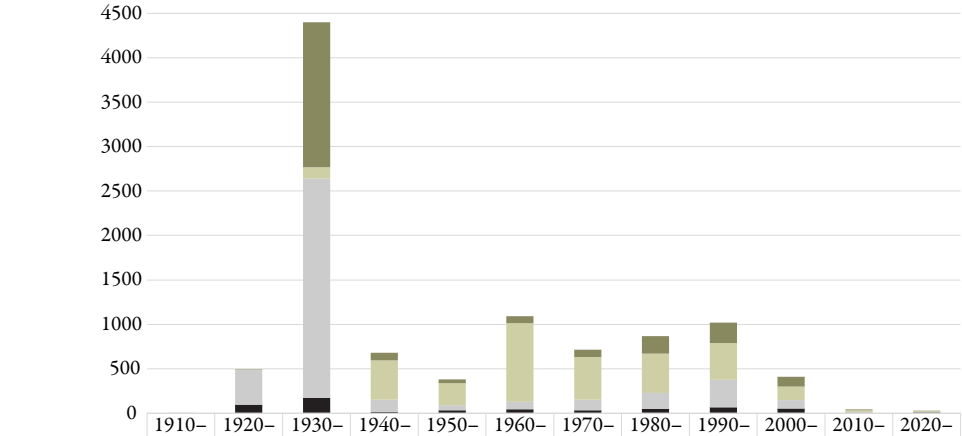
Figure 1. The usage of Latvian swastika names in LVK2022.

Figure 2. The usage of Lithuanian swastika names in DLKT.

In contrast, the results of the Lithuanian corpus DLKT paints a very different picture (Figure 2). Even though both corpora match each other in size and composition, much fewer denominations were found in DLKT. *Svastika* was the only name to be used regularly and it mostly appeared in negative connotation. Other denominations only appear sporadically.

Latvian names of the swastika

In Latvia, swastika ornaments have many name variations, and there is no consensus on how best to refer to them. Discussions on this topic have been ongoing for decades, resulting in scientific and sometimes also personal disputes. Periodika.lv (digital archive of Latvian periodicals) offers statistical data on the usage of these names in each decade, which provides a convenient platform for examining the chronology of these names (Figure 3).



	1910–1919	1920–1929	1930–1939	1940–1949	1950–1959	1960–1969	1970–1979	1980–1989	1990–1999	2000–2009	2010–2019	2020–2029
Laimas krusts, laimes krusts						5	3	7	9	2		
Pērkonkrusts, pērkona krusts		3	1630	85	39	72	73	191	220	104	10	6
Kāškrusts		2	128	445	248	885	483	439	415	152	20	9
Ugunskrusts	2	390	2468	136	58	80	116	182	307	93	9	5
Sauvastika		3	1		2	3	2	1	1	1		
Svastika		94	170	16	32	44	34	47	68	54	6	8

Figure 3. Usage of swastika names in Latvian periodicals. Periodika.lv data.

***Svastika* and *sauvastika*.** *Svastika* (from *svasti* (स्वस्ति)) in Sanskrit has multiple meanings, but in this study's context, the most relevant is "a kind of mystical cross or mark on persons and things to denote good luck (it is shaped like a Greek cross with the extremities of the four arms bent round in the same direction" [Monier-Williams 1899: 1283]. In Latvian outside the field of semiotics and cultural history this name tends to have a negative connotation–this is indicated by both: the analysis of the language corpus, where it often appears in reports on conflicts, crimes, and vandalism, and the responses obtained in the survey.

