

# Christian message of Estonian sheet pendants from the 10th to the 17th century

Andres Tvauri  
andres.tvauri@ut.ee

Department of Archaeology, Institute of History and Archaeology, University of Tartu, Ülikooli 18, 50090 Tartu, Estonia

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## ABSTRACT

Sheet pendants made of silver or copper alloy were worn in Estonia from the 10th to the 17th century. This type of jewelry spread to Estonia from Scandinavia and was also used in Finland, Karelia, Latvia, Lithuania, in the areas inhabited by the Baltic tribes in northeastern Poland, and to a lesser extent in northwestern Russia. The symbols depicted on the sheet pendants are Christian. The three dominant symbols are the cross, representing the Christian faith; a boss or circle, symbolizing God the Father; and five bosses arranged in the shape of crosses, representing the Five Holy Wounds of Christ. The 10th–13th-century sheet pendants include looped squares, which are symbols of St. John the Baptist. The 13th-century circular sheet pendants have a design formed by three volutes, symbolizing the Holy Trinity, triskele, swastika, pentagram, and star. Trapezoidal sheet pendants from the 13th century may have been intended as axe shapes, possibly related to the cult of St. Olaf. The meaning of the volutes and interlace patterns on the trapezoidal sheet pendants is unknown. Recognizable Christian symbols on them include the cross of St. Peter and an anchor. In the 15th–17th centuries, new designs include the Maltese cross and the T-shaped cross of St. Anthony. Sheet pendants not only manifested the wearer's Christian faith but also expressed specific central themes and concepts of Christianity. The pendants reflect themes such as God the Father, the birth and crucifixion of Christ, the Holy Trinity, and the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.

## KEYWORDS

archaeology, Middle Ages, jewelry, sheet pendants, Christian symbolism.

## Introduction

Sheet pendants made of silver or copper alloy, featuring embossed and punched decorations and ranging from 0.3 to 1.3 mm in thickness, were used in Estonia from the 10th to the 17th century (Tõnisson 1962, 220–223; Hein 1976; Leimus 2009; Jonuks & Johanson 2017, 78–79; Kurisoo 2021, 130–132, 286–293). Most sheet pendants are circular, with a smaller number being square. In the 13th century,

trapezoidal sheet pendants were also made, and in the 15th–16th centuries, T-shaped St. Anthony’s crosses and crosses with triangular arm were crafted.

Sheet pendants consist of only two parts: the pendant and the attached suspension loop (Fig. 1: 1). This distinguishes them from similar circular pendants with a high silver content used in Estonia from the 16th to the 18th century (Estonian *paater*; see Kirme 2002, 73–78). These *paater* pendants usually have cast images, soldered suspension loops, and edge rims, with engraving used for decoration (Fig. 1: 2).<sup>1</sup> Sheet pendants from the 10th to the 13th century (223 items) are mostly made of silver, with suspension loops typically made of copper alloy and attached to the pendant with a single rivet. The diameter of circular sheet pendants from this period is usually 30–50 mm. The largest sheet pendant (75 mm) from the 10th to the 13th century was discovered in the Mäetaguse hoard in Harjumaa (Fig. 2: 4). Sheet pendants from the 14th to the 17th century (898 items) are mostly made of copper alloy with very low silver content, featuring a wide suspension loop usually attached with two rivets. The diameter of circular sheet pendants from this period ranges from 43 to 152 mm. Despite the significant variation in size, both large and small pendants were made in the same way, displaying similar decorative motifs and worn together on a necklace. Some 16th-century pendants have a ring or spiral attached to the suspension loop (Figs 3: 1 and 4), likely to produce sound.



FIG. 1. Sheet pendant and *paater* pendant from the 16th century. 1 – from Viru-Nigula in Virumaa (AM E 466: 3), 2 – from the Kihme hoard in Järvamaa (PM A 8: 351). Photos by the Estonian History Museum and Jaana Ratas.

1 Considering this definition, I will not address in this article four pendants previously considered sheet pendants (Kirme 2002, 24–26) but made in the 16th century, featuring engraved figurative compositions and soldered with a suspension loop and an edge strip.



FIG. 2. Sheet pendants from the 13th century from the Mäetaguse hoard in Virumaa (ГЭ 988: 1–4). Photo by Andres Tvauri.

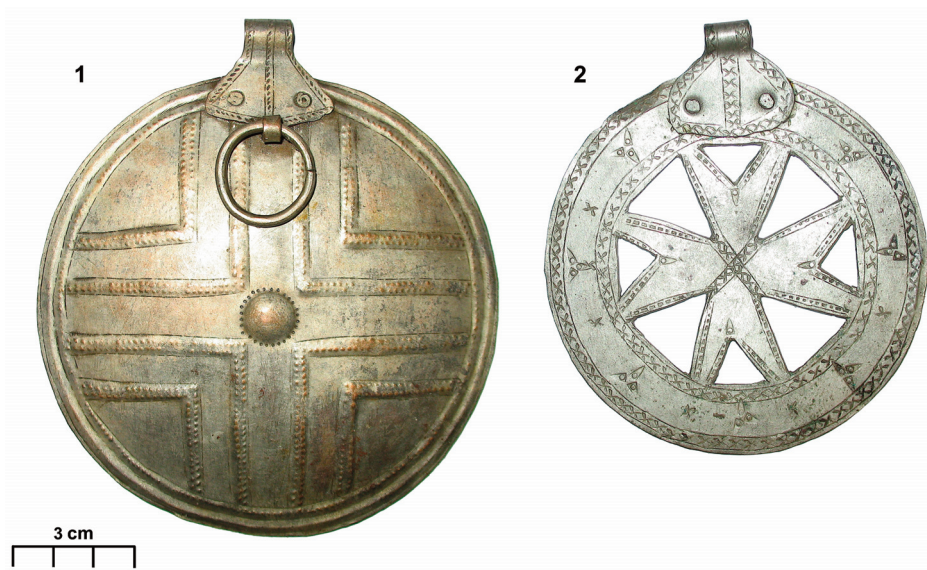


FIG. 3. Sheet pendants from the 14th to the 17th century. 1 – from the Valgma hoard in Järvamaa (AI 2788: 14), 2 – from the Porkuni hoard in Virumaa (AI 2595: 20). Photo by Andres Tvauri.



