

## CHURCH AND COMMUNITY IN VILKIJĀ PARISH FROM THE SECOND HALF OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TO THE END OF THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

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This article investigates the relationship between the Church and community in Vilkiĵa parish from the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The main method used in the study is microhistory. The research reveals the structure of the Vilkiĵa parish, the daily religious practices and traditions in the parish, religious changes.

**Keywords:** Church, community, Vilkiĵa parish, religion.

### INTRODUCTION

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania officially became a Christian country in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The country's north-western region, Samogitia, became Christian only in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century because of its unstable and shifting political dependency between the Teutonic Order and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Samogitians were more attached to paganism because of its service as mental support against Teutonic Order that represented Christianity (Ivinskis 1972, 46). Christianity began its social and structural establishment by creating the network of parishes and dioceses, forming clergy and constructing new cult buildings. However, the Catholic Church had a long struggle with pagan manifestations in society. The Catholic Church, which was the official religion in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, also had to fight for the influence with other Christian denominations – Protestantism and Orthodoxy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Religion is a force that emerges from society, but it can change and shape the society or individual community that created and accepted it. The main research goal is to investigate the relationship between the Church and the local society, i. e., community. The research focuses on several smaller segments to approach the main research goal:

1. Structural and social exploration of Vilkija parish from the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
2. Analysis of Vilkija parish churches and their changes over time.
3. Influence of clergy in Vilkija parish.
4. Investigation of Vilkija parish school, *szpital* (sanctuary) and fraternity.
5. Analysis of Vilkija parish dwellers' religious practices.
6. Vilkija parish in Samogitia was chosen as a research object based on several reasons. There are diverse historical sources about Vilkija parish religious life in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Vilkija was a border parish in Samogitia that was a strong local trade centre.

Chronology. The second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was chosen as a starting point due to the Catholic Church reformation period and the rise of Protestantism. The end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was chosen as an ending point due to the end of the Catholic Church reformation period.

Microhistory is the main research method. Microhistory seeks to explain what is going on at the site of the research, what kind of people live there, what do their actions mean, and to reveal the motivation behind those actions.

Historical sources. Tarkivijus Pekulas visitation of the Samogitian diocese took place in 1579, and it has been very useful for the research because it records the daily religious life of the parish. The research also uses Samogitian diocese acts of visitations dating back to 1611–1651, and Kazimierz Pac visitation of the Samogitian diocese in 1675–1677, providing information about changes in the parish over time. The last two sources yield much less information than the first one because of their different structure. Unpublished sources, including “Lithuanian Metrica” stored in Lithuanian State Historical Archive are selected because they tell a lot of information about Vilkija parish's community, economy and structure. These sources are mainly in Polish and give economic information about the parish, as well as its dwellers' wealth.

Terms used in the work. Below, a few terms are explained to specify their use in the current paper.

Church. This term in the current research has two different meanings. (1) Church refers to the structural organization of certain believers, for example, the Catholic Church. “Church” is always spelled with a capital letter to distinguish it from the second meaning. (2) “church” refers to a building used for religious purposes.

Parish – it is an administrative unit of the Catholic Church in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In the current research, it refers to the community of Vilkija parish.

County – administrative unit in Western European countries in the medieval times. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania uses a different term “volost”. I chose to use “county” instead of “volost” because a reader might be more familiar with this word.

## **VILKIJĄ PARISH SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL STRUCTURE FROM THE SECOND HALF OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TO THE END OF THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

Vilkija parish covered almost the same territory as Vilkija county. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Vilkija town was united with Pernarava, Paštuva and Gaižuva counties (Makarevičius 1976, 68). In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Vilkija parish consisted of Vilkija town, over 8 manors and 19 villages (LVIA, 716–8–19, 209–265). Vilkija parish was located next to the Nemunas River, the eastern and southern parts of the parish were covered in forests.

In Samogitia, there were only 4 manors that belonged to the Grand Duke of Lithuania, and the manor in Vilkija was the most important one. Vilkija town was also an important political centre. Vilkija hosted 4 gatherings of Samogitian *Sejm*, in 1571, 1580, 1581 and 1584 (Miškinis 2007, 329).