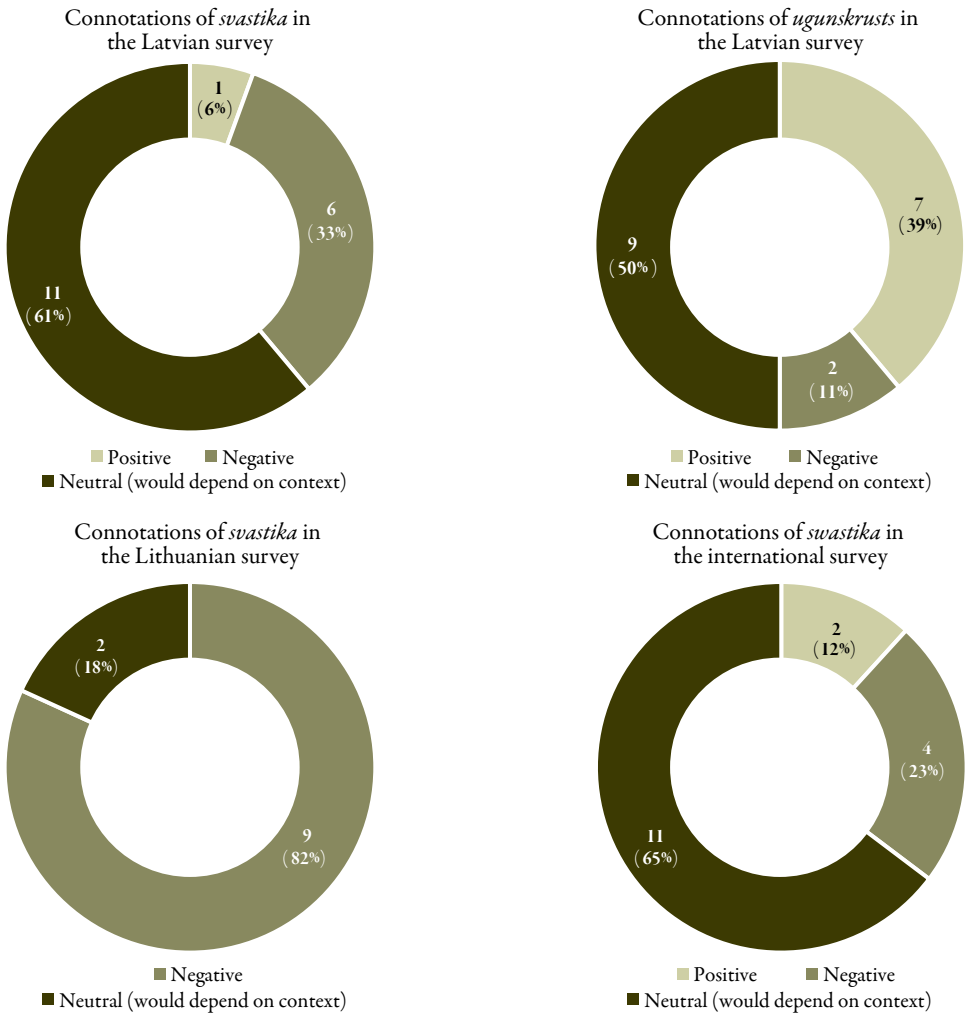


Figure 4. Connotations of svastika, ugunskrusts and swastika in the Latvian, Lithuanian and international respondent groups.

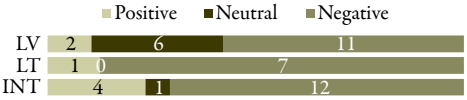
Periodika.lv confirms the use of *svastika* as early as 1922 when it was used to quote the title of T. Wilson's study but the actual term used in the article was *uguns krusts* [Sudmalis 1922]. Along with other examples this article illustrates how *uguns krusts* (or *ugunskrusts*) is used for local swastikas, reserving *svastika* for international contexts [Aberbergs 1924; 16; E. Brastiņš 1923: 71–72].

The usage of *svastika* also relates to the shape of the ornament. *Svastika* typically refers to single-armed forms, while more complex designs are called differently [Paegle 1923: 89]. This distinction is also confirmed by corpus analysis and survey responses. Some authors also believe that *svastika* refers specifically to a cross with arms facing right and a cross with arms facing in the opposite direction should be called *sauvastika* [Wilson 1899: 773; Paegle 1923: 89] but this term was already ambiguous in the 19th century. T. Wilson notes that *sauvastika* was mentioned by the German linguist Max Müller and the French orientalist Eugène Burnouf but without citing any reliable sources [Wilson 1896: 767]. In Latvian, *sauvastika* is used by E. Paegle, though he notes that such symbols are generally referred to as *svastikas* in practice [Paegle 1923: 89; 1925: 315]. Interestingly, a common misconception among Latvians and Lithuanians claims that folk swastikas always face a "positive" direction, while the opposite "negative" one is linked to Nazi use. Though this idea hasn't been confirmed in written sources, it repeatedly arises in discussions after lectures and conference sessions. In reality, archaeological and ethnographic examples face both directions, as also shown in Figure 5.

***Krusts* and *krustiņš*.** Simply meaning ("cross" and "little cross") these names are very frequent in folklore texts, although it is difficult to tell when they refer to swastikas specifically. Having such broad meanings, they were not analysed in the corpus but they are often used in ethnographic publications to name various crosses, including swastikas.

Krusts and *krustiņš* have sparked discord among Latvian ornament researchers. Although these names have been recorded in ethnographic field work [Dzērvītis 1925: 339] followers of the mythological school find them too simple and prefer names linked to deities such as *pērkonkrusts* ("Cross of Pērkons") or *Laimas krusts* ("Cross of Laima") even though ethnographic and folklore materials do not mention such names. Dismissively calling them *kaķpēdiņu nosaukumi* ("cat paw names") the mythological school followers suggest that them to be a newer layer of folklore and respecting national heritage requires looking beyond them [A. Brastiņš 1982: 2046; Grīna, Grīns 1987: 1899]. A. Brastiņš even questions the reliability of these folk ornament names but in that case, for consistency, the same scepticism should also be applied to his primary source – *dainas* – which were collected using the same methodology and face the same limitations.

Swastika in textile.10–12th century. Latvia.
Zemītis, G. (2004). *Ornaments un simbols Latvijas aizvēsturē*, p. 183

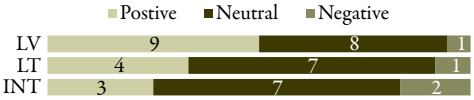


NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LATVIAN: svastika – 10; ugunskrusts – 5; kāškrusts – 1

NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LITHUANIAN: svastika – 9; saulės ženklas – 1

INTERNATIONAL GROUP – WOULD YOU CONSIDER THIS A SWASTIKA: Yes – 11 ; No – 0

Swastika in textile.10–12th century. Latvia.
Zemītis, G. (2004). *Ornaments un simbols Latvijas aizvēsturē*, p. 183