**FIG. 4.** Sheet pendant with St. Anthony's cross and pendant in the shape of St. Anthony's cross from the 16th century. 1 – from the Neemi hoard in Saaremaa (SM A 334), 2 – from Aa manor in Virumaa (ÕES 1202: 1). Photo by Jaana Ratas.

Although sheet pendants are most numerous in Estonia, this type of jewelry is not unique to the country. The earliest dated sheet pendants found in Scandinavia and the Baltic region probably come from southern Sweden, K opingsvik, where the burial of a 15–18-year-old girl was discovered. A bead necklace with two round silver sheet pendants depicting crosses was found around her neck. Based on a brooch found with the deceased, the burial has been dated to around the year 700 (Schulze 1995, 15–16). Silver sheet pendants have been found in the 10th-century graves of the Birka cemetery, located in eastern Sweden, where 45 circular sheet pendants were recovered (Arbman 1940, plate 97). Sheet pendants from the 10th to the 12th century have also been found in hoards in Sweden (H ardh 1976, 42–45, 59–61, 67–70; Duczko 1995, fig. 2: 1b, d; Thunmark-Nyl en 1995a, fig. 24). The Livs from the Daugava area wore sheet pendants from the late 10th century to the early 16th century (Spirgis 2019, 405). From 11th–12th-century contexts, they have also been found elsewhere in Latvia (Zem itis 1994). Sheet pendants were worn in Finland from the 10th to the 13th century (Kivikoski 1970; Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, 145). A few sheet pendants have been discovered in northwestern Russia (Ryabinin 1997, fig. 36: 26; Hvoshchinskaya 2004, plates CV: 10, CXX: 16, CXXIX; Stepanova 2010, 296, fig. 1: 13). In the 12th to 14th centuries, sheet pendants were also used by the Baltic peoples (Mugur evi s 1977, plates XXXVII: 1–8, XXXIX: 12;  nore & Zari a 1980, Nos 153: 4, 161: 2; Urbanavi cius & Urbanavi cien e 1988, 27–28, fig. 37: 12; Iwanowska & Niemyjska 2004, 93–95, plates V: 1–21, VII). The prototypes for the sheet pendants are likely round tin pendants with a cross motif, which were worn in northern Germany and Denmark in the 9th–10th centuries (see Messal 2017).

In earlier times, the symbols found on Estonian sheet pendants were considered pagan (e.g., Tõnisson 1962, 220–221; Selirand 1974, 188; Tamla 1991, 155). Since 1991, when Estonia regained its independence, they have mostly been interpreted as Christian (e.g., Leimus 2009, 8–17; Kurisoo 2013; 2021; Jonuks & Johanson 2017). Some also believe that the symbolism of sheet pendants is both pagan and Christian simultaneously (e.g., Reidla 2012, 71–74).

In the Middle Ages, the purpose of jewelry extended far beyond adornment: it was a means of communication, indicating the wearer's status, wealth, and gender, and expressing their religious beliefs, political affiliations, and family alliances (Mänd 2022, 118). Therefore, the symbolic meaning of the imagery on sheet pendants should not be underestimated.

In this article, I focus on the symbols depicted on sheet pendants. Primarily, I seek to answer the question: what was depicted on sheet pendants, and what was the meaning and message of these depictions? I also explore how the depicted elements changed over time. Additionally, I examine what constitutes the change in sheet pendants during the transition from prehistory to the Middle Ages.

## The meaning of depictions on sheet pendants

### CIRCULAR AND SQUARE-SHAPED SHEET PENDANTS

Circular sheet pendants are the most numerous among Estonian sheet pendants, constituting 87.5% of the total, while square-shaped sheet pendants account for 10%. The production of square-shaped sheet pendants started in the 13th century. Unlike the contemporary circular and trapezoidal sheet pendants, older square-shaped sheet pendants from Estonia are made not of silver, but of copper alloy. All square-shaped sheet pendants have their loop positioned at the corner. In terms of design and execution, square-shaped sheet pendants resemble circular ones and were worn alongside them.

A cross is depicted on 58% of the sheet pendants from the 10th to the 13th century and on 43% of the more recent ones (55% overall). This is not surprising, given that the cross has been the most common symbol of Christianity since the 5th century (Healey 1977, 289). In Estonia and neighboring regions, cross-shaped pendants were widely adopted in the 11th to the 13th centuries (see Kurisoo 2021, 56–75). The cross also appeared on other jewelry in Estonia in the late 11th century, aligning with the spread of Christianity in neighboring regions. Therefore, the cross on sheet pendants holds a meaning derived from Christianity for the inhabitants of Final Iron Age Estonia (Jonuks & Kurisoo 2013, 76–77). Leimus has previously concluded that the symbolic world of Estonian sheet pendants from the 10th to the 13th century is predominantly Christian (Leimus 2009, 17).

Various forms of crosses are depicted on sheet pendants. Kurisoo has identified 13 different types of crosses, 14 stylized crosses, and five diagonal crosses on older Estonian sheet pendants alone (Kurisoo 2013, 23). Here, I will explore



FIG. 5. Sheet pendants from the 11th century from the Paunküla II hoard in Harjumaa (AI 4289: 1–3). Photo by Mauri Kiudsoo.



FIG. 6. Sheet pendants from the 11th century. 1 – from the Paimre hoard in Läänemaa (AI 3888: 9), 2 – from the Kõue hoard in Harjumaa (AI 7136: 10). Photo by Mauri Kiudsoo.

the use of different types of crosses on sheet pendants without going into too much detail or distinguishing between upright and diagonal crosses. Often, two crosses – one upright and the other diagonal – are combined on a single pendant (Fig. 6: 1). The orientation of the crosses does not seem to have been significant for the makers and wearers of sheet pendants. Therefore, Salo’s claim that some Finnish sheet pendants depict a slanted St. Andrew’s cross (Salo 2006, 104–107) seems less plausible.

A cross with equal-length and uniform-width branches can be found on both the earliest sheet pendants (Figs 2: 1, 5: 1 and 6: 2) and on those from the 16th century (Fig. 3: 1). Leimus has suggested that when the narrow branches of the cross depicted on a sheet pendant extend to its edge (Fig. 2: 2), it may have been inspired by certain Anglo-Saxon coin types, especially the “long cross” formed by double lines, which is the most common type found in the Nordic region (Leimus 2009, 16). Similar crosses can also be seen on Estonian bracelets from the 12th to the 13th century (e.g., Selirand 1974, plate XXXVIII: 4, 5).



