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Printed by Airdrie Print Services, 24-26 Flowerhill Street, Airdrie ML6 6BH

ISSN 0269-8773
Editorial

EMILY LYŁE

I had the opportunity of visiting Latvia and Lithuania on a research visit supported by the British Academy in April-May 2005 and was delighted to be able to work with the scholars whose work is represented here and to solicit their contributions to *Cosmos*. Latvian, Lithuanian and the now-extinct Prussian are the only languages in the Baltic branch of the Indo-European family and they carry a distinctive culture. These are languages where the words meaning “sun” and “thunder”, when treated as proper nouns, are the names of gods. Since Christianity arrived late in the Baltic lands and was associated when it came with foreign invaders, there was in some ways an excellent climate there for the preservation of elements of an older belief system up to the present day.

These articles, which are being sent to press in February 2006 although the journal issue has the cover date June 2003, provide an entry into current thinking about mythology and related folklore in the Baltic-language area. They can be supplemented by the articles on aspects of Baltic mythology to be found in the new edition of *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones (2005), where the contributors are the now deceased Haralds Biezais, and a group of currently active scholars, Sigma Ankrava, Janīna Kursīte, Rūta Muktupāvela, Valdis Muktupāvels and President Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, all of whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Riga during my 2005 research visit or on my previous visit to Latvia to attend a ballad conference in July 2004. It is very rewarding to be in touch with scholars in this thriving field and I hope that this issue of *Cosmos* will serve to make their interesting researches familiar to a wider audience.
Figure 1. Distaff from Saldus parish (Latvian History Museum, CVVM 20592). Author’s photograph.
Cosmological Ideas in Latvian Rock Carvings and Distaff Designs

SANDIS LAIME

Students of Latvian mythology have hitherto investigated concepts pertaining to the origin and structure of the world mainly through folklore, most commonly on the basis of mythological folksongs. Aspects of Latvian cosmogony and cosmology have been discussed by Wilhelm Mannhardt, Kārlis Straubergs, Ludvigs Adamovičs, Eduards Zicāns, Haralds Biezais, Guntis Pakalns, Janīna Kursīte, Jolanta Upeniece, Valdis Rūsiņš and others. These studies do not share a common perception of the ancient Latvian world-view. The aim of this paper is not to come out in support of any particular viewpoint on this subject, but rather to draw attention to rock carvings and representations on ethnographic objects as a hitherto unutilised, but promising, source for the study of Latvian cosmological ideas, particularly emphasising the fact that folk art has often been utilised as a very informative source in studies of this kind (see, e.g., Gimbutienė 1994b; Vaiškūnas 2005; Vēlius 1989; Flērova 2001).

Although the documentation of rock carvings is not yet complete, it is reckoned that the total number of signs carved in rocks in Latvia may come to about 3000. The majority are probably connected with some kind of mortuary tradition that, notwithstanding significant changes at around the turn of the seventeenth century, may be traced at rock carving sites from about the fifteenth to the late eighteenth century (cf. Laime 2004b). This tradition is similar to the tradition of “cross-marked trees” in Gulbene District in north-eastern Latvia, which has continued up to the present day. These trees are associated with a burial tradition: when the body is taken to the cemetery, a cross is cut in a particular roadside tree. The main explanation of this ritual is that the soul of the deceased cannot pass the cross and thus leaves in peace the people who stay behind (Eniņš 2002). Only a very small part of the rock carvings consists of signs where, with the aid of Latvian folklore and folk art, we may recognise cosmological ideas. The first to draw attention to this was amateur speleologist Guntis
Eniņš, the discoverer of rock carvings in Latvia. In 1988, two years after his sensational discovery of the rock carvings on Virtaka Rock, Eniņš found another, smaller group of carvings near the major group, which included a sign that Eniņš, citing parallels in Evenk mythology and folk art, interpreted as a representation of the World Mountain (Fig. 1a). Carved next to this sign were several rows of vertical lines, arranged in groups of nine, which Eniņš considered an ancient lunar calendar (Eniņš 1988: 38). Nowadays, although it seems unlikely that the groups of lines relate to an ancient lunar calendar, a cosmological interpretation of the signs carved next to the rows of lines does seem acceptable, and parallels for this may be found not only in Evenk mythology, but also in Latvian and Lithuanian folk art and folklore.

This paper focuses mainly on two rock carvings – on Virtaka Rock (Fig. 2a) and Krustu (Cross) Cliff (Fig. 2b) – and two carvings on distaffs, from Saldus Parish in Latvia (Figs 1 and 2c) and Rokiškis District in Lithuania (Fig. 2d), possibly all depicting the same mythical ideas: the Celestial Mountain, through which there grows a three-branched tree representing the axis mundi.

Before entering into a detailed analysis of these four images, I would like to address the question of whether these carvings can be regarded as purposefully created images and whether their character is not accidental, which would preclude the possibility of any interpretation in terms of mythical ideas. That these representations are not chance events but all reflect definite mythical ideas of a similar nature, is indicated, in the first place, by the identical basic structure of these representations, expressed most economically in the examples of Virtaka Rock and the Rokiškis distaff, showing an arc with a three-branched tree at the top. The other two drawings are much richer in detail, but retain the same structure. Supporting this idea is the fact that the representations come from different sources (rock carvings and distaffs); they also vary in date (the Saldus distaff dates from 1882, the Rokiškis distaff is from 1822 and these particular rock carvings date from approximately the 17th-18th centuries) and have a wide geographical distribution (the distaffs are from the Kurzeme region of Latvia and the Aukštaitija region of Lithuania, while the rock carvings are located in the central part of the Vidzeme region, Latvia), which means that they cannot have influenced one another. Also significant is the fact that certain details in the representation on Krustu Cliff, for example, coincide only with
the details of the image on the distaff from Saldus, which is chronologically later, comes from a different part of Latvia and was made with a different purpose in mind, while other details of this same image bear a resemblance only to the image on Virtaka Rock. Thus, there must have existed a certain complex of ideas, depicted with greater or lesser detail, depending on the particular situation and needs.

Figure 2. Rock carvings and distaff designs possibly containing cosmological ideas: a – Virtaka Rock; b – Krustu Cliff; c – distaff from Saldus parish (Latvian History Museum, CVVM 20592); d – distaff from Rokiškis district (Rokiškis Museum, IE 1336). Drawings by the author.
We may turn next to the analysis of these four drawings. In this paper, reference is made to the vertical and horizontal world model, reflecting mythical ideas on the structure of the world. The horizontal world model may be equated with present-day maps, which depict a horizontal earth surface, while in the vertical world model the structure of the world is viewed in terms of a vertical cross-section, with contrasts between the top and bottom.

**THE EARTH**

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Figure 3. Horizontal world model

The lower sections of the images on Krustu Cliff and the two distaffs terminate in a circular sign, most probably indicating the earth, above which the sky is shown in the form of a cone (Fig. 3). This part of the image is shown in greatest detail on the Saldus distaff (c). Here, in addition to the sky and the tree indicating the vertical division of the world, the earth level is shown as viewed in the horizontal plane. The combination of the vertical and horizontal world model in a single representation is one of the most interesting features of the Saldus distaff. In order to understand it correctly, the drawing should be imagined in three dimensions: in the form of a cone, where the earth forms the horizontal base of the cone, with the Celestial Mountain forming the sloping sides.

In all three cases where the earth is shown below the Celestial Mountain, it appears as circular. Latvian folklore texts provide quite meagre information about ideas concerning the form of the earth, but
there are some indications that the world was formerly imagined as being round. Thus, legends about God’s creation of the world tell how:

When God created the earth, it was different than it is today. It was soft as broth. It had no hills, no valleys, no rivers, no lakes. Then God gave the great ball to the Devil to hold it while it congealed slightly. And the Devil grabbed the soft ball in his hands and started to hold it. (LPT XIII, 117);

When the world had been created, what do you know, it wouldn’t fit under the heavenly vault. What could be done with such a great disc? (LPT XIII, 13).

It is clear that the ancient people structured the space they inhabited, distinguishing favourable, neutral and unfavourable locations. Structured in a similar way was mythical space, the elements of this space often merging with specific locations in the surrounding landscape – caves and hollows in trees could be regarded as passageways to the underworld, while hills and trees could serve as a link with the celestial deities. The image on the Saldus distaff includes quite a rich stock of information concerning the horizontal layout of the world. Regarded as the simplest horizontal world model is a square, with diagonals marking the centre and extending to the four cardinal directions (Toporov 1982; Flërova 2001: 142). Such images are often carved on ethnographic objects. Particularly significant in this regard is the image carved on a distaff from Žūras Parish (Fig. 4). This shows a square divided into four by diagonals, which, unusually, extend beyond the corners of the square, and shown at the end of each of these is an image of the Sun. The image clearly does not indicate four Suns, but rather four cardinal directions.³
Figure 4. Detail of a distaff from Zūras Parish with carved horizontal world model and four cardinal directions (Latvian History Museum, CVVM 20627). Author’s photograph.

Four cardinal directions are also emphasised in the image on the Saldus distaff (Fig. 3c), where these are marked by the corners of a rectangle, connected by diagonals. Also clearly depicted in this image by means of concentric rectangles is the centre of the world: the smallest rectangle, at the centre of the circle, is enclosed within three successively larger rectangles, thus contrasting the centre with the periphery. The centre of the world has a special significance in mythical ideas:

The universe originates from its Centre, it extends from a central point as from a navel. This is how the Universe is born and develops according to the Rigveda – from the core, the central point. (Eliade 1996: 44)
Parallels for this drawing may be found in Latgallian archaeologica...
Such a structure of barrows corresponds to the structure of the carvings discussed here: the barrow is circular, often with a ditch dug around it, regarded by archaeologists not as the source of sand for the barrow, but as having ritual significance (Radiņš 1999: 40). The earthen barrow itself corresponds to the Celestial Mountain, while the deceased individual buried under the barrow is symbolically given up to the abode of the dead, in the underworld. The wooden structure discovered in Barrow 23 at Makašēnu Kuciņi augments this scheme: the timber square laid out on the ground surface serves to structure the horizontal plan of the barrow, marking the four cardinal points and the centre, where the person is buried. Thus, at the time of burial, the scheme of the structure of the world is reproduced, and the deceased is placed within it in a new “abode” – in the land of the dead, the underworld. It should be noted that, in addition to barrow graves, the Latgallians also buried their dead in flat cemeteries.

The image on the Saldus distaff includes several figures carved between the squares, which are difficult to interpret. Possibly, these are meant to indicate certain elements of sacred topography on the horizontal world model, but are at present difficult to interpret more specifically.

**THE CELESTIAL MOUNTAIN**

![Figure 6. Celestial Mountain](image)

Latvian cosmological legends tell how God placed the sky over the earth:
This was at the very beginning. God first made the sky and then the earth. Unfortunately, the earth turned out to be too big, and would not fit under the sky. God stood dejected and didn’t know what to do about it. Here, out of the blue, a hedgehog came up and told God to take the earth and squeeze it together, so that it would become smaller. All right then! God took the earth and squeezed it until it would fit beneath the sky. From this pressure, folds developed in the earth, which we call hills. In his gratitude, God gave the hedgehog a coat that would protect him well. And the hedgehog still wears this coat today. (LPT XIII, 14)

The plot of this legend is also found in Finnish, Estonian, Lithuanian, Romanian and Bulgarian folklore (LPT XIII: 13; Dundulienė 1988: 9). In Latvian folksongs, the sky is described as a mountain, and this is the basis for the concept of the “Celestial Mountain” in mythological research. The Celestial Mountain is the abode and scene of activities of the celestial deities: God (Dievs), the Sons of God (Dieva Dēli), Thunder (Pērkons), the Sun (a goddess, Saule), the Daughters of the Sun (Saules Meitas), the Morning Star (Auseklis) and Ūsiņš, the god of light. The Celestial Mountain is most commonly imagined as made of gold, or sometimes of copper, silver, amber, ice or stone (Biezais 1998: 146-51; Vīķis-Freibergs 1985: 323-9).

In three out of the four images, the Celestial Mountain forms a shape resembling a cone above the round earth, corresponding to the description in the legend where the sky is placed over the earth like an upturned container (Fig. 5). In the most economical carving of these four – the image on Virtaka Rock (a) – the earth has either been left out altogether or else corresponds to the horizontal line in the lower sign, where the image of the Celestial Mountain begins. Structurally identical is the so-called “God sign”, often found on Iron Age ornaments and evidently reflecting ideas similar to those described above.

THE SUN’S CART

The Celestial Mountain also relates to the progress of the Sun: by day, the Sun drives in a cart over the mountain, and at night it sails in
a golden boat across the sea, mounting the cart once again in the morning (e.g., LD 33811).

Figure 7. The Sun’s Cart

Depicted on the Saldus distaff is not only a separate wheel of the Sun, but also the cart of the Sun travelling over the Celestial Mountain (Fig. 7). The motif of the cart of the Sun is also found on the Lithuanian distaffs. Lithuanian researchers consider that the structure and designs on the distaffs correspond to the ancient concept of the structure of the world (Vėlius 1989: 38; Vaiškūnas 2005). This is indicated, for example, by a tripartite distaff from Zarasai District. Carved in the upper section, which corresponds to the celestial sphere, is a horse drawing a cart with an anthropomorphic being. This representation is interpreted as the cart of the Sun (Dundulienė 1988: fig. 8 and caption) or Thunder (Gimbutienė 1994a: 42). The cart shown on the Saldus distaff is quite simply represented, consisting of four wheels, connected in pairs by axes. The placement of the cart in the drawing does not provide an answer to the question of whether the cart is travelling over the Celestial Mountain itself or over the Sun tree. In the folksongs, the progress of the Sun is described in relation to both of these.