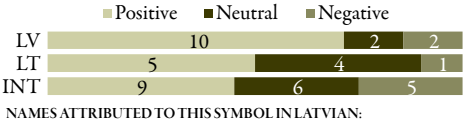


NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LATVIAN: ugunskrusts – 9; kāšu krusts – 2; auseklītis – 1; Pērkona krusts – 1; svastika – 1

NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LITHUANIAN: sūkurėlis – 2; svastika – 1; laužta svastika – 1; pasaulio ženklas – 1; dobilas – 1

INTERNATIONAL GROUP – WOULD YOU CONSIDER THIS A SWASTIKA: Yes – 6 ; No – 7

Swastika in textile.n.d. Latvia.
Celms V. (2007). *Latvju raksts un zīmes*, p. 201

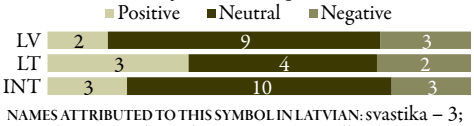


NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LATVIAN: ugunskrusts – 5; Pērkona krusts / pērkonkrusts – 5; svastika – 1; krustiņš – 1; dreiļa raksts – 1

NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LITHUANIAN: sūkurys – 1, ugnies kryžius – 1; medžio šakos – 1; šakotas kryžius – 1

INTERNATIONAL GROUP – WOULD YOU CONSIDER THIS A SWASTIKA: Yes – 4; No – 9

Swastika in bronze.10–12th century. Latvia.
Zemītis G. (2004). *Ornaments un simbols Latvijas aizvēsturē*, p. 183

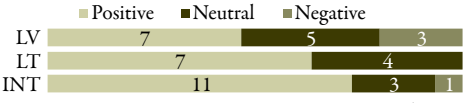


NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LATVIAN: svastika – 3; ugunskrusts – 2; līniju lociņu zīme – 1; zalkša krusts – 1; krustiņš – 1; kāšu krusts – 1; čūsku zīme – 1; zalkša krusts – 1

NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LITHUANIAN: svastika – 2, sūkurys – 1; sūkurėlis – 1; sukutis – 1; klouno kepurėle – 1

INTERNATIONAL GROUP – WOULD YOU CONSIDER THIS A SWASTIKA: Yes – 7; No – 6

Swastika brooch. 9th century. Lithuania
Bliujienė, A. (2000). *Universalusis svastikos simbolis baltų medžiagoje,* p. 23

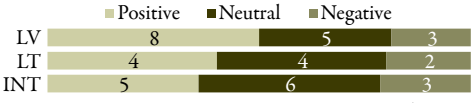


NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LATVIAN: svastika – 3; ugunskrusts – 1; Laimas krusts – 1; čūsku/pūķu zīme – 1; čūsku aplis – 1; zalkša krusts – 1

NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LITHUANIAN: sūkurys – 1, sūkurėlis – 1; žalčio kryžius – 1; gyvačių ratas – 1;svastika – 1; Laimės ratas – 1

INTERNATIONAL GROUP – WOULD YOU CONSIDER THIS A SWASTIKA: Yes – 6; No – 7

Swastika on an Easter egg. n.d. Lithuania
Emaitytė, E. (1996). *Kosminis kiaušinis, lietuvių margutis ir svastika*, p. 9



NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LATVIAN: svastika – 2; Laimas krusts – 2; skuju raksts – 1; krustiņš – 1; ugunskrusts – 1; kāškrusts – 1

NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THIS SYMBOL IN LITHUANIAN: svastika – 1; eglės kryžius – 1; eglišakių kryžius – 1; vainikėlis – 1; gyvate – 1; pušinis kryžius (pušinė svastika) – 1; paparčio kryžius/svastika – 1

INTERNATIONAL GROUP – WOULD YOU CONSIDER THIS A SWASTIKA: Yes – 7; No – 7

Figure 5. Survey responses.

Ugunskrusts. This is the most popular name for swastika ornaments nowadays and is included in most Latvian dictionaries as a synonym of *svastika*. On Periodika.lv its earliest mention in relation to swastikas can be found in a 1914 article [Švābe 1914] in which the author does not introduce or explain the origin of the term, which suggests that the term might have already been common at the time and required no explanation. It may have German origins, as A. Švābe cites German sources and *Feuerkreuz* (Fire cross' in German) appears already in 19th century sources, though unrelated to folk art.

Usage of *ugunskrusts* surged in the 1920s–30s when amid heightened ethnographic and archaeological interest the symbol was especially popular in uniforms, monuments, and other developing fields of applied design. With all of its popularity, the society seems to have been interested in the name as well – in 1926 *Latvijas Saule* published a call urging readers to share information on the use and meaning of *ugunskrusts* [Paegle 1926].

Another reason for the frequent use of *ugunskrusts* was the political organization bearing this name. The Latvian National Union *Ugunskrusts* officially ran only a few months, but it published its own newspaper and was frequently mentioned due to its loud activities and confrontations. The name was probably chosen because at the time it was seen as a singularly Baltic symbol. This myth was cultivated by such artworks as Pāvils Gruzns' play *Ugunskrusta zemē* ("In the Land of the Fire Cross") and it later further contributed to the use of swastika in political contexts [Ūdre 2018: 133, 135]. Neither this organization, nor its successor LNA *Pērkoņkrusts* focused on explaining the symbol or its name.

