

2021

Olav's Rose, Perun's Mark, Taranis's Wheel

Lars Marius Garshol
Independent Scholar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation

Garshol, Lars Marius. "Olav's Rose, Perun's Mark, Taranis's Wheel." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 7, 4 (2021): 121-151. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol7/iss4/7>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

PEREGRINATIONS

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOLUME VII, NUMBER 4 (AUTUMN 2021)

Olav's Rose, Perun's Mark, Taranis's Wheel

LARS MARIUS GARSHOL

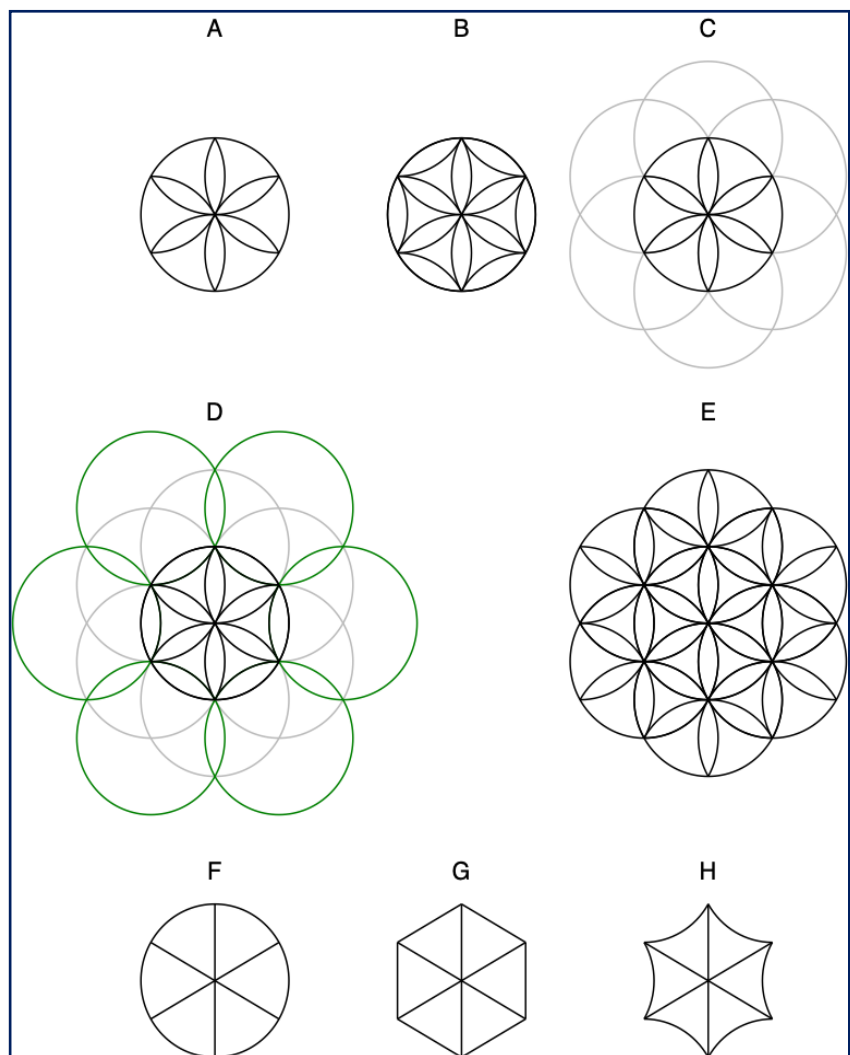
Independent Scholar

The Geometry of the Shape

The six-petalled rose and other symbols closely related to it, appears widely throughout European folk culture as a symbol, drawn and carved on a variety of surfaces. As there is as yet no scholarly consensus as to the general meaning of these symbols, nor as to their origin, this paper will suggest a possible origin and meaning.

Figure 1 shows the basic shapes involved. The base form is **Figure 1A**, a circle with six inner petals formed by overlapping circle

Figure 1. The basic shape variations. Image: author.



segments of the same radius (*Vesica piscis*). This shape is also known as a hexafoil (or hexfoil), daisy wheel, and recently, in New Age literature, as a “flower or seed of life.”

Figure 1B illustrates the infilled form, composed of circular segments drawn on the inside of the outer circle. Here the spaces between the petals can cause confusion as to what is figure and what is ground. This can make the triangle-like spaces between the petals seem like figures in their own right. Some variants seem to emphasize these spaces.

Figure 1E pictures seven interlocking roses created by drawing seven overlapping versions of the base form (**Fig. 1A**). That it is formed from seven hexafoils has no doubt had its own attraction. The form can be extended outwards indefinitely, into a periodic tiling of the plane, also known as a tessellation.

The symbols shown here are strictly geometric, formed from mathematically perfect segments of circles, but in folk art the actual carved or drawn symbol quite often deviates from mathematical perfection. Most likely because not all those making the mark were aware of the underlying abstraction, but it is clear that some of the makers were aware of how it was formed, both from the perfection of their carvings, and from the way the symbol is mathematically generalized in the infilled form (**Fig. 1B**) and by the seven interlocking roses (**Fig. 1E**).

The inward-bending wheel (**Fig. 1H**) is formed using lines that add circle segments bending inwards of the same radius as the circle. When the infilled form (**Fig. 1B**) turns the spaces between the petals into figure (rather than ground) one is left with a shape rather like **Figure 1H**.

Norway

In Norway, the six-petalled rose has mainly been studied in the context of wooden vessels, primarily wooden drinking vessels, although it also appears elsewhere. No comprehensive study has been performed, and so this overview must necessarily be spotty. A famous example of the rose is found on the door of Oseloftet, a *stabbur* (food storage house) from Setesdal in southern Norway, now at Norsk Folkemuseum. Built roughly 1700, the door has a beautiful carving of seven interlocking rosettes within concentric circles (**Fig. 2**). The position of the rose is clearly important, but some context may be required to appreciate its full significance.

Norwegian peasant culture has been described as a “storage culture,” where the short summer was used to produce as much food as possible, which was then stored through the long winter to keep the family alive. Farmers stored as much grain, cured



Figure 2 The door of Oseloftet. Photo: author.

meat, dry crisp bread, and other food as they could. This was their protection against bad harvests, as well as a source of pride as their real wealth.¹ Food was stored on the lower floor of the stabbur, while the upper story was for storage of jewelry, silver items, important documents, and textiles, which were kept in wooden chests.²

The stabbur was the farmer's treasury, and as such the single building on the farm most in need of protection. Oseloftet has only a single entrance, through this door, where the rose has been placed in the middle. The concentric circles around it, too, are

¹ Hans Olav Bråtå and Merethe Lerfald, *Maten og matressursene i Gudbrandsdalen - historiske hovedtrekk siden steinalderen*, ØF report 03/2012, Østforsk. ISBN 978-82-7356-701-7.

² Inger Lise Christie, *Knivens kunst på tre og horn i Setesdal*, (Novus, Oslo, 2016), p. 39.

generally seen as protective symbols.³ The two large door bands, shaped as the tree of life, were also considered protective since they were made of metal.⁴ Placing this symbol in the middle of the single entrance, together with two other magical protections makes it clear that the intention was to ward off evil.

Norwegian farmers believed they were surrounded by supernatural creatures of many kinds, many of them evil or malicious, which must be propitiated or warded off through ritual behaviors of many kinds. One example is the troll, a purely malicious creature. Another is the *vette*, of which there were many kinds, such as those living in the fireplace, in burial mounds, in the forest, in the water, and so on. There was also the *nisse*, the protective spirit of the farm, who must be venerated.