In the context of Samogitia, Vilkija parish (county) was strong economically due to geographical location and trade of Vilkija town. *Szlachta* (nobility group) was numerous (10%) in the parish, but not rich. There were two noble families from Slavic Orthodox lands – Palubinski and Woyna.

Szymon Woyna was the first noble from this family to settle down in Samogitia, he was a middle-class nobleman (Kiaupienė, Kiaupa, Kuncevičius 1988, 37), had two sons and was married twice. Even though Szymon Woyna was Orthodox, his son was Catholic and became a bishop of Samogitia and later – a bishop of Vilnius (Kurczewski 1912, 40, 42).

Aleksander Ivanowicz Palubinski was the holder of Vilkija from 1566 to 1586 (Błaszczuk 2015, 614). His son likewise later became the holder of Vilkija, but most likely he was already converted to Catholicism by that time.

Serfdom was not as pervasive in Samogitia as in the rest of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, therefore peasants competed in production and selling with the *szlachta*. Town dwellers were a numerous group in Vilkija town, some of them were foreigners. However, all three social groups significantly decreased due to the wars in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (LVIA, 716–8–19, 257–265). As a result, jews started to settle down in Vilkija parish in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Meilus 1997, 49).

It is unclear whether Vilkija was a filial church or a parish in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, because the information in different sources varies. Quite possibly, Vilkija was Veliuona's filial church because Vilkija was one of the four parishes that belonged to the Grand Duke of Lithuania. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the sources certify that it was an independent parish.

## **CHURCH AND COMMUNITY IN VILKIJA PARISH IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

### **CHURCHES IN VILKIJA PARISH**

In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Vilkija parish had two churches – Catholic and Protestant. It is known that Vilkija's holder was a protestant Jan Haika in the 1570s and 1580s (Lukšaitė 1999, 254), consequently, the Catholic Church did not have a dominant position in the parish. However, it is also possible that the protestants held the masses at private houses (Lukšaitė 1999, 263).

The Catholic church was in a very bad condition. Its roof had crumbled, the altar was dirty and collapsed, the sacred water was infested by worms, the pigs were running around and digging up the bones of the dead in the church cemetery (ŽVV (1579) 1998, 9, 11, 49)<sup>1</sup>. The vicar of Vilkija parish did not know how to take care of the church. Furthermore, Vilkija parish in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century did not have a school. Before that, children were taken to study in Kaunas. It was the only parish in Samogitia which lacked school in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

According to historical sources, rich *szlachta* Szymon Woyna forced to baptize children at the Orthodox Church (ŽVV (1579) 1998, 15). The Orthodox church building could have been located on S. Woyna's private land or in Seredžius parish that had an Orthodox church and was not far away from Vilkija. The Orthodox community in Vilkija was not "natural", that is, Orthodoxy was forced upon Szymon Woyna's servants in order to subdue them.

### **CLERGYMEN IN VILKIJA PARISH**

The Catholic clergy group was not formed in Samogitia, and most of the Catholic clergy were from Poland, mainly from the parish of Płuck. The Protestant clergy had started to form by conversions of Catholic priests into Protestantism, and educating Lithuanians in Protestant schools.

Vilkija's parish parson and vicar did not fulfil the Council of Trent requirements and their relationship with the local community was not good.

The vicar had very poor theological knowledge, he did not know the language of the locals and didn't follow celibacy. He cohabited with a woman and fathered children. The parson had a better theological knowledge, but he was very quarrelsome and he also lived with a woman, had children with her. He resided in Veliuona parish because he had to take care of 3 Catholic churches (Vilkija, Veliuona, Skirsnemunė)<sup>2</sup>. Parson and vicar did not constitute a proper example of clergymen to the Vilkija parish and they were incapable of disassociating themselves from the secular life. They poorly took care of the religious needs of the parishioners, thereby impacting people's religiosity.