After the 1930s, *ugunskrusts* usage declined due to Latvia's occupation by the USSR but before resurfacing in Latvia in the late 1980s, it sowed a great deal of discord among researchers in exile. Despite being in use since at least 1914, some dismissed it as an invented post-World War I term [Dunsdorfs 1982: 204] but *Dievturi* attributed it to an entirely different graphic symbol.

Dievturi is a religious movement that was established by E. Brastiņš in the 1920s and continued to function in exile. It sought to reconstruct the pre-Christian local religion and devoted a lot of effort to conceptualize traditional ornament through the approach of the "mythological school". In the 1920s, E. Brastiņš still called the swastika *ugunskrusts* [E. Brastiņš 1923], however, by 1932 he applied this name to a different symbol – a cross with crossed arms, also known as *krustu krusts* ("Cross of Crosses") – and argued that calling the swastika *ugunskrusts* was a mistake [E. Brastiņš 1932: 124]. He based this change on folklore citing three customs [LFK: 150, 1079; 1080; 1085] that link this shape of cross to fire but as proof for any concrete conclusions it is hardly sufficient. The cross is unnamed in these accounts and used to extinguish, not ignite, fire – suggesting a general protective function of

all crosses rather than a specific association. Notably, all three examples come from the same informant, further limiting their reliability.

Ironically, *ugunskrusts* gained popularity largely due to Brastiņš himself. His earlier work *Latviešu ornamentika*, which still used *ugunskrusts* for the swastika, was immensely popular in exile schools [Strausa 1987]. The Cross of Crosses is regarded as the main symbol of *Dievturi* faith, therefore E. Brastiņš and other followers are adamant about calling it *ugunskrusts* and referring to swastikas by other names. Meanwhile others continued to use *ugunskrusts* relying on tradition which causes constant clashes between the opposing sides. Nowadays, *Dievturi* have accepted the term *ugunskrusts* for swastika among others.

It is also noteworthy that prominent archaeologists, such as Guntis Zemītis, use *ugunskrusts* in academic texts and the broader society makes a clear distinction between *ugunskrusts* and *svastika*: the former refers to the symbol in a Baltic context and carries a neutral or a positive meaning, whereas the latter denotes Nazi symbolism and has a negative connotation. This distinction was also documented by D. Ūdre in an interview [Ūdre 2023: 13], and can also be seen in a sample from LVK2022: *Saldeniekus satrauc Trešā reiha simbols, pašvaldība mierina – tas ir ugunskrusts* ("Inhabitants of Saldus are concerned about a Third Reich symbol, municipality reassures – it's an *ugunskrusts*"). Not counting the instances referring to the political organization, *ugunskrusts* appears in LVK2022 mostly in neutral connotation. A similar pattern emerges from survey responses.

***Kāškrusts* or *kāšu krusts*.** These names are direct translations of the German *Hakenkreuz* ("hook cross") and have a more distinct link to Nazi ideology. By the late 19th century, the swastika gained popularity in Germany when Heinrich Schliemann observed similarities between the swastikas in Troy and traditional German ornaments. This became material for pseudoscientific studies aimed at proving an affiliation with a supposed superior Aryan culture [Oesterdiekhoff 2007]. It should be noted though, that swastikas are widespread beyond Indo-European cultures and also in Latvia, the earliest known swastikas have been found in Baltic Finnic regions [Zemītis 2004: 51]. The term is very popular (and very negative) during the occupation time from 1940 to 1990 when describing the horrors of Nazism was a popular topic. These names sometimes also appear in articles about ornaments but they are never used as the main term. An exception to this is the article *Uguns krusts* by P. Šmits, in which the author rejects the idea of cross being native to Latvian culture, arguing that the trend was imported from Germany [Šmits 1922]. The usage of *kāšu krusts* here seems to be personally motived to prove the author's point. Another interesting use of *kāšu krusts* can be seen in an article by Valdis Klētnieks, where he proposes to use this term to denominate a symbol commonly known as *jumis* (a sort of an inverted W) [Klētnieks 1959: 307]. *Kāškrusts* and *kāšu krusts* also appear

in the LVK2022 corpus and in most instances carry a negative connotation directly linked to Nazi ideology and vandalism. In the survey, most Latvian respondents recognized *kāškrusts* as one of the Latvian names for the swastika, and some also used it to refer to the examples provided in the survey.

***Pērkonkrusts* or *Pērkona krusts*.** Like *ugunskrusts*, *pērkonkrusts* refers to both an ornament and a political organization. Many Latvian authors associate the swastika with Pērkons (God of Thunder) based on the findings of the Swedish archaeologist Oscar Montelius [E. Brastiņš 1923; Švābe 1914: 284; Sudmalis 1922]. While a connection between thunder and crosses can be observed in folk beliefs it is unclear when they refer to a swastika specifically, it can also be just a simple cross, or the Christian protective gesture. A clearer connection between swastika and thunder is noted in Lithuanian sources [Vaitkevičius 2020].