To protect against these creatures, as well as ill fortune in general, farmers engaged in many protective practices. Horseshoes might be hung above doors, crosses carved into doors, chests, and other objects. Sacrifices of beer, butter, and wort were made to the burial mound or in the fireplace, and so forth. Certain substitute words and phrases were used to avoid attracting unwanted attention. For example, wolves were referred to as “gråbein” (graylegs) to avoid calling them by their true name, and during beer brewing one must never say that the beer boiled, but that the kettle was “playing.”

The subject of Norwegian folk belief is gigantic and can only be hinted at here. While no comprehensive overview has been published yet, Visted and Stigum⁵ wrote an excellent summary, while Leiro⁶ covered superstition in the context of beer brewing. Ørnulf Hodne also wrote a brief overview⁷ as well as a second book surveying the *vette* of land and water.⁸ In English, Kvideland and Sehmsdorf’s useful collection of folk tales

³ Lily Weiser-Aall, “Magiske tegn på norske trekar,” *By og bygd*, vol 5 (1947), p. 127.

⁴ Christie, p. 40. In the past when metal objects were scarce and precious, smithing was seen as a semi-magical skill. All the major pantheons include smith-gods, such as the Greek Hephaestus. Due to this semi-magical aura, metal objects were generally seen as protective. Knives, axes, and pieces of broken tools were all used as protections against evil spirits. This is also the origin of the custom of hanging up horseshoes, not for good luck, but for protection.

⁵ Kristoffer Visted and Hilmar Stigum, *Vår gamle bondekultur* (Cappelen, Oslo, 1952), pp. 303-424.

⁶ Andreas Leiro, *Skikkar og truer ved ølbryggjing* (Voss Folkeminnenemnd, 1965).

⁷ Ørnulf Hodne, *Norsk folketro*, (Oslo: J. W. Cappelens forlag, 1999).

⁸ Ørnulf Hodne, *Vetter og skrømt i norsk folketro* (Oslo: J. W. Cappelens forlag, 1995).

illustrate these beliefs,⁹ while the author's book on traditional beer brewing includes a summary of superstitions relating to beer.¹⁰ The rose at Oseloftet is, however, merely a single example. The symbol has been used in many more contexts.

Weiser-Aall conducted a survey of presumed magical marks on roughly 700 Norwegian wooden vessels from the 16th to 19th centuries. She found geometric symbols on 525 of these, of which 116 featured the six-petal rose, reflecting how common it was in this period. Weiser-Aall was not aware of any explicit meaning attached to the symbol, but she interpreted it as clearly protective.¹¹

Per Gjørder concurred and noted that it is often found in places where it is not ordinarily seen, such as underneath a beer bowl, describing it as clearly ancient and “having survived strong shifts in religion.” According to Gjørder the sources are silent on the meaning of the symbol, and he considered it possible that in later centuries the symbol was copied as “mere empty form.”¹² Åsta Østmoe Kostveit also interpreted the rose as a protective symbol but noted that it could also be used to promote abundance and prosperity. Intriguingly, she explained that the circle surrounding the rose “can often appear as a nimbus, and the whole gives an impression of rotation” — adding that it is often interpreted as a sun symbol.¹³

The symbol also often appeared on the outside of wooden chests.¹⁴ Since these were used to store valuables (as described in the context of the *stabbur*) it is reasonable to assume that the symbol was also used here as a protective mark. It can also be found on smaller wooden containers (*tine*), as well as on wooden boards for smoothing clothes

⁹ Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf, *Scandinavian folk belief and legend* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Lars Marius Garshol, *Historical Brewing Techniques: The Lost Art of Farmhouse Brewing* (Boulder, CO: Brewers Publications, 2020), pp. 177-189.

¹¹ See footnote 3.

¹² Per Gjørder, *Norske drikkekar av tre* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1982), p. 22.

¹³ Åsta Østmoe Kostveit, *Kors i kake, skurd i tre* (Landbruksforlaget, 1997), p. 58.

¹⁴ Gisle Midttun, *Setesdalen* (Oslo: Albert Cammermeyers forlag, 1919), p. 176. See also Peter Anker, *Kister og skrin* (Oslo: Huitfeldt, 1975), p. 62; Randi Asker, *Noen karveskurdkister med muruspjeld* (Årbok: Drammens Museums, 1965-66), pp. 9-42, with an English summary.

(mangletre), gunpowder horns,¹⁵ and on other objects (**Fig. 3**). It was prevalent on wooden utensils used to process dairy on the farms, and Svale Solheim interpreted it as a magical sun symbol to promote fertility and abundance.¹⁶ Again, because no survey exists, only individual objects can be cited.

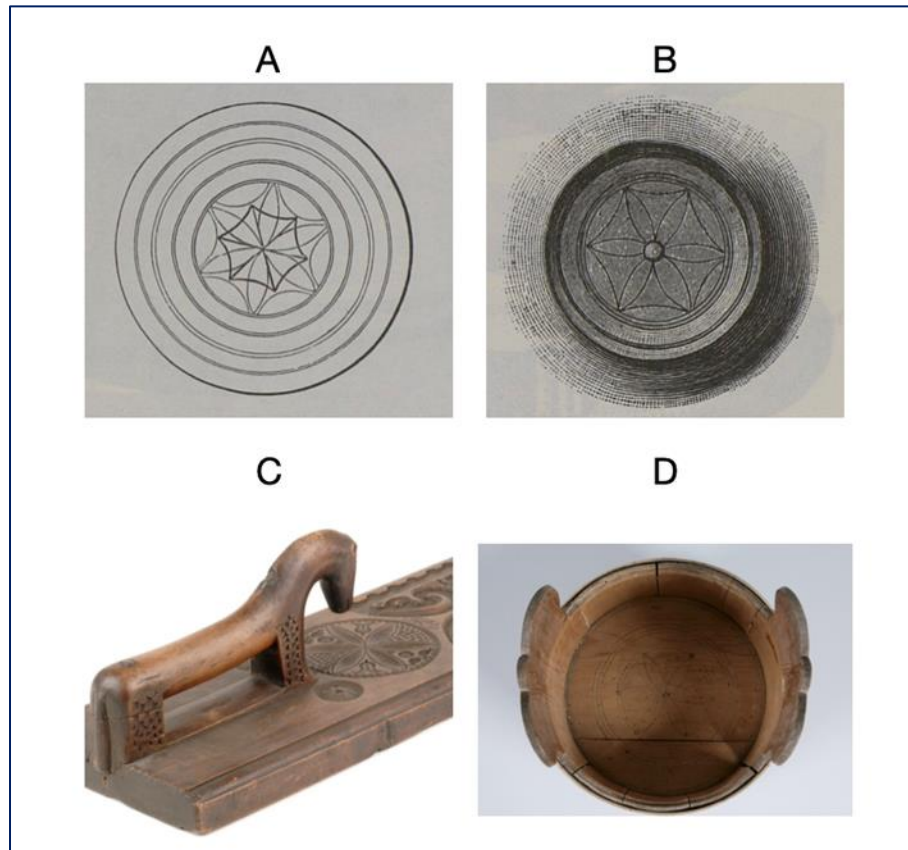


Figure 3 Norwegian examples. **A** and **B** from Rygh:1885; **C** *mangletre* (wooden clothes-smoothing implement), Sverresborg Trøndelag Folkemuseum, FTT.19803, CC BY-NC-SA; **D** *ambar* (wooden container), Sunnfjord Museum, SF.000444a, CC BY-NC-SA.

¹⁵ Christie 2016, pp. 420-424.

¹⁶ Svale Solheim, *Norsk sætertradisjon* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1952), p. 116.

While Weiser-Aall and Gjørder believe that the rose has no known connotations, museum catalogs, auction listings, and other descriptions of objects in many cases call it “Olavsrose.” That is, the rose of Saint Olaf (Olav den Hellige). The rose of Olaf sometimes has four or eight petals, but most commonly six. For the most part, this name refers to the symbol known as “valknute” in Norwegian (English valknut), shown in **Figure 4**, but traditionally it was also used of both the base and infilled rose forms (**Figs. 1A-1B**).¹⁷ As Asker wrote, both are based on a division of the circle into six equal-sized segments.

