

Decoration from the house snake cult belief system, as evidenced in Kosovan vernacular architecture

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Abstract

This study investigates symbolic decoration arising from the house snake cult belief system, as evidenced in Kosovo's vernacular (popular) architecture. This snake cult certainly has its place among the most unusual and important cults within the survival of the belief system surrounding the protecting house gods in Albanian popular belief.

Among the issues raised in this study, it is posited from the very beginning that because of their character and their symbolism, the decoration arising from the snake cult has always been applied in the most exposed places or elements of composition since its use had a magic function of protection and bringing good luck. Furthermore, the use of this ornamentation, particularly in the artistic form of bas-relief, is notable for a compositional structure which is in organic harmony with the architectonic and structural aesthetic concept of vernacular building, or its structural elements.

To give as full a picture and as much evidence as possible of the use of decoration from the earth cult of the snake either as abstract geometric interpretation of it as a symbol, or as a realistic artistic interpretation, there is analysis of a fair number and range of Albanian ethnographic sites where this decoration is to be found.

From the beginning of this study, it is shown that the snake cult is a part of the complex ethno-cultural heritage of our people. Taking a diachronic view, this cult has an uninterrupted history through the arc of time from the Illyrians to the Albanians of our own time.

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Vernacular decoration stemming from the belief system of the protective house gods

The snake cult has its place among the most unusual and important cults from the survival of the belief system relating to the protecting house gods. This cult frequently appears in the Balkan area from pre-historic and Neolithic times. However, when the Illyrians appeared on this land, the importance of the cult grew to the point when it took the dominant role within the mythological and religious system of the Southern Illyrians. Meanwhile, the snake as a symbol of fertility, of the protection of the house and home, or as an earth god, was connected in many ways with the Sun cult. Among the Illyrians, as for other peoples at that level of development, the Sun cult was the foundation for all religious observances. It is said that it developed most in the northern Illyrian lands.¹ And despite great challenges through history, the Illyrians maintained their cultural homogeneity and traditions. The conservative strain in maintaining the cults of their ancestors, and then the unbreakable identity and spirit of the Illyrians meant that these religious beliefs have been protected to survive into our own times. As a consequence, as we will show below, the snake cult still appears as a special phenomenon in Albanian popular belief.

Among the Albanians, the snake is closely connected with the home and the family. Thus, in popular Albanian rites and beliefs, the snake appears as a god protecting life, well-being and the good fortune of the family.²

Depending on the period of history, snake cult decoration has been applied in different ways, with realistic figurative artistic representations or in abstract geometric stylisation.

Figurative-realistic artistic representation with moulded features is

¹ Aleksandër Stipčević, *Ilirët, Historia, Jeta, Kultura, Prishtina, 1980, p.48 and p. 188*

² Mark Tirta, *Mitologjia ndër shqiptarët, Tirana 2004, p.145.*

found from Neolithic times, as in the case of the *terracotta snake figure*, with uniform features in all Balkan-Anatolian Neolithic complexes.

This archaeological figure was discovered in the packed clay layer of a *house* in the Neolithic settlement, 'Tjerrtorja' on the outskirts of Prishtina. The fragmented body of the snake, which is missing its head, is decorated with zigzag incisions accompanied on both sides with vertical incisions (fig. 3.)³. *This snake doubtless served a cult purpose.*⁴

Later, with the formation of the Illyrian *etnikum*, we also find the snake in figurative realistic representations in the silver bracelets found in the 6th-5th century BCE grave of a *royal Illyrian couple* in Banjë e Pejës.⁵

The features of the formation of these Illyrian artefacts (fig.4.), and in particular those of the bracelet, which ends in the form of a realistic representation of a snake's head at both ends, are an expression of the emergence of figurative representation in Illyrian art from an early period of the Iron Age. This is natural as the *snake motif has its roots deep in Illyrian religion.*⁶