It is impossible to compare Protestant and Orthodox clergymen with the Catholic clergymen due to lack of information in historical sources.

On the other hand, the vicar stated that there were magicians and wizards in the parish (ŽVV (1579) 1998, 19). They functioned mostly in the private space, visited people's houses to expel bad spirits, or predicted the future. They also functioned as local doctors. Local medicine was the only available treatment for many groups of the community. The wizards and magicians were able to speak the local language and were active in daily life. Nevertheless, magicians and wizards did not have a place in a public space, because paganism was no longer an official creed.

## **RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN VILKIJĀ PARISH**

In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, baptizing was a common practice in Vilkija parish, but it was not practised according to Council of Trent requirements. Both parson and vicar went to the homes of parishioners to baptize children (ŽVV (1579) 1998, 13). Most likely, the clergymen adapted to the customs of the community. Although this was not legal, the clergymen thereby gradually affirmed themselves as an essential part of this ritual.

Marriage was more closely connected with a private home space and pagan rituals. The pagan marriage rituals still prevailed in Vilkija, as well as in the whole of Samogitia. The vicar visited the houses of the parishioners to marry them, even though, according to the Council of Trent, such marriage was invalid (Vaitkevičiūtė 2009, 167, 168).

People buried their relatives in the so-called "field cemeteries" that were common since the pagan times. There was a field cemetery in the south-east part of the Vilkija parish, people were buried in this cemetery in the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> and later in the 14<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Bertašius 2006, 9). It must have been one of the most frequently used cemeteries by the parishioners. People did not bury their relatives in church cemetery because it was too expensive, moreover, the church cemetery was in a very bad condition

(as noted before, pigs roamed there, digging up bones), and it was unusual to travel to the town to bury a member of the family. People still believed that the ghosts of their relatives lived in the cemeteries. The tradition of burying loved ones in their homeland remained very strong in people's mentality (Čepienė 2015, 316). Another reason was the common pagan rituals, especially the ritual of a feast after the burial.

## **CHURCH AND COMMUNITY IN VILKIJA PARISH IN THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

### **CATHOLIC CHURCH DOMINANCE CHURCH BUILDING CHANGES**

There is no further information about the Orthodox church in Vilkijs parish in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A Protestant church existed in Vilkijs parish in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Catholic sources tend to conceal the existence of Protestant churches. It is known that Catholic church burned in 1596, but it was soon rebuilt (Visitation acts (1675–1677) 2011, 889)<sup>3</sup>.

In the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic church in Vilkijs had only minor upkeep-related problems (Visitation acts (1611–1651) 2011, 332)<sup>4</sup>, therefore the church was better maintained. In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic church was well-preserved, it had religious books, three altars that were funded by parishioners. This shows that Catholics had gained a dominant position in the parish, more dedicated benefactors had emerged, who contributed and supported the maintenance of the church. Also, the Catholic church had trained educated clergy who took better care of the condition of the church.

### **CHANGES IN CLERGYMEN**

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Vilkijs parish had priests with better education, there was always one residing priest to serve the parish. Unfortunately, the sources of the 17<sup>th</sup> century do not tell us as much about the priests as the 16<sup>th</sup> century sources.

We do know that Vilkijs had a lot of priests, therefore, there was always at least one clergyman residing in the parish. Some of the clergymen spoke Lithuanian and most of the clergymen had better education, even though there were exceptions. For example, Vilkijs parish had a priest who overconsumed alcohol and did not take care of the parish (Visitation acts (1675–1677) 2011, 906). The lack of priests became a less severe problem in the Samogitian diocese as the network of Catholic parishes expanded.

## INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL, *SZPITAL* (SANCTUARY) AND FRATERNITY IN THE VILKIJĀ PARISH

Vilkija parish had a school from 1596 (Błaszczuk 1993, 208). It is known that there was a teacher in the parish in 1601, and a school in 1606 (Miškinis 2007, 330). There are no further sources about the school until the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The sources state the existence of a school in 1677, the visitation emphasized that school and children should be taken care of because the unnamed parson was an alcoholic (Visitation acts (1675–1677) 2011, 907). Despite the quality of the teaching and the drunken parson, children were taught the basic truths of the Catholic faith. Furthermore, children must have spread these truths to their families.