Judging from folksong texts, the Sun passes around or else over the Celestial Mountain (cf. Biezas 1998: 147-9). Describing the progress of the Sun, the folksongs sometimes mention walking, although most commonly the Sun is described as driving over the Celestial Mountain. Although the cart of the Sun is not described at length in the folksongs, it is nevertheless clear that the Sun travels in a cart because the folksongs extensively describe the Sun’s horses.
The motif of the Sun’s cart is familiar in the Baltic cultural region not only in ethnographic, but also in archaeological material. Thus, the horses drawing the Sun’s cart, are depicted on anthropomorphomorphic burial urns found at Grabow cemetery in the Gdansk region, dated to c. 500 BC (Gimbutienė 1994b: 92-94). So far, only wheels have been identified in archaeological material from Latvia, regarded as connected with solar symbolism (Zemītis 2004: 51). Solar wheels with six, or less commonly eight spokes, are found on the heads of 2nd-4th century dress-pins from eastern Latvia, and sometimes appear on later dress-pins as well, for example on a Semigallian Middle Iron Age dress-pin from the cemetery of Zvārdes Grīnerti (Latvijas PSR arheologija: 20, plate 41). Serving cult purposes was a 5th-7th century wheel with eight spokes, from the Semigallian cemetery of Vēcauces Lozberģi (Zemītis 2004: 53). Sun wheels also occur in rock carvings in Latvia (a particularly distinctive example is Režģi Cliff; see Laime 2004a: 60-1).

**The Sun Tree**

![The Sun Tree](image)

Figure 8. The Sun Tree

Latvian folksongs tell of a mythical tree often connected with various activities of the Sun, which accordingly is referred to by mythologists as the Sun Tree, noting that this is the Latvian equivalent of the World Tree that appears in the mythical concepts of other peoples (Biezais 1998: 165; Kursīte 1996: 15).
The World Tree was placed at the sacred centre of the world in a vertical position (the centre can take various forms: with two World Trees, three World Trees, etc.). It is the dominant feature determining the formal and substantial organisation of the space of the Universe. In terms of vertical arrangement, one may distinguish the lower section of the World Tree (roots), the middle section (trunk) and the upper section (branches). (..) The World Tree can be used to distinguish the main spatial zones of the Universe: the upper zone (the sky), the middle zone (the earth) and the lower zone (underworld); and the temporal dimension: past – present – future. (*Mitoloģijas enciklopēdija* 1994: 269).

In the series of carvings discussed here, equal importance has been given to depicting the Celestial Mountain and the Sun Tree, since these are the only elements shown in all four carvings (Fig. 8). The most extensive information about the Sun Tree is given by the images on the Saldus distaff and Krustu Cliff. In the images on the Saldus and Rokiškis distaffs, a tree with a three-branched canopy rises above the Celestial Mountain, growing from the centre of the circular earth. “The “real world” always lies at the “centre”, the “middle”, since this is where the division of levels occurs and where the link between the three cosmic zones is maintained” (Eliade 1996: 43). A great variety of locations of the Sun Tree are mentioned in the folksongs: at the edge of the path of the Sun and the path of the shepherds; beyond a lake, which itself lies beyond a mountain; in the River Daugava; in the sea; in a forest; on a rock and elsewhere (Biezais 1998: 156-8). The folksongs also contain a great variety of descriptions of the Sun Tree (see, e.g., LD 34065, LD 33749).

![Figure 9. Trees on the sides of the Celestial Mountain](image-url)
In all four carvings, the Sun Tree rising above the Celestial Mountain has three branches, corresponding to the folksong description of the tree. The images on Krustu Cliff and the Saldus distaff (Fig. 9) show, in addition to the Sun Tree, other trees as well on the sides of the Celestial Mountain: there is one small tree on each side of the mountain on the distaff, while the Krustu Cliff image has a single three-branched tree on the left hand side and a three-branched and a nine-branched tree on the right hand side. Thus, Latvian mythology included the idea of several cosmic trees (or a celestial garden?), as confirmed by the fact that this element appears in variously dated carvings from geographically distant locations, made for different purposes (a late-19th century distaff from Kurzeme and a 17th-18th century rock carving from Vidzeme).

The nine-branched tree depicted on Krustu Cliff deserves further attention. It has three large branches, with another three branches at the end of each branch, corresponding to the structural principle of the “holy tree” of folksongs (LD 34 075). Such a description of the World Tree in folksongs and riddles is also known among the Slavs and Lithuanians (Vėlius 1989: 195-6). In addition to the nine branches, this tree has two horizontal lines marked above and below the forks of the major branches. These may serve to distinguish the three levels of the world: the underworld, earth and sky.

This seems to be the only indication in the series of carvings discussed here of the underworld, which is otherwise not depicted in the carvings, since it is impractical to do so. Likewise, the above-described barrow burial at Makašēnu Kucīņi, where the body has been placed in a grave below the level of the ground surface, indicates that the scheme where the Celestial Mountain with the Sun Tree rise above the earth also envisages the location of the underworld. The underworld (or the roots of the World Tree) is vividly marked in a few other rock carvings on Kara and Ramātas Cliffs. Particularly expressive is the image of the World Tree on Ramātas Cliff (Fig. 10b). Carved on this rock, deeper than other lines, is the central axis of the tree, attached to which is an expressive cluster of roots (the underworld), as well as the level of the earth in the form of a lattice, and the foliage structured by means of small pits (the sky).
Figure 10. *Axis mundi* in Latvian rock carvings: a – Kara Cliff; b – Ramātas Cliff; c – Velnala Cliff. Drawings by the author.
An interesting transformation of the *axis mundi* is the roofed cross with a ladder-like column carved on Velnala (Devil’s Cave) Cliff, interpretable in the context of funerary rites as the soul’s means of reaching the next world (Fig. 10c; Laime 2004c: 49). Folksongs, in their turn, tell of a ladder to heaven: the beanstalk, regarded as a variant of the World Tree (Zicāns1936: 3-4).

One variant of the vertical model of the world is the human body (Mitoloģijas enciklopēdija 268-269), something that finds confirmation in Baltic folklore (Vėlius 1989: 216-18). Corresponding to this idea is the image from Virtaka Rock, and to a lesser extent also that of Krustu Cliff (Fig. 11). The image of the Celestial Mountain on Virtaka Rock rises above a human figure, whose body is formed by a vertical line (the *axis mundi*), at the top of which is the head (top level), with the arms in the middle part, bent at the elbows (also shown in such a pose, with rods at the elbows, are four figures on Velnala Cliff; see Laime 2004c: 47), and outward curving legs in the lower part. Crosses have been carved on either side of the human figures of Virtaka Rock and Krustu Cliff. On Virtaka Rock these are the more ancient slanting crosses, while Krustu Cliff, has Latin crosses, under the influence of Christianity, marking the principle of duality (right/left) within the tripartite world model (cf. Rūsiņš 2004: 175).
CONCLUSION

Only a few examples of images are discussed in this paper, but even these few show that depictions on ethnographic artefacts (particularly distaffs) and rock carvings represent an important source for the study of mythical ideas. The material is particularly interesting because it reveals archaic nuances of Indo-European mythology preserved in folklore and folk art in the area of present-day Latvia right up to the nineteenth century.

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Notes

1 This article is developed from a paper given at conference “Archaeology and Folklore” at the Latvian Academy of Culture (Riga) on 21.03.2005; it has been translated from Latvian by Valdis Bērziņš.

2 The Evenks (obsolete: Tungus) are a nomadic indigenous people, one of the Northern Indigenous Peoples of Siberia, Russia.

3 It seems that the four directions indicated are the cardinal directions rather than the inter-cardinal ones since a number of rituals in Latvian traditional culture are connected mainly with north, east and west while inter-cardinal points do not play such an important role. We can say the same about the archaeological material (grave orientation, etc.)

4 The Latgallians were a Baltic tribe who lived in the eastern part of Latvia. They were one of the tribes that later formed the Latvian nation.

5 The Semigallians were a Baltic tribe who lived in the basin of the Lielupe River in the southern middle part of Latvia and northern part of Lithuania. They later became a part of the Latvian and Lithuanian nations.
References


Zicāns, Eduards (1936). Latviešu tradīcija par garo pupu un ar to saistītie mītoloģiskie priekšstati (The Latvian tradition of the beanstalk and mythological ideas relating to it). Rīga.
The Rose and Blood: Images of Fire in Baltic Mythology

DAIVA VAITKEVIČIENĖ

The mythical expression of fire goes far beyond the boundaries of direct depiction: research into fire deities, rituals, and especially myths inevitably brings us not only to direct manifestations of fire, like fire in a fireplace, fire of heaven or fire of hell, but also to its metaphorical forms. As one of the elements which make up the world, fire exists in plants, animals, constellations, parts of the human body, food, etc. In other words, it can be expressed via any cultural code: botanical, medical, culinary, cosmological and others. In this paper, two typical images of fire in Baltic mythology will be analysed – the rose (botanical fire), and blood (the fire of the human body).

Research is somewhat impeded – yet made more interesting at the same time – by the fact that images of fire are very closely related to the deities of fire, and for this reason research must be comprehensive in scope. An interesting tendency emerges when trying to analyse the images of fire bearing in mind their links to the Baltic fire deities: in most cases, these images express not specific, local deities of a lower hierarchical level (like, for instance, the Lithuanian goddess of the home fireplace Gabija, or an analogous Latvian goddess Uguns Māte), but the gods of the highest level who are related to fire in general. One can assume that the deep level of the metaphoric images of fire is related to more common, well-known and more permanent gods. Such deities are the Lithuanian god Perkūnas and his Latvian counterpart Pērkons and the Lithuanian goddess Saulė, and her Latvian counterpart Saule. It is interesting that not only do these gods have analogous functions in Lithuanian and Latvian mythologies, but they also have the same names. We find the same names also in the Prussian language and religion (Perkono, variant Perkunis; Saule). It is a pity that too little is known about Prussian mythology to allow proper research on the images of fire in Prussian mythology to be carried out.

Perkūnas, the god of thunder, is one of the four highest gods of the Lithuanian pantheon of the thirteenth century, along with Andojas (the god of water), Kalevelis (a god-smith, the guardian of dead
souls) and Medeina-Žvėrūna (the goddess of hunting and warriors) (Vėlius 1996: 256-61, 263-8). At the centre of the Prussian pantheon of gods, there is also Perkūnas, related to power, maturity and fulfilment, and different from Patrimpas, a young god of vegetation, and from Patulas, the god of the dead (Vėlius 2001: 66-7). Considerable offerings were still being made to Perkūnas as late as the seventeenth century (Vėlius 2003: 570). In Latvian mythological songs, Pērkons is one of the most important mythical personages along with the syncretic personage Dievs, his sons Dieva dēli, and the female deities Saulite (little Sun), Saules meita (the daughter of Saule) and Laima.

The issue of the Baltic goddess Saulė has not yet been resolved. Although she is not in the pantheon of either Lithuanian or Prussian deities, the sources between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries reiterate, as a formula, that the Balts worshipped the Sun and the Moon. Many agricultural rituals relating to the Sun have survived; and a multitude of sun myths is preserved in Latvian songs. Since the nineteenth century, this theme has been explored by scholars of comparative Indo-European mythology, and, depending on the trends, the meaning of the sun in Baltic mythology has been either overestimated or underestimated. Previous research by the author of this paper (Vaitkevičienė: 2001) shows that the topic of the mutual relations between Saulė and Perkūnas deserves closer attention, because they emerge not only in the themes of Latvian songs but also in Lithuanian folklore (proverbs and riddles) and in linguistic data (in particular, names of plants and place names).

One should not reject the view that the images of fire analysed here extend far beyond the borders of Baltic culture as they are quite universal. Their universality can be compared to the international popularity of folk beliefs. As in beliefs, one can find many similar motifs and images, yet the meanings differ considerably depending on the region.

This analysis of the images of fire in Baltic mythology is mainly based on folklore and linguistic data, since today the Baltic mythical universe can only be imagined from the fragmentary shivers of a religious system that once existed. Of special value are Latvian folk songs that have preserved mythical themes, and the common array of Lithuanian-Latvian beliefs. The beliefs are the binding material that allow us to join the broken links of associations and determine the network of mythical correlations.
Blazing fire is often associated with blossom, especially with plants that have red flowers. In traditional interpretations of dreams, red flowers forebode a fire. The fire of heaven, the Sun, is also shown as a flower: “A flower blossomed, upraised the whole world. The Sun is rising.” (LMD III 114/9-13). The Sun’s characteristic flower is the rose; it is in this form that the Sun is represented in Lithuanian Christmas songs: this is how the myth of the goddess of sun reborn at Christmas is manifested (Greimas 1990: 472).

In Latvian songs, the rising and setting sun is depicted as a rose wreath, a rose bush, a rose garden and the like, and Mannhardt has already written about this (Mannhardt 1875: 97). In some cases, we see both the sun and the rose, and one of the most characteristic motifs in Baltic mythology is a rose garden (Klaustiņš and Endzelīns 1928-1932: 10, No 1608 etc).

The rose is often the shape of the morning or the evening sun; it is the rising or the setting (fiery, red) sun, as in the riddle: Skaista puķe ezerā: dienu zied balta, rītā un vakarā sarkana. Saule. (A beautiful flower in a lake; it blossoms white in the day, and red in the morning and in the evening. The Sun. Anclāne 1954: No 2680a).

The colour red is the main semantic feature on which the association of the sun (rising and setting) and the rose is based. One should also bear in mind the similarity of the shape but, first of all, let us see what plant is called the rose.