In the LVK2022, most instances of *pērkonkrusts* (94%) refer to the political organization LNA *Pērkoņkrusts* (successor of LNA *Ugunskrusts*) and Periodika.lv shows particularly frequent usage between 1930 and 1939 when the organization was active. A slight resurgence occurred in the 1980s–2000s, mainly in a political context, driven by academic interest and availability of new information [Krēsliņš 2005: 41]. The survey responses list *pērkonkrusts* as one of swastika's names and in one case it attributed to a specific form. In relation to shape, the Latvian Wikipedia article *Svastika* claims that *Laimas krusts* rotates in the opposite direction to *Pērkona krusts*, though no source is cited. A. Brastiņš, in explaining the use of *Laimes krusts* provided examples of swastikas rotating in both directions [A. Brastiņš 1978: 445]. It can be concluded that *pērkonkrusts* as name for the swastika was mostly used by researchers who leaned into the ideas of *Dievturi*, however, this name has not been able overtake *ugunskrusts* in this regard.

***Laimas krusts* and *laimes krusts*.** Both name variants appeared around the same time and their meanings are interrelated. They seek to emphasize the internationally recognized swastika's link to luck and happiness and, according to Periodika.lv, they appear in 1961 when several names for swastika are already in use [A. Brastiņš 1961: 24]. As Guntis Eniņš points out, this only furthers the confusion and he still "does not have a clear conviction of how this compromised symbol should truly be called" [Eniņš 1988: 2558]. The association of the swastika with Pērkons and Laima at the same time creates a structural problem for *Dievturi*: considering it a symbol of Laima would put in at the highest rank of symbols among *dievestības zīmes* ("signs of faith") because Laima is regarded as one of the highest deities but considering the swastika a symbol of Pērkons would rank it lower among *debess parādību zīmes* ("signs of celestial and atmospheric phenomena") [Bīne 1937: 99]. This confusion is later solved by Valdis Celms. He explains that Laima and Pērkons are connected: both are creators and agents of destiny, but in different scales – Pērkons – in the universe

or macrocosm; Laima – in the microcosm or human life, therefore, both names for the symbol are correct [Celms 2016: 62–63].

Even though starting from the 1980s *Laimas krusts* and *laimes krusts* appear in publications more frequently, they can hardly be deemed popular. *Laimas krusts* appears in LVK2022 in 4 instances, in one of them explicitly mentioning positive energy generation in a bathhouse through this symbol. As mentioned before, Wikipedia article states that the rotation direction of the Laimas krusts is opposite to that of the Pērkona krusts, but no evidence supporting this has been found.

Other names for swastika in Latvian include *zaru krusts* ("cross of branches"), *dzirnaviņas* ("little mill") and *zalkši* ("grass snakes"). While revealing interesting alternative narratives of the swastika, such as it representing the rotating sky around the fixed North Star just like a mill [Grāvītis 1990; Ambrazijienė 2003] or two crossed snakes [Buks 1992] they are not common in publications or corpora.

Lithuanian names for the swastika

Considering that the tasks and goals of the study were set from a Latvian perspective, finding Lithuanian samples proved to be more difficult. As Lithuanian culture tends to view ornaments holistically, a smaller variety of ornament names is unsurprising. Even though several swastika names emerge from various Lithuanian sources, preference has been given to the general and international *svastika*.

***Svastika*.** Although it often evokes negative associations, it is still the most commonly used name for the ornament in Lithuanian. No negativity can be viewed in the etymological and semiotic explanations of the symbol though. Compared to Latvian studies, Lithuanian researchers more often emphasize swastika's connection to light. This could be because Lithuanian speakers can hear a clearer connection between the words *svastika* and *švaistyti* ("to scatter, radiate"), *šviesti* ("to shine"), and *šviesa* ("light"). The Latvian *svīst* ("to become bright") which derived from the same root is rarely used in this meaning today, so the etymological link is not as detectable in Latvian.

Some Lithuanian authors reflect on swastikas in relation to Sanskrit, an approach which is not so common among Latvians. Š. Šimkus, analysing the Rigveda texts, notes that *svasti* is not associated with an inert state of happiness or success, but rather with motion, escaping an adverse state, or a successful return home – in other words, happiness is a journey, not a destination. *Svasti* has also been used to denote the journey of the sun god *Sūrya* across the sky [Šimkus 2019: 71–75]. Other Lithuanian researchers have written about the dynamic nature of the swastika and celestial bodies as well [Beresnevičius 1992; Gimbutas 1958].

It was not possible to prove the earliest use of *svastika* but it can be established that it was used during 1920s and 1930s when folklore in Lithuania was researched

just as keenly as in Latvia. However, the symbol was not considered significant to Lithuanian ornament: it is absent from Paulius Galaunė's *Lietuvių liaudies menas* ("Lithuanian Folk Art"), which includes a full chapter on ornaments [Galaunė 1930], and from Jonas Basanavičius' review of the IV Art Exhibition, where around 50 ornament names are listed [Basanavičius 1910]. It is possible that swastikas attract less attention in Lithuania simply because they are less widespread in Lithuania than in Latvia [Tumėnas 1992, 61].

In the Lithuanian language corpus (DLKT), *svastika* mostly appears in negative context (56 instances or 58%) in direct relation to Nazism and vandalism. When its usage is neutral the term is accompanied by descriptors like *rytiška* ("Eastern"), *budistinė* ("Buddhist"), *tautinė* ("ethnic"), and *pagoninė* ("pagan"), showing a desire to differentiate from the symbol's general negative connotation. Survey responses also show a similar picture: nearly all Lithuanian respondents indicated negative associations with *svastika*.