Vilkija had a *szpital* (sanctuary) in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and later – in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. *Szpital* was not a permanent part of the church complex in the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the *szpital* hosted 8 women and 2 men (Visitation acts (1675–1677) 2011, 891), the candidates to *szpital* were carefully selected, they had to work at the church and spread the faith. The goal of *szpital* was not only to help poor people, but also to cultivate their religiosity. The *szpital* dwellers had to go to confession once a month, clean the church, ring bells (Kamuntavičienė 63, 69).

The inhabitants of the *szpital* became part of church's sacred space, so work and religious practices may have promoted the inner religiosity and identity change. The very existence of the *szpital* may have changed the mentality of the parishioners by strengthening the Christian value of helping the poor.

From the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Vilkija parish had a St. Ann's fraternity that was one of the wealthiest in Samogitia, parishioners supported the fraternity throughout the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Anyone could be a member of fraternity, regardless of their social class and wealth (Jovaiša 2001, 116), therefore it helped to equalize religious practices and habits of different social groups.

Fraternities required of their members to take an active part in the Mass, encouraged a more frequent attendance of confession, the members had to recite well-known prayers daily to affirm their devotion (Wiślicz 2001, 68). The fraternity sometimes made moral demands on its members, and the members could be fined for their misconduct.

## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND THEIR CHANGES IN VILKIJĀ PARISH

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic religious practices slowly transformed the pagan practices. Just like in the whole diocese of Samogitia, Vilkija parish had a problem with having more than two godfathers (Visitation

acts (1675–1677) 2011, 907). People wanted to have more godfathers or godmothers to forge social connections, but according to Catholic rules, there could be only two. Also, non-Catholics could not be godfathers or godmothers, which was another problem related to baptizing.

On the other hand, there are no remarks about pagan customs, therefore in all probability baptizing and marriage ceremonies became more Christian and were conducted according to Christian beliefs at the church. We also know that parishioners most likely paid more for burying the dead at the church's cemetery than they should have done (Visitation acts (1675–1677) 2011, 903). The visitation notes that people should pay as much as they can, but this statement suggests that it was done otherwise in reality. However, the church cemetery was not popular in the whole of Samogitia. Parishioners started to sacrifice more money and build altars for the Catholic church in the second half of 17<sup>th</sup> century, which suggests a shift in people's values and beliefs.

The sources also show that the priests started to visit parishioners before Christmas to test their religious knowledge (Visitation acts (1675–1677) 2011, 905). This way, the priest could get to know the parishioners' personal life, see if they kept any pagan relics at home and find out if they participated in inappropriate activities. If people behaved inappropriately and did not know the truths of the faith, the clergyman had to teach them. Such people had to go on Sundays to church to recite ten "Our Father" (Visitation acts (1675–1677) 2011, 905). This showed that the priests gradually entered the private space of the people to observe their lives and teach faith.

## CONCLUSIONS

Vilkija parish (county) was one of the economically strongest districts in Samogitia region. *Szlachta* stratum was large but not rich, the peasants and town dwellers could compete with the *szlachta* at production and selling. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the community in Vilkija had a population downfall due to the wars in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church was in decline, while Protestant and Orthodox communities had better positions in the parish. Protestants had their church in Vilkija at least until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic Church was more influential in the parish.

The clergymen in Vilkija parish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century did not meet the requirements of the Council of Trent and did not care of the parishioners properly. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the situation slowly shifted. Vilkija parish always had a residing clergyman who had acquired better education.



In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Vilkija parish did not have a school, *szpital* nor fraternity. These institutions were slowly developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and helped to change the daily religious practices, beliefs and mentality of parishioners.