For Lithuanians, rožė “the rose” was not just one flower but all of the following:

- Common mallow, Malva sylvestris: roželė (Kaunienė 1991: 99), roželės (Vailionis 1938: 212);
- Vervain mallow, Malva alcea: roželės (Vailionis 1938: 212);
- Dog rose, Rosa canina: rožė (Vailionis 1938: 299), šunrožė (Vailionis 1938: 299);
- Hollyhock, Althea: rožė, kiaurarožė, aukštrožė (Vailionis 1938: 17);
- Field bindweed, Convulvulus arvensis: roželės, rožačkėlės, vargo roželė (Vailionis 1938: 102);
The study of Lithuanian botany shows that plants that are named *rožė* have some common features: a pink or rosy shade and a blossom of four or five petals. In the ornaments of Lithuanian and Latvian sashes and cloth, the rose (*roželė, rožiukė, erškētēlis*) is a diamond with extensions (Tumēnas 1989: 16):

![Fig. 1](image1)

This shape is achieved by crossing parallel lines. The meanings of "crossing", "intersection", "ramification" enter the Lithuanian name of *rožė*, since, in Lithuanian, *rožė* also means a crosspiece or ramification, for instance: *rožė*, "weaving at the intersection of the crossing of basket hoops", "ramification of the horns of an elk or a deer" (Ulvydas 1978: 847). The rose is understood as the centre of an intersection or ramification of several lines and, in some cases, the filling of the centre of the intersection with a circle or a diamond. This is what "weaving at the intersection of the crossing of basket hoops" looks like:

![Fig. 2](image2)
Latvian signs of the Sun – *Saules zīmes* – have an analogous basis, and their immense variety is drawn to two main types (Ancītis 1990: 77): diamond signs (Fig. 3) and rosettes (Fig. 4):

Diamond-shaped Latvian signs of the Sun (Fig. 3) are made of a combination of intersecting lines: these are geometrical ornaments in which the sun is depicted in an abstract manner. As we can see, some variants are very close to the Lithuanian *roželė* (see Figs 5 and 6, and cf. Fig. 1):
The rosette signs of the Sun (Fig. 4) are transitional between floral and geometrical ornament; here, the sun is depicted in the form of a plant (rose). Such ornaments are close to decorations of distaffs and other popular everyday objects in Lithuania (Fig. 7), which are traditionally linked to the symbols of the sun (Vaiškūnas 1992: 133-7):
Here we see a segmented star which, in its turn, is related to the ornaments on the graveyard crosses: crosses of different types depicting “beaming” Sun (Fig. 8). The researchers of Lithuanian ornaments call them “little suns”.

![Fig. 8 Galaunė 1988: 229.](image)

In revealing some common traits between the shapes of saulė and rožė, we would like to emphasise the role of the correlating traits in creating the Sun’s botanical expression. Several dominating features – red, round, intersected, centrifugal – determine the associations between saulė and rožė. As in the case of a metaphor, the sameness is partial: several dominating aspects are chosen from a great number of possible features, which allow rožė to be treated as a botanical manifestation of Saulė.

On the other hand, some of these features mean fire in a different context: for instance, the fire of lightning is also symbolised in different forms of the cross – a straight cross, a turning cross, i.e. a swastika, etc. (Beresnevičius 1992: 42-56). Thus we can make an assumption that geometrical combinations of the circle and the cross in general correspond to the mythical paradigm of fire.
The Rose of the Body

The figure of rožė appears in another, medical, context as well: rožė “rose” is a disease characterised by a sharply demarcated red, painful skin and fever (erysipelas) (Ulvydas 1978: 846). Popular knowledge lists twelve types of rožė – that of the brain, teeth, heart, veins, bones, flying rožė, dry rožė, water rožė, etc. In verbal charms, rožė is often described by its colour (white, red, blue). The colour depends on the origin of rožė: if, for example, one gets it after catching cold in water, it will be a white, water rožė (LTR 4813/9). The meanings of the colours of roses are easier discernable in the mythical context of the meanings of colours. For instance, baltoji rožė (white rose) is related to water and cold and is semantically close to balta saulė (white sun). Popular meteorology says that if the sun is setting “white”, one can expect rain the following day (Šmits 1940: No 26442); when the sun is white and is shining through the clouds, it is said that it is “wading in water”, and thus rain is expected shortly (Petrauskas 1985: 39; LTR 1515/9-1).

Contrary to the white, a red sun means clear, dry weather: when the sun sets red, the coming day will be cloudless (Šmits 1940: No 26443). The red rose is dry, hot and fiery, as opposed to the watery and cold rose. It is caused by heat: if a person is very much ashamed or scared, he or she feels rožė appearing (Petkevich’ 1911: No 181). In order to treat the fiery rožė, red is transformed into white, which can be seen from the verbal charm below:

Lygioj pievoj užaugo dvi rožės – viena balta, kita raudona. Raudona nunyks, o baltoji uždygs!

Two roses grew in a flat field – one red, and one white. The red will wither, the white will take root! (LMD I 940/31)

Since the white rose is of watery origin, the change of red into white indicates the transfer from fire to water, that is, the treatment of rožė. Rožė is seen as a mythical excess of fire in a person, in other words, uždegimas meaning “inflammation” (from Lith. degti “to burn”). The verbal charms show several ways of suppressing that fire. Apart from quenching with water (red → white), there is also quenching with earth, and, as variants, black wool and blue paper are applied to the wound (LTR 4424/79; LMD I 1063/48; LTR 1031/267). This can be
understood as suppression with the colour black. Fire is also extinguished by making movements in the direction opposite to the sun, for example, circling rožė with the ring finger in the direction opposite to that of the sun (LTR 4035/11).

The treatment of rožė is somewhat different when entering sacral relations with the Sun that, as mentioned above, is seen as a rose. In order to cure rožė, verbal charms are said at sunrise, at sunset, and then again at sunrise, facing the Sun (LTR 4118/193; LTR 4765/454). The charms mention “Mary’s flower garden” (LTR 4850/46), resembling “Saulė’s garden”, known from Lithuanian and Latvian songs (Slaviūnas 1959: No 1198; Rėza 1958: No 62; Ambainis 1955: No 343L). When, in a Lithuanian charm against erysipelas, the Virgin Mary is addressed, she is also compared to a rose (LTR 3585/209). This shows that rožė, or erysipelas, can be treated by two mythical methods: (1) by appealing to the sphere of sacral fire (for instance, a goddess in the shape of a rose), and (2) by choosing opposing figures of the mythical code, e.g., red rose vs white rose (fire vs water), red rose vs black wool (fire vs earth). In both instances, the treatment of rožė is based on the knowledge of its mythical (fiery) nature.

**BLOOD**

The rose – the botanical fire – is closely related to another red-coloured figure, blood. In Lithuanian folklore, we often come across the motif of blood, especially the blood of the dead, turning into a rose (that is, the rose is a transformation of blood). This is especially typical in poetical glorification of the death of soldiers in war (Jokimaitienė 1985: 442):

*Devynias kulkas pro šalį lieke,*  
*O su dešimta broleiui kirta.*

*Kur kuns gulieja, meitos kvepieja,*  
*Kur kraujas biega, rože žydieja.*

Nine bullets flew past,  
The tenth hit the brother.

Mint smelled sweet where his body lay,  
Roses bloomed where his blood was shed.
Like the rose, blood is of the colour of fire and that is how it is directly named in verbal charms (LMD I 946/9). Besides, it is hot like fire; for example, people say, *kraujas verda* “my blood is boiling” (meaning, I am angry or hurt), *karšto kraujo* “of hot blood” (temperamental), and *kraujas kaista* “blood is heating up” (exciting) (Kruopas 1962: 461).

According to Lithuanian etiological tales, blood is older than fire, which itself had been formed from the blood of mythical or biblical personages. It is thought, for example, that hell came to existence from Lucifer’s boiling and burning blood (Sauka 1967: 165). Another version of the tale says that it was Jesus who shed his blood and made the burning hell (Balys 1940: 10). It is primeval fire, since there was at that time no fire either on the earth or in heaven. God sent a swallow (Lith., *kregždė*) to bring fire from hell and, because it brought that fire, swallows have red marks under their necks and on their tails (LTR 3470/111).

The relation between blood, fire and the swallow that had brought fire from hell is found in popular botany. For example, the synonyms for the plant *ugniažolė*, “the herb of fire” (*Celidonium majus*, greater celandine), the roots of which are of the colour of fire, are *kregždažolė*, *kregždinė*, *kregždynė* “the herb of the swallow”, as well as *kraujuotė*, “the herb of blood” (Vailionis 1938: 84). This plant is used to treat bleeding (LTR 6447/185). In addition, greater celandine cures skin conditions (warts, herpes) (LTR 6447/185), while herpes and eczema are understood in popular medicine as fire and are called *ugnis*, “fire” (Vitkauskas 1996: 386). One can think that treatment with greater celandine represents the mythical procedure of extracting fire from herpes. This is manifested in the use of other plants the names of which have *ugnis* in their root. For instance, *ugnialapis* (*Tussilago*, coltsfoot) extracts fire from a boil (Vitkauskas 1996: 378); *ugniagėlė* (Lith.) / *ugunspuke* (Latv.) (*Ranunculus acris*, meadow buttercup) stops the spreading of a boil (Šmits 1940: No 31108; Vailionis 1938: 291).

Such fiery plants demand caution, because they can cause a fire. That is why it is not recommended to take a buttercup home (Šmits 1940: No 31109). In the seventeenth century, Matthew Praetorius described a fiery oak, a special type of the oak that belongs to Perkūnas and which contains the sacred fire. To safeguard from a fire, this oak cannot be used for construction, because when cut down it is usually struck by Perkūnas (Mannhardt 1936: 534).
When fiery plants are used in treatment, they extract the surplus of fire from the wound, as Saule, the goddess of the Sun, suppresses the “burning” of erysipelas. The diseases of “fire” are cured by restoring relations with the entire sacral sphere of fire, since erysipelas, boils, warts and similar conditions are caused by violated relations with fire. For instance, rožė (erysipelas) attacks the one who extinguishes fire with dirty water (clean water should be used for extinguishing fire because fire is considered sacred; Balys 1951: Nos 229, 38). And if anybody spits into fire, then a boil is bound to rise on that person’s lips (Šmits 1940: No 30927).

Some of these fiery plants stop bleeding and are used to cure wounds. These plants are usually related to sacred beings; for example, common St John’s wort (Hypericum perforatum), which in Latvian is called asinszāle (“the herb of blood”), has several “biblical” names: Jēzaus žaizdų žolė “the herb of Jesus’ wounds”, Marijos žoliukės “Mary’s herbs” (Vailionis 1938: 175), marijakraujė (Mary’s blood) (LTR 6447/298, LTR 6447/1413, 1424). These names are motivated by broader mythical narratives that appear in verbal charms against bleeding and in etiological tales, e.g.:

\[\text{ējo ponas Jezus per Cedros upį ir puolė ponas Jezus ir nusimušė pirštelį ir kraujas bėgo Viešpaties. Tai taip ir mano bėga. Viešpati Jezau, sulaikyk mano kraują.}\]

Jesus was crossing the Cedra river and tripped over and hurt his toe, and God’s blood was running. My blood is running like this, too. Jesus Almighty, stop my blood. (Mansikka 1929: No 25)

\[\text{Ajo Panełė Švenciausia per loukelius, pataikė kojali in akmenėlį, numušė mažų pirštelį, aptaškė akmenėlį kroujaliu. Per tų kraujų Švenciausios Panełės sustok kraujas iš NN kūno tekėjis.}\]

The Blessed Virgin was walking in the fields; she hit her foot on a stone and hurt her little toe, and splashed the stone with her blood. Because of the Blessed Virgin’s blood, stop, O blood, running from NN’s body. (Krėvė Mickevičius 1926: No 1)
In olden times, stones could grow. Once, while walking, the Virgin Mary hit her toe on a stone. She was very cross and said, “May you not grow larger!” After that, stones stopped growing. (Balys 1940: 10)

These popular beliefs about Mary’s or Jesus’ shed blood even today are related to certain stones that have red stains, are covered in red lichen or are red as if covered in blood (see Vaitkevičius 1997: 34-5). One of these red stones was on the sacred hill of Rambynas on the River Nemunas. The sacred forest of Rambynas is mentioned in the 1394 description of the Crusaders’ roads. Following the introduction of Christianity in Lithuania, public rites on Rambynas were forbidden yet, right up to the nineteenth century, the sick would visit it with offerings for their health; and newlyweds came here asking for marital happiness etc. The sacred stone and a sacred lime-tree were the highlights of the hill (see further Vaitkevičius 1998: 641-6). The stone was hard, reddish-black granite with mica (Glagau 1970: 232). When this stone was broken up by a miller in 1811, some people managed to get hold of the fragments, and guarded them because they protected against natural disasters and cured wounds, in the same way as the thunderbolts called Perkūnų pirštai, (Perkūnas’ fingers) or Perkūnų kulkos (Perkūnas’ bullets). The thunderbolts were used to treat boils, bruises, warts (Balys 1937: No 571, 598), herpes (Balys 1937: No 575), and rožė (erysipelas) (Balys 1937: No 584). Also, bleeding could be stopped with Perkūnas’ bullets (Balys 1937: No 574). Thus Perkūnas’ bullets, by the manner of their application, are identical to the red stones splashed with the blood of Jesus or Mary, which can stop the flow of blood through the verbal charms against bleeding and through appeal to special events in etiological myths.

According to the etiological tale versions and verbal chants mentioned above, the blood-splashed stones were cursed by biblical personages and stopped growing. Some versions of the tale, however, claim that these stones stopped growing for other reasons – when God sent fire from heaven (Ancelāne 1991: 68) or when the thunder rolled...
It is obvious that Perkūnas’ touch upon the stones is borne in mind (cf. Mary or Jesus tripping over a stone), since during a thunderstorm Perkūnas strikes, not just anything, but stones in particular – this is widely explicated in popular beliefs (see Balys 1937: Nos 148-64). Additionally, a tendency is observed for Perkūnas to strike not just any stones, but to prefer red stones, leaving black stones untouched (Balys 1937: No 159a). This allows us to make the assumption that, in etiological tales about the hit stone and blood, Perkūnas appeared much earlier, and only later was replaced by Jesus.¹

Since blood is the liquid form of fire (see above), Perkūnas’ relation to blood (cf. the relation of Perkūnas’ bullets to stopping bleeding) once again, in the context of a different cultural code, points to the fiery nature of this god. On the other hand, the links between Perkūnas and blood demonstrate the importance of the element of cosmic fire in the evaluation and understanding of the mythical qualities of blood.

