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## THE SYMBOL OF THE CROSS IN PRE-BURIAL RITUALS IN THE GALICIAN HUTSUL REGION (SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH – EARLY 20TH CENTURY)

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**The aim** of this article is to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the semantics, functions and specific features of the symbol of the cross in traditional beliefs concerning death and pre-funeral rituals among the Hutsuls of Galician Hutsulshchyna in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Particular attention is paid to determining the place of the cross within the system of folk beliefs, revealing its role in the sacralisation of space, and examining the interaction between Christian and pre-Christian worldview concepts preserved in Hutsul tradition.

The **methodological** framework of the study is based on the principles of historicism, scientific objectivity, and systematic analysis. The research employs historical-comparative, historical-genetic, structural-functional, ethnological, and semiotic methods. The source base includes historical and ethnographic works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemporary scholarly studies, archival materials, and the author's own field research conducted in the Verkhovyna and Kosiv districts of the Ivano-Frankivsk region.

**Results.** The study demonstrates that the symbol of the cross was present at all key stages of the pre-funeral ritual cycle. It has been established that, in the traditional culture of the Hutsuls, the cross performed not only religious but also apotropaic and communicative functions. The research traces the specific features of the use of the symbol of the cross during the preparation of the deceased for burial and in the sacralisation of the domestic space. It is shown that the cross functioned in close interaction with other protective elements of folk magic, including fire, tar, garlic and grain, forming an integrated system of ritual practices intended to ensure the soul's transition to the afterlife and to protect the living from the possible harmful influence of demonic forces believed to become active with the arrival of death. **Conclusions.** The study concludes that in the pre-funeral rituals of Galician Hutsulshchyna during the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the cross retained its status as a universal sacred symbol, combining the Christian doctrine of salvation and resurrection with archaic folk beliefs concerning death, the soul and the afterlife. Its multifunctional nature ensured its exceptional endurance within traditional Hutsul culture, where the cross remained one of the most significant elements of pre-funeral ritual practice, fulfilling religious, protective, ideological and socio-cultural functions.

**Keywords:** cross, death, ritual practices, Hutsuls, Galician Hutsulshchyna, folk beliefs, apotropaic practices, traditional culture, sacred space.

## СИМВОЛ ХРЕСТА В ПЕРЕДПОХОВАЛЬНІЙ ОБРЯДОВІСТІ НА ГАЛИЦЬКІЙ ГУЦУЛЬЩИНІ (ДРУГА ПОЛОВИНА ХІХ – ПОЧАТОК ХХ СТ.)

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**Метою** статті є комплексне дослідження семантики, функцій та особливостей використання символу хреста у традиційних уявленнях про смерть у передпоховальній обрядовості гуцулів в межах Галицької Гуцульщини у другій половині ХІХ – на початку ХХ ст. Особливу увагу приділено визначенню місця хреста в системі народних вірувань, виявленню його ролі в сакралізації простору та взаємодії християнських і дохристиянських світоглядних уявлень гуцулів. **Методологічну** основу дослідження становлять принципи історизму, наукової об'єктивності та системності. Використано історико-порівняльний, історико-генетичний, структурно-функціональний, етнологічний та семіотичний методи дослідження. Основою джерельної бази стали історико-етнографічні праці кінця ХІХ – початку ХХ ст., сучасні наукові дослідження, архівні матеріали та власні польові дослідження, здійснені на території Верховинського та Косівського районів Івано-Франківської області. **Результати.** З'ясовано, що символ хреста супроводжував усі основні цикли передпоховального етапу. Встановлено, що в традиційній культурі гуцулів хрест виконував не лише релігійну, а й апотропеїчну (охоронну) та комунікативну функції. Простежено особливості використання символу хреста під час підготовки померлого до поховання, а також практики сакралізації житлового простору.

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Доведено, що символ хреста функціонував у тісному взаємозв'язку з іншими обереговими засобами народної магії, зокрема вогнем, дьогтем, сажею, зерном, утворюючи єдину систему захисних обрядодій, спрямованих на забезпечення переходу душі до потойбіччя та захисті живих від можливого негативного впливу демонічних сил, що за віруваннями гуцулів активізувалися з приходом смерті. **Висновки.** Встановлено, що в передпоховальній обрядовості Галицької Гуцульщини другої половини XIX – початку XX ст. хрест зберігав статус універсального сакрального символу, який уніфікував християнське вчення про спасіння і воскресіння та архаїчні народні уявлення про смерть, душу та потойбічний світ. Його багатофункціональність забезпечила виняткову стійкість у традиційній культурі гуцулів, де хрест залишався одним із найважливіших елементів передпоховальної обрядовості, виконуючи релігійну, захисну, та соціокультурну функції.

