

Lithuanian Collector
Coins

Coins dedicated to *Užgavėnės* from the series “Traditional Lithuanian Celebrations”



Denomination: €5	On the edge of the coin: JEI NEBĖGSI, IŠVARYSIM, SU BOTAGAIŠ IŠBAIDYSIM! (If you stay, we will oust you, whipping you away!)	
Silver Ag 925	Quality: proof	
Diameter: 28,70 mm	Weight: 12,44 g	
Mintage: 3,000 pcs	Coin designed by Giedrius Paulauskis	
Issued in 2019		



Denomination: €1,5	Edge of the coin: rimmed	
Cu/Ni alloy	Quality: unc	
Diameter: 27,50 mm	Weight: 11,10 g	
Mintage: 30,000 pcs	Coin designed by Giedrius Paulauskis	
Issued in 2019		



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TRADITIONAL LITHUANIAN
CELEBRATIONS

Užgavėnės



The Curiosities of the Lithuanian *Užgavėnės*

Užgavėnės (also known as Mardi Gras, Shrove Tuesday) is most likely the merriest of all Lithuanian celebrations. This day is traditionally full of cheer, mischief, and all forms of self-expression. The festivities have also found their place in urban culture, as they are organised by local communities and ethnic centres. *Užgavėnės* remains authentic and spontaneous in nature – there is no divider between the theatrical festivities of the merrymakers and the spectators as everyone knows what is happening and how to fit in. After all, each of the *Užgavėnės* rituals promotes: “winter, winter go away, let spring out to play!”

In the calendar, the *Užgavėnės* holiday separates the after-Christmas period from the pre-Easter one. The following day – Ash Wednesday – marks the beginning of Lent, a forty-day period of fasting in preparation for the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on Holy Easter.

What makes the traditional Lithuanian *Užgavėnės* special? It is the old beliefs that are intertwined with customs and mostly relate to agricultural magic – the wakening of the earth to the yearly circle of life. Many of the customs of the festivities are witness to the archaic nature of our *Užgavėnės*, which, by some of its characteristics, even goes back to the Stone Age. One might also trace relics of the natural Baltic religion. In general, this rural pastime is a very interesting phenomenon of ethnic culture formed by a variety of historical circumstances.

What makes *Užgavėnės* the most fascinating is the parade of masqueraders: revelling, playing different kinds of musical instruments, making rattling noises with all



sorts of utensils and causing mischief, they fill the streets of various towns or villages, rallying to the yards of different homesteads. Traditionally, they portray wild animals, such as wolves and bears, large birds – cranes and storks, domestic animals – goats and sheep, as well as outlanders – Hungarians, Jews, and Gypsies. Amongst them are mythological creatures, like the Witch, the Devil, *Kaukas*, and the Grim Reaper.

The host of a homestead would let the masqueraders in only if they cheered him up with wit and creativity. This is when the true folk theatre performance would start. The themes of the oratories were traditional: the hosts would be praised to the skies just so they would open the doors to the seemingly weary and soaked comers from faraway lands. This is already where the mythological nature of masks is becoming evident, as they carry a very essential feature of

agricultural magic – the connection between the living and the spirits of the ancestors, the manifestation of the so-called necrocut. The masks of the masqueraders are in essence a portrayal of the images of distant ancestors that were once created by the mythological consciousness. In wintertime, the spirits were said to lurk in the homesteads of the living, in barns sheltering the harvest. With the breath of warmer air comes the time to bid them a final farewell, for the spirits will have to depart to the fields to watch over the crops. The masks of wild animals and birds most likely owe their origin to the past worshipping of totemic guardians. Ancestor spirits, once aiding in hunting, later extended a helping hand in farming, too. The spirits of the harvest and fertility became associated with domestic animals, hence the masks of the Goat and the Ram. In some places across Žemaitija (also known as Samogitia), the

masqueraders would walk around dressed as beggars, disguised with carved or leather masks imitating wretched, furrowed faces with deep wrinkles and toothless mouths. It seems likely that, back in the day, these masks would also be used to imitate the ghosts of the ancestors. This impression is further reinforced by the figure of the Grim Reaper that would follow the beggars, foreboding them with its scythe. Likewise the Samogitian Jewish *ličyna* (Jewish masks) – with huge schmoozes, prominent features, shaggy. Yet why are these masqueraders called the Jews? This has surely nothing to do with sneering at ethnic minorities. Quite the opposite, these characters of the *Užgavėnės* festivities – both by their appearance and behaviour – emphasise that they are strangers, outlandish, otherworldly. For a ploughman, “strangers” meant the Jews who would live in a village nearby and sell their goods in the marketplace, as well as the Gypsies who would occasionally turn up by their farmstead. The Gypsy characters that would wander around during the *Užgavėnės* festivities in Aukštaitija would offer trading, fortune-telling with cards, meanwhile attempting to sneak something. There was a time when they would travel around trade fairs with trained bears – and look, a shaggy ‘Bear’ from the flock of masqueraders – with its fur turned inside out – invites onlookers for wrestling. The fact that the masks would also represent those arriving from the otherworldly, metaphysical realm manifests in their behaviour when entering a house as well. The masqueraders would add a variety of onomatopoeic, foreign words to their speech. They would often present themselves as arriving from a country where everything is reversed – the day starts with a sunset and ends with a sunrise. They might even be wearing their boots backwards: the left boot on the right foot, and the right boot on the left. The “upside-down” world is the reflection of the mythical spirits in

the world of the living. That mythical world is overseas, therefore, the visitors arrive wet and cold while wading through water. Time does not exist in the world of the dead, so the masqueraders playfully mix the past and future in their speech. For example, the ‘Jew’ would offer to buy what seems to be a hen but is merely a dead crow that “used to lay eggs well on the morrow.”

