

A Grave Cross on Eastern-Slavonic Ritual Towels: Life and Death on Textiles

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Abstract. The paper presents Eastern-Slavonic *rushnyks* (embroidered towels with a sacral meaning) with the images of death. Despite the fact that the origin of them was printed cross-stitch papers, these images became folklorized, as there have been many transformations in folk culture (both formal and mental). The aim of the article is to show different understandings of one and the same picture (a grave cross with guelder roses twigs wrapped around it and two birds sitting against each other on the twigs) and the typical inscription (“*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*”) to it. This is possible by analyzing various combinations of mentioned visual and verbal formulas with others that were also embroidered on *rushnyks* in conjunction with the previous ones. The author makes the conclusion that hanging on the walls, Eastern-Slavonic embroidered towels with such formulas presented, for the most part, *memento mori* topic, demonstrating various forms and manifestations of passing away.

Keywords: Death; *Memento Mori*; Cross; Ritual Towels (*rushnyks*); Epigraphic Embroidery.

[es] Una cruz de lápida sobre toallas eslavas orientales: vida y muerte en textiles

Resumen. El artículo presenta toallas bordadas (*rushnyks*) eslavas orientales con las imágenes de la muerte. A pesar de que el origen de las mismas fueron los papeles de punto de cruz impresos, estas imágenes se folclorizaron, ya que ha habido muchas transformaciones en la cultura popular (tanto formal como mental). El objetivo del artículo es mostrar diferentes entendimientos de una misma imagen (una cruz de lápida con ramitas de rosas de guelder envueltas alrededor y dos pájaros posados uno contra el otro en las ramitas) y la típica inscripción (“*Mi tumba está debajo de la cruz; mi amor está en la cruz*”). Esto es posible mediante el análisis de diversas combinaciones de fórmulas visuales y verbales mencionadas con otras que también fueron bordadas en *rushnyks* en conjunto con las anteriores. El autor llega a la conclusión de que colgadas en las paredes, toallas bordadas eslavas orientales con tales fórmulas presentaban, en su mayor parte, tema *memento mori*, demostrando diversas formas y manifestaciones del muerte.

Palabras clave: muerte; *memento mori*; cruzar; toallas (*rushnyks*); bordado epigráfico.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. “*My Grave Is under the Cross; My Love Is on the Cross*”: Cross as a Universal Symbol. 2.1. “*When I Die, Come to the Cemetery and Plant a Rose Near the Cross of My Grave*”: Eternal Friendship or Love Behind the Grave. 2.2. “*Let the Grave Punish Me for Loving You!*”: Death as the Result of Unhappy Love. 2.3. “*The Cossack Told to Make a High Grave and Plant a Red Guelder Rose on the Headboards*”: Heroic Death on the War. 3. Conclusions. 4. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, Eastern-Slavonic girls and women massively started to embroider ritual towels with naturalistic images and appropriate inscriptions. The name of this phenomenon is plot and epigraphic embroidery. Its peak lasted through the mid-20th century.

Epigraphic embroideries have been ignored by researchers and collectors for over a hundred years. The need for operative fixation of these materials is governed by the certain distance through time from the moment of their emergence and imminent increasing of this period. Many of them which are still preserved by successors of the embroideresses are gradually selling off by the

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owners². And this is where the main problem lies. These embroideries often move to their buyers without proper certification. We have very little information about real pragmatics of these *rushnyks*.

However, those few comments which I managed to collect show that some ritual towels with similar inscriptions and images may have variability of meanings. All these samples of epigraphic embroidery have been made everywhere both in cities and villages. It was a fashion of the first half of the 20th century to embroider verbal texts. Everyone from the poorest girl to the noble lady was addicted to this occupation. Accordingly, it was not an expression of a certain social group, but a mass phenomenon. So, the context of these textiles is also really wide and our task is to show the plurality of senses.