This means that the *snake cult within Illyrian mythology* was protected in an unbroken line to our own times. It is therefore not surprising that in 2001, during the archaeological excavations in an Illyrian centre in Kosovo - specifically the *Illyrian settlement of Çifllak*⁷ - from the first or second century CE,

³ The fact that, according to the mythological beliefs of that time, *the terracotta figurines disappear from human eyes* leads us to understand that *in the Neolithic and Eneolithic period the religious belief system was made up of a number of concepts, in particular the forms of its manifestations.* This means that *the cult of the protective house gods* was manifested in the cult's *concept of invisible objects* - hidden from the eyes of humans - as well as in the concept of *objects*, particularly *visible cult ornamentation* used deliberately in the places most obvious to the human eye.

⁴ Radoslav Galović, Predionica, neolitsko naselje kod Prištine, Muzej Kosova i Metohije, Prishtina 1959, p.25, Fig. 6/1.

⁵ Arheološko blago Kosova i Metohije, od neolita do ranog srednjeg veka, Katalog. Prishtina: Museum 1998 (Belgrade), p.577.

⁶ Milutin Garašanin, Prahistorija, Belgrade/Zagreb/Mostar 1982, page 137.

⁷ The settlement of Çifllak is at the mouth of the valley of the White Drin, on the right hand side. It is bordered to the north with the village of Kramovik, to the east with Guri i Kuq, and to the west with Meqe ad Rakovina. In this ancient centre, quality architectural objects made by *local craftsmen* have been found. Luan Përzhishta, The Illyrian settlement of Çifllak, Albanika - Ekskluzive, 71/2007, page 66.

snake figures were discovered in a block of marble,⁸ which were carved in bas-relief from the surface of the stone.⁹

This is the reason that fig.1 shows a real snake, *Vipera berus*, from the *Viperiadae* family of snakes, poisonous vipers, which populates all the paleoartic region and thus most of the area where the Illyrians once lived, and where Albanians live today.¹⁰

Supported by scientific observation, we can see immediately that the *snake's heads on the Illyrian bracelet* have a figurative structure which, in every detail of its features, reproduces those of the real snake mentioned above.¹¹

Furthermore, the natural features of this species of snake weren't only the model for Iron Age artists, but also for the craftsmen of an earlier period - the neolithic, as is the case with the *terracotta snake figure* shown in fig.3. Here, the craftsman of that period decorated the upper part, the terracotta snake's back, with zigzag incisions accompanied by vertical incisions regularly spaced on both sides, a decoration which represents the green/ blue colours on the back of the real *Vipera berus* snake, shown in fig.1.

And if we make a great leap in time, diachronically through the uninterrupted existence of this cult of the snake, we will see how it survives in Albanian popular beliefs even in our own time in realistic figurative representations. In realistic figurative forms, the snake is used in Albanian ethnographic artefacts, shown in fig.2.

It's also very significant that the snake shown in fig.2,¹² made by a Drenica girl with textile thread and two colours of

⁸ Here too, this block of marble could have been used as the base for a *stela*.

⁹ Here too.

¹⁰ *Opća enciklopedija*, 7. Zagreb 1981, p.109.

¹¹ Similarly in Illyrian art later, in the Antique period, in relief representations of the snake in the Ripçi fragment, as well in the representation of two other snakes in the Sestenius urn (1st - 4th century CE), we can easily distinguish the Bosnian viper (*vipera amodyttus*). Since the figurative composition used in these objects relates to the *cult of the dead*, it is affected by the implementation of particular compositional schemes in the same style (cf. Dimitrije Sergejevski, *Iz problematike ilirike umjetnosti*, Godišnjak III/1, Sarajevo 1965, p.124).

¹² Taken from the rich ethnographic collection of Nexhmi Bardhit, Zabel i Ulët, Drenica, 1998.

beads, almost entirely reflects the real snake shown in fig.1. In this case, too, the snake's back (fig.2.), as with the Neolithic snake, is decorated with zigzag lines, produced with three rows of coloured beads.¹³ Of these, the two outer rows are worked in black beads, while the central row of beads are green.