FIRE OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Rožė and kraujas represent the same mythical content of fire, thus one figure can easily transform into another. This is correlated with transformations of a different nature, for instance, passing from life to death. When a person dies, only a certain figurative transformation takes place: where blood is running, a rose grows (Jokimaitienė 1985: No 467, and LTR 701/55):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Kur kraujas tiško,} & \quad \text{Where blood splashed,} \\
\text{Ten rožė dygo,} & \quad \text{A rose grew,} \\
\text{Kur galva krito,} & \quad \text{Where a head fell,} \\
\text{Žemčiūgai blizga.} & \quad \text{Diamonds sparkle.} \\
\text{Kur galva krito,} & \quad \text{Where a head fell,} \\
\text{Bažnyčią statė,} & \quad \text{A church was built,} \\
\text{Kur kraujas bėgo,} & \quad \text{Where blood ran,} \\
\text{Rožė žydėjo.} & \quad \text{A rose blossomed.}
\end{align*}
\]
A rose that grew in the place of death (or on a grave) is identified with the soul of the dead. For instance, in one song from a region of Lithuania Minor, the soul of a young man is shown as a rose blossom floating in a river (Kalvaitis 1905: 113). Another version of this imagining is the belief that the soul of a dead lives in flowers:

*Kadu žmogus miršta, o pamirus kiek laiko būna gėlėsna, kol ji kur paskiria, paskui iš tų gėlių vėl skirta po žmones, ir vėl gema ir auga žmonės.*

When a person dies, for some time after death he stays in flowers until he is elsewhere assigned, then from those flowers [they] are sent among people, and again people are born and grow. (Stanikaitė 1994: 77)

A division between two images of fire, the rose and blood, is quite evident here: the dead manifest themselves through flowers, while a human’s vital powers are represented by blood which gives red colour to a human’s face. Lithuanians believed that a healthy person has red cheeks (Ulvydas 1981: 665; Astramskaitė 1993: 139); cf. this charm about a patient’s fate:

*Raudonų raudonų pivonijų virini. Nu, ir tada žiūri: kad ružava, tai atgis ar didelis, ar mažas, o kad baltas, tai jau mirs, neatgis.*

You boil a bright red peony. Then watch: if it’s pink, then the patient will recover, whether old or young; if it’s white, then he will die, will not recover. (LTR 6447/1291)

When a person dies, however, the fire of the body – blood – is transformed into the botanical fire – the rose. This conception determines funeral traditions; for example, the rose is a traditional flower of a graveyard.² This tradition is evident in Lithuanian and Latvian songs, where it is repeated thousands of times that red roses must be planted on graves (Jokimaitienė 1985: No 671; Barons 1894: No 4070 and others).

Manifesting the transformation of death, the rose, both in the mythical and the ritual dimension, helps the dead in passing to a new state (getting to a different world), and so it is sometimes depicted as
a mythical plant by which one can climb to heaven. This motif is especially characteristic of Latvian songs, of which the following is one example (Barons 1915: No 34041):

*Iestādīju baltu rozi*
*I planted a white rose*

*Baltā smilšu kalniņā;*
*On a white sandy hill;*

*Tā izauga liela, gara*
*It grew big and tall,*

*Līdz pašām debesīm.*
*Up to heaven.*

*Es uzkāpu debesīs*
*I climbed to heaven,*

*Pa tiem rožu zariniem.*
*On those branches of the rose.*

Due to its mediation function, the rose may be used in burials. According to A. L. Jucevičius, roses were part of the coffin-lining in nineteenth-century Samogitia: “The Samogitians would line the coffin with a thin linen cloth, embroidered with various designs and strewn with dog roses” (Stanevičius 1954: 19). Archaeological data also confirms “roses” as an element of the burial; for instance, in a seventeenth-century grave of a woman the archaeologists found the seeds of the hollyhock (*Althea*) (Varnas 1987: 38).

Other symbols of the colour red can have the same mediation function; for instance, the deceased would be girdled with a red band (Šmits 1940: No 20769). A red band means fire and such a red band was offered to fire during wedding rituals (LTR 6447/232); by doing this, the bride wanted to ensure that her hearth would always burn well (LTR 6447/1490).

Not only metaphorical images of fire, but also fire in its pure form allow the spirit of the dead to go to heaven; such, for instance, is the fire of lightning. It is a universally known belief that a person struck by lightning goes straight to heaven; already touched by fire, he or she will not have to suffer the heat of fire in hell or purgatory (Balys 1937: Nos 875-81). This and other similar beliefs can be easily related to the ritual of the burning of the dead, which was known in Lithuania before the introduction of Christianity. (Jogaila and Vytautas, the grand dukes who brought Christianity to Lithuania, were the first rulers of the country who were not cremated during their funeral). In this context the image of the rose (botanical fire) is only one of the figurative means of expressing the sacral meaning of fire as well as the powers and functions of the gods in charge of fire.
THE ROSE GARDEN

The concept of the sacrality of the rose and blood has been preserved in modern times through planting and attending to a flower garden. In Latvian songs, a flower garden is called rožu dārzs, a rose garden, since the central flowers there were rozes, the hollyhocks (Klaustiņš and Endzelīns, 1928-1932: 3.425). In Lithuanian songs it is different, because these cannot be imagined without a rue garden, where rue plants, roses and lilies grow. Lithuanian rue plants have one common feature with Latvian roses: like roses, they grow from drops of blood:

_Rūtos yra šventos ir nešventintos, nes jos yra išdygusios iš Jėzaus kraujo lašų: kai Jėzus meldėsi alyvų daržely, nulašėjo kruvinas prakaitas ir išdygo rūtos_.

Rue plants are sacred without consecrating because they sprout from the drops of Jesus’ blood: when Jesus was praying in the olive garden, ensanguined sweat fell on the ground and rue sprouted. (Balys 1986: No 1838)

_Kada Jėzusą nukrįžiavo, šv. Magdalena surinko nukritusius kraujo lašelius ir pasėjo. Išaugo rūtos, už tai rūtų negalima mėtyti._

When Jesus was crucified, St Mary Magdalene collected the drops of his blood and sowed them. Rue plants grew from them, and that is why you cannot throw rue about. (Balys 1940: 101)

The connection between rue and blood can be explained only with prior knowledge of the fact that, in Lithuanian, rue was not only _Ruta graveolens_, but also bearberry, _Arctostaphylos uva-ursi_ (Šimkūnaitė 1990:28). The red berries of this plant resemble drops of blood. Due to the red berries, this plant is also called _kristakrauję_ (Christ’s blood) in Lithuanian (Kaunienė 1991: 204). The relation of blood with a rue garden is recorded on the ritual plane, too; for instance, it used to be held that it was necessary to slaughter an animal or bird (a rooster, a chicken, or at least a mouse or a frog) while planting a rue garden, and to bury its head in that garden. If that was not done, the flowers would not grow (Balys 1986: Nos 1847, 1849). Similar rituals were
carried out in the garden: if an apple tree did not give fruit, then some animal was buried under that tree (Slaviūnas 1947: 182); for a newly planted tree to take root and grow, after planting it had to be watered with the warm blood of a bird or an animal (Balys 1986: No 1884).

On the other hand, an offering of an animal’s head in a rue garden secures success to the farm animals. For instance, there was a belief that if, when planting a peony, one buries the head of an animal under its roots, then animals will not die (Balys 1986: No 1849).

Burying a head or spilling blood introduces the broader theme of the offering to the dead. An analogous, but much larger-scale, offering of an animal is necessary during the funeral ritual:

Jeigu šeimyna mato, kad ruošiasi mirti tėvas arba diedukas, tai sako, kad reikia papjauti veršelis arba paršelis, nes gali gyvuliai gaišti.

If a family sees that father or grandfather is nearing the end of his days, they say that a calf or a piglet should be slaughtered, because animals might start dying. (Balys 1981: No 593)

The funeral offering is understood as providing the share of the dead. If an animal is not slaughtered for the wake, the whole herd might die, since the deceased “will get his share anyway” (Balys 1981: No 594). Similar logic can be discerned in the offerings in the orchard or the flower garden. Fruit trees and flowers are the abode of the spirits of the deceased and, for this reason alone, one cannot cut down apple trees and other fruit trees in a garden (Balys 1986: No 1928). As has been mentioned above, the spirits of the recently deceased live in flowers, and so it is plausible that the flower garden of the ancestral home could be the abode of the spirits of a farmstead. This can be confirmed both by Lithuanian and Latvian material; for instance, one Latvian song says that after death, a spirit found abode on the top of an oak in the rose garden, but nobody in the family could see it (Šmits 1938: No 55205).

Why do the dead “call for fresh blood” (Šmits 1940: No 2082), as popular beliefs insist? The same beliefs answer this question: blood allows the spirit of the dead to get to heaven. It is figuratively imagined that the deceased travels to heaven with the animal which had been slaughtered for his or her wake (Šmits 1940: No 2082). We can see that blood correlates with the rose, by climbing which one can
get “onto the clouds”, and, continuing the chain of associations, with the fire of lightning (since a person struck by lightning goes to heaven). This yet again shows that identical mythical content is represented through different but mutually related mythical images.

CONCLUSIONS

In Lithuanian and Latvian mythology, fire is encoded through the use of cultural images, of which two – the rose (botanical code) and blood (physiological code) – are especially productive. The choice of these, from among a huge mass of images, is based on metaphorical thinking: metaphorical images of fire, and fire itself, are related by one or several common semantic features (colour, warmth, shape, etc.). This allows treating such images as mythical metaphors of fire. They prevail in traditional culture even when their primary meaning is forgotten and associative relations are hard to recognise.

The two images of fire under analysis – the rose and blood – are closely inter-related. In certain situations, one image can replace the other as a variant of the same mythical content. In addition, they not only express the element of fire, but also the fire-related mythical content in general. In this particular case, both the rose and blood express upper space: ritual actualisation of these images in beliefs and rituals related to funerals is understood as a way to help the deceased to go to heaven (the top cosmological space). Thus it is possible to speak not only of the similarity or even identity of the meanings, but also of the functions. It is also possible to grasp the correlation of the functions of the two gods in the Baltic pantheon that have been highlighted here: Saulė (Sun), who is perceived as the rose of heaven, and Perkūnas (Thunder), who is represented by the image of blood.

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Notes

1 In numerous Latvian songs and one unique Lithuanian song, Perkūnas sheds the oak’s blood (Rēza 1958: No 62). In this case, Perkūnas is an active agent – his blood is not shed, but he causes the blood of another
to be shed. Incidentally, rainwater that has collected in the hollows of stones is also called blood, and is used for treatment. The water in stone hollows after the first thunderstorm has similar curative powers (Vaitkevičius 1997: 34).

2 In Lithuanian folk songs, this traditional graveyard plant is rue. According to V. Tumėnas (1989: 18), “rue plants (which for Lithuanians served as roses [emphasis by V.T.] and were the symbol of love and innocence, a symbol of wedding) often decorated the graves of Lithuanians”.

3 An identical red band is used to stop bleeding or cure warts and other sores, cf.: Es aizsēju asins upi Ar sarkanu dzīpariņu (I tied the river of blood with a red band); see Kursīte 1996: 60.

4 On the burning of the dead and the sacral context of this ritual, see Kursīte 1996: 60; Vaitkevičienė and Vaitkevičius 2001; Vaitkevičius 2004.

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The First Thunder as a Hierophanic Experience in Lithuania

NIJOLĖ LAURINKIENĖ

In traditional Lithuanian belief, as can be seen mostly through folklore and ethnography, concepts of some natural phenomena as divine and as emanations of supernatural power persist up to the present day. From ancient times, special attention has been paid to one of the most impressive natural occurrences – thunder, together with the lightning that accompanies it – and to storms in general.

The first peal of springtime thunder has always been considered a very important event in the course of the yearly cycle in the Lithuanian countryside. First of all, it marks the passage from winter to spring, the regeneration of the world that surrounds us. The belief was that the first thunder initiated a qualitative change after a period of cold and darkness, and so the specific time and circumstances of the first thunder of the year have long been closely observed. In Lithuania, thunder is usually heard for the first time during the second half of March or in April. Sometimes this coincides with Christian springtime festivities which, it should be noted, have their own pre-Christian foundations, such as the Annunciation (25th of March) or Easter (between the 22nd of March and the 25th of April) and Saint George’s Day (23rd of April).

The natural phenomenon of thunder was understood as a transcendental power that strongly shook the universe. People imagined thunder to be a manifestation of Perkūnas, the god of storms and thunder (see further Laurinkienė 1996; 2000). The word for thunder and the name of the god in the Lithuanian language are the same, Perkūnas, and so this word is used indiscriminately as a proper name, or as a name for an event. If something has been “thundered”, it means it has already experienced this event.

The function of the god in spring was to shake all objects on the surface of the earth, both in the physical and metaphysical sense, bringing about their cleansing and an influx of vital potency. This renovation of the macrocosmos through divine might can be interpreted as a consecration, after which the world is no longer
dangerous to man, and becomes useful to him in many ways, especially agriculturally.

According to Nathan Söderblom, sacrality is a fundamental category in a religion. There is no religion that does not differentiate between the sacred and the profane (Söderblom 1913: 731). Rudolf Otto stresses that holiness is related to a unique inner experience which he calls *das Numinose* (the numinous). In Otto’s view, the experience of holiness is something “altogether different” (*ganz andere*) from that which is common in our daily experience. This phenomenon is of another world and a certain kind of miracle (Otto 1979: 28-37). Holiness is experienced as a *mysterium tremendum*, “a terrible mystery” (Otto 1979: 13-15), but is experienced also as a magical and attractive mystery, a *mysterium fascinans*, and as something very powerful and unusually majestic. A person, perceiving himself or herself as the creation of someone, feels humble and dependent on this majestic mystery (Otto 1979: 22-26, 42-52).

Mircea Eliade, while emphasising the importance of the concept of hierophany in religion, stresses the point that the histories of religions describe hierophanies – various manifestations of holiness. Holiness can be perceived when a specific connection, a relation exists between the transcendental reality and the *homo religiosus*. When holiness is uncovered to us, we stand before a mysterious event, the manifestation in things of something that does not belong to our world, but nonetheless forms part of our “natural” or “worldly” surroundings (Eliade 1997: 8-10).