FIG. 7. Sheet pendants from the 13th century from the Muhu stronghold hoard in Saaremaa (ΓΘ 984: 5–8). Photo by Andres Tvauri.

The cross with triangular arms, or the cross with concave edges along the arms, is more commonly found on 13th-century sheet pendants (Figs 2:4, 7:3 and 14:4), although it also appears on later ones. Leimus has noted that the Order of the Brothers of the Sword also used a cross of this shape as its symbol (Leimus 2009, 15). Additionally, there is evidence of a sheet pendant in the form of this type of cross (Kirme 2002, fig. 19), which is privately owned, and its exact place of discovery is unknown. Based on its engraved ornamentation, it is estimated to have been made in the 15th or early 16th century.

The Maltese cross appears on only 25 sheet pendants from the 15th to the 17th century (Fig. 3: 2). Most of these pendants feature a Maltese cross cut out from the surface, creating an openwork design. Unlike other types of crosses on more recent sheet pendants found throughout mainland Estonia, 20 of the 25 Maltese cross pendants with known discovery locations have been found in Virumaa.

The depiction of a cross with lozenge-shaped terminals is widespread on both 13th-century (Fig. 8: 1) and 14th–17th-century sheet pendants (Figs 9: 1 and 10: 2). This type of cross was very popular in Estonia and neighboring regions in the 12th–13th centuries, appearing on pendant crosses (see Kurisoo 2021, 63–64), penannular brooches (see Tõnisson 1962, plates XXI: 1–3, XXIV: 2, 3), and, for example, on widely used types of sword belt mounts from the Late Iron Age (see Mägi 2002, plate 38: 11). In the 14th–17th centuries, its use was mainly confined to sheet pendants.

A cross formed by four scrolls or volutes is also very common on both 13th-century (Figs 7: 4 and 11: 2) and later sheet pendants (Fig. 9: 2). Such scrolled



FIG. 8. Sheet pendants from the 13th century from the Kumna hoard in Harjumaa (AM A 434: 112, 14, 102, 108). Photo by Jaana Ratas.



FIG. 9. Sheet pendants from the 14th–17th century. 1 – from the Soontaga hoard in Tartumaa (TÜ 2748: 19), 2 – from Valgma hoard in Järvamaa (AI 2788: 20). Photo by Andres Tvauri.

crosses can also be found on 10th-century silver pendants adorned with granulation, discovered in the Birka cemetery in Sweden (see Duczko 1985, 32–39, figs 23–25), and in various hoards found in Sweden (Stenberger 1958, figs 19: 10, 40: 3, 45, etc.). These crosses were common on jewelry among the East Slavs and are also found on sheet pendants from Finland (e.g., Nordman 1924, fig. 67). It is possible that the scrolled crosses on Estonian sheet pendants were borrowed from 12th-century disc brooches from Gotland. This type of cross likely spread to Scandinavia from western Europe, where it appears on both jewelry and illuminated manuscripts (Leimus 2009, 14).

Crosses with volutes at the ends are deemed rare on sheet pendants, found only on three 13th-century artifacts from the Paunküla II hoard in Harjumaa, the Müsleri hoard in Järvamaa, and the Kukruse cemetery in Virumaa (Fig. 12: 1).





FIG. 10. Square-shaped sheet pendants from the 14th–17th century. 1 – from Viru-Nigula in Virumaa (AM A 1077: 2), 2 – from Palu manor in Järvamaa (AM E 467: 3). Photos by Andres Tvauri and the Estonian History Museum.



FIG. 11. Sheet pendants from the 13th century from the Varudi-Vanaküla hoard in Harjumaa (RM A 65: 5, 6, 8, 10). Photo by Jaana Ratas.

Similar volute-ended crosses are observed on numerous 13th–14th-century silvered brooches and decorative pins made of iron in Curonia (Svarāne 2007).

A square-shaped cross with three dots at the corners (Fig. 12: 2) is believed to have been copied from 11th–12th-century Danish or Anglo-Norman coins (Leimus 2009, 15). This design also appeared on items such as bracelets (Tamla 1995, fig. 5: 11) and temple rings (Kiudsoo 2019, fig. 144) in Estonia during the 12th–13th centuries. Three bosses are added to crosses with narrow parallel arms on sheet pendants. Pendant crosses with three dots at the ends of the arms are abundant in 10th–13th-century contexts in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic States, and Kievan Rus' (Staecker 1999, 111–115; Kurisoo 2021, 60–62; Churakova 2017). The number three symbolizes the Holy Trinity (Bertelsen 2015, 57).



FIG. 12. Sheet pendants from the 13th century. 1 – from the Kukruse cemetery in Virumaa (TÜ 1777: 3500), 2 – from the Kaberla cemetery in Harjumaa (AI 4116: 198b/3). Photos by Aive Viljus and Mauri Kiudsoo.

From the 10th–13th-century sheet pendants, 25 are adorned with a looped square (Figs 2: 3, 6: 1, 7: 2 and 8: 2), constituting 12% of sheet pendants from this period. This design is not found on later sheet pendants. Sheet pendants featuring a combination of a looped cross and a regular cross are among the oldest in Estonia and were obtained from the Paimre hoard in Läänemaa, left in the ground at the end of the 11th century (Fig. 6: 1), the Kõue hoard in Harjumaa (*terminus post quem* = *tpq* 1080), and the Otepää hillfort in Tartumaa. In the first centuries of the second millennium, the looped square was popular throughout northern and northeastern Europe. Pendant crosses shaped like the looped square, dating from the 12th to the 13th century, have been found in Kievan Rus' territories (Kurtasov & Seleznev 2010, 39) and Latvia (Mugurevich 1965, fig. 38: 2). The looped square is a symbol of baptism and St. John the Baptist (Liungman 1991, 268, 297, 360; Salo 2006, 110–122). For instance, in Swedish, the looped square is referred to as *sankthanskors* (Saint John's cross; Reuterswärd 1986, 53), and in Finnish, the term *hannunvaakuna* translates to coat of arms of John (Hannu) (Stigell 1974, 46–47). In this sense, the looped square has been associated with Midsummer Day or St. John's Day, and it appears on at least two Estonian Swedish runic calendars (Stigell 1974, 47). Its connection to the sacrament of baptism is also evident on a 12th-century baptismal stone adorned with looped squares, preserved in Øster Starup Church in Denmark (Reuterswärd 1986, fig. 14).