Swastika names in *margučiai* (Easter egg) ornaments. While swastikas do appear on Lithuanian ethnographic textiles such as *nuometai* (a type of women's headdress) [Kargaudienė 1992: 23] and sashes [Tumėnas 1992: 61] their most notable and elaborate variants can be found on Lithuanian Easter eggs. Swastikas used on eggs also have peculiar names: *gaidžiai* ("roosters"), *sūkurėlis* ("little whirl") and *zalčiukai* ("little grass snakes") which specifically refers to a three-branched variant of the swastika [Stravinskienė 1993: 7; Emaitytė 1996]. The swastika's link to snakes also appears in Latvian literature [Klētnieks 1990: 24; Celms 2011: 215] and in the typical Curonian brooches featuring a swastika formed by four snakes (Figure 5), found in both Latvia and Lithuania [Bliujienė 2000: 23; Zemītis 2004: 59].

Sūkurėlis. This name is the second most popular swastika name in Lithuania and even appears in the Lithuanian Wikipedia article regarding the swastika. As mentioned before, this term is used to describe swastika patterns on *margučiai* but it is also used by members of Romuva, an organization which could be described as the Lithuanian counterpart of the Latvian *Dievturi*. In *Baltų tikėjimas* ("Baltic faith") *sūkurėlis* is described as a dynamic symbol of fire and associated with *Dievas* (the supreme god), Perkūnas and his wife Laima [Trinkūnas 2000: 109] – these ideas correspond to the doctrine of Latvian *Dievturi*. It is also worth noting that this name normally refers to a swastika with rounded edges and this type of swastika was also adopted as the main emblem of the Romuva movement. Brooches featuring similar designs have been found in territories inhabited by the Curonians [Bliujienė 2000: 23; Zemītis 2004: 59]. This type of swastika was included in the survey, and unsurprisingly none of the Lithuanian respondents perceived it negatively. It was also deemed positive by Latvian and international respondents.

Sūkurėlis is present in DLKT only in one instance, which is not related to ornamentation. It's non-diminutive form *sūkurys* ("whirlpool") appeared 347 times, with only one instance referring a swastika. *Sūkurys* was also mentioned in some survey responses as a variant.

Swastika names adopted from Latvian. Since the 1990s, Lithuanian articles show a trend of adopting Latvian swastika names such as *ugnies kryžius* ("fire cross"), *Perkūno kryžius* ("Thunder Cross"), and *Laimos kryžius* ("Cross of Laima"). These appear first in works discussing Latvian ornaments [Matulevičienė 1991: 8; Endriukaitienė 1995: 38; Dziarnovičius, Kviatkoustaja 1999: 50] or citing Latvian sources [Ambraziejienė 2003; Tumėnas 2015], suggesting they are borrowings. The spread of these terms may be linked to the Lithuanian translations of V. Celms' works which are frequently cited in the literature. Of these only *ugnies kryžius* appears in DLKT (4 instances), with three instances clearly referring to the swastika.

Even though swastika's association with Perkūnas (the Lithuanian equivalent of Latvian Pērkons) has been explained both through semiotics and mythology, as well as archaeological evidence, the name *Perkūno kryžius* only appears in the previously mentioned Latvian-related sources and is not found in DLKT but some of the Lithuanian respondents' mention having heard this name. The responses also included *Laimos kryžius* and in Lithuanian Wikipedia, an image showing swastikas in Latvian ethnography is labelled as *Laimos kryžiai* ("Laima's crosses"), which again notes that the symbol has connotations to both – Pērkons/Perkūnas and Laima. Even though the Lithuanian sources don't explain the link between swastikas and Laima, V. Vaitkevičius mentions the invocation of Perkūnas in Latvian and Lithuanian wedding traditions [Vaitkevičius 2020: 110]. Weddings are generally considered to be Laima's responsibility and A. Brastiņš linked the usage of swastikas in bridal attire to Laima [Brastiņš 1961] showcasing a field where the functions of these deities overlap.

Lithuanian sources also mention *šakų/šakotasis kryžius* ("cross of branches") and *kablių kryžius* ("cross of hooks") however, these are too general to be deemed as borrowings from Latvian and are most probably derived from German.

Names related to sun. Although there are no specific names, the swastika is often compared to the sun and referred to as *saulės ženklas* ("sign of sun") or *saulės simbolis* ("symbol of sun"). This is likely linked to the widely documented interpretations of the swastika as a symbol of light and celestial movement. The term *saulės ženklas* appears in DLKT in 3 instances, in all of them with a neutral meaning. Same as in the Latvian corpus, one example clearly demonstrates the contrast between a local name and the negatively connoted international one: *tai ne svastika o saulės ženklas* ("it is not a swastika but a sun sign").

Conclusions

Compared to Lithuania, Latvia demonstrates a greater variety of names for the swastika, and its usage is more frequent. Swastikas are more prevalent in Latvia's archaeological heritage – a point also noted in Lithuanian sources. Some examples are highly ornate and visually distinct from the simplified Nazi swastika, evoking fewer associations with its ideology.

