

## **FAMILY VAULT OF THE DUKES OF COURLAND**

The family vault of the Dukes of Courland is located on the basement-floor level of the south-east corner of Jelgava Palace, seemingly connecting Rastrelli's building and the old Jelgava medieval castle.

The first members of the Kettler family, the Duke Gotthard's under aged sons, had died in Riga Castle, were buried in Kuldīga and only later brought to Jelgava. The Duke Wilhelm's wife Sophie who died in 1610 also had been buried in Kuldīga castle church was completed; there was a cellar beneath it for the Dukes' sarcophagi. The cellar premise was about 9 m wide, with a free passage in the middle and covered by a barrel vault. In 1587, the Duke Gotthard was the first to be buried there; 24 members of the Kettler family were buried until 1737.

During the Northern War; in September 1705, the crypt was damaged for the first time when Swedish soldiers broke off several sarcophagi and stole jewellery.

In 1737 when the castle was blown up, the church and crypt were destroyed as well. Sarcophagi were placed in the shed while the family vault premise was built on the basement floor of the new palace. The new crypt consisted of two rather small vaulted premises on the basement floor of the southern block, with a separate entrance from outside that was walled up later. The Birones did not realize the idea of a separate family vault.

In 1819, a call to the Courland society was announced to donate money for the reconstruction of the Dukes' family vault. The present place on the basement floor of the palace south-east corner was chosen. A 16,5 m long and 5 m wide barrel-vaulted premise was obtained instead of three small rooms. Sarcophagi were placed here, quite close side by side until the fundamental reconstruction of the crypt in 1933-1934.

The Duke's family vault was demolished by Bolsheviks and Bermondt soldiers in 1919. The sarcophagi were broken and Dukes' remains thrown out of the coffins.

On 4 May 1934, the Construction Board of the Ministry of Interior Affairs passed the reconstructed crypt in charge of the Heritage Board; then it was opened to the public. At the end of World War II and during the first post-war year, the crypt was ravaged frequently. In 1946, it was walled up. In 1973 and 1976, a detailed description, survey and photographing were carried out. The sarcophagi and their contents were handed down to the Rundāle Palace Museum that started conservation and partial restoration of textiles. Latvian University of Agriculture did fundamental repair of the premise, installed heating and electricity. In 1990 the Rundāle Palace Museum opened the Duke's family vault to the public, although restoration of the sarcophagi has been partial until now.

Now the crypt contains 30 buried persons – 21 metal sarcophagus and nine wooden coffins. These burials were made from 1569 to 1791.

The oldest burial in the crypt is from 1569, a small sarcophagus for the Prince Sigismund August was made by the Riga pewter-maker Cyriakus Klint who had made also the Prince Gotthard's sarcophagus. He died in 1570.

The Duke Gotthard Kettler's (1587) sarcophagus is very simple but already the next ones – the Duchess Anna's (1602) and Sophie's (1610) – testify to a rapid development of style and increased decorativeness. The Duchess Sophie's sarcophagus stands out by subtle engravings of coats of arms and ornaments.

The Duchess Elisabeth Magdalena's splendid sarcophagus with Mannerist-style ornaments was made by Jelgava pewter-maker Franz Warnradt in 1645. He is likely to have made also the Duke Friedrich's (1642), Prince Vladyslav Ludwig Friedrich (1648) and Princess Christine Sophie's (1650) sarcophagi. The Duke Wilhelm's sarcophagus is similar but simpler.

A turn to Baroque style is perceived in the Duke Jacob, his wife and son Karl's sarcophagi that all are much alike. Their hypothetical author is Liepāja pewter-maker Heinrich Pomoller. The first sarcophagi were made for the Duchess Louise Charlotte who died on 18 August 1676, and Prince Karl Jacob who died on 29 December of the same year. It is likely that Duke Jacob ordered his own sarcophagus in proper time because it is identical to his son Karl Jacob's sarcophagus. Funeral ceremonies became more pompous in the Duke Jacob's time but especially during the reign of the Duke Friedrich Kasimir. His funeral, which had been scrupulously described, embodied the ideal of splendour he had strived for during his entire life. Friedrich Kasimir's sarcophagus made by the Jelgava pewter-maker Christoph Epner has not survived; it seems to have been destroyed during the war ravages of 1705.

Friedrich Kasimir's wife Sophie Amelia's sarcophagus (1688) testifies to the Baroque-style tendency to abundance of forms.

Ferdinand, the last Duke of the Kettler family, is buried in a sarcophagus made in Danzig and brought to Jelgava in 1743. Its form is especially rational and geometrical.

The patron of Jelgava Palace, Duke Ernst Johann Biron, is buried in a copper sarcophagus commissioned to the Danzig copper-smith Johann Daniel Peppih and girdle-maker Gottlieb Kaufmann together with the Duchess Benigna Gottlieb's and the Duke Peter's early deceased son's sarcophagi. The form of sarcophagi has retained Baroque-style curved sides but decoration conforms to the style of Neo-Classicism.