On the oldest Estonian sheet pendants from the 11th century, a cross with branches adorned with smaller crosses is depicted against the background of a looped square (Fig. 6: 1). This type of cross, consisting of four Latin crosses pointing in each cardinal direction, symbolizes the proclamation of the Gospel to the world (Liungman 1991, 142). It is noteworthy that this type of cross is present on the oldest Estonian sheet pendants, especially considering its popularity in 10th-century Uppland, Sweden, on gold-thread garment decorations and metal



**FIG. 13.** Sheet pendants from the 13th century with swastika. 1 – from the Kaberla cemetery in Harjumaa (AI 4116: 198B/1), 2 – from the Nogu hoard in Võrumaa (AI 4041: 14), 3 – from the Kostivere hoard in Harjumaa (AI 3797: 11). Photos by Andres Tvauri and Mauri Kiudsoo.

studs on seax sheaths (Duczko 1997, fig. 4: 1, 2). In the 11th century, this type of cross was also carved on some Uppland runestones, which are undoubtedly Christian monuments (Duczko 1997, 301, fig. 5).

The swastika is depicted on seven 10th–13th-century sheet pendants (Fig. 13). One of them (Fig. 13: 2) features a swastika with rounded arms, combined with five bosses. In contrast, among the 14th–17th-century sheet pendants, an engraved swastika with rounded arms appears on only three examples, all made by the same craftsman (see Kirme 2002, 27, fig. 16). The swastika was an ancient symbol of the sun god, predating Christianity. Early Christians also saw it as a symbol of God, and over time, it evolved into a sign representing Christ (Reuterswärd 1986, 58).

The St. Anthony's cross appears on only two recently discovered round sheet pendants, one from the Koigi hoard in Järvamaa and another from a chance find in Neemi village, Saaremaa (Fig. 4: 1). Additionally, at least 20 St. Anthony's cross-shaped sheet pendants are known from Estonia (Fig. 4: 2). While most of these pendants are simple in execution, some exhibit skillful craftsmanship. Several examples with a St. Anthony's cross-shaped pendant attached to a loop with spiral ends have been discovered. Although the T-shaped cross carries various meanings in Christian iconography, these ornaments can be associated with St. Anthony the Great, a highly popular saint in medieval Estonia among city dwellers, the local German elite, and Estonian peasants. The manifestations of his cult persisted in folk beliefs until the 19th century (Alttoa 1989; Jonuks & Joosu 2013, 131; Põltsam-Jürjo 2021; Jonuks 2022b, 334–335).

The St. Anthony's cross was a popular symbol across the German cultural sphere in the Late Middle Ages (Reisnert 2008, 628–629, figs 1 and 2; Sawicki 2013). The creators and wearers of St. Anthony's cross-shaped sheet pendants



**FIG. 14.** Sheet pendants of a necklace from the 13th century from the Kukruse cemetery in Virumaa (TÜ 1777: 1606, 1603, 1604, 1607, 1610, 1602, 1605). Photo by Jaana Ratas.

were undoubtedly aware of the association with St. Anthony. Notably, none of these pendants features a cross or the five bosses, instead showcasing abstract punched decorations and engraved plant ornamentation. It would have been a violation of the hierarchy of symbols to wear a symbol representing a saint of mundane origin on a jewel portraying Christianity, God the Father, or Jesus. In contrast, one sheet pendant from Aa manor in Virumaa features an engraving of male genitalia (Fig. 4: 2), likely from the 16th century based on its design. Since phallic imagery is not characteristic in Christian iconography, this pendant might have served as a wedding gift for a bride, with the depicted subject intended to ensure her fertility.

Among sheet pendants from the 10th to the 13th century, a common design element is a central boss, featured on 31% of these pendants (Figs 2: 2, 5: 3, 7: 1, 14: 1 and 7), compared to 11% among more recent ones (Fig. 15: 1). In Sweden, similar sheet pendants with one central boss have been found both in hoards (see Duczko 1989; 1995, fig. 2: 1b) and in 10th-century graves in Birka (Duczko 1989; Odebäck 2021, 115). Some buried women wore them around their necks, along with pendant crosses, and in one grave, together with an equal-armed brooch depicting two male deers at the Well of Life (Trotzig 2004, fig. 2). This motif was popular in early Christian art, symbolizing baptism and the sacrament of the Eucharist. The contextual findings suggest that Birka's single-boss sheet pendants, which are among the oldest sheet pendants, had Christian significance.



**FIG. 15.** Sheet pendants from the 14th–17th century. 1 – from the Porkuni hoard in Virumaa (AI 2595: 13), 2 – from the Kobiluse hoard in Tartumaa (ERM A 476: 3). Photos by Andres Tvauri and the Estonian National Museum.

There have been suggestions that these sheet pendants represent circular shields with a domed top, and terms such as “shield-shaped pendant” (e.g., Gräslund 2007, 93) or “miniature shield” (e.g., Gardęła 2014, 98–99; Gardęła & Odebäck 2018; Odebäck 2021, 113–120) have been used. Therefore, it has been assumed that such a small shield symbolized the defenders of Christianity (Trotzig 2004, 200–202). However, this explanation does not seem plausible because sheet pendants with a single boss or circle remained in use for centuries after the use of round shields with a domed boss had ended. Moreover, they have generally been found in Scandinavia in women’s necklaces, not warrior graves. Instead, the representation on this type of ornament can be explained by Christian numerical symbolism. In Christianity, the most prominent number is one, a sacred number symbolizing God the Father (De Vries 2004, 418). This is represented by the circle, a shape with no beginning or end (Bertelsen 2015, 57). Since the Ten Commandments forbade making an image or likeness of God, until the 13th century, God the Father was represented only through symbols and ornamentation (Salo 2005, 46–47).

In Sweden’s earlier jewelry tradition, there are no examples of sheet pendants with a single central boss. However, such jewelry was worn in Denmark, Norway, England, and Germany as early as the 6th–7th centuries (Gräslund 2007, 93). The design likely spread to Birka from Christian lands. In Åland, the earliest sheet pendants with a single boss date back to the 10th century (Kivikoski 1948, 49, fig. 33), and Livs wore them most commonly in the 10th–13th centuries (see Spirģis 2019). A sheet pendant with a single boss has also been found on the coast of Poland, in the Truso fortified settlement (Gardęła 2014, 98–99). Additionally, all 33 sheet pendants discovered at the Jegliniec hillfort in northeastern Poland



FIG. 16. Sheet pendant from the 13th century from the Lõhavere hillfort in Viljandimaa (AI 4133: 2085). Photo by Mauri Kiudsoo.

are decorated with this motif (Iwanowska & Niemyjska 2004, 93–95, plates V: 1–21, VII). At least one has been found in Ingria (Kilunovskaya & Semenov 2006, 30).

