

DAUGAVPILS UNIVERSITY

# ART TEMPUS

Volume 1

2013

Journal **ART TEMPUS** is published and distributed by Institute of Art with the support of Daugavpils University (Daugavpils, Latvia).

Journal **ART TEMPUS** publishes original articles on art science: visual arts, musicology and choreography.

Manuscripts should be sent to the Editor in Chief. Journal **ART TEMPUS** will be published one time a year.

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### **Publisher:**

INSTITUTE OF ART, DAUGAVPILS UNIVERSITY,

Vienības Str. 13 – 230, Daugavpils, LV-5401, LATVIA

ISSN 2255-9396

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## The Architecture of Bēržu Cemetery Chapel

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### **Abstract**

Bēržu cemetery chapel was built in 1791 as an octagonal building, possibly a portico entry. This is a rather rare wooden church type of Latgale's 18<sup>th</sup> century churches. There are remains of some original wall painting, which are important for the history of interior art design. In the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the building was expanded by adding simple characteristic marks of late classicism as featured in the splendid entry doors. The chapel was relocated to Bēržu cemetery only in 1920. The present building is a result of complicated building history of various periods of constructions' assemblage. Some original details are completely or partially lost, using new elements instead. Nevertheless, Bēržu cemetery chapel presents a unique example of sacral architecture of the Latgale district and Latvia in general.

*Key words: Chapel, Hewed Log, Frieze, Meander, Cladding.*

### **Introduction**

The architectonically artistic investigation of Bēržu cemetery chapel in Bērzpils district, Balvu region was carried out due to the planned renovation works (Dirveiks 2011). The building is an architectural monument of state importance No. 2840 and it is believed to be the oldest wooden building in the region. Therefore, the project and conservation methodology have to be based on thorough inspection of the building. The architectural survey included building's facades and interior cladding audit, as well as fixing of culturally and historically important details and cladding elements, thus gaining broader concept of the object's building history.

The original volume of current Bēržu cemetery chapel was built in 1791. The building initiator was the owner of Zosuli estate – Teofil Benislavski. The estate was situated near the Ruskulova – Krišjāņi highroad approximately 6 km from Bērži. The small wooden church or chapel operated as a branch of Bēržu church (Krūmiņš 2003: 39). As stated by J. Svilāns, the small church was called "*public oratorium*" or "*aula Zosuli*" (Svilāns 1995: 43). Zosuli church was dedicated to Jesus Heart and a corresponding painting was held in it.

Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the building was rebuilt and expanded. It is known that in 1866 public services were not held there anymore due to its old age (Svilāns 1995: 43).

After the World War I the old estate was divided into new farms and the church was prepared for demolition. The chapel is situated in its current place – Bēržu cemetery on the castle mound, since 1920 when it was relocated from its former place in the territory of Zosuli estate by the order of J. Kindzulis, the dean of Bērži (MDC) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Southern view on Bēržu cemetery chapel. On the right – part of the original polygonal chapel (Photo by I. Dirveiks). 2011.

In July of 1972 it was surveyed by the employees of Rundāle palace. The given building description reported interior equipment items and the fact that chippings' roof had recently been replaced. Even then the description already contained a guess on the originally polygonal building volume (PDC). In October of 1975 three paintings were deposited in the museum of Rundāle palace (RPM sc. arch. No. 5476). There were two paintings by unknown artists – “Saint Magdalene” (Inv. No. RPM 1375) and “Heart of Jesus” (Inv. No. RPM 1377). On the reverse side of third painting's canvas – “Jesus Body is laid in a Tomb” (Inv. No. RPM 1376) – there was a writing with a possible name of the painter *Pinxit Ciszkiewicz*. The wooden sculpture “Crucifixion” was deposited in the museum of Rundāle palace in 1981. The present 19<sup>th</sup> century bench is mentioned in the description from 1996 and is named there incorrectly, i.e. most probably it is a patronage chair (MDC).