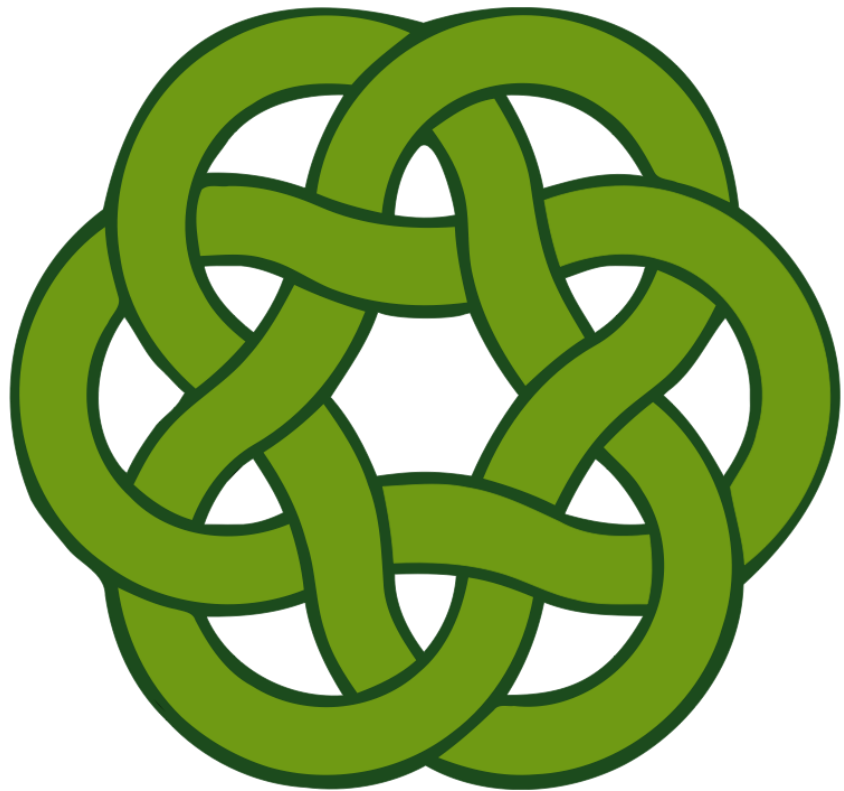


Figure 4 The knot form of the rose of Saint Olaf (valknute). Image: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

¹⁷ Asker, p. 12.

In most cases when the six-petalled rose is described in Norwegian folk art, no reference to Saint Olaf is made. Why the association is relatively tenuous is not clear, although it may be that the meaning was lost after the Reformation and that the symbol became merely decorative. Gjørder and Weiser-Aall both suggest that in modern times that had happened to many symbols. With the name of “the rose of Olaf” one might assume it was a Christian symbol, but it has been found far earlier, on Iron Age bronze kettles.

The infilled form (**Fig. 1B**) occurs on a bronze kettle from the early Iron Age (500 BCE-550 CE), in the inside bottom, surrounded by concentric circles. Overlaid on top of it is the inward-bending wheel (**Fig. 1H**), possibly because of the earlier noted visual connection.¹⁸ **Figure 1B** also appears on another bronze kettle, this time on the outside bottom, dating from the late Iron Age (550 CE-1000 CE).¹⁹ This shows that the symbol far pre-dates Saint Olaf, and indeed Christian belief in Norway. Norway is generally held to have been Christianized in 1030, although the process began before this date, and continued for some time after. Thus, the association with Saint Olaf must have been overlaid on earlier beliefs.

Weiser-Aall and Gjørder both took it for granted that usage of the symbol was continuous through this period despite the large gap in time from the two kettles to the later examples. During this time, the overwhelming majority of Norwegian objects and buildings were made from wood, and very few examples predating 1500 survive, likely causing this gap in the evidence. The record is too sparse to argue for continuous usage of the symbol, but Peter Anker also concurs that it has a very long history. For example, the rose (base form **Fig. 1A**) was carved into the jamb of the west door to Atrå stave church. This church, built in the 1180s, was demolished in 1833. Exactly when the rose was added is impossible to say, but it is likely that this is an example of the symbol from before 1700. Weiser-Aall and Gjørder both thought the symbol had been used fairly consistently throughout time, although in more modern examples it is not a given that the symbol is necessarily used with any protective intent. In some cases, it may simply have been used as decoration.

¹⁸ O. Rygh, “Norske oldsager ordnede og forklarede,” *Christiania*, 1885, vol. I, p. 353.

¹⁹ Rygh, vol. I, p. 726.



Figure 5 Twisted rosette on mangle.
FTT.12308, Sverresborg Trøndelag
Folkemuseum. Photo: CC BY-NC-SA.

Another rosette that occurs on Norwegian material is the “twisted rosette.” It is nowhere near as frequent as the six-petal rose and has no known name or connotations. Here the impression of rotation is undeniable (**Fig. 5**).

Britain

The six-petalled rose has been widely used in Britain, although again no comprehensive survey exists, so it is impossible to measure the full extent of its usage. The existing literature shows that these marks have been used on buildings in Britain at least from medieval times and up to the 19th century. It is widely found in churches, but also in farm dwellings, as well as barns. It is also seen on lockable wooden chests,²⁰ just as in Norway, and on cross slabs in the Isle of Man.²¹

²⁰ Timothy Easton, “Apotropaic symbols and other measures for protecting buildings against misfortune” in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery, and Witchcraft in Christian Britain*, Ronald Hutton (ed.), (Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, 2016), pp. 39-67.

²¹ P. M. C. Kermode, “More Cross-slabs from the Isle of Man,” *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol 63 (1928), pp. 354-360.

Matthew Champion lists three possible theories for the use of these marks:²²

- That they are related to consecration marks in churches.
- That they are mason's marks.
- That they are magical protective symbols.

Since the marks also appear in profane buildings and wooden buildings, as well as on other objects, the first two theories cannot entirely explain them and so are unlikely as candidates for their ultimate origin. All three explanations may have been valid at later points in time, and indeed also at the same time. Champion argues that most of uses of the hexafoil in English medieval churches simply do not match the first two explanations. That so many of them appear together with "recognized devotional inscriptions" suggests, he writes, that they are intended as ritual protective markings.²³

Timothy Easton claims the symbol is now generally seen in the English literature as protective. Easton earlier coined the term "apotropaic" for this type of magic.²⁴ Arnold Pacey concurs that this is the general scholarly consensus in the British literature, but adds that, in some cases, the hexafoil seems to be simply "pattern-making for its own sake."²⁵ In Norway and Britain the symbol was, to a large extent, used the same way, appearing on buildings and wooden chests, and being interpreted the same way: as a magical protective symbol.

The symbol often appears in conjunction with so-called "taper burns," deliberate burn marks made on many buildings.²⁶ Because of this, Easton suggested that the

²² Matthew Champion, "Magic on the Walls: Ritual Protection Marks in the Medieval Church" in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery, and Witchcraft in Christian Britain*, Ronald Hutton (ed.), (Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, 2016), pp. 15-38.

²³ Champion, p. 23.

²⁴ While some claim Easton coined this term either in 1972 or in the 1980s, the original source cannot be located, even though all later sources appear to agree that he did.

²⁵ Arnold Pacey, *Medieval Architectural Drawing* (Stroud, UK: Tempus, 2007), p. 81, 165.

