

Sacred Footwear: Latvian Perceptions in the 19th Century and Today

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Abstract: This article sheds light on previously overlooked perceptions of Latvian traditional footwear and demonstrates how both the material of the footwear and the way of obtaining it determined whether shoes were considered sacred and pure or sinful and unlucky. An analysis of folklore texts and the results of a contemporary survey show that wooden shoes made of bast were looked upon as sacred and pure, as opposed to leather which was considered impure. Bast shoes are the cheapest to make, yet historical records from central Latvia show that they were worn for weddings. Peasants did this to ensure success for the couple, suggesting that the choice of footwear was determined by some mythological meaning and not only by practical or financial considerations. Though some new developments can be observed, many modern Latvians tend to sympathize with the perceptions documented a century ago. This allows for estimates of the significance of these perceptions in previous centuries.

Key words: bast shoes, wooden shoes, leather footwear, modern perceptions, sacred as clean and pure, traditional dress

Introduction

Dress consists of garments, accessories, and footwear, and it has been a close human companion for thousands of years. Thus, features of society are reflected and incorporated by clothing: economics, technology, skills and crafts, trade, societal and behavioral norms, as well as mythological perceptions, among others. It seems that there may be as many intangible aspects to dress as there are practical. The aim of the article is to illuminate an unnoticed set of perceptions regarding Latvian traditional footwear to demonstrate how the material of footwear and the way of obtaining it determined whether the shoes would have been considered sacred or sinful. This has been accomplished by thorough analysis of written sources (content, wording, meaning, context), combined with contemporary survey results and based on previous studies of material sources and their chronological development.

Historical written sources

This article is based on analysis of historical written sources which mention wooden bast shoes. The focus is on eleven texts that have been collected over more than ten years of research on folklore and ethnographic material. This material is stored in the archives of three memory institutions: the Latvian Folklore Archives (LFK) at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, specifically their collection of traditions and database of proverbs (LTT); the National History Museum of Latvia (LNVM) and its Monument Board archive (PV); and the Institute of Latvian History at the University of Latvia and their Repository of Ethnographic Material (E). Of these, only the database of the proverbs is both published and available online. The other archive materials have not yet been digitised or published. These materials were acquired during ethnographic expeditions that took place in Latvia between 1925 and 1949; it should be noted that respondents were asked to talk about the 'old times' and ways of life. We therefore assume that the traditions reflected in the material were widespread in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, they are also likely to involve older traditions and knowledge that were passed down from generation to generation.

Previous research

Until now, traditional Latvian bast shoes have been outside the scope of research in all disciplines. Neither dress historians nor folklore researchers have paid much attention to bast shoes, aside from mentioning them among other types of traditional footwear, often placing them lowest in the hierarchy of prestige (Šmits 1929: 418–421; Slava 1966: 91; Jansone 2021: 32, 83, 98) until a recent more thorough analysis (Pigozne 2023: 158–161).

This article is the first to explore the aspect of mythological meanings of bast shoes. The phenomenon of perceptions and ritual practices connected with traditional footwear had been previously recognized by folklore researcher Kārlis Straubergs (Straubergs 1944: 347–352). The mythological meaning of garments and footwear is depicted in a chapter in Ieva Pigozne's monograph devoted to the colours of Baltic dress (Pigozne 2020: 127–140). Wedding attire was analysed in two articles by Pigozne; however, only one of them mentions bast shoes and the peculiar perception that these shoes were the best footwear for weddings (Pigozne 2018: 146–147). No other authors have paid particular attention to bast shoes or the traditions of peasant wedding attire. Several researchers have devoted their studies to the sacrality of trees (Švābe 1920; Straubergs 1944: 53–84; Reidzāne 2015: 89–137) in Latvian folklore, less often to domestic animals and pets (Straubergs 1944: 165–206).