Unlike Lithuania, Latvia lacked its own ancient state symbols (such as *Vytis* or Columns of Gediminas), which led to the incorporation of traditional signs, such as the swastika, into the national visual identity during the early 20th century. The *Dievturi* movement, which actively linked ornamentation to Baltic mythology, further encouraged broader discourse and multiple symbolic names.

In contrast, Lithuania predominantly uses the single term *svastika*, with alternative names such as *sūkurėlis* confined to specific cultural circles like Romuva or practices like Easter egg decorations. Discourse in Lithuania emphasizes the swastika's association with light, possibly due to the linguistic connection between *svastika* and words related to light, such as *švaistyti* or *šviesa*. Despite this, *svastika* carries mostly negative connotations in public perception.

In both countries, local terminology helps to distance the symbol from its Nazi associations, even though names like *ugunskrusts* and *pērkonkrusts* are not free from controversy, due to their ties to radical political movements.

This study also shows how the scientific discourse affects public perception. In Lithuania, the swastika is generally seen as a solar symbol but in Latvia it is more often linked to Pērkons and ancestral beliefs. Views differ on whether it is central to local culture, aligning with archaeological and cultural research.

It also highlights the value of emic and etic perspectives. Studying Latvian material emically and Lithuanian material etically allows meaningful comparison. The emic approach offers richer data, while an etic perspective yields more limited data that may be more concise but it can be hard to identify causality. For a Latvian, it was difficult to understand why in Lithuania the swastika never took on a role as a national or state identity representing symbol until a Lithuanian bachelor's student of history (Naglis Grasmanas) pointed out an obvious reason – in Lithuania, this role is fulfilled by the old statehood symbols of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Some cultural knowledge is so embedded that it is left unstated in academic publications. For a Latvian – for whom the connection between traditional ornaments and national identity is often assumed – this was not immediately evident.

Although the emic position can carry preconceived notions, it does not inherently mean a lack of objectivity. A core responsibility of the researcher is to question assumptions, including one's own. It is also important to recognize that no

culture is monolithic; any emic perspective represents only a segment of a broader community. Also, the difficulty to view both cultures emically highlights how Latvian and Lithuanian cultures, often grouped together as "Baltic", can differ significantly.

It was also observed that Lithuanians have written more frequently about Latvian culture than Latvians have about Lithuanian. Fortunately, this can be easily remedied. This research should be viewed as a preliminary overview. The surveys, which came as a later addition, provided valuable insights. With a wider scope and as a part of a larger interdisciplinary study, they could yield deeper insight not only into ornament terminology but also perception and national identity.

Acknowledgment

The research is financed by the Recovery and Resilience Facility project "Internal and External Consolidation of the University of Latvia" (No. 5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/007)

References

(anon.) (2023). Svastika. Vikipedija.lt. Available: https://lt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svastika (viewed 31.05.2024.)

(anon.) (2023). Ugunskrusts (zīme). Vikipēdija.lv Available: https://lv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ugunskrusts_(z%C4%ABme) (viewed 31.05.2024.)

Aberbergs, J. (1924). Latvju kapenes. *Kulturas Balss Latvijas vēstures bilžu paskaidrojumi*. pp. 15–18.

Anča, S. (2023). The Nomenclature of Traditional Ornaments in Latvian and Lithuanian. *Sustainable Multilingualism*. 23/2023, 228–247. https://doi.org/10.2478/sm-2023-0019

Basanavičius, J. (1910). Apie "tautadailę" IV-je Lietuvių Dailės parodoje. *Viltis*. 04.07–04.16.

Beresnevičius, G. 1992. Baltiškų simbolių dinamika. *Senoves baltų simboliai*. Vilnius: Academia, pp. 42–55.

Bliūjienė, A. (2000). Universalusis svastikos simbolis baltų archeologinėje medžiagoje. *Liaudies kultūra*. 2000/4, pp. 16–27

Brastiņš A. (1983). Par latvju tēlotāju rakstu. *Labietis*. 62, pp. 2045–2046.

Brastiņš, A. (1978). Latviešu tēlotājs raksts. *Latvju Māksla*. 5, pp. 444–447.

Brastiņš, A. (1961). Laima. *Labietis*. 21, pp. 21–25.

Brastiņš, A. (1969). Tēlotājs raksts. *Labietis*. 37, pp. 676–681.

Brastiņš, E. (1932). *Dievtuŗu cerokslis jeb teoforu katķisms*. Rīga: Latvijas dievturu sadraudze.

Brastiņš, E. (1923). *Latviešu ornamentika*. Rīga: Vālodze.

Bīne, J. (1937). Kādiem rakstiem rotāsim. *Vadītājs*, 2, pp. 96–103.

Buks, A. (1992). Kāda hipotēze par dažiem latviešu ornamenta un mitoloģijas saskarsmes aspektiem. *Literatūra un Māksla*.1992/1, p. 6.

Celms, V. (2016). *Baltu dievestības pamati. Baltų religijos pagrindai.* Rīga: Lauku avīze.

Celms, V. (2011). *Latvju raksts un zīmes: baltu pasaules modelis, uzbūve, tēli, simbolika*. Rīga: Folkloras informācijas centrs.

Dunsdorfs, E. (1982). Latvju rakstu nosaukumi. *Archīvs XXII.* Melburna: Pasaules brīvo latviešu apvienība, pp. 179–207.