²⁶ Timothy Easton, "Scribed Barns in Leathersingham and Tasmania: A parallel world" in *Eavesdropper, Suffolk Historic Buildings Group*, no. 54 (Autumn 2016), pp. 23-28; Alison Fearn, "A Light in the Darkness – the Taper Burns of Donington le Heath Manor House," *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 6, 1 (2017): 92-118.

symbol may, at least in some cases, have been intended as protection against fire. British emigrants to the US and Australia brought the tradition with them, and these marks can also be found on historic buildings there, showing how deeply embedded and tenacious the tradition was.²⁷

As in Norway, not all British examples of the rose are necessarily protective in intent. The explanation is most likely the same as was advanced with regard to Norway: that the meaning of the symbol was eventually forgotten, but people continued carving it as a simple decorative mark.

The British tradition has another connection to offer with the six-petal rose, in coopering. The cooper uses a compass to measure the inside diameter of the cask, to determine the necessary radius of the “heads” – the lid and bottom of the cask. This is done by setting a compass to the assumed radius, and then “walking” the compass around the inside perimeter of the cask. If in six steps the compass returns to exactly the point where it started, then the compass is set to the correct radius.²⁸

The connection with the rosette is that this is almost exactly the same way the rosette is formed with a compass and, in both cases, the connection arises from the simple mathematical fact that each “step” created with a compass, when set to the correct radius, moves 60 degrees around the circumference of the circle (intersecting two circles in this way is how one constructs a 60-degree angle with a compass). Six steps of 60 degrees will necessarily be 360 degrees, a complete circle.

This has been offered as an explanation for the rosette symbol,²⁹ but it is not clear that there is anything more to it than a simple case of geometries overlapping. Coopering is an ancient art, but how a method for measuring the radius of a cask should turn into a protective symbol on bronze kettles and buildings is not obvious. Curiously, Weiser-Aall noted that on coopered vessels, particularly larger ones, the mark was added to the bottom before the staves are put together. She concluded that it must have been made by the cooper in these cases. It is possible that there is more to this connection than might appear at first sight.

²⁷ Easton p. 26; Crystal Hollis, “Medieval Milwaukee: Unlikely Graffiti at the St. Joan of Arc Chapel,” *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 6.1 (2017): pp. 132-146.

²⁸ *The Cooper pt3 Chiming the Cask*, Youtube video, Social History Curators Group, December 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3yLUWRWo3s>

²⁹ Geoff Latham, personal communication.

Russia, Ukraine, Poland

Linda Ivanits writes of the Slavic thunder god Perun that his symbol, “the thunder sign (gromovoi znak), a six-petaled rose inside a circle, was still carved on the edges and peaks of roofs in Northern Russia in the 19th century for protection from thunder and lightning.”³⁰ Another Russian name for the symbol is “the thunder wheel” (gromovoi koleso).

As can be seen in **Figure 6**, both the base form (**Fig. 1A**) and the infilled form (**Fig. 1B**) are referred to by these names. The twisted rosette from **Figure 5** may also be referred to by this name. The spoked hexagon (**Fig. 1G**) and the symbol shown in **Figure 7** could also hold the same meaning, at least in modern contexts. The author has not been able to find traditional examples of these two last forms, which may be modern inventions for New Age purposes.

The same sign was common in Galicia (a region spanning what is now southern Poland and western Ukraine), where it was used as a protective mark in roof beams among the villagers in the Tatra and Carpathian Mountains.³¹ (**Figs. 8-9**). As can be seen, the single rosettes (**Figs. 1A-1B**) are the most frequently depicted, but from other sources we know that the seven overlapping rosettes (**Fig. 1E**) also occurs. Several symbols that show some visual similarities may be related, but this is uncertain. According to Areta Kovalska, the symbol, known as “the symbol of Perun” and “the thunder mark” in Ukraine, usually has six petals, but occasionally features eight.³²

The Christianization of the Slavs began in the 10th century. Among the eastern Slavs, Kievan Rus adopted orthodox Christianity in 988, while in the west, Mieszko I, Duke of Poland, adopted the Roman form of Christianity in 966. Eventually, Poland became a Catholic country, while Russia followed Kiev into orthodoxy. Ukraine, largely depopulated by the 13th-century Mongol invasion and subsequent warfare against their Tatar successors, was resettled partly by Poles and partly by Russians. The western part of Ukraine, where use of the symbol of Perun is documented, was part of Poland until its second partition in 1772.

³⁰ Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (M. E. Sharpe, 1989), p. 17.

³¹ Areta Kovalska, “A Protection Symbol for the Home: The Six-Petal Rosette on the Crossbeams of Galicia,” blog post *Forgotten Galicia*, 2018-10-22, <https://forgottengalicia.com/a-protection-symbol-for-the-home-the-six-petal-rosette-on-the-crossbeams-of-galicia/>.

³² Kovalska 2018.



Figure 6A Sergin House, Kizhi island, Karelia, Russia, 19th century. Photo: Ludvig14, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

In northern Russia, the general population remained largely unaffected by Christianization well into the 19th century. According to Ivanits,³³ although the peasants

³³ Ivanits 1989, p. 19.

Figure 6B Kutuzovskaya hut, recreation of a peasant house. Memorial complex, Kutuzovskaya prospekt, Moscow, Russia. Photo: Ludvig14, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.



Figure 6C Six-petal rosette where the thunder mark normally would be. 20th century house, Kirov oblast, Russia. Photo: Dmitriy Zhezlov, used with permission.

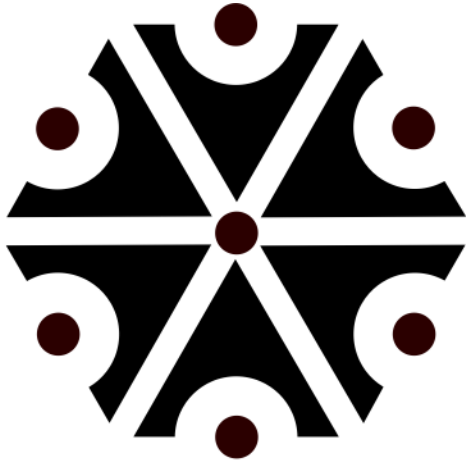


Figure 7 Modern thunder mark. Drawing by Zeimusu. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

observed the outward forms of Christian belief, many had little or no understanding of the Christian religion. A 19th-century Russian ethnographer described the typical peasant of Vologda Province as “a complete pagan, who had heard something about God from his parents, but knew nothing whatsoever about Christ.”

There seems little reason to doubt that, in these regions, the symbol originates from the old Slavic pagan religion as a symbol of the thunder god Perun, although this origin had been forgotten in many areas. While the symbol shares the same origin in these three countries, it bifurcated into two separate traditions. In northern Russia the symbol was associated with outside roofs, while in south-east Poland and western Ukraine, it was most associated with roof beams on the inside. In both cases the association with the god Perun and its use as a protective symbol remained. **(Fig. 8)**

In northern Russia it is not uncommon to find six- and eight-petal rosettes of various shapes carved on newer wooden buildings where the single rosettes **(Figs. 1A-1B)** would normally appear. It is difficult to say whether these were intended as thunder marks or whether the carvers were simply repeating visual convention with no thought to any underlying symbolism. It is also not clear why the rosettes have changed shape, but it may be that once they were no longer seen as protective symbols any form of rosette became acceptable to the tradition. **Figure 6C** shows an example of a newer house with rosettes that resemble the six-petal rosette without clearly being the same symbol. It is striking that, in the Russian context, the symbol is used as protection against lightning (which causes fires) when, as noted above, researchers have suggested it may have been intended to protect against fire in Britain.



Figure 8 Rosette on a roof beam from a 1681 house. now in the Museum of Folk Architecture, Sanok, Poland. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, Silar.