Types of traditional peasant footwear

The nineteenth century was a century of major transformation not only in the development of production and infrastructure, but also in clothing. The traditional dress of Latvian peasants underwent multiple extensive shifts. In the 1850s and 60s, starting in the Riga area and other parts of Vidzeme (in the governorate of Livonia) and Zemgale (in the governorate of Courland), traditional peasant clothing gradually disappeared from festive wear, and by the end of the century also from daily wear (Karlsone 2013: 20–22). Footwear was the least varied part of peasant clothing. For centuries, traditional peasant footwear could be made of wooden bast or leather. Leather shoes were of three kinds: one-piece leather shoes tied with laces or *pastalas*, shoes, and boots. *Pastalas* were the most common footwear of Latvian peasants as documented

by Johann Christoff Brotze (1742–1823) in the last quarter of the 18th century (Pigozne 2016). Shoes and boots were the most expensive footwear, and they became commonly widespread only in the second half of the 19th century (Jansone 2021: 32).



Figure 1. A pair of worn one-piece leather shoes tied with laces or *pastalas*. Private collection. Photo Ieva Pigozne.

Bast shoes were of two types: either made of bast together with bark and woven loosely, or made of plain bast and woven tightly according to the form of the foot. The first type was easier to make and less durable, the second was light, more elaborate and prestigious. Both were called *vīzes*. Another type of *vīzes* or *petērnēs* was made of linen or skein cord and was mostly worn in winter.



Figure 2. A pair of bast shoes – *vīzes* – made of bast and bark. Private collection. Photo Ieva Pigozne.



Figure 3. A pair of light bast shoes – *vīzes* – made of plain bast. Private collection. Photo Ieva Pigozne.

Archaeological expeditions discovered the first bast shoes in the 9th century settlement of Āraiši (Zariņa 1999: 83) and the first *pastalas* were found in the layers of an 11th century Koknese settlement (Bebre 1997: 114). The last examples of Latvians making and wearing *vīzes* and *pastalas* were documented in the middle of the 20th century. This shows that wearing the simplest bast and leather shoes is a tradition that spanned over a thousand years. Accordingly, perceptions connected with making and wearing these shoes are likely very old and were passed on from generation to generation, although dating these perceptions is a very challenging task.

An analysis of historical texts and their context

Historical texts containing information on bast footwear are scarce, as most records do not refer to any kind of footwear. Because bast shoes have been thought of as the least prestigious footwear, it is surprising to learn that they are sometimes mentioned in descriptions of Latvian wedding traditions. These 19th century descriptions occasionally mention the attire of the bride and the groom, but rarely is there a focus on footwear. The texts analysed here are exceptions as they not only talk about bast shoes being worn at weddings, but also explain why. Commentaries on why certain traditions were practiced are

rarely added to the descriptions at the time of interviews because it is either common knowledge or simply not asked for. In this case, the explanations are rather extraordinary, and, therefore, these five texts served as inspiration for the writing of this article. Four of the texts are stored at the Archives of Latvian Folklore and one at the National History Museum of Latvia. All five were documented during interviews conducted in the Madona district in the Vidzeme region in 1928.

People did not wear leather shoes or boots for weddings in the old days. They wore bast shoes. Footwear that was made of leather was considered un-sacred, but *linden bast was viewed as especially sacred* (my italics). (LFK 893, 279 Madona district, Bērzaune parish, Kaileņu 6kl pmsk.)

Wedding traditions. People wore bast shoes or leather shoes. Bast shoes were considered to be *more sacred* than those made of leather, because leather was taken from animals, and thus *they were a sin*. (LFK 891, 3298 Madona district, Lazdona parish)

Old wedding traditions. People did not wear shoes or *pastalas* – they could happen to be made of a hide from fallen stock. In that case the couple would have bad luck with their cattle in the future. (LFK 891, 3162 Madona district, Ļaudona parish)

People wore yellow leather *pastalas*, later – shoes. In the earlier times people wore bast shoes. That was done to avoid entering the marriage wearing the hide of fallen stock as that could happen if *pastalas* were worn. (LFK 891, 3170 Madona district, Sāviena in Ļaudona parish)

People did not wear leather footwear for weddings. They could be made of the hide of fallen stock and that would lead to bad luck. People instead peeled *clean bast* and wore bast shoes. (LNVM PV: Madona district, Mētriena parish, informant Ede Bērziņš 76 years old, Āres farmstead)

Currently, only three other texts have been found where bast shoes are mentioned as the footwear of the bride and/or groom. Two of them are stored at the Archives of Latvian Folklore (e.g., LFK 891, 3200 Madona district, Cesvaine parish; LFK 891, 3188 Madona district, Kalsnava parish) and one at the Repository of Ethnographic Material at the Institute of Latvian History (E20, 2959 Balvi district, Latgale region, documented in 1949).

