

Symbolism of the „three oak leaves“

The winters back then were long and there was no television or internet. Accordingly, people could invest a lot of time in their hobbies, of course only those with money and employees for the household. Philosophy and symbolism were very popular back then and unlike today many decorative elements on buildings or monuments had a deeper meaning. Furthermore, for some people it was probably also important to memorize themselves as long as possible.

A very impressive construct of such symbolism was provided by King Friedrich-Wilhelm III of Prussia when he created the "three oak leaves". They are probably familiar to every collector of German militaria, as they decorate many medals (Fig. 1).

I definitely salute him for this extensive derivation of his very personal symbolism. Fortunately, he wrote down the meaning and it was kept in the Prussian Secret State Archives, at least until the Second World War (Fig. 2). Unfortunately, I don't know whether it survived the war, because my information comes from an old book from 1941.



Fig. 1: Order of the red Eagle 2nd class with crossed swords and oak leaves

Thus, here is the meaning of the "three oak leaves":

1. The oak leaf is the symbol of German merit.
2. The number of 3 leaves indicates the 3 classes of the Prussian medal of the the Red Eagle.
3. The center line of the middle leaf and the center line of the leaf to the right together form an L, which stands for his wife Queen Luise.
4. The 9 serrations of the middle leaf indicate the number of his children alive at the time. The 5 serrations on the left stand for the 5 sons, the 4 serrations on the right for the 4 daughters.
5. The 4th end line of the 3 joined leaves form an "X" or a "Latin 10". If you add this 10 to the 9 serrations of the middle leaf, you get the number 19, the date of his beloved wife Luise's death.
6. The center line of the central leaf and the upper round leaf line, which joins that line on the left, together form a "J". This stands for July, the month in which his Luise died.
7. The previously mentioned "X" or "Latin 10" also stands for the year 1810, the year in which his wife died.
8. The "X" or the "Latin 10" together with the 24 points of all 3 leaves add up to 34, the age at which Queen Louise died.
9. The "X" or the "Latin 10" together with the 7 serrations of the leaf on the right gives 17, the number of years Queen Louise lived in Prussia.
10. The "X" or the "Latin 10" together with the 8 serrations of the leaf on the left gives 18 as the date of the Order's foundation.
11. The previously mentioned "J" also points to the month of January, the month in which the Order was founded and at the same time the month in which she attended the last ceremonial act.
12. The "X", or the "Latin 10", also pointed to the year 1810 as the year in which the medal was founded.
13. The "X" or the "Latin 10" also points to the 10th (March) as Queen Louise's birthday, whereby the month is derived from the number of 3 leaves, which stand for the 3rd month of the year.
14. The 24 leaf points indicate the 24th (December 1893), the wedding day of King Friedrich-Wilhelm III and Queen Louise. The "X" stands for the month of December, although it should be noted that the original calendar only had 10 months (*probably due to the lack of a 12 needed, the king at the time bent the meaning here somewhat*).

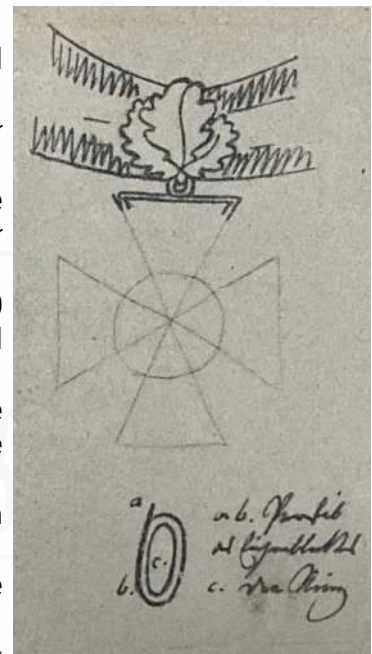


Fig. 2: Hand drawing of the medal with the 3 oak leaves from the Secret State Archives (Geheimes Staatsarchiv) in Berlin

You can probably conclude from this that Frederick William III really loved his wife and children dearly; but also that he had a lot of time and boredom. In any case, I think it is an extraordinary piece of contemporary history and I'm glad to have found these loving and very personal reflections by Friedrich-Wilhelm III and to be able to present them.