A lot of samples, unfortunately, are already irretrievably lost, but today we still have a chance to reconstruct – to one degree or another – a picture of this phenomenon. Since 2013 I have been collecting photos of *rushnyks* with inscriptions from different sources. They are systematized in Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery) which is on my own web portal³. To date, there are 2511 items in the Index. The collection is constantly updated.

As the Index shows, one of the most popular topics is death. On the embroidered towels, it was usually depicted as a grave with a cross in different variations. The most typical are the following four crosses⁴ (especially, the first two of them):

- 1) a cross with roses wrapped around it (Fig. 1);
- 2) a cross with guelder roses twigs wrapped around it and two birds sitting against each other on the twigs (Fig. 2);



Figure 1. A cross with roses wrapped around it. Source: Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery), Iconic Formulas, <http://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/>

Figure 2. A cross with guelder roses twigs wrapped around it and two birds sitting against each other on the twigs. Source: Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery), Iconic Formulas, <http://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/>

Figure 3. A cross with pod twigs wrapped around it. Source: Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery), Iconic Formulas, <http://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/>

Figure 4. A cross with ears wrapped around it. Source: Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery), Iconic Formulas, <http://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/>

- 3) a cross with pod twigs wrapped around it (Fig. 3);
- 4) a cross with ears wrapped around it (Fig. 4).

All of these crosses images were embroidered on the model of printed cross-stitch papers. The last ones were published as separate files, as well as placed in fashion magazines of that era. Particularly, the following image of a cross (Fig. 5) was in the appendix to the magazine *Rodina* (October, 1900) which was distributed across the territory of Russian Empire.



Figure 5. The cross-stitch paper with the cross image in the appendix to the fashion magazine *Rodina* (October 1900). Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/461196818074933874/>

² Tetiana Volkovicher, *Verbalni teksty u narodni vyshyvtsi kintsia XIX – pershoi polovyny XX st.: geneza, semantyka, prahmatyka* [Verbal Texts in Folk Embroidery from the End of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century: Genesis, Semantics, Pragmatics] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2019), 4, <http://www.etnolog.org.ua/pdf/stories/monografiji/2019/volkovicher.pdf>.

³ Tetiana Brovarets, “Interaktyvnyi elektronnyi pokazhchyk folklornykh formul (Epigraphic Embroidery)” [“Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)”], *Volkovicher*, 2016, accessed September 13, 2020, <http://volkovicher.com> (the password: 2707).

⁴ All of these images are described in greater depth in the monograph: Volkovicher, *Verbalni teksty u narodni...*, 130-131.

Despite of the precise samples, folk modifications of these pictures were not excluded. For example, embroideresses could combine the elements in various ways, adding or omitting some of them. Moreover, they often made inscriptions to these images. In doing so, they showed different understanding of one and the same picture. Sometimes, these crosses even were thought to be not grave ones (not connected with death at all).

In this paper, I will focus specifically on the death meaning and other linked to this concept topics.

Reminder of time passage is the most general message of ritual towels with the image of a cross. Many of them were decorative, as Eastern-Slavonic people (especially, Ukrainians) hanged these *rushnyks* on the walls of their houses. Thus, the embroideries with a cross image constantly reminded to the residents of the house about inevitable death. Such embroidered reminders can be attributed to *memento mori* genre. This genre is rather popular in visual arts, so it is rather well understood⁵.

At the same time, there are astonishingly few refers to this topic on textiles, namely on Eastern-Slavonic embroidered towels (*rushnyks*)⁶.

2. “My Grave Is under the Cross; My Love Is on the Cross”: Cross as a Universal Symbol

Cross is widely known as a universal sign. A lot of meanings of the cross are connected with a primality of its form as it consists at its core of two simple lines intersecting at right angles⁷.

However, the image of a cross may be much more complex than just two right lines. It can be complicated by way of extra lines, with different forms at the tip, with the addition of interwoven plants and sitting birds, as we can see on the images above. It also may be added with the whole scene of the cemetery: a grave, a fence and trees. Even so, a cross image is yet polysemantic, if we speak about the embroidered Eastern-Slavonic towels (*rushnyks*). I hope that we will see it on the ensuing examples. Two exactly equal images may have different connotations on folk embroideries.