Footwear: people wore bast shoes. And they wore them for weddings, too. Wedding shoes were made of bast from elm trees; such shoes belonged to the festive attire. Linden bast shoes were used for work and everyday use. (E20, 2959 Silmala, Balvi district)

Again, it must be noted that if any footwear is mentioned in the descriptions of wedding traditions, it most often refers to bast shoes. The last three texts, however, do not explain why bast shoes were worn to weddings. Though they further indicate that the assumption that bast shoes were the least prestigious might be wrong, or that there are other values besides the scale of expensive/modern/prestigious versus cheap/old-fashioned/humble.

The meaning of the word *svēts*

The Latvian-English dictionary provides a translation of the word *svēts* as sacred or holy. The etymology shows that *svēts* originates from the Indo-European root meaning 'sacred' or 'light', which resulted in the earliest meaning of *svēts* being 'bright', 'light', and 'white' (Karulis 2001: 970–972). The Thesaurus of the Latvian language (Tezaurs) provides several meanings for *svēts* including divine, very intense and important, and certain and real. The National History Museum of Latvia holds one text devoted to bast shoes where adding an extra level of cord woven to the soles made them 'more sacred'. This is a very unusual use of the word 'sacred', although it resonates with some of the meanings of the word provided in the Thesaurus.

Linden bast shoes were worn for all farm work when the weather was dry. In winter they were fortified with a linen string *to become more sacred*. This footwear was also used for festive occasions. (LNVM PV: Rudzāti parish, Daugavpils district, Latgale region, documented in 1927)

The first five cited texts, however, bring up another definition of the word 'sacred' in Latvian meaning 'clean', 'pure', 'innocent'. Altogether in the texts included in this study the word 'sacred' is used in three different meanings that can be arranged in pairs of opposites:

- sacred as sacred and good versus sinful;

- sacred as clean (also white), pure, undamaged, innocent versus dirty, damaged, unclean, and impure;
- sacred as strong or fortified versus weak and unsustainable.

However, in the analysed texts it is not possible to identify a clear pair of opposites in the 'sacred vs. profane' category (Eliade 1996: 19–24), as it could be argued that the antonyms 'clean vs. dirty' might fit better into the category of 'sacred/pure' vs. 'damaged/sinful'.

The mythological meaning of bast shoes

In this study, the term 'mythological' refers to sacred (as opposed to profane) ideas or activities the meaning of which embodies a manifestation of the spiritual world based in mythology and often explained through symbols.

The five texts that are our focus reveal that in the 19th century people wore bast shoes for weddings because shoes made of linden or other trees were considered sacred, pure, and clean, whereas shoes made of cattle leather were to be avoided because they were seen as unclean and damaged, even 'sinful'. The explanations provided in the texts clarify that leather shoes were to be avoided as they might be made from the hide of fallen stock and thus be unclean. We should also clarify that fallen stock refers to a farm animal that has died of a natural cause or disease. Thus, the natural death of an animal is considered dirty as opposed to slaughtering, which is an interesting point of view, as it applies the same category of 'clean' versus 'dirty' to the skin of the animal as to whether the animal's meat can be used for human consumption. Footwear is never eaten, so this aspect should not affect the practical side of wearing leather shoes, thus demonstrating that the material of the footwear is looked upon not only practically but also as having a mythological meaning. The words and explanations provided allow us to conclude that the concept of sacred is viewed in the 'clean/pure/innocent' vs. 'dirty/damaged/corrupt' category and somehow less in the category of 'sacred' vs. 'profane'.