### **Building period I. 1791 – 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

During the first building period which dated from 1791 till the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the chapel was built as a thin octagonal volume (Figure 2). That is a rather rare type of Latgale's 18<sup>th</sup> century wooden churches. Judging by analogy, the building could have had one or more frontons and an antechamber as it was, for example, in Dubna (Krūmiņš 2003: 40). There are not many *clear* solution examples, and small chapels built in such way may be found in Dzelzava, Kalnājuši, Ludza (Krūmiņš 2003: 88). The building



Figure 2. Chapel of Zosuli estate in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Theoretical dimensions reconstruction (I. Dirveiks' sketch). 2011.

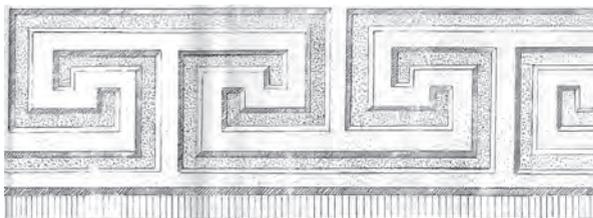


Figure 3. Wall friese painting. 80's of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Drawing by V. Strupule). 2011.

directly onto the log construction. During the research the paint coats were cleared mechanically with a scalpel. Testing spaces and their number were limited. The chemical analysis of the paint has not been carried out yet. Most probably, the so-called “horizontal tree-part” composition was used – a dark socle part, a light monochrome wall and an ornamental frieze's belt at the upper part of the wall. Such painting system was widely used during the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the lower part of the wall the logs are badly damaged due to humidity, therefore the painting of the socle has not been preserved. The main plane of the wall was painted light pink. The antique art motive of *meander* was used for the plinth and painted in darker and lighter shades of pink (Figure 3). Black and white chiaroscuro adds the illusion of dimension to the painting. There is no information about the original interior decoration for the beam and plank ceilings because they have not been preserved.

### Building period II. 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – 1920's

Up to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the parish part of the building was extended; a rectangle room with entrance porch was attached to the octagonal part (Figure 4. A). It

was built as a log house with dovetail joints. The hewed logs are 23 to 27 cm high, but the wall is 16 cm wide. The side posts of the window box are tied into the logs. We have no information about original facade cladding. However, according to some analogies the original facades also had plank cladding (Krūmiņš 2003: 130).

The original window openings had a vertical rectangle shape. The assumption is based on the painted frieze in the interior, which is disrupted by the upper part of the current window, as well as the later built crude cut in the logs. Supposedly there had been plank floor in the altar space, but the rest is a lime floor. The walls are erected on stone basics, which is typical for churches in Latgale.

The original polychrome interior decoration has been preserved. The walls are painted with glue colours

was decorated with a portico with 4 pillars and triangular fronton on top (pillars were replaced with simple logs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The middle part of the fronton is highlighted by the triangle made of profile ledges. It should be noted that the planks in the frontal plane were connected by ledges that were gudgeoned and integrated in the planks. This type of construction solution secures resistance against deformation. The plastic expression of the facade is highlighted by profiled cornices. Most part of the building is covered by the roof with two sloping surfaces. Eastern side has three surfaces that correspond to the apse plan of the first building period. Walls are based upon typical boulder fundamentals. After the parish room expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the walls were white-washed, thereby covering the original painting in the altar part.

Window openings became active element in the architecture of facades. Both the new molten upper parts and the decorative strutting are typical for the late classicism and Biedermeier time (Figure 4.B). Only the lower part of big windows on the northern part under the balcony has survived. Altogether it contains 16 square-like panes.