Concrete manifestations of holiness are usually tied to a specific place and time, like a breakthrough from the world of the supernatural to our world of man. The first spring thunder is one of those situations in the course of the year when, it was believed, something extraordinary took place, something connected to the other world. In this article an attempt has been made to show, primarily on the basis of popular beliefs, how this holiness was experienced and how its expression was perceived during the first thunder of the year.

The first thunder is an event that announces the beginning of spring: *Kai pirmą kartą išgirsta griaustinį, sako, kad dabar būsiąs tikras pavasaris*. (When one hears thunder for the first time, one knows that now spring has really begun.) That is because Perkūnas in spring is its harbinger and the renewer of nature (LTR 832/413).
The first spring thunder would initiate a new period in the lives of people, especially in farming activities. Till then no one carried out agricultural chores or took domestic animals out to pasture:

> Seniau, sako šiaulėniškiai, pavasarį nieko nepradėdavę sėti ir sodinti, kol neišgirs davę pirmojo perkūno. Kas to nepaisys, to javai nederėsią.

In old times, say the people of Šiaulėnai, they would never start spring planting and sowing till they heard the first thunder. Who does not heed this, his grain will not grow well. (BrčNR: 474)

Only after the first thunder would the planting and the driving of animals to pasture begin:

> Sugriaudus pirmą kartą pavasarį ūkininkai mislija, kad Dievas jau sujudino žemę, ir jau galima pradėti dirbti, sėti, ir jau viskas augs.

When the first thunder has been heard, the farmer knows that God has moved the earth and work can begin, you may sow and everything will grow. (LTR 823/329)

> Po pirmos perkūnijos tuoj išvaro gyvulius ir sėja javus.

After the first thunder, domestic animals are immediately driven out to the fields and sowing begins. (LTR 823/455)

The first time thunder sounds is not just a sign of spring in nature. A deeper meaning is seen in this event for, as can be gleaned from the beliefs discussed here, the first thunder had the power to sacralise this world. This power of thunder in spring was very highly valued. It was imagined that during the winter, the dark part of the year, the world gradually filled with powers adverse to man. Till that first thunder, even touching this contaminated earth or objects upon it was considered dangerous; it was forbidden to sit on the ground or on a stone, to go barefoot, to light a bonfire or to swim in a lake or river:

> Ant neužgriaustos žemės negalima gulėti ir ugnis kūrentė.
On “unthundered” earth you may not lie or make a fire. (LTR 1032/85)

*Kai perkūnas sugriaudžia, nuo tos dienos galima basiems vaikščioti.*

When thunder has sounded, you may go barefoot from that day. (LTR 828/334)

*Kol Perkūnas nesugriaudžia, negalima maudytis, nes velnias vandenyje yra, ir negalima sèstis ant žemès ir ant akmens.*

Until Perkūnas has thundered, you may not go swimming, because the devil is in the water, and you may not sit on earth or on stone. (LTR 757/79)

These prohibitions were heeded mostly because it was considered that the devil hides in the earth and in water deposits. Exiling him from these natural places – from the sphere inhabited by man – can only be achieved by the first thunder in the spring. Thus the god of thunder blessed worldly space in a yearly action, and made it acceptable for man to live in and so allowed people to become active in many ways.

After the first thunder, the earth becomes clean, holy, and full of life. Now it is considered good to be as close as possible to the earth, in order to gain both physical and spiritual strength from the meadows and fields that are recuperating after the winter hardships. This can be seen in some specific customs, carried out right after the sound of thunder:

*Dzūkijoj, Merkinės, Liškiavos ir kitose apylinkėse, sakoma, jog kai pavasarij išgirsti pirmą griaustinį griaunant, verskis tuoj per galvą, kad visą tą metą turètum laimę.*

In Dzūkija, in the regions of Merkinė, Liškiava and others, they say that as soon as you hear the first thunder, you must turn somersaults, so you will be lucky during all of the coming year. (BrëNR: 475)
In the region of Panevežys they say that, as soon as you hear the first thunder, you must roll on the ground, and then lightning will never hit you. (BrčNR: 475)

In Pašusvis, in the region of Kėdainiai, the shepherds upon hearing the first spring thunder turn somersaults, and they do so in order that thunder would not strike them that year (BrčNR: 475).

In some beliefs, it was required to roll on the ground naked and specifically three times:

**Kai išgirsti pavasarį pirmą griausmą – pasivoliok (pasiritenk) ant žemės - nebijosi perkūno. Žmonės voliojas. Voliotis reik nuogam tris kartus: pasivoliok, atsikelk iki 3k.**

When you hear the first thunder in the spring, throw yourself on the ground – you will not fear thunder. People roll around. You have to roll naked three times: you roll, you get up, you roll again and so three times. (LMD I 635/5)

**Kai išgirsta pirmą kartą perkūną, bėga nuogi, voliojasi po pievą, kad blusos nekąstu.**

When they hear the first thunder, they run naked and roll in the meadow, so that the fleas will not bite. (LTR 1349/49)

These customs were carried out naked, apparently in order to be in closer contact with the earth.

Rolling around or over your head on the ground is propitious and brings good luck and courage to the person. It also is good for fertility:

**Pirmą kartą išgirdusios moterys puola ant žemės ir voliojasi: kad linai derėtų – linai bus rąstu paristi, sulig žmogaus didumo.**

When they hear the first thunder, the women throw themselves on the ground and roll around: so the linen should grow strong, like logs, and as tall as a man. (LTR 1041/116)
Būdavo seniau, kai pirmą kartą užgriaudžia, tai moterys, kur tuo laiku buvo ir pasiviliodavo, tai, sako, ropės dera.

It used to be that upon hearing the first thunder, those women that heard it and rolled on the ground would have a good turnip harvest, they say. (LTR 374c/1310)

It strengthens your health as well to roll on the ground. It is considered that rolling on the ground after the first thunder will keep your shoulders from hurting. If you roll on the ground near the grain storage building, you will avoid boils (LTR 374c/2836). It is also good for your health to rub your head with a pebble or hit it with something made of iron:

Pikelių apylinkėje, Mažeikių apskr. sakoma, jog, kai pavasarį išgirsti pirmą kartą perkūną griaudžiant, paimk nuo žemės akmeniuką, patrink juo sau galvą ir padėk iš kur buvai paėmės, tai niekad tada tau galvos neskaudės.

In Pikeliai, in the region of Mažeikiai, they say that when you hear the first spring thunder, pick a small stone from the ground, rub your head with it and put it back exactly where you found it, then you will never have a headache. (BrčNR: 475)

Kai pirmą kartą užgirsti griaudžiant, reikia sau galvą padaužyti su geležimi, tai ji neskaudės.

When you hear the first thunder, you must hit your head with some iron, and you will not get headaches. (LTR 265/260/22)

The first thunder brought health not only to people, but also to animals:

Po pirmos perkūnijos galvijus reikia išginti į laukus, karvėms prie ragų prikabinti maišeliuose šventų žolelių. Tuomet jos bus sveikos, ir perkūnas jų nenutrenks iki sekančio pavasario.

After the first thunder cattle must be driven to the fields, with sachets of holy herbs attached to the horns of the cows. Then they will be healthy, and thunder will not strike them at least till the next spring. (LTR 832/210).
Thunder is also good for lambs; those that have been thundered grow strong, are not prone to diseases (LTR 828/339). The power of the first thunder to strengthen the vitality of nature and man is very clear and it is worth noting that Eliade considers vitality and fertility to be one of the characteristics of holiness (Eliade 1994: 26).

During the first thunderclap or right after it, humans can get rid of bothersome parasites. It is done in the same way – by rolling on the ground: “Išgirdus pirmą kartą griaudžiant, liepia vaikams griūti ant žemės voliotis, tada, sako, vasarą blusos nepjausią.” (When you hear thunder for the first time, children are told to fall on the ground and roll, they say that fleas will not bite them during the summer.) (LTR 757/84). A particular ritual was carried out when it thundered.


Upon hearing the thunder roll for the first time, people would hurry to ask through a window into the house “Are there fleas in the house?” while the person in the house would answer that they went to a particular place. In those houses that kept this tradition, they say, there were no fleas all year round: they go to the place that was mentioned in the answer. (BsFM: 179)

After the first spring thunder the renovated earth and all of nature had a beneficial effect on man, as if helping to cleanse and strengthen.²

In Lithuanian beliefs that explain the influence of the first thunder on nature – the growth and fertility of beasts and plants – the importance of the peal, the sound of thunder itself, the main action of Perkūnas, is constantly stressed:

Griausmas sujudina žemę, ir augalai pradaeda geriau augti.

Thunder moves the earth, and plants start to grow better. (LTR 761/5)

Griausmingi meta - derlingi, žemei neduoda supult.
A thunderous year – a good harvest, the earth will not go fallow. (LTR 1032/122)

*Kakiais metais daugiau griaudžia, daugiau žemę sutrinkia, geriau auga.*

The year that has more thunder, the earth is rattled more, you have better growth. (LTR 1032/123)

*Griaustinis išjudina žemę, išvaro pašalą, ir augalai geriau auga.*

Thunder nudges the earth, chases away the deep frost, and plants grow better. (LTR 832/459)

*Pavasarije pirmutinis griausmas sujudina žamen ir tuojaus paskui pradeda graitiau žolė želtie.*

In spring, the first thunder moves the earth and right after the grass grows faster. (BsFM: 178)

*Šiaulėnų apylinkės senų žmonių įsitikinimu, pavasarį neauganti žolė, kol pirmasai perkūnas nepajudina žemės.*

In the region of Šiaulėnai, old people believe that grass will not grow in spring until the first thunder shakes the earth. (BrčNR: 474)

*Perkūnas trekdamas sujudina žemę, tai geriau auga javai.*

Perkūnas hits the earth and shakes it, then grain grows better. (LTR 763/50/)

*Pa perkūnijas gerai grybai dygsta, mat žemė sutranko.*

After thunder mushrooms grow better, because the earth has been beaten. (LTR 1032/124/)

So the main reason that plants grow better is that the earth has been beaten, shaken, rattled by thunder. Thunder shakes and beats not only the earth, but trees as well. Trees that have felt the effects of thunder are harmless (probably because the devils have been chased out). At that point their bark is taken to make flutes:
Kai pirmą kartą pavasario perkūnas sugriaudžia, tai žmonės sako: “Jau atatrenkė medžiam žievę, todėl dabar bus galima karnos plėsti ir vamzdeliai sukti”.

When thunder sounds for the first time in spring, people say: “The trees have had their bark knocked loose, now we can tear it off and make flutes”. (LTR 757/156/)

Pirmasis griaustinis pavasario atitrenkia žilvitį, ir vaikai tada gali iš žilvičio dūdas suktis.

The first spring thunder loosens the bark of the willow, and children can then roll flutes from the willow. (LTR 757/80/)

Here the incredible effect of Perkūnas’s thundering can be seen upon man and nature. The world that surrounds us, moved by this great force, acquires new qualities, as it were. Put differently, the world is blessed the instant Perkūnas sounds the first peal of thunder. That Perkūnas’s thunder and lightning were considered holy and capable of making things sacred can be seen through many facts in folklore, including the following.

That thunder is something majestic, valued as holy, can be perceived by the behaviour of people during a storm. The household was asked to maintain serious behaviour:

Griaudžiant žmonės sako vaikams, kad jie neišdykautų, ramiai laikytųsi, kad griaudžiant nesijuoktų iš perkūno, nes jis supyks ir nutrenks.

When it thunders, people say to their children, Do not misbehave, stay calm, don’t laugh at Perkūnas when he thunders, or he will get angry and strike you down. (LTR 832/103).

Šiaulėnų apylinkėj užėjus perkūnijai senieji žmonės draudžia juoktis vaikams ir suaugusiems. Mat, perkūnas galis supykti ir trenkti.

In the region of Šiaulėnai old people forbid both adults and children to laugh. You see, Perkūnas can get angry and strike. (BrčNR: 475).
Nesibarti, nepykti, ramiai elgtis. Rūkyti švęstom žolėm, jei labia triginksi.

Do not get angry or argue, behave calmly. Light some holy herbs, if the thundering is very powerful. (LTR 739/60).

Eating was not allowed during a thunderstorm: “Kai griaudžia, valgyti negalima.” (When it thunders, you must not eat.) (LTR 739/54, also LTR 739/43, LTR 763/37, 41). Additionally, old people would not allow children to point a finger at a flash of lightning in the sky: “Kai žaibuoją, negalima rodyti pirštų tam, kuris nematė žaibuojanto.” (When lightning flashes, you may not point it out with your finger to someone who has not seen the flash himself.) (LTR 763/37, also BrčNR: 475). Men were obliged to take their hats off during thunderstorms:

When it thunders, you should not sit in the house with your hat on, because lightning can strike that person. Once there were three men sitting on a bench in a house, the middle one wearing a hat, so when lightning did strike, it struck the one with the hat. His friends were fine (LTR 1627/114, also LMD I 1063/419, LTR 1742/43).

There is a story about a shepherdess who started dancing, her hair loose, when it started to thunder, so that the rain should wash her hair. The elders told her to stop, because the “sky is unquiet”. But she would not listen, and continued to dance. Then Perkūnas struck, tore off her hair and drove it deep into the ground. (LTR 752/46). Most people would feel nervous during thunderstorms. If someone, unafraid of thunder, behaved inappropriately during these rumblings, he would be punished for it, according to stories like this one:

bįjau, ale I dransus nesu”. Saka: “Aš nei velnia to griaustinia nebijau. Kan jis muon gali padaryti?” Tik ant to žodžia griaustinis žybt! I nutrenki tan iš viduria, kur blevyzgoja, o tims dvim nieka nepadari.