**Ключові слова:** хрест, смерть, обрядовість, гуцули, Галицька Гуцульщина, народні вірування, апотропеїка, традиційна культура, сакральний простір.

## 1. Introduction

By the beginning of the 20-th century, funeral rites in the Galician Hutsul region remained the most archaic and conservative aspect of its traditional culture, having developed over the centuries into a coherent system of rituals, practices and symbols. One of the key elements of this system in Hutsul tradition was the symbol of the cross. In Christian terms, it personified the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the victory of life over death and the hope of resurrection; however, in folk culture, its meaning was considerably broader. This was particularly evident in ritual practices associated with the approach and onset of death. The cross became an integral part of preparing a person for their passing, the sacralisation of the living space, and a means of performing protective rites and ritual practices designed to ensure the soul's proper passage to the afterlife. Alongside church rites, local folk customs continued to be practised in the community, in which the symbol of the cross was combined with other apotropaic elements: candles, water, grain, garlic, tar and other objects that were also believed to possess protective qualities.

The study of the symbol of the cross in pre-funeral rites allows for a deeper understanding of the distinctive features of the Hutsul worldview, the nature of the interaction between Christian tradition and folk beliefs, and the mechanisms for the preservation of archaic elements in the spiritual culture of the Carpathian population.

## 2. The role of the cross in preparations for death

In the traditional Hutsul worldview, death was perceived as a complex, protracted and perilous transitional stage, during which both the deceased and their living relatives and members of the community faced threats from demonic forces that filled the mythological universe of Hutsul culture: the aridnyk, the devil, the opyr, the nyavka, the bida, poterchata, and so on. (Onishchuk, 1909: 47–139). This was an extremely unstable period, when the established balance of the world of the living was disrupted by the opening of the boundary between the earthly and the otherworldly realms. It is for this very reason that Hutsul funeral rites took shape as a coherent system of ritual actions, linked primarily to apotropaic practices, the use of numerous attributes of folk magic, and rituals involving the symbol of the cross, with the aim of neutralising

the chaotic forces of evil which, according to folk beliefs, became active at the moment of death and throughout the entire funeral and memorial cycle. In this context, the cross served not only as the central symbol of the Christian faith, but also as a universal sacred sign of a protective nature, capable of ordering space and restoring the disturbed cosmic balance. Its use can be traced through virtually every stage of the funeral rite: from the moment of agony and the declaration of death to the burial and subsequent memorial practices. Placing a cross on the dying person, the coffin, the doors and windows of the house, funeral paraphernalia along the route of the funeral procession, and on the grave was intended not only to bless the deceased but also to protect the living from the possible return of the soul and the harmful influence of demonic beings.

Hutsul funeral rites follow a clearly defined three-stage structure, comprising the pre-burial, burial and post-burial (commemoration) cycles (Guziy, 2006: 569). Each of these stages constitutes a separate, self-contained set of ritual acts aimed at facilitating the deceased's transition from the world of the living to the «after life», as well as at ensuring the protection of the family and the community. By analysing ethnographic sources from the second half of the 19th century and drawing on the findings of recent fieldwork conducted within the communities of the Verkhovyna and Kosiv districts, we can identify a fourth sub-stage – the «preparatory» stage – which precedes the three main ones. This stage is linked exclusively to the concept of a «proper» death. In traditional Hutsul culture, a «proper» death (sometimes described as «good», «natural» or «righteous») (Shukhevych, 2018: 1156), meant a death that occurred at the appointed time of life, in one's own home, surrounded by family, and with all the necessary pre-death rites observed. Key features of such a death included the opportunity for confession and communion, the making of an oral will, saying farewell to loved ones, the recitation of prayers, and the lighting of a candle, accompanied by the frequent making of the sign of the cross (Spaska – Labchuk, 1967). Of particular significance in this context were actions aimed at easing the soul's departure and ensuring its passage to the afterlife. To this end, a cross was placed upon the dying person if they were unable to do so themselves. This act was of paramount importance, given

that, according to Hutsul belief, a soul without a cross would not reach the «Other World» but would remain wandering on Earth (Pawluk, 1951). In the lowland villages of Galician Hutsulshchyna, a consecrated candle was lit beside the dying person, it was placed in their hands or kept near their bed. The candle's flame symbolised the light of Christ, which was meant to illuminate the soul's path to the Kingdom of Heaven, and also served an apotropaic function, protecting the person from the interference of demonic forces at the moment of death. Relatives and those present prayed continuously, repeatedly making the sign of the cross over themselves and the dying person. It was the sign of the cross that was considered the most effective means of ensuring victory over the forces of evil, which, according to popular belief, became particularly active at the moment the soul parted from the body (Gurej, 1967).