In addition to the previously described sheet pendants with a single central boss, there are also examples where the sole boss is placed at the center of a cross (Figs 2: 1, 4, 3: 1, 5: 1, 7: 2, 4, 8: 1, 13: 3 and 14: 4). A circle, ring, or boss in the center of a cross is presumably a reference to the perfection and infinity of God (Salo 2005, 123).

The design consisting of five bosses arranged in a cross is found in 10% of sheet pendants from the 10th to the 13th century (Figs 11: 3 and 16) and in 65% of sheet pendants from the 14th to the 17th century (Figs 10: 1 and 15: 2). It is noteworthy that in sheet pendants from the 14th to the 17th century, the design with five bosses is even more common than the cross, which occurs only in 43% of sheet pendants from this period. Most pendants have only five bosses, but often they are combined with a cross. Outer bosses can be placed both on the arms of the cross (Figs 6: 1, 7: 3, 8: 4, 9: 1 and 10: 2) and in the corners (Figs 5: 1 and 17). Outer bosses can also be smaller than the central boss or consist of three smaller bosses.

A sheet pendant with a combination of five bosses and a cross, found in the Kõue hoard, is one of the oldest Estonian sheet pendants from the 11th century. This motif was utilized throughout the period when this type of pendant was in use and is often found alongside a cross. In Estonia, the motif of five circles also appears on silver bracelets from the early 13th century (see Leimus 2009, fig. 29) and on necklaces from the first half of the 16th century (e.g., AI 2635: 1147; Reidla 2012, fig. 53). In Tallinn, even a medieval limestone mold for casting tin



FIG. 17. Sheet pendants from the 14th–17th century from the Jõgeveste hoard in Viljandimaa (TÜ 2845: 4, 6). Photo by Andres Tvauri.

pendants with five bosses has been discovered (AM 20209 K 5894). Round tin pendants with five bosses from the medieval period have been found at the Sargvere settlement site in Järvamaa (TÜ 2821: 39), in Kodavere, Tartumaa (TÜ 2693: 12, 13), and in Kabila village in northern Viljandimaa (Kiudsoo 2020, 5, fig. 5: 3). Since tin does not preserve well in the ground, tin pendants with five bosses were likely much more common in Estonia at the time than archaeological finds suggest.

Elsewhere, this motif is found, for example, in Sweden. Some such sheet pendants have been discovered in Birka's 10th-century graves (Odebäck 2021, 115, fig. 7.3). Sheet pendants with a motif of five bosses and a cross have also been found on Gotland and in the counties of Ångermanland and Gästrikland (Arbman 1940, plate 97: 13, 15; Stenberger 1958, fig. 51: 9; Duczko 1987, 26–27; 1995, fig. 2d). This symbol is present on Finnish sheet pendants as well (see Nordman 1924, fig. 56), including those made in the 9th century with looped-ring clasps (see Salo 2005, fig. 19: 2, 3). Sheet pendants with five bosses have been found in Latvia from the 11th to the 14th century (Zemītis 1994, fig. 1: 4, 5, 8, 9; Muižnieks 2021, fig. 33: 3, 6). This symbol appears also on Viking Age silver necklaces and bracelets from Sweden (see Hårdh 1996, fig. 15).

Previously, the design formed by five bosses on sheet pendants was considered a variant of the cross (Leimus 2009, 17; Kurisoo 2021, 128), but it is now recognized as a distinct symbol. According to Latvian archaeologist Roberts Spīrgis, the five bosses on the cross of sheet pendants and pendant crosses symbolize the drops of Christ's blood shed on the cross, representing the Five

Holy Wounds he received during his crucifixion. The number five refers to the redemption accomplished by Christ through his crucifixion. The motif of five bosses arranged like the number five on a die has symbolized the sacrament of the Eucharist since at least the 8th century. The cult of Christ's five wounds was also significant in the Teutonic Order, where falling in battle and receiving five wounds was considered the best death for a Teutonic knight (Spirģis 2016, 337–338 and references therein). Furthermore, medieval altar mensas in Estonia and Latvia are often adorned with five consecration crosses, representing Christ's wounds (Mänd 2023, 321). The depiction of Christ's wounds is also present on a *paater* pendant from the 16th century (Fig. 1: 1), where, in addition to the cross, the wounds are depicted as five gemstones or glass pieces.

The symbol of Christ's Five Holy Wounds can still be seen today on the state emblem of Portugal, adopted by King Afonso Henriques in 1139. According to a legend recorded in the 15th century, Christ appeared to the king and instructed him to adopt a coat of arms featuring the Five Holy Wounds to ensure victory over the Moors in the Battle of Ourique (Weiß 1868, 197). Depictions of Christ's wounds can also be found on pendants elsewhere in medieval Europe. For example, a square-shaped gold reliquary pendant from the 16th century, discovered in England, features Christ's wounds arranged similarly to the cross-shaped designs on Estonian sheet pendants. However, in this case, the central wound is depicted as a heart, while the four outward wounds are shown as sharp oval shapes (Robinson 2010, 115, fig. 45).

The pentagram, or five-pointed star, appears on two sheet pendants (Fig. 14: 2, 6) that are part of a necklace found in the Kukruse cemetery, which included seven sheet pendants, with a cross on the central pendant. A pentagram was also painted on the vaulted ceiling of Karja Church in Saaremaa in the second half of the 13th century (Bome & Markus 2005, 10, 42, fig. 10), as well as on the wall of Kaarma Church, also in Saaremaa (Markus et al. 2003, fig. 114). The pentagram on the church vault is undoubtedly a Christian symbol, possibly representing Christ as the perfect man (Bome & Markus 2005, 44). In Christian symbolism, the pentagram signifies Christ. The number five was considered a Christological number because Christ received Five Holy Wounds on the cross, and the name Jesus has five letters in most European languages (Hall 1994, 5; De Vries 2004, 231, 435).