Because of the great importance of this *cult creature in the survival of Albanian popular beliefs*, there was a tradition that girls would make one before their marriage, for their trousseau, and hang it on the wall of the dairy on their wedding night and it would never be moved from there. This survival from pagan belief has been maintained by Albanians wherever they are, because amongst other things, this creature of the earth symbolised *women's fertility*.

Figurative representation of the snake to protect the home

We find an artistic figurative representation in iron of the snake in Albanian vernacular architecture *used as a protector of the house* on the front gates to the courtyard of the ZHERKA family home in Gjakova (fig.7., beginning of the 20th century).

Two snakes, shown in a realistic form with simplified stylisation, make up the structure and function of the *iron latches* for shutting the front gates to the courtyard of this home. One of their eyes, as can be seen in fig.7., is formed by the end of the extended flat piece of the latch which is decorated with incisions in the form of zigzag lines in three rows, of which the middle row, on both sides, is accompanied by triangles in a regular pattern.

We also find this form of artistic representation of the snake, symbolised with the abstract geometrical stylisation in the form of zigzag lines accompanied by triangles on two sides, in the Illyrian first century CE stela at Sinj (Croatia) with the Illyrian names PAIO and CUIO (fig.11).

On this Illyrian stela, the snake cult decoration is shown in

¹³ In this instance, we think that it could be stressed too much and the popular artist was not aware of artefacts and works from Neolithic artists. However, it still means that these two works took as their model a real snake from the same species.

an artistic geometric composition together with decoration of the Sun cult in the form of encircled six-sided star-rosettes.

Similarly, some centuries later, in the early middle ages of the Arbër Period (the 6th to 8th century CE), we see the snake cult and the Sun cult together in a brooch of molten bronze. In the encircling part of this ornament, the snake cult motif is shown in a meandering abstract geometric stylised form - broken zigzag lines which encircle the figure of a creature in whose body are five decorations from the Sun cult in the form of concentric circles (fig.10.).

The union of the earth cult with the Sun cult

The representation of these two cults together in geometric art occurred in accordance with the period when the appearance of realistic figurative representations of the earth creature, the snake, was alternated with its abstract-geometric symbolic representation. This was in the first century BC, and in the beginning of the common era, at the time when, according to the expert G MANO-ZISI,¹⁴ as well as the existence of cultural unification, a way of life, being burned in an underground chamber or grave, we also have *the union of the earth cult and the sun cult*.

The union of these two cults can also be explained by the fact that, according to A. STIPÇEVIQ,¹⁵ the snake was not only an earth symbol but also a symbol of plant *fertility* and was connected with other sources of life, as was the Sun. In Egypt and in Greece, the snake is sometimes seen as a *personification of the Sun*.

Consequently, we also find these two cults appearing together, whether *in stylised abstract geometric form* or in *realistic figurative form* in the front board of cribs from the Dukagini Plain (fig.9.) and then in the under pillar and central pillar of the front of the *hajati* and in other parts of the garner in the village of Grashticë in Prishtina municipality (fig.12., beginning

¹⁴ Djordje Mano-Zisi, Antika, Belgrade/Zagreb/Mostar 1982, p.21.

¹⁵ Aleksandër Stipçeviq, Simbolet e kultit të ilirët, Prishtina 1983, p.60.

of the second half of the 19th century¹⁶), and again in the arch of the small door to the courtyard of the Albanian *kulla* of the SYLËREXHA in Vranoc in the Barani Valley (fig.13., end of the 19th century) and then in the *kulla* of Rexhë FETAHU in Gurakoc in the municipality of Istog (fig.16., first half of the 19th century), on the arched doorway of the *kulla* in the village of Perla e Epërm in Mirëdita,¹⁷ on Dukagjini plain spindles (fig.22.), on the house built in the Pulaj neighbourhood, in the village of Vërmicë (fig.15.), on the gravestone in the Albanian village of Vuksan Lekiq in Tuzi (second half of the 17th century¹⁸), as well as on the arched doorway in the *kulla* of Ramadan SELIMI in the village of Krajk in the Has region (fig.19.), where there is Sun cult decoration carved in bas-relief in the stone of the arch of this doorway (19th century) and others.