Three men were walking, when a big thunderstorm started. One would make the sign of the cross with every peal and every flash of lightning, and say: “I am so afraid of thunder.” The second said: “I am not afraid, but neither am I brave.” Says: “The devil, I am not at all afraid of thunder. What can it do to me?” As he spoke lightning went flash! And struck this person who was in the middle, the one who blasphemed, while the other two went untouched. (LTR 1564/35)

This kind of individual foolhardiness was very rare. Thunder that shook everything and flashing lightning inspired respect, and also religious fear. Such fear accompanies the perception of holiness, and can manifest itself as a direct experience of a terrible and fascinating mystery (*mysterium tremendum, mysterium fascinans*).

What the god Perkūnas touched became sacred as well. If during a thunderstorm lightning struck a house, it was forbidden to put out the fire, because it was considered holy (BrčNR: 475, also TŽ 5 644). Fire struck by Perkūnas was considered out of the ordinary (BrčNR: 475).

People would keep chips of a tree that had been struck by lightning. They would try to have in the house something that had been touched by Perkūnas since it was believed that this had a good effect. Pieces of wood from a tree struck by lightning would be stuck under the roof (BrčNR: 475, LTR 828/164, TŽ 5 644), under the foundations, (LTR 823/393), or in the wall (LTR 1032/33). During storms, such chips were used to fumigate all the rooms (LTR 832/389). In one belief there can be found a wider explanation of why the remains of a tree struck by lightning are used by people:

*Griaustinio sudaužytas medžio skeveldras žmonės vartoja apsisaugoti nuo velnio, nes velnias bijo Perkūno trenktų daiktų. Ant sudaužyto akmens skeveldų žmonės stato namus, nes į juos Perkūnas netrenkia.*
Pieces of a tree hit by lightning protect you from the devil, because he fears things struck by Perkūnas. Upon a shattered stone people build houses, because Perkūnas will not strike. (LTR 832/386).

These shards of struck wood were used in agriculture and in the household. If you put a piece like this under the plough and till the field, weeds will disappear (TŽ 5 644, also LTR 758/41). “Perkūno trenkto medžio skeveldras arba uždegto namo nuodėgulius pakiša po balkiu, tai nebūna troboje prūsokų ir blakių.” (Chips from a tree hit by lightning or blackened wood from a house burnt by lightning are stuck in the eaves, so that the house stays free of cockroaches and bed bugs.) (LTR 1041/119, also LTR 374d/2166, LTR 828/169).

Pieces of a tree destroyed by lightning are used, either by way of their smoke or through being imbibed, to bring down fever (LTR 840/181/9), for the fits (shock, convulsions) (LTR 757/74, 154) and for “devilish diseases” in general (LTR 832/388). To keep the beasts healthy, pieces of wood broken by Perkūnas had to be kept in the barns as well (LTR 828/175/).

In all the cases mentioned above, trees shattered by lightning are considered a means of protection, and a blessing as well. It probably was believed that an object transformed by Perkūnas retains special powers, powers attributed to the god of thunder himself. Matthew Pretorius, writing in the seventeenth century, notes that a person who swallowed ashes from an object hit by Perkūnas was said to acquire the gifts of enchanting fire and foretelling the future (Mannhardt 1936: 537). This means that a person who eats something touched by the god of thunder himself acquires divine, magical powers.\(^3\)

We have spoken here about the effect of wood from trees struck by lightning. It can also be seen that similar roles were played by other objects associated with Perkūnas, among them “Perkūnas’s bullets”, that is, sharp prehistoric tools that protect you from the devil, bring good luck and are used for healing (LT 3 2: 322, LTR 828/72, LTR 832/248, 254). These so called “little axes” were considered very valuable and sacred (LTR 739/30, LTR 757/41, LTR 758/18).

It is interesting that in some folklore texts Perkūnas himself is called holy:
Kadd’ tawe švent’s Diewaitis užmuštų/užtrenktų!
May the Holy God kill/strike (as in thunder) you! (SLT: 394)

Trenk tave šventi perkūnai!
May holy thunders strike you! (LTR 757/36)

Kad tave šv. Perkūnelis!
May St. Perkūnelis [diminutive of Perkūnas] get you! (LTR 1041/102)

So it can be seen that Perkūnas with his rolling thunder seemed extraordinary to people with an ancient concept of our world, something holy and an irruption from the other world. As mentioned above, thunder was not considered a natural process, but rather something divine, that is determined and carried out by a god, more specifically the god of thunder. That is why it can be considered a theophany – a manifestation of a god – and at the same time a hierophany – a manifestation of holiness. It is as if, during the first thunderclap (something that happened periodically, every year), the world was split by a powerful force that emanated from the god Perkūnas and that changed its very essence.

The exact moment for the first thunder to appear cannot be strictly defined. It is determined by the godly action itself, the rolling of thunder. The specific time this happens in the spring is important, because this foretells the weather, the harvest and the general luck the farmer will have that year.

Šiaulėniškiai geriausiais metais laikydavo tuos, kuriais pirmoji perkūnija pasigirsta Velykose.

In Šiaulėnai, people consider the best years to be those when thunder is heard for the first time at Easter. (BrčNR: 475)

Pikelų apylinkėje, Mažeikių apskr. senieji žmonės tvirtina, kad jei kuriais metais kovo mėnesį pasigirdo prmasis perkūnas, tai karvės tą metą maža duosiančios pieno.
In Pikeliai, in the region of Mažeikiai, older people affirm that cows will bring less milk the year the first thunder is heard in March. (BrčNR: 475)

Around Kupiškis they say that if it thunders early in spring when there is still ice, the grass will grow poorly that year (LTR 739/78). Around Krosnas the explanation is: “Jeji pavasarį dar medžiams neišsprogus griaudžia, tai bus nederlingi metai.” (If it thunders in the spring before the buds open on the trees, the harvest will not be good that year.) (LTR 828/190). And in the vicinity of Aukštadvaris it is said that, if it thunders for the first time while there is still ice, it will be a cold summer (LTR 904/49). From these divinations a belief becomes clear, which is that if Perkūnas thunders too early it bodes no good.

Attention was also paid to what time of day or night the thunder rolled: “Panevėžio apylinkėj tikima, jei pirmasai perkūnas pareina prieš pusiaudienį, tai tą metą būsianti lietinga vasara, o jei po pusiaudienio – tai sausa.” (Around Panevėžys it is believed that if the first thunder sounded in the first half of the day, it will be a rainy summer, but if it was heard after noon – a dry one.) (BrčNR: 474).

Besides noting when thunder was first heard, people also made careful note from which direction the first peal could be heard:

Reik žiūrėti, kur pirmą kartą pavasarį sugriaus griaustinis ir spirs: jei pietuose spirs – bus geri metai, jei žiemiuos ar kitur – blogi metai.

You have to watch, from where will the first spring thunder strike: if in the south, it will be a good year, if in the north or somewhere else – a bad year (LTR 64/1075/).

Jeigu pavasarį pirmas griausmas ažgriaudžia rytuos, tai bus sausi metai, žiemiuos – šalti, pietuos – karšti, vakaruos - liūta.

If the first spring thunder sounds in the east, it will be a dry year, in the north – a cold one, south – warm, in the west – rainy. (LTR 759/23/).

Kaip šiaulęniškiai sako, jei pirmas pavasario perkūnas parėjo iš pietų šalies, tai būsią geri metai ir šilta vasara.
As those from Šiaulėnai say, if the first spring thunder came from the south, it will be a good year and a warm summer. (BrčNR: 474)

From these examples it is clear that space had different qualities of unequal value to people with ancient beliefs. The best option was considered thunder in the south, announcing a good year, a warm summer.

It is interesting to note that some objects were considered valuable by people because they were “unthundered”, due to the fact that they lost their power after the first thunder. Mostly these were different materials used in healing. Acid produced by ants holds its power only till the first thunder (LTR 739/77/). Medicinal powers were attributed to an unthundered crayfish bone (lapides cancerorum): “Neužgriausta vėžia girnela išėma krishly iš akes.” (An unthundered crayfish kneecap will take out a particle caught in your eye.) (LTR 1032/87/). Some herbs are only gathered until the first thunder:

Pavasarį, kal neužgriausta, renka žolas gydymui. Pacias žolas melsvai žydi, trims lapeliais, auga pa lazdynais ir kitais lapuočiais, jų žiedai labai kvėpia.

In the spring, when it has not thundered yet, healing herbs are collected. A certain plant with blue flowers, with three little leaves, grows under hazels and other leafy trees, and the blossoms smell very strongly. (LTR 1032/95/).

In a similar way, thunder affects horseradish adversely. After thunder it loses its bite: “Prieš pirmą perkūniją šeimininkės skuba kast krienus, nes, sako, kai užgriaudžia, išeinaš visas kartumas į žemes.” (Before the first thunder housewives hurry to dig up the horseradish roots, because they say all the sharpness goes into the earth.) (LTR 757/87/). The sharpness is what they are valued for as a food, of course.

So some beasts and plants that have distinctive characteristics had to be made use of before the first thunder. This exception was applied mostly to objects in nature used as medicine or healing aids. So often something that is of no good to the healthy is applied to the sick.
A special mention should be made of the snake. The aim was to catch one before the first thunder, because only from such snakes could medicine be made:


In spring, while thunder has not been heard yet, you must go to the swamp, catch a brown snake and take it home, wedged in a stick. Then you take this snake and stick its head in a bottle, so she goes in altogether. Once she’s in there, you must fill the bottle with arielka (schnaps), if you don’t have any then use plain water, and let her soak. After it has stood for a while, there is no better medicine than this. They give to children for the fits, for cattle to keep away the mice, for bloating, for pigs that don’t eat, into all the fodder. The important thing is that it must not have been thundered. Because snakes, as soon as they hear thunder shed their skin, and become no good for medicine. (LTR 2132/51)

Pavasarį, kol griausmas neažgriaudžia, gyvatė yra didžiausias vaistas, o ažgriaudus jas gydomoja galia sumažėja.

In the spring, before thunder has sounded, snakes are a great medicine, but the medicinal properties diminish after thunder. (LTR 1032/89)

Gyvatė, pagauta be griausmo, yra geras vaistas gyvulius gydyti, bet pagauta po griausmo jau netinka.

A snake, caught before first thunder, is a good medicine for the beasts, but caught after thunder is no good any more. (LTR 739/717, also LTR 1032/88)
Norbertas Vėlius noticed that snakes are the opposite of Perkūnas (Vėlius 1987: 137). This is due to what is quite clearly apparent in popular beliefs, that snakes were considered creatures of the devil (Lithuanian velnias, a chthonic being, that has anthropomorphic or zoomorphic shape): the devil cries when you kill a snake, and if you kill a snake and spit, the devil will resuscitate that snake with your spittle (Vėlius 1987: 137). In one belief it is considered that Perkūnas hits a snake and throws it on the earth: “Kai Perkūnas spiria, tai jis meta žemėn gyvatę, bet ta gyvate tuoj vėl pakyla į viršų.” (When Perkūnas strikes, that’s him throwing a snake to the ground, but it rises up again right away.) (LTR 739/111). It would seem that Perkūnas is fighting a foe. The connection between snakes and the devil is also visible in the belief that the devil can acquire the shape of a snake (Vėlius 1987: 135). So the relation between these two mythical creatures is indubitable. An interesting fact is that people were cured of snakebite with Perkūnas’s bullets (LTR 11/18c; LTR 832/252), showing that the power of these bullets annuls the power of snake poison. Truly, Perkūnas and snakes are opposed mythological creatures, with counterpoised meanings.

The first spring thunder would start a new yearly cycle. In the deep, religious meaning, first thunder recalls an archaic festivity, that moment in the flow of cyclic time that restores primordial, “clean” time, when space is consecrated and a certain divine act (usually of creation, cosmogonic emergence or consecration) is repeated and remembered. According to Eliade, people felt a religious longing to live in a holy and clean cosmos, just as it was at the beginning (Eliade 1997: 47). This longing, desire and even need can be perceived in the expectation surrounding the first thunder as a world-shaking event.

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Notes

1 All translations from Lithuanian are by Ieva Čekuolytė.

2 The cleansing function of thunder is known in other cultures, not only in Lithuanian tradition. The archaic Hittite-Luvian ritual Tunavi (“River ritual”) includes an address to the god of thunder. An old woman would
hold a black sheep over a ritually unclean person, speaking this incantation: “God of thunder, merciful, come down from heaven and be our guest, from above, from heaven down to earth, God of thunder, hurry!” The goal of this ritual was to rid a person of an enchantment that makes him dirty to gods and men (Toporov 1995: 26-7). This is clearly a cleansing function of the god of thunder.

3 Pretorius also tells the story of how, during a great storm c. 1652 in Nybudzien (now Kaliningrad in the Russian federation), an old Lithuanian man from the region of Samogitia saw lightning strike his saddle which turned to ashes. Later the old man said: “Ich wolte gern der Welt loss sein, und wen mich Gott durch seinen donner zu sich genommen hätte, würde ich ohne einige schmerzen auffgelöset seyen and dort im Himmel meinem Gott dienen, und daraus hätte ich schliessen können, dass ich Gottes Kind wäre, weil Er mit seinem Kinde dem Dievaitė mich zu sich nehme.” (BRMŚ 3 136). Here it is clear indeed that Perkūnas has his own world in the sky, that he is the representative of the “other” world.

References and Abbreviations


LMD – The folklore collection of the Lithuanian Scientific Society (Lietuvių mokslo draugija) stored in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives.

LTR – Lithuanian Folklore Archives (Lietuvių tautosakos rankraštynas) in the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Vilnius.


Historical Sources for the Study of Latvian Mythology

ALDIS PUTELIS

INTRODUCTION

Latvians and Lithuanians themselves believed that before the gods that are now honoured as the rulers of this world, the power was in the hands of different gods. Full theogony and cosmogony, i.e. creation stories of gods and this world cannot be found in the folk material collected so far. Just some legend texts assist in understanding it. (Lautenbahs 1882: 23; author’s translation, from Latvian)

This is a quotation from a research work by Jēkabs Lautenbahs (1847-1928), a linguist, folklorist and writer. The quotation indirectly points at many complicated circumstances and problems encountered at the time when the first study of Latvian folklore and mythology was attempted.