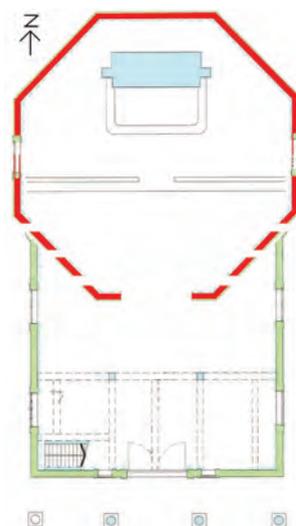
Lavish double doors with a transom is the most important accent of the second building period in the primary – Western part of the facade. This is the most expressive architectural style element in the entire building (Figure 4.C). Leaves of the doors contain decors of Empire-Biedermeier style motive. At first the doors were painted in monochrome ochre colouring. The leaves of two panels have been hanged up in hinges of band hooks. Panels have double uplift that makes a specific relief on the facade side and it is attached to the foundation with wooden locking dowels. According to formal characteristics, the upper oval panel used to contain an octagonal star. One of the current locks could have survived from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and lock of the second box has been made at the same time as leaves in the second third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Figure 4. Changes in the building in the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:  
 A – Scheme of the plan with the contour of the original polygonal space to which the current parish part was attached in the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century;

B – Window with a leaf from the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century;

C – Exit doors with transoms.

(Drawing by V. Strupule, Photos by I. Dirveiks). 2011.



4.A



4.B



4.C

It has to be highlighted that two window leaves that have been built in the wall above the entrance – have been an important facade element in their original place because of the complex strutting. Each of those leaves belongs to a different building period, and only during the last reconstruction in 1920 they have been inserted in the overall architectural shape of the facade.

Important elements of this period are so called patronage benches and a part of worshiper's bench (without the front part). Altogether in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century marks of simplified empire and classicism style were made to the building.

### **Building period III. 1920 – 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In 1920 the building was relocated from Zosuļi estate to Bēržu cemetery. Before dismantling, parts of the building were marked with blue pencil. Facades were covered with paneling of horizontal 2 cm thick and 20 cm wide plank. Very few existing sources on Bēržu chapel stress that in 1920, there were used nails of local blacksmiths (Svilāns 1995: 43). The use of such material in 1920's can be considered as a rare exception. In many nearby places hammered and industrial nails can be found. The connection between the polygonal – later attached part of the building has been reinforced by internal and external legs that have been braced together with screw-bolts.

Roof has been constructed of partly barked spruce round timber for rafters and non-barked laths. Up to 1993 the roof was covered with shingles, covered by asbestos cement plates. Ceiling bars were covered by distant planks. Walls were covered by plaster that was put on splinters and then whitewashed. Facades were painted in monochrome grey color.

In 1920 retablo and mensa were also made (Figure 5). During this period the balcony supported by two square-shaped pillars was also constructed. The balcony ascent was installed in the North-Western corner. New windows were made, preserving parts of the upper segmented leaves.



Figure 5. A view on the altar side in 2011 during the research.  
(Photo by I. Dirveiks). 2011.

After relocating the building, the 19<sup>th</sup> century dimensions and facade style of the building were preserved even though many of the original details had been lost.

## **Conclusions**

History of the building can be divided in three parts. 1<sup>st</sup> building period covers time from 1791 to the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the chapel of Zosuļi estate was built as an octagonal and centric volume. Examples mentioned by A. Krūmiņš, a researcher of Latgale district churches, can be supplemented also by the former Jesus Heart chapel of Zosuļi estate. The original interior – frieze that contains a polychrome variation of the classic meander ornament – has partly been preserved from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

2<sup>nd</sup> building period includes all the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to 1920. It is characterized by significant changes in dimensions of the building. Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century the parish part of the church has been extended by attaching a rectangular part and a covered porch to the octagonal volume; this new part had a portico with 4 pillars and triangular fronton on the top. Entrance doors from the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are the most important architectural element – they contain elements of late classicism. Other important elements are so called patronage bench and a part of worshiper's bench, as well as parts of windows.

After the reconstruction church gained something similar to the B-type plan by A. Krūmiņš (2003) – rectangle with a polygonal choir part. Only in this case the choir part remained projective in the side facades – signifying the original dimensions.

The current building is the result of relocation of the constructions from Zosuļi in 1920. Parts of the original details have been lost and new elements have been used; in many places new constructions degrade the original architectural quality. During this period the new altar was installed, new roof was placed and walls were plastered. After a number of reconstructions a compiled timber building has been formed. Small chapel has been turned into a small church that is still used as a chapel and contains building elements from the 1791, first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1920's – altogether it presents a good example of sacral architecture from Latgale district and Latvia in general.

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