The triskele is depicted on only four sheet pendants from the 13th century (Fig. 11: 4). The triskele is also found on at least one sheet pendant from Ingrida (Kilunovskaya & Semenov 2006, 30). In the second half of the 13th century, the triskele was painted, for example, on the vault of Karja Church in Saaremaa (Bome & Markus 2005, 42, fig. 10). In Christian iconography, the triskele symbolizes the Holy Trinity (Hall 1994, 7).

The design formed by three volutes is found on only two sheet pendants from the Kukruse cemetery (Fig. 14: 3, 5). It is possible that the three volutes on these pendants symbolize the Holy Trinity. In this respect, the Kukruse pendants would



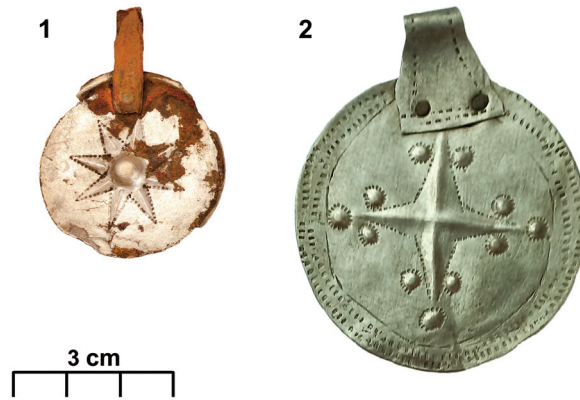
not be entirely unique, as similar designs have been found elsewhere. For example, sheet pendants with three C-shaped motifs, volutes, or rings have been found in Finland (Salo 2005, 67–69, fig. 27). Three volutes also appear on granulated silver pendants from Birka in Sweden (see Duczko 1985, 42–48, figs 38–40) and on granulated pendants from various Swedish hoards dating to the 10th–11th centuries (see Stenberger 1958, figs 19: 6, 40: 4, 41: 4, 5). A silver sheet pendant found near a burial in Stånga churchyard on Gotland also depicts the Holy Trinity as three rings placed in the center of the sheet pendant, within a larger ring (Thunmark-Nylén 1995b, fig. 457: 2).

Five sheet pendants from the 13th century feature a circle with six or eight spokes, usually with a boss at their intersection. Among the 14th–17th-century pendants, only three depict this spoke design (Fig. 1: 1). A nine-spoke sheet pendant has been found in southwest Finland, from a grave in the Luistari cemetery, together with a coin minted after 1018 (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, 143, 187, fig. 39: 1a, b). A similar motif is found, for example, on sheet pendants from the Salaspils Laukskola cemetery in Latvia (Spirģis 2016, fig. 2).

In Christian symbolism, the closest counterpart to this design is the Christogram or monogram of Christ, formed by the Greek letters I and X (Ιησοῦς Χριστός) placed on top of each other, enclosed in a circle. This symbol was especially prevalent in Eastern Roman Christian art, appearing in the 6th-century mosaic in the Basilica of San Vitale and the Archiepiscopal Chapel in Ravenna, Italy (Mauskopf Deliyannis 2010, plates VIa, V). Six-spoke circle-shaped Christograms were also painted on church vaults during the Middle Ages, as seen in Gotland (see Söderberg 1971, figs 42 and 43) and Denmark (see Reuterswärd 1986, 121). Several Swedish churches have six-spoke wheel-shaped consecration crosses on their walls (see Reuterswärd 1986, figs 54–56). In Finland, a six-spoke wheel-shaped Christogram is found on a trapezoidal tombstone from the 13th century in Raisio (see Reuterswärd 1986, fig. 47). An eight-spoke Christogram, formed by a cross and the Greek letter X, was a common motif in the decoration of Romanesque churches and tombstones (see Reuterswärd 1986, 109, figs 14 and 16). Boge Church in Gotland has a painting of an eight-spoke wheel motif, dating from around 1300, depicting consecration crosses (Reuterswärd 1986, 113, fig. 53).

Several 13th-century sheet pendants (Fig. 11: 1) and ten sheet pendants from the 14th to the 17th century (Figs 9: 2, 15: 2, 17: 2 and 18: 2) feature a four-pointed star. The interpretation of this symbol is unclear – whether to consider it a cross or a star. On the 11th-century runestone called Dynna (*Dynnasteinen*) in Norway, the three Magi are depicted arriving at the Infant Jesus, and above them is the Star of Bethlehem, represented as a four-pointed star with a circle in the middle (Strömbäck 1970, 12, plate 2).

An eight-pointed star is found on nine 13th-century pendants (Fig. 16: 1). A similar star is present above the Calvary group set in the second half of the 13th century in the wall of Karja Church in Saaremaa. Due to its placement in the



**FIG. 18.** Sheet pendants with a star. 1 – from the Pada cemetery in Virumaa (AI 5366: CXXXII/6), 2 – from the Soontaga hoard in Tartumaa (TÜ 2748: 20). Photos by Jaana Ratas and Andres Tvauri.

church, the second meaning of the eight-pointed star in Christian iconography is considered. It symbolizes resurrection, signifying eternal life (Bome & Markus 2005, 10–11, fig. 1).

On two sheet pendants from the Kukruse cemetery, a lunula-like design surrounds the cross from the top (Fig. 19: 1). This combination of the cross and lunula is meaningful. A similar ring-shaped pendant with the same design has been found in Riga (Spirģis 2012, fig. 9: 10). In Estonia, copper-alloy pendants from the 11th to the 13th century, featuring both lunula and cross, have been discovered, such as those from the Madi cemetery in Viljandimaa (see Kurisoo 2013, fig. 3.22: 14). Similar copper-alloy neck crosses from the 11th to the 12th century, with a crescent moon above the cross, have also been found in Kievan Rus' territories, suggesting Byzantine cultural influence (Kutashov & Seleznev



**FIG. 19.** Sheet pendants from the 13th century. 1 – from the Kukruse cemetery in Virumaa (TÜ 1777: 1257), 2 – from Pärnu (AI 2176). Photos by Jaana Ratas and Mauri Kiudsoo.

2010, 14). Lunula-shaped pendants were widespread during this period, especially in Kievan Rus' and other parts of eastern Europe, regions believed to be influenced by Byzantine culture (Kurisoo 2013, 79 and references therein).