The moment in time itself, when these activities were started, is of great significance for the Latvian nation. Until that time there had been no Latvian nation, but rather a class that had recently found some ways to enter higher society by fulfilling its requirements – those of being, in essence, German. For those Latvians who had achieved something in their lives and did not want to adopt even at a superficial level the different culture of those who had, though gradually still effectively, deprived the Latvians of their rights since the crusades of the thirteenth century – for them there had to be a way to prove the national rights of the Latvians. One might argue that it was just an attempt by the wealthy to abandon the requirement of aristocratic descent in order to hold a position in society, allowing money to talk instead. Still this would be only partly true.

In order to prove its rights a nation must have some history, some great personalities and deeds, to build its modernity upon. Latvians could boast nothing like that; from the early 13th century their own local kings had gradually lost their power to the German knights conquering the land, until the local people were turned into serfs.
Thus all of the modern culture beginning with Christianity (which was the official basis of the advent of the German knights – bringing the new light to the ignorant) was introduced by the Germans, claiming their rights and denying those of the local people. The task was clear though complicated – to prove that the Latvians had a significant culture of their own.

Mentioning the two nations together in the above quotation was not coincidental; it points at the then fashionable idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian great nation. With Lithuanians having been a powerful nation ruling a vast territory, it was beneficial for the Latvians to point at kinship (considered much more of an essential factor at that time than nowadays). Though the idea never yielded any political results, it had some certain manifestations in cultural life, including, for example, the title of the first and most famous edition of Latvian folksong texts, *Latvju Dainas*, for which the Lithuanian word meaning “song”, *daina*, was chosen instead of the Latvian word *dziesma*.

Secondly, the quotation mentions the existence of some Latvian pre-Christian deities. At that time this bore a certain cultural-political meaning, with folklore positioned as the cultural basis of a Latvian national cultural and even a nation.

Then, it might strike the reader that Lautenbahs does not even mention any written sources among those to be used to establish “full theogony and cosmogony”. This might be explained by the fact that to him there were no sufficiently reliable written sources. Or perhaps the actually existing written sources (whatever their reliability) were unavailable to Lautenbahs.

And lastly, there is the problem of the relationship between mythology and folklore (the two being considered clearly separate around the turn of the twentieth century) as well as the genre problem. If a folklore item classified as a legend tells the creation story, is it still a legend or is it a myth?

The main difficulty encountered by those interested in the topic of Latvian mythology is the lack of old documentary sources, including old records of folklore texts. There are historical reasons for this. The territory of modern Latvia was far away from the great cultural centres of ancient Greece and Rome, so that only a few indications of it have been found in Classical accounts, with those telling next to nothing about the local people living on this soil, perhaps only mentioning the amber found there. Also, the local tribes were not
united and, although there were individuals who ruled comparatively vast territories, no great kingdom was ever established that might have left written testimonies.

The end of the twelfth century brought about another factor that is still a matter of controversy. At that time the first German missionaries appeared on the soil of modern-day Latvia. They were not the first foreigners who trod this ground – the Vikings and the Slavs had been there before, trading, fighting, and also building churches. By that time the Vikings had been wiped out and the Slavs had left the lands to the local rulers demanding taxes in return. But the missionaries were followed by men who backed their faith with military force, and the “baptising of the pagans by means of sword and fire” (as it has been referred to in modern Latvian tradition) began. The locals were fighting the intruders, but also rather frequently their own neighbours (in alliance with the German knights), so that the tribes, which later formed the modern Latvians, were never united, not even in the face of what could be understood as an external enemy. Therefore quite soon the fight was over in favour of the conquerors, who had better military skills and techniques. This conquest established German rule, though gradually, with the Latvians been made serfs in the end.

Thus around the time of the national awakening the pre-Christian (or equally, pre-German) times received the aura of a Golden Age, at the same time being beyond the reach of any documentary proof. Though the arrival of Christianity is frequently considered a positive development, the price paid for it was rather high. After many years without rights, by the mid nineteenth century Latvians had only two alternatives – to remain Latvians, that meaning being peasants or maybe artisans, belonging to the working class, or adopt the German language, change their names to make them sound German, and, having gathered some capital, enter the higher society. Still the self-esteem of many Latvians who were sure of their abilities would keep many Latvians from opting for the latter. A claim for nationhood was seen as the solution, denying the inherited rights of the rulers and allowing anyone to try and achieve a position in the society.

But this claim was not so easy to back. As already mentioned, the whole of modern culture was introduced by the current rulers of the time, mostly German, who were completely content with the situation. They regarded the Latvians as lower class – plain brutes
with no culture of their own, no past (in the sense of heroic deeds in the field of battle) and consequently no future.

The Latvians needed some proof of their own indigenous culture to back their political and social aspirations. And the counter-force to be overcome was quite established, and also so accustomed to the situation that all of the better people were nominally Germans that any claims of Latvians were readily rejected. This was expressed both openly and in individual correspondence. One of the harshest examples of this attitude may be the following lines from pastor Brasche’s letter, written in the 1860s to the President of the Latvian Literary Society, an organisation established by Germans and for Germans to a great extent. Brasche himself was an outstanding member of this Society.

Those who know our “nationals” have long lost all hope for the Latvian people. It is a stillborn nation. The Latvians have no national past and no history, they cannot have a future. The only character traits which distinguish them are their totally backward and crippled language . . . and their blinding hatred for the Germans. (Quoted in Trapans 1989: 21)

For many years Germans had tried to enlighten Latvians, rejecting their rude and naïve songs, many of them without any prejudice and out of the purest intentions, and one of the ways to eliminate the unwanted tradition was to replace it by offering a substitute in the form of these authors’ own contemporary ballad tradition. Being superior in melodic sophistication and clearly differentiated textually, these songs indeed became popular and remain known up to now.

But the Finns had shown a brilliant example with “Kalevala”, and the scholars of that time were interested in ancient culture and folklore (since MacPherson’s “Ossian”, through Herder’s Stimmen der Völker and then on and on). If the Latvians could succeed in proving that their mythology was as sophisticated as the Greek or Roman, if the Latvian folksongs, legends and folktales were comparable in their beauty and elaboration to those of other well-established nations, it could be enough to convince the people of Latvia that this fight could be won, that the Latvians were equally worthy people, and there was no need to pretend to be Germans.

It was the age of national romanticism. It brought numerous exaggerations and faulty assertions with it, but it started the scholarly
study of Latvian folklore in general and mythology in particular. Still the issue of what were the sources to be used for this study was really acute.

FOUR TYPES OF SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF MYTHOLOGY

Generally there are four types of source mentioned: historical documents, folklore texts, archaeological evidence and toponymic evidence. Indeed, these cover all possibilities. The documents would preserve the formal opinions and registered (and dated!) encounters with the relevant phenomena while folklore is the collection of all oral compositions, bearing evidence possibly closer to the phenomena under examination, though it is difficult to date folklore with sufficient precision. Archaeology can fill in the gap left, providing data on the material life of our predecessors, thus proving or refuting the theories derived from the previous two types of source, while toponyms can indicate places of ritual significance and add to the more direct data of archaeology. The question is, How much of this data of each type is available?

Historical documents

One thing we must admit is that in dealing with documents we must exercise the utmost caution and bear in mind that the authors were not scholars in the modern sense of the word. All of the documents after 1200 (pretty much the same as those created before although the latter were much less numerous) are written by strangers to the local culture who in most cases were hostile to it. Besides it appears that there is no case in world literature where ancient myths have been described in detail by those who fully believed in them. Whether the mythological period is placed culturally before the period of literacy or whether a belief system would be considered deprived of its sacred characteristics if put down in writing remains a question.

Folklore texts

Around the same time that Lautenbahs wrote the words quoted in the introduction, T. W. Rolleston, in the conclusion to his book *Myths of the Celtic Race*, stated that: “Folk-lore has not been regarded as
falling within the scope of the present work. Folk-lore may sometimes represent degraded mythology and sometimes mythology in the making. . . . Mythology, in the proper sense of the word appears only where the intellect and the imagination have reached a point of development above that which is ordinarily possible to the peasant mind.” Rollestone’s view was generally accepted at the time, so the first Latvian scholars had to oppose the basics of the only field they could rely upon in their search for the highly needed data, as around the turn of the 20th century folklore was strictly separated from mythology, very cautiously considering the legends as useful for the study of the latter (as indicated by Lautenbahs). Was the Latvian mythology irrecoverably lost along with the priests of the ancient religion? Still, there also was a strong opponent to such views – the folkloric school. Wilhelm Mannhardt, known as an outstanding representative of this approach, believed that the so-called lower mythology found in the later folk culture and in the ancient traditions is sufficiently similar to be used for general mythology study. Of the different folklore genres one may expect spells and incantations to have preserved direct relics of the old religion, and certain legends and folk-tales may in some respects come close to myth. Folk-song texts are, however, considered the best source, because due to the rhythm and traditional stability of the performance they have retained descriptions and names that have been lost in all other genres and are never mentioned in the historical documents.

Archaeological evidence

The use of archaeological data for the study of mythology is somewhat limited. This is caused mainly by the fact that the archaeologists themselves tend to formulate the results of their research rather cautiously, for example, using the term “culture” instead of directly pointing at any ethnic group when describing a find. Though the technology used allows for more and more exact dating of finds, they still are positioned within a rather wide time slot. Similarly the archaeological finds can only testify that some custom or concept has been present in a particular culture if some particular material culture items, structures or customary burial techniques are present in the area. Still these data cannot provide any proof regarding the oral traditions connected with the culture (except in the case of finds of written texts, but these are to be classified with the
historical documents). Archaeological data is useful in the formation of hypotheses regarding the distribution of some concepts or customs, but it cannot prove or disprove the existence of phenomena that leave no material trace.

Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994), archaeologist and the most famous researcher into Baltic culture, in her book *The Balts in Pre-Historic Times*, when speaking of Baltic mythology, uses data from the historical texts and folklore, not archaeology. One difficulty in using archaeological data for the study of Baltic mythology may arise from the fact that archaeology so far can produce abundant proof of relatively recent offering sites, while no structure that might be called a pre-Christian temple has been found. So we are again dealing with the “lower mythology” here, but have no data regarding the higher deities that can be interpreted without a significant amount of speculation.

**Toponymic evidence**

And last but not least, the toponyms. Since for centuries the administrative power on the territory of modern Latvia has been in the hands of persons not speaking Latvian, the toponyms have been changed, either adopting those from the local inhabitants into another language, adapting them to that language, or created anew. In any case the toponyms have undergone certain stages of development ending up in a Latvianised form. There is also a group of recent toponyms created with the national idea in mind, deliberately using some literary work or well-known folkloric source (e.g., farmsteads named “Lācplēši” after the main hero (“the Bear-Slayer”) of the literary epic published in 1888). The linguistic form of the toponyms, although quite distorted in a number of cases, may allow one to determine the ethnic group originating the name (e.g., the many cases of Finno-Ugrian place-names in Latvia), but it is still very difficult to come to any conclusions regarding the toponyms in relation to cult sites, without a significant amount of speculation.

The present article will be limited to a survey of the available historical documents.
HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

The chronicles

The oldest known description of – probably – the Baltic tribes including the Latvians is a short passage in a travelogue by Tacitus in his *Germania* written in 98 AD. The description just mentions some *gentes Aestiorum*, saying that these people till their land and are more diligent than their lazy neighbours. Beyond that the Roman traveller (sent by Nero in 55 AD to explore these lands) mentions the worship of some female deity and the wearing of amulets. However incomplete and superficial the description, it testifies that individual deities were known at that time and that at least one of those was a female deity. And, as Mannhardt puts it, this document “is valuable for us because it is all we have until the 9th century” (Mannhardt 1936: 8).

Unfortunately for the Latvians, the documents from the 9th century mentioned by Mannhardt deal with other ethnic groups, providing no evidence regarding the group of tribes that later formed the Latvians. Thus chronologically the next well-known document providing information about the territory of modern Latvia is a chronicle that covers the events in the last decade of the 12th century and the first half of the 13th century which is known as “Heinrich’s Chronicle”. Another chronicle, written less than a century later, the “Rhymed Chronicle”, retells (somewhat superficially) the events described by Heinrich (or maybe provides a mythological perception of the events of the period not known to Heinrich), and then proceeds with the story until the complete conquest of Livonia at the end of the thirteenth century. Thus the two documents, when combined, provide a full description of the situation and events in the thirteenth century, though possibly giving a limited and one-sided view.

The introductory chapter to Heinrich’s Chronicle states the following: “And nothing else has been added to that what we have nearly all seen with our own eyes, but what we haven’t seen by ourselves, was learnt from those who were there to see and participate.” (Author’s translation from Latvian). It is considered reliable by most historians in regard to the historical part (Mugurēvičs 1993) though interpretations as to who Heinrich was (a Christianised local or not) and where exactly this or that event took place are numerous.
But the document provides almost no information as to the beliefs and gods of the encountered local people. This might seem strange at first glance but it is no surprise. As has been shown by Klaustinš, Mugurēvičs and others, the attitude of the Christian authors of that time (and also of those living several centuries later) regarding non-Christian belief was generally negative; their writings diabolised it and gave just a few examples which were quite often not very reliable. The chronicle mostly speaks of the difficulties encountered in the process of converting the pagans and of how they return to their heathen practices when there is a chance, etc. Still there are a few hints on the customs of the Balts.

The only description of a ritual is that telling of Curonian warriors burning their dead and lamenting them after an unsuccessful attack on Riga (Henrici Chronicon: 137-9). Unfortunately, the description provides no detail, though it is in line with the archaeological data regarding Curonian burial traditions.

The only deity name mentioned is attributed to the Estonians. In the description of a campaign against them, the author of the chronicle mentions that the Estonians call to “Tharapita” for help. This fact was used in the 1930s by romantic nationalists of Estonia to establish a modern religion worshipping Taara as the highest deity in the past, but students of the Estonian pre-Christian religion (e.g. Ergo-Hart Västrik) consider placing Taara in this position a misunderstanding just as the Chronicle’s Tharapita is a misinterpretation of an Estonian phrase “Taara, help!” (Taara, avita!). Unfortunately for the study of Latvian mythology not even this much evidence can be extracted from the chronicle.