Other areas

The six-petal rose is widely represented in Lithuanian folk art, where it can be found on wooden beer bowls,³⁴ on spindles,³⁵ as well as on wooden objects of other

³⁴ Daiva Vaitkevičiene, *Žydinti taure: alus ir midus baltu kulturoje*, (The Flowering Cup: beer and mead in Baltic culture), Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2020. Figs. 96, 98, 100.

³⁵ Simonas Gutautas, personal communications. Easily confirmed by Google search: verpstes ornamentas.

kinds. The symbol is known as “saulute” in Lithuania, a diminutive of sun (“saule”), but it is not found on wooden beer tankards in Estonia, as evidenced by many examples given by Tiina Võti.³⁶

The rosette is very prevalent in folk art of the Alps, to the point that it is known in Italian as “sole delle Alpi” (sun of the Alps). The Italian political party Lega Nord has proposed it as the flag of Padania, the north-Italian region which Lega Nord proposes to declare as an independent state.³⁷

Christoph Simonett describes the six-petal rose as very commonly carved into roof beams and painted red in peasant houses in the Swiss canton of Graubünden. He shows several examples strikingly similar to those from Poland and Ukraine. The infilled form (**Fig. 1B**) is by far the most common, but the base form (**Fig. 1A**) is also found, as is the seven interlocking roses (**Fig. 1E**), and the twisted rosette (**Fig. 5**). Simonett does not appear to be aware of any specific significance to the symbols but writes that “no doubt a certain religious element has played its part in choosing these” symbols.³⁸ He also shows the base form of the rose (**Fig. 1A**) carved on the side of wooden chests.³⁹

It is also found in the Pyrenees⁴⁰ and it has also been found on objects excavated from Late Bronze Age Mycenae,⁴¹ and by Peralta Labrador’s work on finds from Iron Age Cantabria in Spain.⁴²

³⁶ Tiina Võti, “Õllekannud,” *Kunst*, (Tallinn, 1986).

³⁷ “Lega Nord,” wikipedia, accessed 2020-12-18.

³⁸ Christoph Simonett, “Die Bauernhäuser des Kantons Graubünden,” Vol. 1, “Wohnbauten”, (Basel: Verlag Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, 1965), pp. 224-226.

³⁹ Simonett 1965, p. 232.

⁴⁰ Ariel Golan, *Prehistoric Religion: Mythology, Symbolism* (Jerusalem: Ariel Golan 2003), p. 54.

⁴¹ Jens Høyrup, “Geometrical patterns in the pre-classical Greek area. Prospecting the borderland between decoration, art, and structural inquiry,” *Revue d’histoire des mathématiques*, 6 (2000), p. 50.

⁴² Eduardo Peralta Labrador, “Las estelas discoideas de Cantabria” in *Estelas discoideas de la Península Iberica* (1989), pp. 425–446.

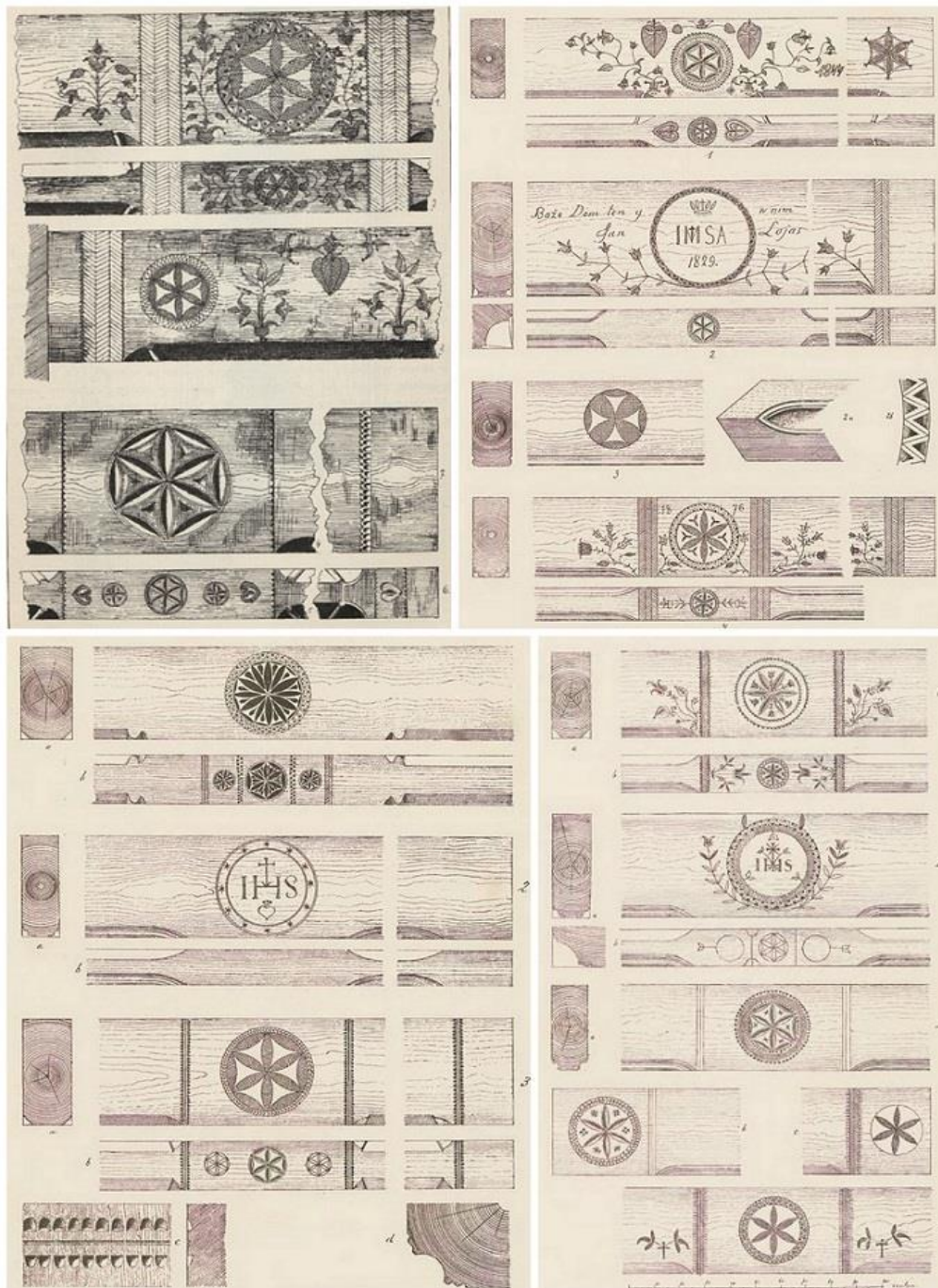


Figure 9 Roof beam decorations in the southern Polish region Podhale. Image: After Matlakowski (1892) and Matlakowski (1901).

Perkwunos

If the six-petalled rosette was a protective symbol associated with Perun, why does it also occur as a protective symbol in countries where Perun was never worshipped? A possible explanation would be if the symbol were originally associated with *Perkwunos,⁴³ the hypothesized original Proto-Indo-European thunder god, and its use thus spread together with the Indo-Europeans. For *Perkwunos himself there is essentially no direct evidence, and so it is hopeless to look there. However, if the theory is correct, the rosette should also be associated with other deities derived from *Perkwunos.

While nothing is known directly about *Perkwunos, his many derivatives share many similarities. They are middle-aged (all), bearded (all), ride a chariot/wagon (all), throw lightning bolts from the chariot (all), have a snake-like monster associated with the underground as their arch enemy (Thor, Perkunas, Perun), and protect ordinary people from evil forces (Thor, Perkunas, Perun). The role of the thunder god as protector against evil obviously is enormously relevant to the use of the rose as a protective symbol, but some context is required to see the full extent of the connection.