Abstract geometric interpretation of the snake symbol

As well as these, we find the use of decoration from the earth cult of the snake in geometric abstract interpretation of its symbol, whether knowingly or not, in numerous instances in other vernacular built or ethnographic sites. Thus we see it

¹⁶ It should be emphasised that in this *hambar*, of megaron type, is an impressive number of 34 ornamental motifs, mainly from the cult of the Sun but also from the cult of the snake.

¹⁷ A. Baçe *et al*, *Historia e Arkitekturës shqiptare*, Tirana 1980, p.580.

¹⁸ Šefik Bešlagić, *Stari malisorsi nadgrobni spomenici u Vuksan Lekiću*, Museum of Kosovo bulletin, no.X, Prishtina, 1970, p.376, fig.5.

From the evidence of gravestone memorials, called 'steqke', in the Malësia village of Vuksan Lekiq near Tuzi, the author noted ancient graves of mountain Albanians of the Catholic faith, of very great importance. He considers these graves to be dated partly from the 17th century and mainly in the 18th century. From the illustrations given in this study we can see that on the gravestones is bas-relief and high-relief carving of a host of ornamentations with a variety of cults which are relics of pagan belief. Represented here are the cult of the Sun, the earth cult of the snake and other animals of the earth, and the cult of the protection of nature, particularly the gods of vegetation etc. As part of this complex of ornamentation with particular symbolism, other geometric shapes have been carved, including triangles and ornamentation using a great variety of complex forms, as well as range of arms of different types etc. This means that in this case we are dealing with a very complex social and religious belief or phenomenon.

used in Albanian popular textiles, particularly on women's costume woven at home, and also in men's clothing, on the capital of cradles, and on wedding chests, on the shuttle of loom, on spindles, on basketwork (bassinet), etc.

We find an abstract geometrical interpretation of the snake produced by zigzag form incisions on Iron Age two-handled clay bowls (4th - 5th century BCE, fig. 5.¹⁹), found in the Illyrian tumulus necropolis in the village of Romajë in Dukagjini. We also find this abstract figurative form, as we see in fig.6., in the cradle belt - capital made with coloured beads, and in cushions from Dukagjini (fig.8.), round gates, on the front of the *hambar* in Grashiticë (fig.12.) as well as in handtowels with embroidered motifs from the end of the 19th century in Dukagjin. By observation of the cushion from Dukagjin and the details in the front of the garner in Grashiticë we understand that, as well as a number of similarities between these two geometric representations of the snake, their ends are notable for their similar structure. To these facts we can add that the dots between the zigzags on the garner decoration are the same as those we see in Illyrian archaeological finds.

Meanwhile, we find the belt-capital of the Drenica region cradle with abstract geometric use of the snake symbol in numerous cases. Invariably the colour blue is used in their weaving and decoration with beads. A concrete example of this is the blue beads used to form triangles which are accompanied on both sides by a meander in zigzag form. As with the use of blue, the triangles are used for their apotropaic function.²⁰ The ethnographic object, the capital, is placed above the cradle surround. In many cases, a snake is carved on this part of the cradle in a *realistic artistic* style. In Dukagjini, we find such

¹⁹ Arheološko blago Kosova i Metohije, od neolita do ranog srednjeg veka, Katalog. Prishtina: Museum 1998. (Belgrade), p.570.