In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the surviving pagan customs and folk beliefs flourished, the sacraments of baptism and marriage were performed at home, the parishioners still buried their relatives in the pagan cemeteries. Slow changes emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – people began to receive the sacraments in the church, while burial in the church cemetery and the sacrament of anointing remained unpopular.

## ABBREVIATIONS

LVIA (Lith. Lietuvos valstybinis istorijos archyvas) – Lithuanian State Historical Archive.  
ŽVV (Lith. Žemaičių vyskupijos vizitacija) – Visitation of the Samogitian diocese.

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Vilkija transfer [Polish], Lithuanian State Historical Archive, Vilnius, LVIA-LM 93.

Vilkija pawning to Jan Radziwill [Polish], Lithuanian State Historical Archive, Vilnius, LVIA-LM 128.

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- <sup>1</sup> Created reference for a published historical source. ŽVV (in Lithuanian – Žemaičių Vyskupijos vizitacija) stands for Visitation of the Samogitian diocese in 1579, (1579) – historical date of the source, 1998 marks the publication year.
- <sup>2</sup> There was a lack of Catholic priests in Samogitia, therefore one priest had to serve two or three parishes.
- <sup>3</sup> Visitation acts (1675–1677) (Žemaičių vyskupo Kazimiero Paco 1675–1677 sudaryti vizitacijų aktai) – Samogitian bishops' Kazimierz Pac formed acts from 1675–1677.
- <sup>4</sup> Visitation acts (1611–1651) – (Žemaičių vyskupijos vizitacijų aktai (1611–1651)) – visitation acts of the Samogitian diocese (1611–1651).

## BAZNĪCA UN KOPIENA VILKIJAS DRAUDZĒ NO 16. GADSIMTA OTRĀS PUSES LĪDZ 17. GADSIMTA BEIGĀM

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### ANOTĀCIJA

Šajā rakstā apskatītas baznīcas un kopienas attiecības Vilkijs draudzē no 16. gadsimta otrās puses līdz 17. gadsimta beigām. Pētījumā galvenā izmantotā metode ir mikrovēsture. Pētījums atklāj Vilkijs draudzes struktūru, ikdienas reliģiskās prakses un tradīcijas šajā pagastā, reliģisko ieražu maiņu.

**Atslēgvārdi:** baznīca, kopiena, Vilkijs draudze, reliģija.

### KOPSAVILKUMS

Lietuvas Dižkunigaitija bija Eiropā viena no pēdējām valstīm, kas pieņēma kristietību. Tās ziemeļu reģions – Žemaitija – kļuva kristīgs tikai 15. gadsimta pirmajā pusē. Kristietības pieņemšanas process ilga ne mazāk kā dažus gadsimtus, jo reliģiskās un kultūras mentalitātes pārmaiņas notiek ļoti lēni.

Šī darba mērķis ir izpētīt baznīcas un kopienas attiecības Vilkijs draudzē laikā no 16. gadsimta otrās puses līdz 17. gadsimta beigām. Pētījumā galvenā izmantotā metode ir mikrovēsture. Darba mērķis – veikt analīzi, apskatot Vilkijs draudzes struktūru, reliģisko ēku stāvokli, garīdzniecību, kā arī skolas, patversmes un brālības ietekmi, un atklāt izmaiņas draudzes locekļu reliģiskajā praksē.

Visvājākās pozīcijas draudzē katoļu baznīcai bija 16. gadsimta otrajā pusē. Vikārs nespēja pienācīgi rūpēties par draudzi un baznīcu, ļaužu mentalitātē bija vērojamas pagāniskas ticības paliekas. Katolicismam draudzē bija jāsacenšas ar protestantismu un pareizticību. Situācija mainījās 17. gadsimtā, kad noslēdzās katoļu baznīcas reformācija un reliģiskais plurālisms palika pagātnē. Vilkijs draudzē bija labāk izglītoti katoļu priesteri, turklāt katoļu sakramenti un reliģiskās prakses kļuva nozīmīgākas sabiedrībai, pateicoties skolai, patversmei, brālībai, labāk izglītotiem priesteriem un to rūpēm par draudzi.