Perun/Elijah

In Russia, the prophet Elijah assumed many of the properties of Perun in popular belief, including the role as protector against evil.⁴⁴ Russian peasants believed in “the unclean force,” which animated all evil spirits and creatures. Ivanits:⁴⁵

Russian peasants imagined that Elijah rode across the sky in his fiery chariot striking the earth with lightning bolts as he pursued the unclean force. Since the devil was prone to hiding anywhere, measures were taken to keep him away during storms: the candles from Holy Thursday were lit, houses were censed, black cats and dogs, possible transformations of the devil, were thrown outside, and everything was sealed with the sign of the cross, for, according to general

⁴³ The initial asterisk is linguistic convention to show that the name is only hypothetical: it has been reconstructed by reversing assumed linguistic changes over time, but has never been directly attested.

⁴⁴ Ivanits 1989, p. 29. Dmitriy Zelenin, *Russische (ostslavische) Volkskunde* (Berlin und Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1927), p. 397.

⁴⁵ Ivanits 1989, p. 29.

belief, the prophet might strike a house, animal, or person in which the unclean force sought refuge.

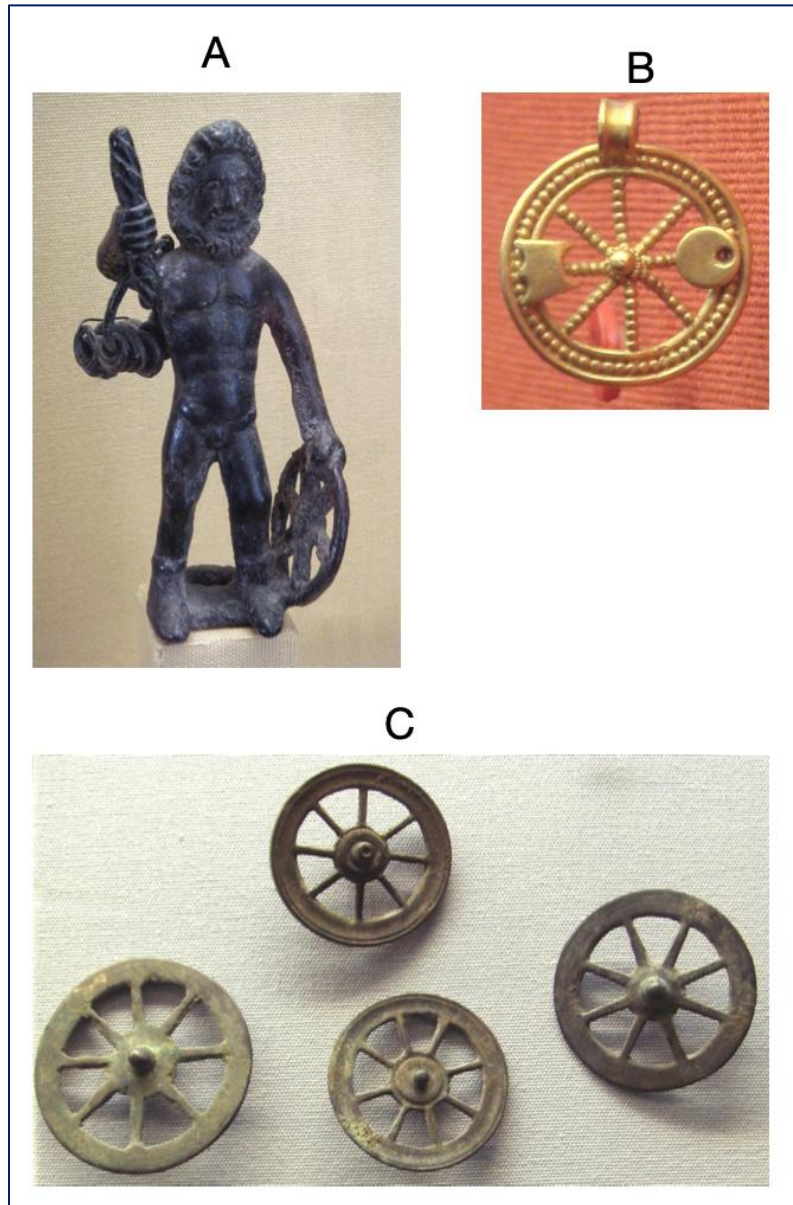


Figure 10A Taranis wielding thunderbolts, wheel, Le Chatelet, Gourzon, Haute-Marne, France. Photo: Wikimedia Commons; **10B** Celtic wheel related to Taranis cult. Photo: Wikimedia Commons; **10C** Votive wheels, related to cult of Taranis. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The function of the symbol is thus made plain, at least in the modern north Russian context: the rosette averted lightning by keeping the unclean force out of the building, which removed any reason for Elijah/Perun to strike it with lightning. And, of course, keeping evil forces out of the building was a good thing in general. The author has not been able to find the rose directly

associated with Elijah, but it can be found in Russian icons of Ogniyena Maria (fiery Mary), a fire goddess who in popular belief was the sister of Elijah/Perun.

Thor/Olaf

The Norwegian context has a close equivalent: Saint Olaf assumed many of the properties of Thor around the 12th century in Norwegian folklore.⁴⁶ Saint Olaf became bearded, irascible, and assumed the same role of demon killer protecting ordinary citizens. Olav Bø writes:

Nearly everywhere in [Norway] there are stories of the banishment of trolls and giants, and it has therefore been common to say that Saint Olaf in folk tradition took the role that Thor had in pre-Christian times.⁴⁷

Perhaps the most explicit connection can be found in the 12th -century Norse *Nidrstigningar Saga*, a Christian tale based on an apocryphal gospel, modified for the Norse context. One of the modifications was the inclusion of the Jörmungandr, the world serpent which Thor will slay on the day of doom (Ragnarök). In *Nidrstigningar saga*, it is Saint Olaf who kills Jörmungandr.⁴⁸ Given this, it is suddenly not so strange that the name of the rose in Norway should be “rose of Olaf.” It seems likely that Saint Olaf acquired the rosette together with the other attributes of Thor.

Taranis/Jupiter

Taranis, the Celtic thunder god, can also be connected with the rose, but as with Thor, the association is for the most part indirect. Taranis has a well-known association with wheels of six and eight spokes.⁴⁹ (Fig. 10) Miniature metal wheels thought to

⁴⁶ Georges Dumézil. *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). p. 125. Carl Lindahl et al (eds.), “Olaf, Saint” in *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 299

⁴⁷ Olav Bø, *Heilag-Olav i norsk folketradisjon* (Oslo: Samlaget, 1955), p. 46. Author’s translation.

⁴⁸ Oddgeir Hoftun, *Kristningsprosessens og herskermaktens ikonografi i nordisk middelalder* (Solum, 2008), p. 108.

⁴⁹ Miranda Green, “The Worship of the Romano-Celtic Wheel-God in Britain seen in Relation to Gaulish Evidence,” *Latomus* Vol. 38, No. 2 (April-June, 1979), pp. 345-367.



Figure 11 Gundestrup Cauldron, interior panel B. Photo: Claude Vallette, Wikimedia Commons.

derive from the cult of Taranis have been found in very large numbers and appear to have been partially mass-produced, as seen in a stone mold for casting wheels.⁵⁰

The wheels associated with Taranis mostly appear to be simple six-spoke circles (**Fig. 1F**), and not rosettes, but as the Russian evidence has already shown, the rosette can easily be interpreted as a wheel. For example, a depiction of a wheel god from Caerleon in Wales has a wheel that is probably a rosette, although the faint shape makes it difficult to be certain. The ambiguity is itself interesting, as it demonstrates how visually similar the two shapes are. It may well be that the rosette became accepted as a more aesthetically and geometrically appealing representation of the wheel. A rosette

⁵⁰ Green 1979, plate xv.

very similar to the spoked hexagon (**Fig. 1G**) was inscribed on an altar dedicated to Jupiter/Taranis and on an altar dedicated to Jupiter/Taranis in Chester, UK.⁵¹

Even earlier, the Gundestrup cauldron's panel C has a depiction thought to be of Taranis, where the visible part of the wheel has eight spokes (**Figs. 11-12**). Intriguingly, the rosette (**Fig. 1A**) appears on another panel (B), although with no obvious reference to Taranis. The cauldron is thought to have been made 200 BCE-300 CE in Thracia. While the area may have had some Christian belief at the time, the iconography on the cauldron is clearly pagan.