Dzērvītis, A. (1925). Rakstu nosaukumi. *Latvijas Saule.* 31–33, pp. 338–339.

Dziarnovičius, A., Kviatkouskaja, A. (1999). Svastika kaip kosmologinis simbolis ir etninis požymis. *Liaudies kultūra.* 1999/3, pp. 49–52.

Emaitytė, E. (1996). Kosminis kiaušinis, lietuvių margutis ir svastika. *Šiaurės Atėnai*, 13, p. 9.

Endriukaitienė, A. (1995). Lietuviškų pirštinių ornamentas. XIX a. pabaiga-XX a. pradžia. *Liaudies kultūra,* 1995/1, pp. 33–40.

Eniņš, G. (1988). Ko slēpj raksti. *Labietis*, 76, p. 2553–2561.

Galaune, P. (1930). *Lietuvių liaudies menas.* Kaunas: L.U. Humanitarinių mokslų fakultetas.

Gimbutas, M. (1958). *Ancient Symbolism in Lithuanian Folk Art.* American Folklore Society.

Grāvītis, V. (1990). Labi aizmirstais vecais par dažām tautas rotājošā raksta zīmēm. *Avots,* 3, pp. 32–37.

Grīna, M., Grīns, M. (1987). Cieņu latviešu rakstiem. *Labietis*, 74, pp. 2460–2461.

Kargaudienė, A. (1992). Nuometėliai. *Liaudies kultūra*, 1992/6, pp. 21–23.

Klētnieks, V. (1959). Kāšu krusti un ugunskrusti. *Labietis*, 20, pp. 307–308.

Klētnieks, V. (1990). *Senču raksti II.* Rīga: Laikraksta "Daiļrade" pielikums.

Krēsliņš, U. (2005). *Aktīvais nacionālisms Latvijā 1922–1934.* Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds.

Ķenga, O. (2024). "Latvju rakstu" tradīcijas ģenēze (1869–1924). *Krustpunkti: kultūras un mākslas pētījumi*, 2, pp. 20–38.

Latvijas Nacionālā digitālā bibliotēka. (n.d.). Periodika.lv. Available: https://periodika.lv (viewed 10.02.2025.)

Levāne-Petrova, K., et al. (2022). Līdzsvarotais mūsdienu latviešu valodas tekstu korpuss. *CLARIN-LV digital library.* Available: https://korpuss.lv/id/LVK2022 (viewed 31.05.2024.)

Matulevičienė, S. (1991). Latvių ornamentikos tyrinėjimai. *Liaudies kultūra*, 1991/1, pp. 8–7.

Monier-Williams, M. (1899). *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary (Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*. Oxford: Claredon Press.

Oesterdiekhoff, G.W. (2007) . Geschichte eines Symbols. *Deutschlandfunk Kultur* 26.01. Available: https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/geschichte-eines-symbols-100.html (viewed 24.05.2024.)

Paegle, E. (1926). Uzaicinājums. *Latvijas Saule*, 40, p. 441.

Paegle, E. (1923). Josta ar uguns krustiem. *Latvijas Saule*, 10, pp. 89–93.

Rozenberga, V., Zemītis, G. (1991). *Senču raksti.* Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures muzejs.

Strausa, M. (1987). Raksti un rakstu nosaukumi. *Laiks*, 46*,* p. 5.

Sudmalis, I. (1922). Uguns krusts. *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 34, p. 3.

Šimkus, Š. (2019). Amžinojo sugrįžimo simbolis. *Būdas*, 2019/3, 70–76.

Šmits, P. (1937). Kāšu krusts. *Vēsturiski un etnogrāfiski raksti*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, pp. 52–53.

Ūdre-Lielbārde, D. (2024). The Latvian Folk Ornament and Mythology Nexus as Revival: Contested Historical Layers, Visualized Ideologies, and Commodified Creativity. [Unpublished]. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23241.66408

Ūdre, D. (2023). Vernacular voices and contested meanings: contemporary uses of the swastika in Latvia. *Journal of Baltic Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2023.2248099

Ūdre, D. (2018). Ugunskrusts Latvijā strīdīga kultūras mantojuma kontekstā. *Letonica*, 38, pp. 123–142.

Tumėnas, V. (2015). Vietinio ir tarpkultūrinio požiūrio siejimo aktualumas svastikos šiuolaikinės sampratos tyrimuose. *Tradicija ir dabartis*, 10, pp. 105–124.

Tumėnas, V. (1992). Eglutės ir svastikos ornamentų simbolika Lietuvoje. *Senoves baltų simboliai*. Vilnius: Academia, pp. 56–65.

Vaitkevičius, V. (2020). The swastika in Lithuania: the horizon of the 13th and 14th centuries. *Archaeologia Baltica*, 27, pp. 104–119.

Vytauto Didžiojo Universitetas. (1998–2016). Dabartinės lietuvių kalbos tekstynas. *CLARIN-LT digital library*. Available: http://tekstynas.vdu.lt/tekstynas/ (viewed 31.05.2024.)

Zemītis, G. (2004). *Ornaments un simbols Latvijas aizvēsturē.* Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūts.

Wilson, T. (1896). *The Swastika: The Earliest Known Symbol, and Its Migrations: with Observations on the Migration of Certain Industries in Prehistoric Times.* Washington: Government Printing Office.