²⁰ Also deserving of mention here is the survival of the less prevalent pagan belief of *the cult of snake sacrifice* for good luck in building a home. As far as we have learned, the practices of this cult was also carried out at the ground-breaking ceremony for the Bajraj family *kulla* in the village of Istog i Poshtëm, when a snake was killed and its blood poured around the foundations, and finally its body was walled up on the east corner of these foundations (cf Ukë Xhemaj, Etnokultura shqiptare në Podgur, Prishtina 2003, p.259)

chiselled snakes also on the outer side of the side panels of the cradle²¹, and on the capital of a cradle from a village near Peja²², as well as on a cradle from Podguri,²³ and on the capital of another cradle from Kosovo,²⁴ etc.

Representations of the snake in a realistic artistic form

As we said earlier, we find *realistic representation of the snake* carved on the arched doorway of the SYLËREXHA *kulla* in Vranoc²⁵ (fig.13.), as well as on a cornerstone of the 'long house' near the entrance gate of this *kulla* (fig.20.), and in a arch feature of the window built on the second storey - on the side elevation of the *kulla* of Ali GECI in Llukë e Poshtme near Deçan²⁶, fig.21, as well as on the arched doorway of the *kulla* of Ramadan SELIMI in the village of Krajk in the Has region (fig.19.), on the arched doorway of the *kulla* of Sadri SALIHI in the village of Dubovik in Dukagjini (fig.17.), on the cornerstone of the *kulla* of Haxhi ZEKA in Peja, on the front elevation of the *kulla* of Rexhë FETAHU in Gurakoc near Istog (fig.16.), on the right hand upright of the arched doorway of the *kulla* of Bardhosh DINA in Dubovik, in the municipality of Deçan,²⁷ etc.

In the context of all this, we will pay special attention to representations of the snake in a realistic figurative form, shown *in bas-relief* (showing moulded above the surface of the stone). This snake decoration can be seen on the right hand vertical stone of the arched doorway of one of the *kullas* built in

²¹ See: the author's extensive photo-documentation

²² Mark Krasniqi, *Gjurmë e gjurmime*, Prishtina 1979, p.457.

²³ Ukë Xhemaj, *Etnokultura shqiptare në Podgur*, Prishtina 2003. p.317.

²⁴ See the author's photo documentation.

²⁵ In the context of the Vranoc *kulla* in the *Barani Valley* it should be emphasised that from the fieldwork done we can see that the Albanian vernacular architecture in this area is notable for a very rich ornamented symbolism.

²⁶ On the arch of this window, *in bas-relief from the surface of the stone*, two snakes are carved, with their heads uppermost, looking at one another. I.e. the artistic compositional representation of these two snakes is a compositional structure, i.e. symmetrical, against the vertical shaft of the window, and on its arch.

²⁷ In this case we see two snakes in parallel positions, sloping with heads uppermost carved in bas-relief from the surface of the stone.

the HOXHAIJ neighbourhood in Junik.²⁸

As we can see from the above, because of the character and their symbolism, these snake ornamentations are always shown in the most exposed places, since their use had the functions of magic, protecting and bringing good luck. Furthermore, the use of this ornamentation, particularly in the artistic form of bas-relief, is notable for a compositional structure which is organically in harmony with the aesthetic conceptualisation of the structuring and architectonics of vernacular architecture, or with elements of its structure.

The cults of the sun and the snake

On the SYLËREXHA *kulla* in Vranoc, on the arch of the small door to the courtyard, through which family members and guests enter, there are a total of seven (7) decorative motifs from *the cult of the Sun and the snake* (fig.13.²⁹). Meanwhile, the

²⁸ As part of this *belief system from the snake and Sun cults*, we have two other astrological motifs, showing the half moon, carved on both sides of the sun motif in the form of a spiral. Similarly, on the arched doorway of the *kulla* of Ramadan Selimi in the village of Krajk in the Has region, as well as decoration from the snake and Sun cult, we see *three other astrological motifs showing the half moon*. The same motif from the *moon cult*, together with an earth creature is also carved on a cornerstone of the *kulla* mentioned above. Furthermore, the half moon motif, together with the snake as an earth creature, carved in a realistic representation, can be seen on the arched doorway of Sadri Salih's *kulla* in the village of Dubovik in Dukagjini. It is clear that this representation, together with those relics of belief in the moon, the Sun and other natural phenomena, are complex expressions of pagan beliefs related to nature.