Let me consider Figure 2 in more detail. In the full version it consists of a cross with guelder roses twigs wrapped around it and two birds sitting against each other on the twigs, a grave under the cross, a fence and two opposite trees. The point is that initially it was a picture of a certain author who put a concrete sense in it. Then, in the process of folklorization, this image was gradually acquiring new meanings, without necessarily changing its form (visual elements). Thus, all of these cross images became visual folklore formulas.

Speaking about verbal folklore formulas on the ritual towels, there are also a lot of examples when one and the same inscription has different senses. In particular, a very popular embroidered verbal folklore formula is “*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*”. This formula is common not only in epigraphic embroidery, but also in other folk texts. For example, it is used in Ukrainian folk song “*I was walking in the garden, in the cherry orchard, in the cherry orchard*”⁸. The song tells that a boy has betrayed his girlfriend, marrying another woman. The abandoned girl sings:

Oh, there in the field, oh, there in the field, oh, there is a black cross, oh, there is a black cross.

Under the cross is my grave, on the cross is my love, on the cross is my love.

Whoever goes will read that love may lead to the death, that love may lead to the death,

That from love and fondness one's bones go under the ground, one's bones go under the ground.

In this text, the abandoned girl is planning to commit suicide:

I will take a knife and forks, I will stick it through my body all the way to the heart, I will stick it through my body all the way to the heart,

I will stick my body, I will ruin my soul because of my love to you, because of my love to you.

One should understand that this meaning of the mentioned formula is not the only one. Also, it has a proto-text in written literature. This is a poetry “*Last Struggle*” (1838) by the famous Russian poet Alexey Koltsov⁹. It tells about eternal struggle with fate and strong human will. However, this poetry has been also folklorized before entering the *rushnyk*. It means that the embroiderers did not perceive it as an author's verse but as a folk song.

Regarding to the context and combining with other verbal formulas the formula “*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*” may have various senses: from the celebration of wedding or Easter to the death¹⁰. I must clarify that within the bounds of the death topic there is also a variety of connotations on Eastern-Slavonic *rushnyks*. Examining the main of these connotations is given hereunder.

⁵ Melony Elsie Del Real, “Death Positivity: A New Genre of Death and the Genre Function of Memento Mori” (Mg. Theses, California State University, 2020), <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/1014/>; Jessica Stewart, “Memento Mori: Life and Death in Western Art from Skulls to Still Life”, *My Modern Met*, 2019, <https://mymodernmet.com/memento-mori-art/>.

⁶ Natalya Gangur, “Traditional Folk Arts and Crafts of the Kuban. The Main Types of Arts and Crafts. Folk Crafts Kuban Map of the Krasnodar Territory” (Ph.D., Krasnodar State University of Culture and Arts, 2002), <https://brendoptom.ru/en/tradicionnoe-narodnoe-dekorativno-prikladnoe-tvorchestvo-kubani-osnovnye.html>; Franklin Sciacca, “Ukrainian *Rushnyky*: Binding Amulets and Magical Talismans in the Modern Period,” *FOLKLORICA* 17 (2013): 14-16; Tetiana Volkovicher, “Pod krestom moya mogila, na kreste moya lyubov...: mnogoznachnost vyshitykh nadpisey, ili syuzhetno-epigraficheskie rushnyki – novaya traditsiya XX veka v usloviyakh globalizatsii” [“Under the Cross Is My Grave, on the Cross Is My Love...: Multiple Meanings of Embroidered Inscriptions, or Plot and Epigraphic *Rushnyks* Is a New Tradition of the 20th Century”], in *Zbornik doklady i tezisy 7 Mizhnarodnay naukova-praktychnay kanferentsiyi “Traditsiyi i suchasny stan kultury i mastatstva”* (Minsk: The Center for the Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature researches of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, 2017), 1: 688-690.