In contrast to a «proper» death, particular concern was caused by the so-called «sudden» or «abrupt» death, which occurred suddenly and violently, through suicide, drowning, death by lightning strike or other extraordinary circumstances. Such cases disrupted the traditional order of the afterlife and were regarded as potentially dangerous to the community. Those who died in such circumstances were often attributed with the characteristics of «unclean» dead, capable of exerting a negative influence on the living after death. This is precisely why additional protective and apotropaic practices were applied to them, a significant proportion of which were also linked to the symbolism of the cross. For example, if an unbaptised child (zbiglyne) dies, according to Hutsul belief, it will inevitably turn into a devil, Satan (bida) will take it and carry it away. «That one, the zbiglyne, as misfortune carries it into the clouds, cries out in many voices and pleads: «Whoever believes in God, let them give me a cross, or at least a cross-shaped object. If no one heeds it, it vanishes without a trace and becomes the worst of devils» (Shikerik, 2009: 150). In this context, the preparatory stage of the funeral rites served an extremely important function in preparing a person for the transition to another state of being. Through a complex of religious, magical and social actions, not only was a farewell to the deceased observed, but a protective space was also formed, designed to ensure the soul's harmonious transition to the afterlife and to minimise risks to the living members of the community. It is precisely within this stage that the symbolism of the cross as a universal symbol of protection and the ordering of the liminal state between life and death is most clearly manifested. V. Shukhevych describes the Hutsuls' preparations for death as follows: «As soon as a man shows signs of impending death, they lay him on a bench by the dining room window, wrap him in a white cloth, wash his hands and feet with warm water, and shave the older man. Those who still have the strength make the sign of the cross themselves,

and if they are unable to do so, others make the sign of the cross for them» (Shukhevych, 2018: 609). In the presence of a person who is «passing away», one must refrain from weeping and instead recite the «Lord's Prayer» (Shukhevych, 2018: 609). According to the accounts of R. Kaindl (Kaindl, 2000) and O. Kolberg (Kolberg, 1970), ordinary Hutsuls at the end of the 19th century knew no canonical prayers apart from the «Lord's Prayer» and, occasionally, the «Hail Mary». Consequently, it was the symbol of the cross, which accompanied prayer at the bedside of the dying, that sanctified space and time, remaining the primary symbol of faith for the Hutsuls.

According to Hutsul beliefs, a home to which «death had come» would partially lose its status as a safe living environment and become a place vulnerable to the influence of demonic forces. Objects that had come into contact with the deceased were also considered defiled and were often used in folk magic practices with the exception of the cross. Even seeds were removed from the house so that they would not «freeze» along with the owner (Shukhevych, 2018: 609). Such actions were driven by beliefs regarding the «impurity» of both the deceased's body and the space in which death occurred. Therefore, the preparatory stage involved not only preparing the person for death, but also the entire living space. It is no coincidence that the beams of a Hutsul house were invariably crowned with crosses and thunder symbols. Crosses were burned onto the doorways using a Jordan candle, and similar symbols were drawn with tar or soot. These actions were intended to protect the dwelling from any negative influence, which, according to folk beliefs, was particularly intensified with the onset of death. In addition to the cross, other ritual objects and amulets were used, including candles, holy water, poppy seeds and wedding regalia, in line with similar practices throughout Ukraine and Europe (Huzii, 2006: 569). Also, relatives sought to create a proper sacred space around the dying person. Icons, holy water, candles and other objects of religious worship were placed by the bedside. In some localities, a window was opened or a door left ajar so that angels could come to the person and take their soul (Shukhevych, 2018: 609). These actions reflected a syncretic blend of Christian dogmatic beliefs with older folk beliefs concerning the soul's journey and the need to ensure its proper passage between the worlds. Thus, the symbol of the cross in the rites associated with preparing for death in the Galician Hutsul region served as an independent apotropaic means, whilst remaining a unique sign of God.