²⁹ Two such decorations are also carved on the lower arch of the right hand window of the men's *oda*, set on the front elevation of this *kulla*. On entering the *kulla's* courtyard, whether we like it or not, our glance is drawn to the arched doorway of the *kulla* entrance and to its rich and aesthetically pleasing ornamentation, so rare for a *kulla*. On the lower part of the arch of this door, on either side two decorations from the Sun cult are carved in the form of encircled six-sided star-rosettes. Similarly, another ornamentation of the same type is carved on an edging stone on the top of this arch, with slightly larger dimensions in comparison with the two decorations below. These three decorations together make up a series of ornaments with circular contours which, in Illyrian times, symbolised the *sun trinity*, meaning the Sun in the east, at its zenith and as it sets. On the left hand pillar of the arched doorframe, two geometric decorations are carved, the likes of which we see used everywhere in the physical culture of Albanians. Between these two decorations is carved another circular decoration from the Sun cult, with smaller dimensions

great arched doorway to the courtyard, on the rear section of the right pillar, as well as the left section of the arch, each have decorative engravings of the Sun cult in the form of a six-sided star-rossette, within a circle³⁰. Similarly, on the front (eastern) elevation of the *kulla*, near the door mentioned, on roughly the middle stone carved on the left corner of this elevation, there is another decorated motif from the snake cult. In this case, the snake carved on the stone in bas-relief, standing out against the surface of the stone, has its tail curled in a spiral, or as the common expression is, 'curled like a coil' (fig.18.).³¹

The representation of the snake in vernacular architecture in the forms described above, particularly in its carving in the characteristic position, from which the snake *observes and checks anyone coming into the courtyard or the house* immediately symbolises the protective god of the house and family members.

As Zyliha (Gunga) DOLI, born in the ninth decade of the 19th century, frequently told people, the *house snake* which was fixed in the stones of the great courtyard of his house, in the Çabrat neighbourhood of Gjakova, *knew and protected every member of the family living in the house*. According to him, they often saw the *house snake curled like a coil*. So the snake cult in Albanian popular belief, as a relic of ancient pagan beliefs, was not only thriving in the villages, but was a powerful force even in the cities.

In addition, we also learn that in the past *in popular belief and ritual the snake* was represented as an earth creature *with totemic powers*.

Totemisation refers to the belief in primitive traditional human communities that a mythological relationship exists between humans, on the one hand, and animals and plants on the other, in which the creatures and - less frequently - the

when compared with the Sun trinity. Furthermore, within this *kulla*, on its third floor, in the men's *oda* and the *divanhanja*, on the front of the chimney of the hearth, beautifully formed, there are similar decorative motifs from the Sun cult in the form of encircled six-sided star-rosettes, in two compositional variations.

³⁰ Particularly above this stone, on the other elevation - the *kulla's* southern side, we have another deep-relief carving of another astrological motif showing the *half-moon*

³¹ Aleksandër Stipçeviq, *Illirët...* op. cit. p.197.

plants, are seen to have the role of *protectors of the ancestors of the tribe* or of the *clan*. This mythological phenomenon, known to have existed among the Illyrians previously, and unbroken in its continuation, survives in popular Albanian belief.

The belief system surrounding ornaments with *a range of cult symbols*, carved in the *kulla* of Ramadan SELIMI in the village of Krajk in the Has region is also a element within the defined context described above.

On the arched doorway of this *kulla*, a total of 14 (fourteen) decorations are carved. Moreover, on one of the cornerstones of this *kulla* two decorations have been carved, while just one decoration has been carved on the other stone.

In the current study we will not stop for wider full individual explanations of the symbolism of these decorations, suffice to say that they are part of the decorations of *the earth cult* - creatures of the earth and thus *the snake cult*, *the sun cult*, *the horse cult*, as well as the *vegetation cult* together with the *cult of birds*.