During the *Užgavėnės* festivities, the masqueraders would also often dress themselves as the ‘Devil’ and the ‘Witch’. These two characters are also part of the heritage of the historical past. The Devil derives from the image of *Velinas*, one of the most important gods of the proto-nation’s religion. It was a livestock guardian, and hence its features: horns, hooves, and the tail. In the Baltic mythology, the Witch was a goddess of the forest. The character’s name speaks of its abilities of clairvoyance, prophesy, and healing. Thus, it is likely that the village’s

fortune-tellers and herbalists were then referred to as witches. The image acquired a negative connotation during the Middle Ages, when witch hunts were spreading further across Europe. The crowd of masqueraders would be complemented by the big-head or the dwarf called *Tiliukas*. In Samogitia, it is referred to as *kaukas*, elsewhere it could be *pagirnis* or *naminukas*. It is also known as *malpa*.

Alongside the images of ‘Strangers’, historical characters, too, were implanted into the crowd of masqueraders. Take, for example, the ‘Horse with a Rider’. The rider is a young boy, pretending to be riding a horse – made of two sieves, a bed sheet, and a wooden carved head with a mane of coarse fibre – with his boots tied on the sides. This character presumably serves as a reminder of the times when the state military forces consisted of cavalry. To this very day, the Lithuanian *Užgavėnės* still



features the character of the ‘Hungarian’, yet through time it evolved from a ‘soldier’ to a ‘doctor’. People would frequently say ‘Hungarian’ to refer to incomers from European lands who had trouble learning Lithuanian. They would often include tradesmen, merchants (*kromininkai*) offering villagers to buy not only lots of odds and ends, but also salt, spices, as well as some medicines. This is where the Doctor of Ash Wednesday descended from, together with his bitter medicines for stomach-ache and yesterday’s gluttony.

At *Užgavėnės*, ancestor spirits visit people in a bid to help them find harmony within the natural elements, and lift the burden of all predicaments in the community. For example, they would mock bachelors who could not find themselves a wife: a ragged, unfortunate *Sidasas* with a straw rope around his waist would be thrust closer to the girls. Meanwhile the ‘Crane’ – a bird of love – would pinch and tickle ripe girls so that next year they would no longer stay “on last year’s straw”, and would bid farewell by dropping one of its feathers as an invitation to flee the parents’ nest. The ‘Jews’, too, would bargain to buy elder maidens for whom it is time to marry (*bergždenikės*). Together with the crowd of masqueraders come the ‘Newlyweds’ followed by a train of music players. The couple is comical: the ‘Bride’ would be a stout lad in a white dress, hiding his face behind a veil, and the ‘Groom’ would be a small fellow with a flower on his lapel.

But what was the most important was to oust the tiresome, evil spirit of winter called by many names – *Morė*, *Kotré*, *Barbora*, *Senė Kūniškė* (in Samogitia) or *Gavėnas*, *Diedelis*, *Čiučela* (in Aukštaitija). The end of them was sad – in midnight, they would be ostracised from the village, pushed down the mountain, drowned in an ice-hole or even burned at

the stake. Samogitians would drag *Morė* to the execution tightly secured on a wheel with a sleigh runner. This is how they would playfully show the way spring shoves winter away. Yet one could hardly draw near the scarecrow – it is angry, flinging around with rolling-pins or flails in its hands. The fight of *Lašininis* and *Kanapinis* is an echo of the contest between the ‘Bear’ and the ‘Moose’ – summer and winter rulers – that took place in very old times.

Before Lent, one would make sure to eat plenty and heartily from what was left of food reserves: three times on Sunday, six times on Monday and as many as nine times on Tuesday. To put food on the festive table of *Užgavėnės*, Samogitians would be cooking a hotchpotch with barley, peas and a pig’s tail. Other traditional dishes of the celebration would include meat jelly, doughnuts, goose necks stuffed with grits, eggs. A housewife, who was lying down on the job lazy to make some tastier meals, would serve pancakes to the masqueraders.

At *Užgavėnės*, across most of Lithuania, one would also ride around in sleighs. As one saying has it, the further one goes, the longer the flax grows. What fun it was to plunk from the sleigh into a pile of snow and roll in it. And if one happened to whisk some curvier lady in his arms, he would rejoice in good yields. The sleigh would also carry a swarm of bees – a flock of buzzing children one behoves to splatter with water. Yet one could not approach them easily – the whip of the driver reaches far! Another pastime of the *Užgavėnės* festivities that was greatly fancied amongst the youth was the swing. Here again, the higher the swing, the longer the flax. These obviously attest to the characteristics of simile, the magic of similarity.

Prof. Dr. Libertas Klimka