### 3. The significance of the cross in pre-burial rites

The pre-burial stage began immediately after a person's death. «When a person dies, the body is laid out, dressed beforehand during life, if death occurs suddenly, it is dressed immediately by anyone: relatives

or neighbors. Once the body is placed on the bench, it is covered, leaving the footwear and the face uncovered» (Shekeryk-Donikiv, 2009: 162). As part of this ritual, a small wooden cross was made, tied with red thread, placed in a small cup containing grain, and set beside the head of the deceased. The grain traditionally symbolised rebirth and the cyclical nature of existence; the red thread served as a talisman; and the cross, as P. Shekeryk-Donikiv notes, was intended to serve the soul after death so that it might pray to God (Shekeryk-Donikiv, 2009: 163). This purpose of the folk-crafted cross is an element of local tradition, which likely has more ancient origins, since shortly after a death, a member of the household would go to church, from where they would bring back a hand-made cross (crucifix), which was placed alongside the wooden cross that had already been made (Kolberg, 1970: 327). The duplication of the folk wooden cross and the church crucifix may indicate not only the archaic nature of the original tradition, but also the different functional purposes of these objects. In the Christian tradition, the cross with the crucifix is a testament to Christ's sacrifice and a symbol of the Resurrection, whereas the folk wooden cross, together with bread and a candle, may have been regarded as an essential item of equipment to ensure the soul's well-being in the afterlife (Shekeryk-Donikiv, 2009: 163). This combination of two objects – different in origin but similar in symbolic meaning – clearly demonstrates the syncretism of the Hutsul pre-funeral tradition. Such practices correspond to broader Carpathian and pan-Ukrainian beliefs regarding the need to provide the deceased with items that might be required during their passage to the afterlife. In this context, a small wooden cross, made immediately after death, can be regarded not only as a Christian symbol but also as a kind of mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Placing it by the head of the deceased, together with grain and a red thread, was intended to ensure the soul's safe passage to the afterlife and, at the same time, to protect the home from the deceased's possible return. Consequently, the combination of the folk-crafted cross with the ecclesiastical crucifix reflects a synthesis of archaic beliefs and Christian symbolism characteristic of Hutsul tradition, in which both objects, despite their outward similarity, performed different yet complementary functions within the structure of the pre-burial rites.

According to V. Shukhevych, after a person's death, whilst some of the household members went to fetch the gravedigger, the carpenter, the priest and the trembita players, others lit a bonfire in front of the house (Shukhevych, 2018: 610). Among the Hutsuls, the bonfire was associated with concepts such as purification, grace, light, life and protection; the cross

embodied these same qualities. In this instance, it may be surmised that, amongst other things, the bonfire in the ritual system of the pre-funeral cycle is present as a vestige of relict Slavic traditions, when the rite of cremation was practised (Kolesa, 2001: 12). An analysis of ethnographic materials suggests that the symbolism of the cross in traditional Hutsul rituals during preparations for a funeral has, to a large extent, retained archaic features. The use of bonfires, grain, and the marking of cross-shaped symbols with tar and charcoal attests to the pre-Christian foundations of many beliefs, which were subsequently integrated into the Christian tradition.

#### 4. Conclusions

The research carried out provides grounds for asserting that the symbol of the cross held an important place in the traditions associated with preparing a person for death and in pre-burial rites within the Galician Hutsul region in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Its function was not limited solely to the canonical Christian interpretation, but encompassed a broader range of mythological and socio-cultural meanings. In this context, the cross emerges as a syncretic symbol, combining the function of a talisman with the Christian understanding of salvation and resurrection, and serving as one of the key elements of Hutsul pre-burial rituals. At the same time, within the system of traditional beliefs, it served as an important means of symbolically organising space. In combination with other apotropaic means, the cross became a key instrument for the sacralisation of the home and the neutralisation of the dangers accompanying the liminal state between life and death. It simultaneously served as a sign of the salvation of the soul, a means of protecting the community, and an important mechanism for restoring the disrupted order, ensuring the deceased's passage to the world of the ancestors. The study revealed that the semantics of the cross in the funeral rites of the Galician Hutsul region were shaped by the long-standing interplay between pre-Christian beliefs and ecclesiastical tradition. Consequently, the cross in Hutsul pre-funeral rites emerges as a complex, multifunctional symbol that unifies church and folk traditions, combining Christian notions of the resurrection with archaic beliefs about death, the soul and the afterlife. A promising avenue for further research is a comprehensive analysis of the functioning of the cross as a symbol at all stages of Hutsul funeral and memorial rites, and its comparison with the traditions of other historical and ethnographic regions of Ukraine. Equally important is the study of the transformation of the semantics and ritual functions of the cross in the context of the social and cultural changes of the 21st century.

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