The image of a four-legged creature appears on two Late Iron Age silver sheet pendants from Pärnu (Fig. 19: 2), which are considered imports from Scandinavia (Tamla 1995, 91). This creature may be a leucrotta or crocotta, mythical animals believed by ancient Greeks to reside in India. These creatures were described as having deer legs, a lion's body, and a horse's head, with mouth extending to the ears and bone plates instead of teeth in both jaws. Leucrottas were believed to mimic human speech and were often depicted in bestiaries – manuscripts describing and allegorically interpreting animals (Heck & Cordonnier 2012, 364–365). It is speculated that this creature, represented on pendants widely worn in northeastern Europe in the 12th–13th centuries, illustrated some instructive Christian story (Spirģis 2014). Similar copper-alloy leucrotta-shaped pendants have been found in Estonia and neighboring countries to the east and south (Jonuks 2021, 199, fig. 2).

Leimus has suggested that the motif on these Pärnu sheet pendants was borrowed from engraved decorations on Gotlandic disc brooches (Leimus 2009, 16). A disc brooch with a similar motif has been discovered in Piila, Saaremaa (Tallgren 1925, fig. 177). Since the animal's head depicted on the Pärnu sheet pendants looks back, it cannot be ruled out that it might represent the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*). In this case, the halo around the lamb's head may have been interpreted as horns. However, it is also possible that these exceptional Estonian sheet pendants have origins in the east. A very similar sheet pendant, probably made by the same craftsman and dated to the 13th century, was found at Serenskaya hillfort in Kaluga Oblast, Russia (Zajtseva 2005, 148, fig. 3.1, 3).

#### TRAPEZOID-SHAPED SHEET PENDANTS

Trapezoid-shaped sheet pendants found in Estonia have a completely different design, and thus their meaning is considered separately. These pendants (Fig. 20) are known only from the 13th century, with a total of ten examples discovered.

There is no information about the meaning of the trapezoidal design for the makers and wearers of these sheet pendants. They have been previously referred to as axe-shaped (Kivikoski 1970; Hein 1976; Leimus 2009) or bell-shaped pendants (Tomanterä 2008). If the design was meant to resemble an axe, the trapezoid-shaped pendants may express the cult of St. Olaf. St. Olaf II Haraldsson of Norway (ca 995–1030), who was declared a saint, is associated with an axe as his attribute. In the 11th–12th centuries, small copper-alloy axes were used as amulets symbolizing St. Olaf by Scandinavian soldiers in the Kievan Rus' state and Scandinavia (Makarov 1992, 52; Roslund 1990, 57). The battle-slain Norwegian king also fit well as the patron saint of the Baltic Sea crusaders, so his cult grew explosively in the early 13th century, mainly during the Danish crusade



**FIG. 20.** Trapezoid-shaped sheet pendants. 1 – from the Kaberla cemetery in Harjumaa (AI 4116: 198B/4), 2 – from the Liikva hoard in Harjumaa (AI 2505: 10), 3 – from the Kumna hoard in Virumaa (AMA 434: 1), 4 – from the Varudi-Vanaküla hoard in Virumaa (RM A 65: 9), 5 – from the Kukruse cemetery in Virumaa (TÜ 1777: 2826), 6 – from the Kukruse cemetery in Virumaa (TÜ 1777: 3498). Photos by Andres Tvauri, Mauri Kiudsoo, Jaana Ratas and Aive Viljus.

(Markus 2017). Trapezoid-shaped sheet pendants from this period have also been found in Estonia, all located in the north Estonian area conquered by Denmark. The cult of St. Olaf spread widely in Finland from the late 12th century (Knuutila 2020). From that time on, Finland was gradually incorporated into the dominion of the Swedish king and church.

On one sheet pendant found in the Kaberla cemetery (Fig. 20: 1), Leimus interprets the design as depicting a ship on waves or the Greek letter  $\Omega$ , along with a St. Peter's cross (upside-down Latin cross; Leimus 2009, 13). The same image has also been tentatively considered as Thor's hammer (Tamla 1995, 95). Jets has suggested that this type of cross is a symbol of the Scandinavian thunder god Thor, with the palmetto under the cross associated with the myth where Thor battles the world serpent Jörmungandr (Jets 2001, 137–138). According to Jonuks, there are no references to this myth in Estonian sources (Jonuks 2009, 300). Another interpretation is that the upside-down Latin cross symbolizes St. Peter, who was allegedly crucified head down. The boat depicted under the

cross may indicate that Peter was originally a fisherman (Jonuks & Johanson 2017, 79). In Christian symbolism, the boat is also a symbol of baptism and an attribute of several saints (Farmer 2011, 471).

A trapezoid-shaped sheet pendant from the Liikva hoard in Harjumaa (Fig. 20: 2) features a volute and a braided ornament underneath, but instead of St. Peter's cross, there is a triangular-ended rod. Here, the triangle might represent the Holy Trinity. A pendant from the Kumna hoard in Harjumaa (Fig. 20: 3) has a boat and a braided ornament underneath, but instead of St. Peter's cross, the design consists of two rolled ends of a volute. The closest match to the latter is on a sheet pendant from the Varudi-Vanaküla hoard (Fig. 11: 1), where it is combined with a star. The meaning of such a design is unknown.

On two sheet pendants found in the Kukruse cemetery, a design resembling an anchor can be seen (Fig. 20: 5, 6). A similar design is also present on a trapezoid-shaped sheet pendant found in Lenvik, northern Norway (Kivikoski 1970, fig. 4: 4). In Christian symbolism, the anchor is a symbol of St. Clement. Clement I was a pope who served at the end of the first century. According to Christian tradition, Clement was exiled to the Crimean Peninsula during the reign of Emperor Trajan, where, at the emperor's command, he was tied to an iron anchor and drowned in the sea (Farmer 2011, 93–94). However, there is no reason to assume that anchors on Estonian sheet pendants were associated with the veneration of St. Clement. In Christian symbolism, the anchor also signifies hope for eternal life (De Vries 2004, 16). A two-pronged iron anchor was not unknown to the inhabitants of Estonia in the 12th–13th centuries – ships with such anchors sailed in northern European waters as early as the Viking Age. One example is the anchor found on the Ladby Viking ship, used as a burial ship in Denmark in the early 10th century (Sørensen 2001, 51).