⁷ Inna Smirnova, *Taynaya istoriya kresta [The Mysterious History of the Cross]* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2006), 143.

⁸ “Po sadochku ya hodyla, po vyshnevomu sadu, po vyshnevomu sadu” [“I Was Walking in the Garden, in the Cherry Orchard, in the Cherry Orchard”], *Electronic Archive of Ukrainian Folklore*, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://folklore-archive.org.ua/work/2293/>.

⁹ Aleksey Koltsov, *Stikhotvoreniya A. V. Koltsova. Polnoe sobranie* [Poems by A. V. Koltsov. Complete Set of Works], ed. Arseniy Vvedenskay (Saint Petersburg: Edition of A. F. Marks, 1892), 132.

¹⁰ Volkovicher, “Pod krestom moya mogila...”, 688-690.

2.1. “When I Die, Come to the Cemetery and Plant a Rose Near the Cross of My Grave”: Eternal Friendship or Love Behind the Grave

By and large, we have a very popular embroidered visual formula which is the image of a cross with guelder roses twigs wrapped around it and two birds sitting against each other on the twigs (Fig. 2)¹¹. And we have a no less popular embroidered verbal formula which is the inscription “My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross”¹². Our task is to see the different connotations of the ritual towels wherein these two formulas – a visual one and a verbal one – are present.

The easiest way to reveal this or that connotation of one and the same formula is to look at complementary formulas, of course, if they exist. As we can see on the photo below (Fig. 6), the inscription consists of three verbal formulas:

- 1) “My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross”;
- 2) “In this grave is love”;
- 3) “When I die, come to the cemetery and plant a rose near the cross of my grave”.



Figure 6. The embroidered towel (rushnyk). Cherkassy region (Ukraine), 1918. Source: Zvenyhorodka Historical-Architectural and Art Museum, <http://zvenmuseum.ru/o-muzee/novyie-postupleniya>

In general, the third verbal formula means eternal friendship (or love), as it can be often found in girlish albums of that era: such inscriptions were in letters from

one girl to another girl¹³. Speaking about this verbal formula on the *rushnyk*, it may also be a gift as a memento. The other two verbal formulas underline the meaning of the third one. In this case, it is not a funeral towel. There is nothing dramatic in these words, although the graveyard is on the image and all three formulas comprise the word “grave”. This *rushnyk* may be perceived as a manual for the friends to stay faithful to each other. Death is natural to every living thing, so a girl prepares her friend to this event beforehand. This embroidered towel can be called a *memento mori* of one’s friend.

2.2. “Let the Grave Punish Me for Loving You!”: Death as the Result of Unhappy Love

However, death might also be premature. Therefore, on this occasion it is taken as punishment for the sin. In some case, somebody may ask the grave to punish him / her for something.

The following figure presents a *rushnyk* with the visual formula identical to the previous one (a cross with guelder roses twigs and two birds), but a bit different inscription (Fig. 7). It consists of two verbal formulas:

- 1) “Let the grave punish me for loving you, but I do not fear the grave, I will die with the one I love”;
- 2) “My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross”.



Figure 7. The embroidered towel (rushnyk). Poltava region (Ukraine), the first half of the 20th century. Source: Violyty: Auction & Antiques, <http://auction.violity.com/30208651-rushnik>

¹¹ To date, the “Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)” includes 107 items with variants of this embroidered visual formula: <http://volkovicher.com/ikonichni-formuli/m-kalina-zozuli> (the password: 2707).

¹² To put it bluntly, this is one of the most often encountered embroidered formulas. At present, the “Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)” includes 127 items with variants of this embroidered verbal formula: <http://volkovicher.com/invarianti/pod-krestom-moya-mogila-na-kreste-moya-lyubov-realizatsiya-invariantu> (the password: 2707).