Figure 12 Gundestrup cauldron, interior panel C. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Jupiter was the Roman counterpart, and while he has no obvious association with wheels, he was often depicted as riding a quadriga (four-horse chariot) through

⁵¹ Alison Cooley, *Monumental Latin Inscriptions from Roman Britain in the Ashmolean Museum Collection* (Britannia, 2018), p. 15; Green 1979, plate XII.

the sky. Indeed, the main temple of Jupiter, that on the Capitoline hill in Rome, had a statue of Jupiter riding a quadriga at the apex of the roof.

In the Celtic areas of the Roman Empire Jupiter and Taranis were conflated into a single deity, known as Jupiter Taranis. It has already been suggested by several authors that the six-petalled rosette may have been used as a symbol in the cult of Jupiter Taranis among La Tene-period Celts. Peralta Labrador makes this connection and Dmitriy Galtsin also connects Taranis's six-spoke wheel with the six-petal rosette associated with Perun.⁵²

Zeus

Zeus, the Greek counterpart, has no well-known association with wheels, but depictions of him with wheels are nevertheless easy to find. One example is an eight-spoked wheel next to Zeus on a coin of Menander II 90–85 BCE, on the Wikipedia page for Zeus.

Perkunas

The Lithuanian counterpart was Perkunas, with Vytautas Tumenas suggesting that the six- or eight-spoked wheel was a shared attribute between Perun, Perkunas, and Jupiter.⁵³

The Wheel of the Thunder God

Thor may also have been associated with wheels. Archaeologists in Denmark and Sweden uncovered a large number of stone discs with holes in the center.⁵⁴ Swedish peasants called these "åskhjul" (thunder wheels) and they were still in use in the late 19th century. People would scrape off pieces of these wheels to use in medicine to cure

⁵² Peralta Labrador 1989 cites Jose Maria Blazquez, "Religiones preromanas", Madrid, 1983, p. 265, A. Gaidoz, "Le dieu gaulois du soleil", *Revue Archéologique*, Paris 1884-1885, and J. J. Hatt, "Rota flammis circumsepta. A propos du symbole de la roue dans la religion gauloise", *Revue Archeologique de l'Est*, II, 1957, pp. 82-87. Dmitriy Galtsin, "Claiming Europe: Celticity in Russian Pagan and Nativist Movement (1990s–2010s)," *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* Vol. 20, No. 2 (2018), pp. 208-233.

⁵³ Vytautas Tumenas, "The common attributes between the Baltic thunder god Perkunas and his antique equivalents Jupiter and Zeus," *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* Vol. 16, No. 4 (2016), pp. 359-367.

⁵⁴ Wilhelm Frimann Koren Christie, "Den Gotlandske Steenring," *Urda* Vol 1 (1837), pp. 45-66.

livestock diseases. (**Fig. 13**) While no explicit link with Thor is known, the name is suggestive, as is the similarity with Taranis's wheel cult.



Figure 13 Thunder wheel, Nordic Museum, 1930 gift of Viktor Karlsson from Ydre, southern Sweden. Nordic Museum NM.0185143. Photo: Mona-Lisa Djerf, CC BY-NC-ND.

Another wheel connection can be found in Russian iconography where Elijah is often shown ascending into heaven in a chariot (**Fig. 14**). The depictions emphasized the wheels, though this may be nothing more than a means of showing the chariot. It was precisely the ascension in the chariot which made Russian peasants connect Elijah with Perun in the first place.⁵⁵

An obvious question to ask is why a wheel would be associated with a thunder god. Several explanations have been offered. In connection with Taranis the suggestion that it is a sun-wheel represents something close to scholarly consensus.⁵⁶ Exactly why a thunder god would be associated with the sun is not clear, and no direct evidence connecting the wheel with the sun has been put forward. Vytautas Tumenas suggested

⁵⁵ Ivanits 1989, p. 30.

⁵⁶ Miranda Green, "Jupiter, Taranis and the solar wheel" in M. Henig and A. King (eds), *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph 8, 1986), pp. 65–75.

Figure 14 17th-century Russian icon of Elijah. Note that the wagon itself is hexagonal. Photo: Vladimir Podachev, Wikimedia Commons.

that the three crossed thunderbolts which the god is often depicted with, surrounded by a circle, together might form the wheel.

However, there is another possibility: Thor, Perun, and Perkunas are all described as riding through the sky in a two-wheeled chariot, and Jupiter in a quadriga. In the various religions this is how the god creates thunder, either by throwing



lightning bolts from the chariot, or (in Norse and Lithuanian mythology, at least) from the wheels themselves.⁵⁷ Because the chariot is a key attribute of the god, it does not seem fanciful to assume that the wheels associated with Taranis and the other forms of the god derive from the wheels on the chariot.

The wheel may have also been preferred as visual symbol for being far easier to draw, carve, and sculpt than the chariot. **Figure 14** vividly shows how even relatively sophisticated painters in later times found it difficult to paint a chariot and deliberately used the wheels to visually identify the vehicle as a (in this case) wagon.

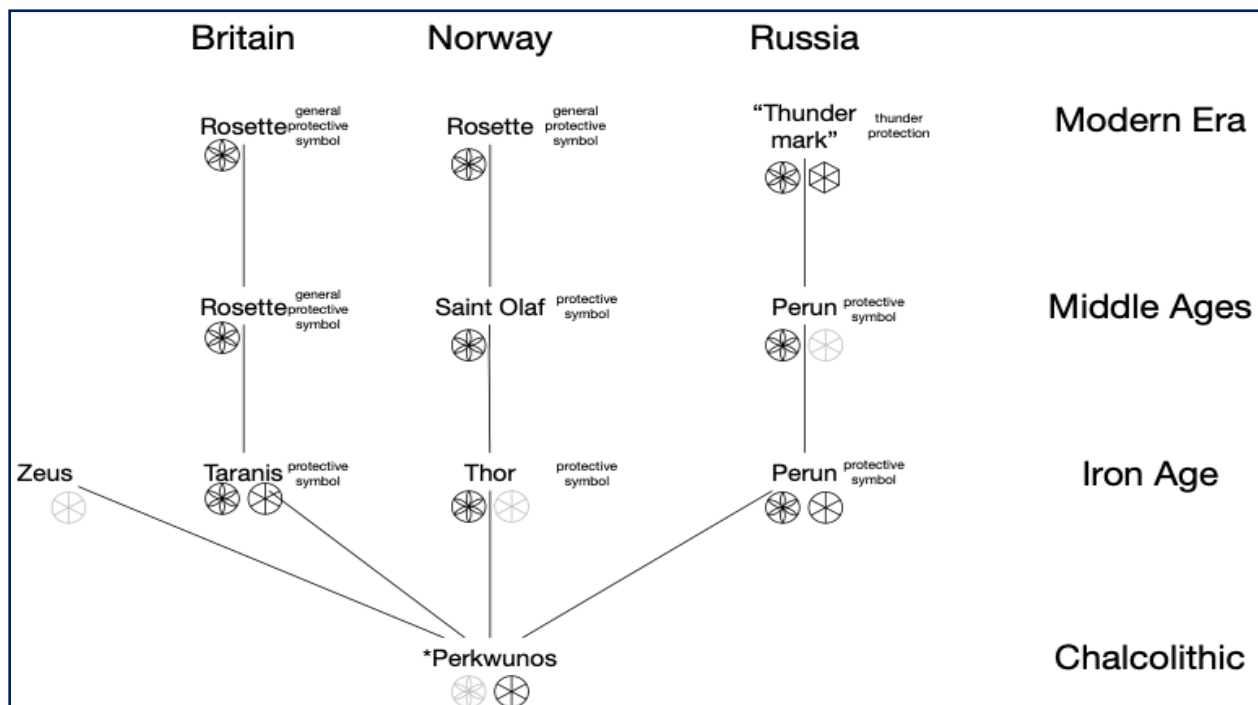


Figure 15 Schematic diagram of assumed development in time and space. Image: author.