As part of this belief system surrounding ornaments with particular symbolism, in bas-relief, there are also carvings of other astronomic and apotropaic ornaments, such as the half moon and the triangle, as well as three other ornaments from the *cult of craftsmanship*.

Conclusion

In this analytical study it has therefore been clearly proved that the cult of the snake is a part of the complex ethno-cultural heritage of our people. This cult developed diachronically, in an unbroken line of time from the Illyrians to the Albanians of today

Translated by Trankos

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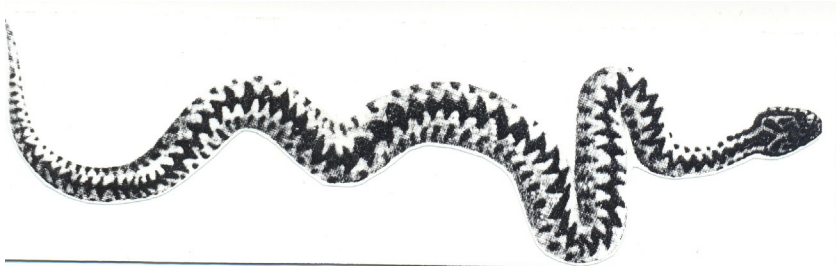


Fig.1.

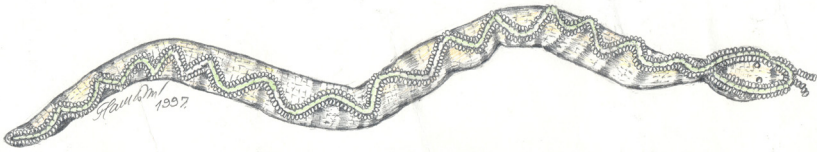


Fig.2.



Fig.3.



Fig.4.



Fig.5.



Fig.6.



Fig.7.



Fig.8.



Fig.9.



Fig.10.



Fig.11.

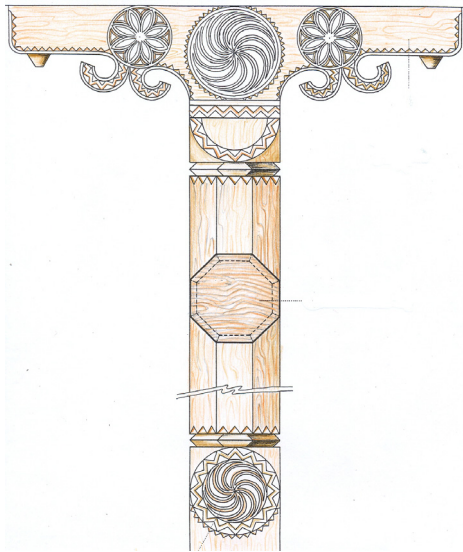


Fig.12.



Fig.13.



Fig.14.



Fig.15.



Fig.16.

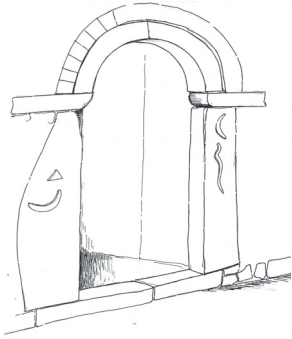


Fig.17.



Fig.18.



Fig.19.



Fig.20.

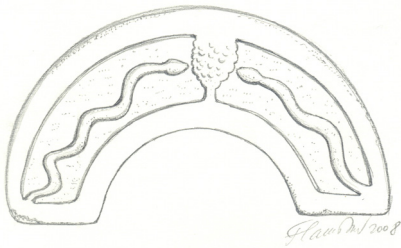


Fig.21.

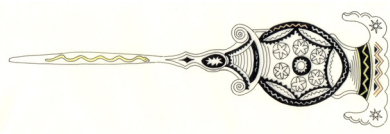


Fig.22.