Regarding the mythological meaning of bast shoes, two more texts should be mentioned. They are two folk beliefs recorded in two different villages in the north-eastern corner of the Madona district. They both talk about throwing bast shoes in the direction of a hunter or fisherman leaving for work if one wishes

them to have a successful take that day (LTT 19559 Lubāna parish, Madona district; LTT 19560 Meirāni parish, Madona district). No further explanation is given, however, again we can conclude that bast shoes were viewed as something good and capable of bringing good luck.

Those who stay at home should throw bast shoes in the direction of a hunter or fisherman when they leave for work. This will ensure them success. (LTT 19560 Meirāni parish, Madona district)

Before comparing the materials of wood and leather, we should also mention that in many parts of Latvia, folk beliefs about footwear have been recorded where any kind of footwear seems to signal how lucky or unlucky the wearer's journey or even life ahead will be. In addition, throwing footwear in the direction of the door and interpreting the position of them when landing was also a popular method of traditional divination of the future during Christmas or New Year celebrations. Both traditions are mentioned in publications by Kārlis Straubergs (Straubergs 1944: 347–351) and Ieva Pīgozne (Pīgozne 2020: 136–138).

Digging into people's opinions today

To explore further the depth of the mythological meanings behind bast and leather shoes, the decision was made to conduct an 'ethnographic excavation' of Latvian perceptions. The author of this study had a successful experience in a similar ethnographic excavation in 2012 while interviewing 52 women about mythological perceptions and practices connected to clothing and footwear (Pīgozne 2013: 83–91). This previous case proved to be useful in understanding more about the archival records, as well as finding out that much of the lore and many of the skills had survived into the 21st century. It turned out that many people possessed knowledge passed down from previous generations, accompanied by an exchange of information among interest groups as well as via published literature and social media.

An online survey containing three questions was carried out in the summer of 2022 with 321 participants. The average age of the participants was 48.6 years. There were approximately 10 times more women than men, however, despite the call to participate being advertised to everyone. Only one question had multiple-choice answers, whereas the other two were free-form and produced

a wide variety of answers. The answers to the open questions are not provided in percentage or absolute numbers because the varieties in their form and word uses meant only the main tendencies could be identified. The answers provided are discussed in detail only as far as they refer directly to the question of sacred footwear analysed earlier.

To find out whether modern people also consider wooden bast shoes more sacred than those of leather, the first question was: “Are some natural objects more sacred than others? Please answer according to your opinion and how you feel about them.” It was a multiple-choice question and had several possible answers. The results (the number of responses indicated in the parentheses) confirmed that natural objects from which bast is made were considered sacred much more often than domestic animals, i.e. – the source of cowhide (leather) for shoes and boots. A natural spring (source of water) was the most common answer (149), followed by a tree (146) and a forest (120). A domestic animal was the least popular answer (9), thus placing it lowest on the scale of most sacred natural objects included in the survey.