## Discussion and conclusions

Since Estonian sheet pendants from the 13th century differ in their execution from those found in neighboring countries, it can be concluded that they were made locally. This indicates that their symbolism was widely known here (Kurisoo 2021, 288). Presumably, the visual prototypes of the symbols depicted on these pendants came from earlier Scandinavian sheet pendants and western European coins. Since Christianity had already spread both east and west of Estonia during the 10th–12th centuries, there is no reason to believe that the inhabitants of Estonia were less knowledgeable than their neighbors about the Christian meaning of these symbols (see Leimus 2009, 21; Kurisoo 2021, 290). At this point, I will not discuss what the term “Christian” might have meant in 11th–12th-century Estonia (see, e.g., Mägi 2002, 150–157; Valk 2003; Leimus 2009; Jonuks & Kurisoo 2013; Jonuks 2018; 2022a; Kurisoo 2021, 286–293). However, I am convinced that the inhabitants of Estonia at the time knew that

they were using ornaments with Christian symbols. As evidence of this, there is, for example, a necklace found in the Kukruse cemetery, where a larger-than-average sheet pendant with a cross representing the wearer's faith is prominently featured. On either side are pendants symbolizing the Holy Trinity, followed by two pendants with pentagrams symbolizing Christ's Five Holy Wounds, and pendants symbolizing God at the ends of the necklace (Fig. 14).

On sheet pendants from the 10th–13th centuries, there is usually one motif: either a cross, pentagon, triskele, or one or five bosses arranged in a cross shape. The design of later sheet pendants is characterized by the combination of symbols, including various crosses and five bosses; sheet pendants with only one symbol are less common among later finds. In addition to the main motif(s), later pendants also feature additional decorations along the edges. The placement of two crosses of different shapes and other symbols on top of each other was common in the engraved ornamentation used; for example, on silver round buckles in Sweden and Finland (see Salo 2005, figs 20 and 23).

After the 13th century, the occurrence of looped crosses, swastikas, pentagons, and sheet pendants with one central boss or a ring decreased by about threefold. In contrast, from the 14th century onwards, the proportion of sheet pendants with five bosses or depicting Christ's Five Holy Wounds increased significantly, rising from 10% to 65%. It is important to note that the motif of Christ's Five Holy Wounds is much more common on sheet pendants from the 14th to the 17th century than crosses, which are found on only 43% of pendants from this period. In the 14th–17th centuries, new symbols, such as the Maltese cross and the St. Anthony's cross, were added to the design of sheet pendants. These changes in symbolism may be attributed to an increased emphasis on the narrative of Christ's Passion and Eucharist, and a decrease in the themes of the sacrament of baptism and the Trinity in the church's messages to the local population in the 14th–16th centuries. However, until the content of the preaching delivered to the Estonians by clergy during this period is known, this observation remains speculative.

In the 17th century, the symbol of Christ's Five Holy Wounds, once prominent on Estonian peasant adornments, gradually faded away along with the use of sheet pendants. During the 17th and 18th centuries, these were replaced by *paater* pendants, which carried a similar symbolic significance. The new design featured a depiction of the Calvary group, an emblem of Christ's Passion (see Kirme 2002, figs 89–92, 94). This shift from the symbol of Christ's five wounds to the Calvary scene likely occurred as Lutheranism spread throughout the region.

It can be noted that over time, the significance of sheet pendants increased in the religious self-expression of the Estonian peasantry. While in the Late Iron Age, sheet pendants were just one among many types of pendants, in the medieval period and the second half of the 16th century, they became the most abundant and largest type of pendant in the sets of Estonian women's necklaces.

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# *Eesti 10.–17. sajandi rinnalehtede kristlik sõnum*

Andres Tvauri

## RESÜMEE

Rinnalehed on hõbe- või vasesulamist valmistatud plekkripatsid, mida kanti Eestis 10.–17. sajandil. See ehtetüüp levis Eestisse Skandinaaviast. Rinnalehed olid kasutusel ka Soomes, Karjalas, Läti ja Leedu aladel, balti hõimude poolt asustatud aladel Kirde-Poolas ning vähesel hulgal Loode-Venemaal. Olen jaganud Eesti rinnalehed teostuse ja leiukonteksti poolest kaheks: 10.–13. sajandi (223 tk) ja 14.–17. sajandi rinnalehed (898 tk).

Rinnalehtedel kujutatud sümbolid on kristlikud. Neil domineerivad kolm sümbolit: kristlikku usku väljendav rist, üks Jumalat tähistav kühm või ring ning viis ristikujuliselt asetatud kühmu, mis kujutavad Kristuse viit püha haava. Mõlemast perioodist pärinevatel rinnalehtedel leidub ka riste, mille harude otsesse on paigutatud kolm kühmukest, mis sümboliseerivad Püha Kolmainsust. 10.–13. sajandi rinnalehtedel leidub silmusristi, mis on Ristija Johannese sümbol, ning 10.–11. sajandi rinnalehtedel ka ristikujuliste otstega riste, mis tõenäoliselt väljendasid kristlikku misjonitegevust. 13. sajandi ringikujulistel rinnalehtedel esineb voluudist koosnevat kujundit, mis viitab Pühale Kolmainsusele, ning triskelet, haakristi, viisnurka ja tähte. 13. sajandi trapetsikujulised rinnalehed võivad olla mõeldud kirvekujulistena, väljendades Püha Olavi kultust. Trapetsikujulistel rinnalehtedel kujutatud voluutide ja põimornamendi tähendus ei ole teada. Äratuntavad kristlikud märgid neil on Püha Peetruse rist ja ankur. 14.–17. sajandi rinnalehed on küll varasematest suuremad ja arvukamad, kuid sümbolite valik nendel on piiratum: neil on enamasti rist ja viis kühmu või üks kühm, kusjuures enamikul juhtudel on kujutatud korraga risti ja viit kühmu. Selle ajastu rinnalehtedel on enim levinud Kristuse viie haava sümbol. Haakrist esineb kesk- ja varauusaegsetel rinnalehtedel vaid üksikjuhtudel. 15.–17. sajandil lisandusid rinnalehtede kujundusse Malta rist ja T-tähe kujuline Püha Antoniuse rist.

Rinnalehed manifesteerisid oma kandja kristlikku usku ning väljendasid kindlaid ristiusu teemasid ja mõisteid. Rinnalehtedel kajastuvad Jumal Isa, Kristuse sünd ja ristisurm, Püha Kolmainsus ja ristimise sakrament.