¹³ Irina Kulakova, “Album lokhmatogo medvezhonka” [“Album of a Shaggy Bear Cub”], *Rodina* 4 (2004): 100.

Speaking about the first verbal formula, we can state that the embroidered lines are from the popular cruel romance. This is a folklorized song. The author of the original text (and music) is Yakov Prigozhiy¹⁴. In the author's variant the last verse is the following:

*One maiden lies here,
She has died from tuberculosis,
She has gone into the ground from love.*

As it is widely known, tuberculosis (consumption) was a very modish illness in the 18th and 19th centuries, as it was regarded as a disease caused by mental anguish and a grief of love¹⁵. Thus, the death from love can be construed literally. And it is not about suicide on that occasion, but this is a natural consequence of an unhappy love. Love pains lead to a consumption, and this disease leads to the death.

By the way, a consumption illness and its connection with unhappy love is also mentioned in the other cruel romance “*A long time ago, I have orphaned*”¹⁶ which includes the lines of the second verbal formula “*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*”:

*But I am suffering from consumption,
Any day now I will die,
Nobody knows my disease,
Although everybody tells me to be treated.
Here under the cross is my grave,
And on the cross is my love,
May you be rich and happy,
My love is among the graves.*

Another embroidered towel (Fig. 8) directs where exactly must be the grave of a girl who suffers from love. This *rushnyk* contains a reduced variant of the visual formula that we deal with (a cross with guelder roses twigs and two birds sitting against each other without the image of a cemetery) and the next two verbal formulas:

- 1) “*Oh, dig me a grave on his gentle trace;*
- 2) “*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*”.

As one can read, the grave of an unhappy girl in love has to be on the trace of her boyfriend. Apparently, she wished to have connection with him even after her death.

One more *rushnyk* talks about the traumatic experience and feelings of one who got over the death of his girlfriend. Here we see the same visual formula in its full version (with a fence and trees).



Figure 8. The embroidered towel (*rushnyk*). The place of manufacture is unknown, allegedly the first half of the 20th century. Source: Violity: Auction & Antiques, <https://auction.violity.com/45933565-rushnyk-1>

It also consists of two verbal formulas (Fig. 9):

- 1) “*In the garden, over the grave, a black raven is cawing; my sweetheart will think of me and cry bitterly*”;
- 2) “*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*”.



Figure 9. The embroidered towel (*rushnyk*). Poltava region (Ukraine), the first half of the 20th century. Source: Violity: Auction & Antiques, https://auction.violity.com/102449413-rushnik-starinnij-5/?utm_source=search_result&utm_medium=rushnik-starinnij-5&utm_campaign=95uah

Sufferings may also cause to death in the imaginary of embroideresses, because passing away is also considered as the intention of an unhappy girl. Generally, any purpose would ease her pain¹⁷. In this case, the intention is death.

¹⁴ Valeriy Safoshkin, comp. “Mogila” [“The Grave”], in *Ochi chernye: Starinnyy russkiy romans* [Black Eyes: An Old Russian Romance] (Moscow, Russia: Eksmo, 2004), accessed September 16, 2020, <http://a-pesni.org/popular20/mogila.htm>.

¹⁵ Roberta Barker, “Consumption and the Stage: A Late-Blooming Fashion”, in *Fashion and Illness in Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Literature and Culture*, ed. Clark Lawlor and Anita O’Connell, Special Issue, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 4 (2017): 621, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1754-0208.12511>.

¹⁶ Alla Kulagina and Fiodor Selivanov. *Gorodskie pesni, ballady, romansy* [Urban Songs, Ballads, Romances] (Moscow: Philological Faculty of MGU, 1999), <https://www.rulit.me/books/gorodskie-pesni-ballady-romansy-read-398689-45.html>.

¹⁷ Lisa Gabbert, “Suffering in Medical Contexts: Laughter, Humor, and the Medical Carnavalesque”, *The Journal of American Folklore* 133, no. 527 (2020): 14, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.133.527.0003>.