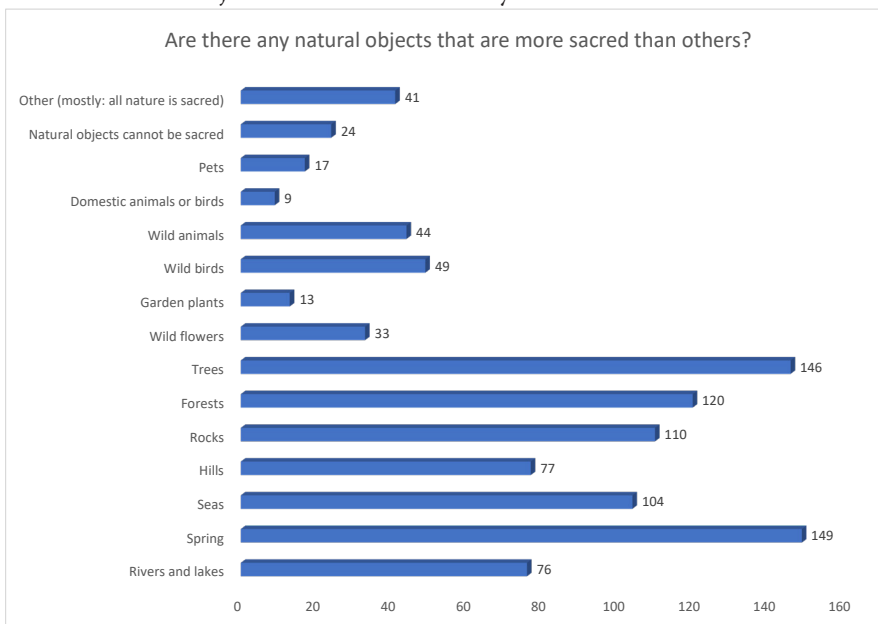


Figure 4. Results of the survey conducted in 2022 by Ieva Pigozne.

The results of the survey clearly correspond to the analysed texts on sacred footwear and reveal that similar perceptions of sacred natural objects persist in the 21st century. At the same time, there were people who thought that natural objects cannot be sacred (24) and those who replied in the open answer section (41), most of whom emphasized that all nature is sacred. Therefore, it appears that strong Christian or scientific world views were underrepresented, considering that nature as sacred was viewed as an acceptable idea by the majority of respondents.

The second question was aimed at formulating the material of potential imagined sacred footwear: “If you had to make sacred clothing or footwear, what material would you choose? Don’t think about how easy or hard it is to do, but about the ideal option.” The most frequent answers included natural textile fibres, of which linen, silk and wool were mentioned most often, while nettle, hemp and cotton appeared less frequently. Among repeatedly mentioned answers were other natural materials, including leather, fur, wood, and bast. Much less often other natural materials such as stone, crystals, silver, gold, bronze, and metal were mentioned, and these seem to nod in the direction of mythological beliefs, probably inspired by fairytales or fantasy fiction. Among such answers were light, the sun, sunlight, peace, fog, amber, moonlight, spiderwebs, shells, feathers, flowers, and water, and most were mentioned only once.

One group of answers was quite practical, reflecting modern eco-friendly thinking. This group included natural materials, local materials, and unspecified materials that do not pollute the environment. Some people paid more attention to the emotional value of their sacred attire mentioning that it had to be handmade, self-made, or given as a gift with good thoughts. Others emphasised that the sacred attire had to be made of something light or white. These answers align well with the previously described notion of clean and white. A few answers specified that sacred attire could only be made of natural materials of both plant and animal origin, provided that the animal was not killed specifically for the purpose. This seems to contradict the old perceptions according to which slaughtered animals were acceptable but fallen stock was not. A small group of respondents, however, replied by saying that sacred attire does not exist. A common monotheistic religious-based answer was: “How can clothing or footwear be sacred? That is absurd. Only God is sacred.”

As expected, the responses were diverse, and natural materials – especially those historically used to make traditional clothing and footwear – were among

the most popular. At the same time, the number of respondents who could not imagine sacred clothing or footwear was surprisingly small for a 21st century European society. Another noteworthy observation is that typical Christian values were noted less frequently than those of a modern eco-friendly approach.

The third question was targeted at finding respondents' attitude to the ideas expressed in the analysed texts: "From your point of view today, how would you comment on the documented idea that in the 19th century bast shoes were considered sacred because they were made of wood (linden bast), but leather shoes were made of cowhide and therefore could not be sacred?" There were no dominant answers to this question, although the variety was not great. The largest group of answers expressed agreement and understanding, while admitting that they had never thought about the issue, and that this seemed to be "a good point" and even an acknowledgement that "I will look at bast shoes differently now." Along with people who did not answer this question, there were also comments that tried to explain the situation, for example, "That is what people thought back then" and "These people must have been weird." Another set of answers asserted that "There is no difference whether you kill an animal, or a tree" and others made comments on and calls for vegan or vegetarian lifestyles. These answers were those that could be recognised as most reflective of a modern eco-friendly lifestyle and/or esotericism. The overall conclusion, however, is that most of the answers either contained sympathy for the idea of sacred footwear or a willingness to understand and treasure it as ancient knowledge. There were very few who expressed outright rejection or condemnation.