⁵⁷ Anne Holtmark, *Norrøn mytologi*, (Oslo: Samlaget, 1970), p. 101; Nijole Laurinkiene, "Transformations of the Lithuanian God Perkunas," *Studia Mythologica Slavica* Vol. III (2000), pp. 149-158.

In this context, the Russian name “thunder wheel” begins to make more sense, and the sense of rotation that Åsta Østmoe Kostveit noted in the Norwegian rosettes suddenly becomes noteworthy. The English name “daisy wheel” likewise. The “twisted rosette,” found in Russia, Norway, and Switzerland in similar contexts to the rosette might conceivably be related, although no explicit proof of this has been found. The chariot wheel communicated to viewers a far more obvious symbolism to ordinary people than a sun-wheel, and so seems a better explanation. Still, the Lithuanian term “saulute” does point in the direction of the sun-wheel, although how old the term is, is not known.

Given how variable folk traditions are, it is not a given that the symbol necessarily had the same interpretation everywhere, or at all times, nor that each person necessarily subscribed to only one interpretation. In short, it seems that the wheel was considered a symbol of the Indo-European thunder god, and that the two rosettes (**Figs. 1A-1B**), and the six-spoked circle (**Fig. 1F**) were all considered visual representations of the wheel. Over time the connections weakened in many regions, and so some of the connotations of the various symbols were forgotten.

A possible ultimate origin

Of course, *Perkwunos need not be the symbol’s ultimate origin. The six-petal rosette also occurs in the Middle East and there it likely predates the Proto-Indo-Europeans. However, *Perkwunos himself was not necessarily a Proto-Indo-European invention, since early Middle Eastern religions abound in storm/sky gods with strong similarities to the derivatives of *Perkwunos. For example, Ba’al was a bearded storm god throwing thunderbolts who had a special enmity against snakes. Similarly, Marduk was bearded, threw lightning, and pursued the sea serpent Tiamat. Astrologically he was associated with the planet Jupiter. The original homeland of the Proto-Indo-Europeans lies on the plains north of the Black Sea, and archaeology shows there were extensive trade links with Middle Eastern civilizations.⁵⁸ The Middle Eastern thunder

⁵⁸ David Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 5.

gods all appear to lack any association with chariots, but this is easily explained, as the chariot appears to be an Indo-European invention.⁵⁹

Development over time

The rosette may originally have been a protective symbol associated with *Perkwunos whose use spread together with the belief in the Indo-European thunder gods. The early finds from Late Bronze Age Mycenae and Iron-Age Cantabria are not so early as to be inconsistent with this theory. Yet, with time, the symbol's associations must have changed in many places.

In Russia and Ukraine, the association with Perun is still remembered, although quite vaguely, and the mark has become protection against lightning rather than a general protection against evil forces. Judging from the reactions Russian friends received when asking their acquaintances for photographic examples, the association with heathen beliefs has made the rosette something of a taboo in today's Russia.

In Norway, the symbol seems to have changed association from Thor to Saint Olaf, though the connection with Saint Olaf became quite weak over time, possibly due to the Reformation. The symbol was clearly used as a general protective symbol until quite late, but in the late 19th and 20th centuries it became more purely decorative. Per Gjærder describes watching an old maker of wooden beer tankards (ølkanne) carve the rosette into the bottom of a tankard in Sunnfjord in Norway 1962. Gjærder asked the man why he did so, but the answer was just a shrug and a muttered "it should so be." Gjærder took this to mean that any belief associated with the symbol was by then gone, and that the man was "merely repeating empty form."⁶⁰

In Britain there is insufficient data to say whether the widespread use of the rosette on churches and farm buildings in the Middle Ages and after derives from the cult of Jupiter/Taranis, or whether it was reintroduced by later Norse invaders. Easton 2016 implies that the symbol is particularly prevalent in Suffolk, which is interesting, as Suffolk was part of the Danelaw (the area of England ruled by the Danes). The image on cross-slabs in the Isle of Man could also be due to Norse influence, as the island was

⁵⁹ Anthony 2010, p. 397. Strictly speaking, the Sintashta culture is credited with the invention. The Sintashta were an offshoot of the root Indo-European culture (the Yamnaya), thought to be ancestral to the Indo-Iranians.

⁶⁰ Gjærder 1982, p. 22.

under strong Norse influence from the 7th to the 13th century. Given that British folk tradition preserves no specific beliefs associated with the rosette, it would appear that the traditions associated with it died out relatively early in Britain.

Conclusion

Questions so poorly illuminated by explicit sources as this one cannot ever be answered with anything like certainty, but the theory that the six-petal rosette originates as the wheel of *Perkwunos seems quite well founded. Further detailed research should be able to either confirm or reject many of the more tenuous connections postulated in this paper.

As described initially, the rosette is a relatively simple geometric figure easily derived from basic usage of the compass. It would therefore be expected to show up in various contexts simply by chance. However, it has been so widely and popularly used across Europe in the same way, as a protective magical symbol, that there must be more to it than mere chance.

The key arguments in favor of the symbol originating with *Perkwunos include that the symbol in Slavic folklore is explicitly associated with lightning, Perun, and wheels. Wheels and chariots are already closely associated with other Indo-European thunder gods. In Norway, there is an indirect connection via Saint Olaf, and other scholars have already suggested the rosette might be associated with Taranis. If the rosette really does derive from *Perkwunos this would explain several aspects of the symbol's history.

A key aspect of Thor/Perun/Perkunas/Jupiter is their role as defenders against evil and monsters in various forms, which explains why the god's symbol would be used as a protective symbol. In popular belief this protective role was assumed by their Christian "successors," saints Elijah and Olaf. In Scandinavia, Russia, Lithuania, Greece, and Rome the protective thunder god was the most popular god in the pantheon, which helps explain why the symbol was so popular, at least initially.

As Indo-European peoples spread out over all of Europe, they left only small, isolated geographic pockets of languages belonging to other language families, explaining how the symbol became so popular across all of Europe. A pagan Indo-European origin would also explain how the symbol came to be widely used across Europe before the introduction of Christianity, as evidenced by the Gundestrup cauldron, the Norwegian bronze kettles, Mycenaean finds, and the Iron-Age Spanish carvings.

A final argument for the pagan origin of the symbol is its association in more recent times with remote and sparsely peopled regions: the north of Russia, the mountains of Galicia, the Pyrenees, the Alps, Norway, and Lithuania (the last country in Europe to adopt Christianity). In this context the widespread usage of the symbol in England appears to be quite exceptional. 🐉

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Morten Rønningen, Geoff Latham, Eirik Storesund, Simonas Gutautas, Martynas Savickis, Dmitriy Zhezlov, and Timothy Easton for valuable references and discussions. Many thanks also to the anonymous reviewer, who was very helpful, and to Birgit Irene Næss at Strømmen public library for helping me track down some of the more obscure references.