2.3. “Farewell, My Honey, I’m Going on Campaign. God Willing, I Will Come Back”: Heroic Death on the War

The next example is a *rushnyk* that consists of three visual and four verbal formulas at once (Fig. 10). The upper visual formula is still the same reduced variant of the image of a cross with guelder roses twigs and two birds. Accordingly, the inscription under this image is still the same verbal formula “*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*”.

In the middle the visual formula is an image of a soldier who embraces with a girl. The inscription to this picture is an extended variant of the typical verbal formula for this image “*Farewell, my honey, I am going on campaign. God willing, I will come back. – Oh, my dear, what do I do? Why are you leaving me? Who should I love?*”.

The other verbal formula is to the same middle image from the other side of the *rushnyk*: “*– Hello, my dear girl! Have you forgotten me, my sweetheart? – Forgotten, forgotten, my rock dove... Why are you unjust, my dear?*”.

We can see that while in the first case the visual formula of embracing soldier and his girlfriend means their separation, in the second case the exact same picture signifies their imaginary reunion after the soldier’s absence.

Ultimately, the lower visual formula presents the image of a man sitting in the deer-drawn carriage. The inscription under this picture is an amplified variant of the verbal formula “*The sun is low, the evening is soon over, I am in a rush to you, my sweetheart*”: “*The sun is low, the evening is soon over, I am in a rush to you, my sweetheart, I am in a hurry, but I will not caught you*”. As we can see, this is an unhappy end to the popular verse.



Figure 10. The embroidered towel (*rushnyk*). Sumy region (Ukraine), the first half of the 20th century. Source:

Violity: Auction & Antiques, http://s1.violity.com/files/2016/04/23/17/62824_1461420531.jpg

Connecting eternal themes as love, fidelity, being apart, reunion, war and death, the presented *rushnyk* belongs to several categories at once. As for the death meaning, it may mean both the result of unhappy love (if we are speaking about a girl) and the heroic death in war (if we are speaking about a soldier). There are almost certainly two deaths at once, as is usually the case in folklore texts.

3. Conclusions

Notwithstanding the plausibility of mentioned plots, I have to notice that many of these embroidered stories were the imaginations, bearing little relation to reality. A *rushnyk* is not a document of its owner. And it is not an autobiography of its embroideress. This is just a work of folk art. It may reflect a mood, feelings and emotions at a specific point.

That is why we must resist the temptation to examine it literally, trying to see connections between real lives of their concrete owners and the embroidered stories. Of course, there have also been true embroidered plots, that is to say there have been the *rushnyks* devoted to real episodes from the life of an embroideress, but it was a small percentage of them.

For this research, I have chosen Eastern-Slavonic embroidered towels which have the image of cross with guelder roses twigs wrapped around it and two birds sitting against each other on the twigs combining with the inscription “*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*”. Such *rushnyks* presented, for the most part, a *memento mori* topic. Hanging on the walls inside the house, they daily reminded about the imminence of one’s death while at the same time they demonstrated various forms of passing away.

In this paper, I have presented three possible manifestations of death in Eastern-Slavonic epigraphic embroidery. The first one is *memento mori* of one’s fellow (it can be perceived as a guidance for the friends to stay faithful to each other). The second one is a premature passing away because of unhappy love and intense sufferings connected with this. As it was believed few centuries ago, mental torments caused by unhappy love may lead to a consumption disease, and the tuberculosis had lethal effects. Finally, the third one is a heroic death on the war. The loss of a soldier can result in the passing away of his girlfriend (which is again is a death caused by love tortures).

The current list of potential death forms in epigraphic embroidery is not exhaustive. It just demonstrates the polysemantic nature of one and the same verbal and visual formulas. Even within one topic of death it may have various connotations. I have deliberately referred to only one visual formula (which is a cross with guelder roses twigs wrapped around it and two birds sitting against each other on the twigs) and only one verbal formula (which is “*My grave is under the cross; my love is on the cross*”) to show its diversity in folk understanding.

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