It is possible to conclude that according to the results of the survey, when asked about sacred shoes and clothing today, Latvians tend to have three different opinions. Many agree with the opinions from the 19th century, while some do not see a difference between killing an animal or tree, and others cannot fathom how footwear or clothing could be considered sacred. It appears that the first two groups look at sacred footwear and clothing in the category of 'clean'/'pure' vs. 'unclean'/'impure', while the third group – 'sacred' vs. 'profane'. However, when asked about the sacred objects of nature, all respondents think in the category of 'sacred' vs. 'profane'. The results of the survey reveal that trees are overwhelmingly more often considered sacred than household animals and this result backs the idea expressed in the analysed texts containing traditions from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Moreover, the comparison of 19th

and 21st century argumentation demonstrates how people's worldviews have developed, as well as how durable some of the old ideas can be. The persistence of these ideas well into the 21st century suggest that they must have been very important in the past.

Conclusions

Traditions of making and wearing wooden bast shoes had been documented in the territory of contemporary Latvia, lasting for more than a thousand years until their disappearance in the 20th century. There is, however, little information on either the practical aspects of the tradition or the mythological perceptions of bast shoes. This article is the first to be devoted to Latvian traditional bast and leather shoes and aspects of mythological perceptions connected with them.

From analysing texts stored in three different memory institutions we can conclude that bast shoes are the only footwear about which there are additional specific mythological perceptions in addition to those connected with footwear in general. Texts from the Madona district in the Vidzeme region carry evidence that bast shoes were considered sacred. 'Sacred' in this context means that bast shoes were looked upon as clean, pure, and undamaged, as opposed to leather shoes, *pastalas*, and boots that were viewed as unclean, damaged, and even sinful because they could be made of the hide of fallen stock and thus bring bad luck. The concept of sacred in this regard comes within the category of clean/pure/innocent vs. unclean/damaged rather than the sacred vs. profane category. Thus, bast shoes, despite having been the simplest and cheapest footwear, were still considered suitable for wedding attire and for bringing good luck in the future. The importance of wedding attire as representative of assets accompanying the couple as they move into a significant new phase of their lives seems to be a near universal tradition across times and cultures (Welters 1999).

We can also conclude that using interviews or surveys to conduct the 'ethnographic excavation' to gather modern people's opinions can be a useful approach when investigating old perceptions that were vaguely recorded in the past. Many members of modern Latvian society still carry old perceptions and beliefs (varying from passive knowledge or simple appreciation to active promotion of them). This allows us to estimate how important these perceptions must have been in previous centuries. And with caution and proper

methodology, this could allow us to continue using modern respondents in these 'ethnographic excavations' when researching cultural phenomena with seemingly historical origins.

Results of the study carried out in 2012 confirm that antiquated mythological perceptions still influence decisions and actions of modern society. Results of the survey carried out in the summer of 2022 show that contemporary Latvians are much more likely to consider trees and forests (sources of bast) to be more sacred than domestic animals (sources of leather). This suggests that old beliefs about sacred trees and natural products (including bast) made from them may have persisted to the 21st century and still be present in modern people's motivations, opinions, and actions in daily life. The study showed that more than half of the respondents express similar views, agree with the old beliefs, or sympathise with them. It can be observed that some new tendencies have appeared since 1928 as modern concepts of doing 'no harm' and vegan lifestyles have modified the understanding of nature itself, as well as the relationship between people and nature.

Finally, we can conclude that the vast collections of folklore texts and descriptions of traditions that have been collected over the last 150 years, stored in several memory institutions, contain a valuable source of information on the archaic peasant lifestyle and inherent mythological perceptions. Some of these perceptions have already been noted and included in academic studies. There are, however, many other treasures that have not been studied properly or may not even have been discovered yet. The potential of studying the mythological perceptions of clothing and footwear alone promises new epiphanies in the future.

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