The Rhymed Chronicle differs from the Heinrich work both in its language and structure and in the social group represented by its author. This chronicle is more like an epic telling about the battles and the warriors participating in them. It is not as well done as the “Chanson de Roland” but it belongs to the same tradition, at least to some extent. The Rhymed Chronicle is a literary work based on historical events, paying most attention to their military aspect. Roberts Klaustinš, commenting on the character of the chronicle in the preface to its translation (Atskanu hronika: xiv-xv, p. 1) says the following: “The Rhymed Chronicle is a poetry work of mediaeval tradition, not an objective historical document.” The chronicle starts with an outline of events before the time directly described in it. Judging by the significant differences in time assigned to different
events, the unknown author of this chronicle had no access to Heinrich’s text.

Both of the chroniclers tell some miracle stories, that obviously represent their authors’ world perception, proving that in this they actually were not too far different from the pagans they were trying to convert. One such is the story of “A priest’s coffin that grew longer because of a divine miracle” related in Heinrich’s Chronicle. Another is the story of a couple secretly killing a German (Christian) merchant, but when the couple’s child is born, wounds similar to those cut on the victim are visible on the child’s body. This story is found in both the chronicles, obviously being part of general oral tradition. This adds an extra need to reckon with inclusion of such oral tradition items into the text without any special indication to it. This is a proof of the authors not separating the actually seen by one’s own eyes from what was believed to be equally true – a rather mythological world perception, in fact.

Not much else can be found in the Rhymed Chronicle regarding the religion and mythology of the local people. Mainly it just states that they do have some gods of their own, but there is no closer description. In fact the facts related are mere parallelisms to the practices of the Christians – prayers to God (or gods – by the pagans) before a battle, rich sacrifices by both the German knights and the pagans in case of success in the warfare and return with a loot, interpretation of lost battle as God’s punishment for some wrongdoings. This parallelism raises the question whether the descriptions are reliable at all, as it is rather likely that the chronicler, who possibly met the local people as opponents in the field of battle, did not know much of their ways, projecting his own onto them instead.

Both Christians and pagans are described as employing similar practices, e.g. divination. Heinrich describes how Couronians spend a fortnight near Riga trying to foretell when their gods will be the most favourable to them and when will it be the best moment for the attack. Again a hint of the same can be found in the Rhymed Chronicle, where the knights have foretold that their campaign against the Couronians will be successful and it turns out so indeed. Similarly there are data regarding the striking of pacts among the Order brothers for each to kill the other if severely wounded in battle to save him from death by torture at the hands of the enemy, a
practice that is ascribed to the Couronians at the battle at Riga in Heinrich’s Chronicle (xiv, 5, p. 139).

Thus to summarise this we must admit that the chronicles do not provide us with sufficient data for specific study, both because the data regarding the pre-Christian religion of the local people are scarce and the facts available may be a truthful description, a projection of something better known into unknown, a made-up untrue assertion to denigrate the opponent or just generally regular practice of the battlefield.

Apart from the information that can be interpreted differently the Rhymed Chronicle mentions a single name of a deity – this time the well known Baltic god of thunder Pērkons (Latvian form, Lithuanian Perkunas, known also in Prussian and in Slavic languages), in the text described as a Lithuanian idol (Perkune, ir apgot). There is no indication of Taara in this chronicle text, as there was no sign of Pērkons in that of Heinrich’s. This is quite natural as the events take place in geographically different areas, still – had these names of gods been generally known, it would be quite likely that they would have been used in both texts to characterise the local pagan beliefs. So the Rhymed Chronicle gives us at least a name of a Baltic god. The rest can be used only as some secondary information with little reliability. As in many other cases, the ancient belief has not been sufficiently described at the time when it was the ruling faith of the local people of the region.

Descriptions by foreign authors

For a long period after these first chronicles greater attention is paid to Prussia, where long wars were fought against the Prussians who rebelled against their new lords. Interestingly enough there is also more data on their gods, while the rest of the Balts were scarcely mentioned in written sources. Most of the written records that follow the first chronicles are of the same character. They just mention the fact that the local people are still pagans, worshipping disgusting idols. Rarely are these idols described in any detail, but the number of descriptions is significant.

This raises a question – were the domestic spirits mentioned the only mythological beings worshipped, were the higher gods forgotten? Or maybe these household altars and places of sacrifice were more visible to the foreigners? Eliade (1995: 108) mentions that
in different cultures: “If . . . an intervention by a priest or a sorcerer yields no result, the stakeholders remember the existence of a Higher Being, which may be nearly forgotten at times, and pray to it offering sacrifice.” Perhaps, then, the conditions might have been still tolerable without the need to appeal to this higher deity. It would have been necessary to ensure the success of everyday work and the satisfaction of mundane needs, but this would have involved only particular lower deities. Still, it is also possible that strangers were not allowed to see what they should not see. Maybe the authors have again projected into this situation a better-known practice, the worship of particular patron saints quite frequently having taken over the functions of pre-Christian deities.

Another tendency obvious in most of these works is a rather free treatment of the information available, with data added from different sources. This can lead to far-from-reality compositions being presented as true and valuable descriptions of some people or tradition or place. It is not clear whether the authors could discern all the differences among the local peoples; maybe they did not even want to bother themselves with such differences. In several cases “new” information emerges as the result of an error in the transcription of a manuscript. As at that time there was no requirement regarding indication of sources, it is impossible to trace back every peculiar statement and assertion. Also, there are grounds for believing that in some cases set expressions were used to convey an idea, so that the phrasing should not be taken at face value. All these are characteristic features of the period, and one must reckon with them when reading the texts and using them as sources for research.

**Accounts of a Baltic temple: Romow and Criwe**

To describe a religion one must take a look at the ritual involved. At least the organisation of a temple would shed some light on the related issues, showing how the rituals might have been carried out. Unfortunately no temples of the Balts have been preserved, and there are no accounts of rituals either.

Therefore the description of a long-lost temple in Romow and the high priest of it (named Criwe) has acquired a special position in the study of Baltic mythology and religion. Also the mentioned above Lautenbahs was inclined to pay great attention to it, most likely
hoping to derive from the described cult some knowledge of the mythology. Though the opposition of scholars to these ideas grew quite strong later, much attention has been paid to this issue by all researchers into the rituals and religious organisation of the ancient Balts.

To find out as much as possible one must look for the source. And though the most quoted one is that by Simon Grunau (discussed below), the first ever, though short, description of it can be found in Peter von Dusburg’s *Cronica Terre Prussie* dated 1326. His work, as suggested by the title, is devoted to the description of events in Prussia, but it includes also the history of the Teutonic Order and is in parts considered as a reliable historical source. In this chronicle there is a description of some place “in the middle of Prussian lands”, that has received its name from Rome and is called Romow (*locus quidam dictus Romow*). There resides some man whose powers can be compared to those of the Pope. The name of this man is *Criwe*. To explain the power of this man it is said that not only Prussians, but also Lithuanians and other nations of Livonia are his subjects. Interestingly enough, Peter von Dusburg states that the Prussians believe in the rebirth of the body whatever the life of a person has been, so that the fate of all is equal (or God treats them all the same). At the same time he states that the Prussians have no concept of God as they are underdeveloped and cannot comprehend such high notions. Furthermore, having no alphabet, they cannot have any kind of sacred writing, therefore they “erroneously” consider divine all “created things” such as the sun, the moon, the stars and thunder etc. The author goes on to say that their temples are forests and fields, as well as waters, where no work shall be performed – neither cultivation of land nor fishing.

This description shows the author’s Christian world-view and demonstrates his attitude to non-Christians. There is some discrepancy between the statement that the local people carry out their ceremonies in flat fields or in forests and that they have a temple where a high priest with far-reaching power resides, though one must allow for the possibility that the term “temple” was used of such places. Obviously the author had his own aims when writing this. But already this description raises the question: is any part of this account reliable, and if so, then – which?
The excerpts from this chronicle along with other important historical sources valuable for the study of Baltic mythology have been brought together by Wilhelm Mannhardt in the posthumously published book where he also comments on the old texts concerning pagan religion among the Baltic-language-speaking peoples. These chronicles occupy quite a conspicuous place in this collection. Though Dusburg’s chronicle as such is considered as a quite reliable source, Mannhardt, having quoted the passages, argues that the description of Romow must be the result of a misunderstanding or an embellishment to the story (Mannhardt 1936: 88). First, he objects to the idea of centralised power in the territory mentioned, denying the possibility that the local people would have travelled such significant distances to consult a religious leader. This appears to be a very reasonable argument, which, even if we do not deny the existence of such a central temple, makes it irrelevant to the study of Latvian mythology since the distance between Latvia and the Prussian Romow is obviously too great. Similar distances are travelled only by armies intent upon plundering their neighbours’ lands, and, as such raids in this area demonstrate, there was no centralised power ruling the lands, so that such a journey to a far-away temple would have been rather dangerous for anybody willing to undertake the hardships of travel. Mannhardt has other objections as well, as to the location being not “in the middle of the land” before the German invasion. Though even Mannhardt admits that such a place and priest might have existed, he points out that there are documents mentioning Romow after von Dusburg’s chronicle, but no indication of it before.

Several writers have developed the description, but the one who brings it to a culmination is Simon Grunau, whose *Cronica un beschreibung allerlustlichenn, nützlichsten un waren historien des namkundigenn landes zu Prewssen* was written between 1517 and 1521. This work combines all the data made available by previous authors, adding details not known before. It describes the cult, ritual activities and some deities worshipped at this temple. As such it has been quite frequently quoted.

Grunau mentions the Prussian deities several times. The first such listing of them is the description of the king Witowud’s banner, a white piece of cloth with depictions of three males of different age and appearance who are said to be the three main deities of the Prussians. The writer only gives the names of two – Potrimppo and Patollo. In addition to that he mentions some symbols on the banner.
that must have been an inscription or some signs of the respective deities. To refer to these signs as written text should be considered as exaggeration, as there is no other example of Prussian writing to be found. Still there are ornamental signs attributed to deities also in Latvian tradition and so this is no basis for refusing the whole story some credibility.

The next significant description is that of an incredibly large sacred oak, that was the place of worship of the same gods. It is said to be so thick that not a single raindrop can fall on what is under it, and in some ways the description is more reminiscent of a mythical location than of a real place in this world. The tree is divided into three parts so that each can be devoted to one of the deities worshipped here. Several authors, including Mannhardt and Šmits, have mentioned that this description resembles the description of the tree at Uppsala in Sweden that grew beside a temple that contained the images of the three pre-Christian gods, Thor, Wodan and Fricco, as Adam of Bremen says in his chronicle. However, Puhvel (1974: 80-2) has pointed out that there are many differences between the two accounts and that Grunau’s statement cannot be dismissed as a simple borrowing.

Grunau in his chapter on the names of Prussian gods places Patollo as the highest of the Prussian deities, with this being the god of the dead and the otherworld. Potrimppo is described as the god of military success, thirsty for blood the same as Patollo. Perkuno is the god of thunderstorm. He adds a detailed description of cult and ritual activities for each of the gods, along with the description of the priest class that is responsible for carrying these out.

Grunau places the foundation of the temple city around 521 AD. He tells that the king’s town was called Noytto and the temple town was named Ricoyoto. The state and the temple were run by two brothers called Widewuto and Brutheno, and Criwo Cyrwaito was but the title of the latter. When they reach an age comparable to the forefathers in the Old Testament (which Mannhardt mentions as another source of Grunau’s description) they give their people a number of rules including the ban against introducing any other deities beyond the three described above and let themselves be sacrificed by burning, becoming deified themselves (this does not appear to be a contradiction in the eyes of Grunau). So three more gods can be found in this description: Wurschayto or Borsskayto meaning “the leader, the master of sacrifice” and Szwaybrotto
meaning “his brother”, though such names of deities do not appear to suggest their ancient character, especially when no other source confirms their existence. The last deity mentioned in Grunau’s work is Curcho – the god of eating to whom food is offered. Unlike the previous two, Curcho has been at least mentioned elsewhere – in connection with crops in the peace treaty concluded between the Prussians and the crusaders in 1249. Obviously Grunau, using all available information, could not overlook it and had to include also this obscure deity.

As mentioned before, many of the Prussian deities have been later attributed to Latvian mythology as well, though there is no proof in any traditional material of them belonging to the Latvian tradition. Potrimps and Pekols are among those. Unlike them Pērkons is a deity known to all the Balts, as testified also by the Rhymed Chronicle above. But there is a peculiar detail regarding the cult of Perkuno as described by Grunau. He mentions the formula for approaching this deity, namely: dewus Perkuno abselo mus. Interestingly enough this short sentence is very close to modern Latvian and easily translates as: “god Perkuno, have mercy on us!” The chronicler’s knowledge of local languages may have been rather limited, and also the transcription does not allow for any certain judgements, as at that time there is no harmonised orthography for any Baltic language. Still, the second half of the phrase appears to be closer to Latvian that to any forms of Prussian. What does it prove? Were the gods of Ricoyote or Romow indeed the gods of all the Balts? Was the language of the cult Latvian (as Prussian differs significantly from the other two Baltic languages)? Or did Grunau make a compilation of all available to him? Wilhelm Mannhardt concludes that “the description of the Prussian times of paganism Grunau gives his readers is stitched together with lies, misunderstandings and distortions of mostly modern parts.”

In many of the historical documents there can be found a repeated formulaic description of the pagan cult of the Balts. It appears first in the text by Peter von Dusburg, where he writes that the Prussians venerate “all created things” – like the sun and the heavenly bodies, thunder, and animals as gods showing them the honour appropriate for the Creator. It turns out that similar statements were repeated later in works of different authors regarding different people. Indications of some people venerating “created things” as the “Creator” can be found also regarding the Finno-Ugric Ingrians, along with the
statement that fields, waters and growths are the “disgusting temples” of this pagan religion (Mansikka 1922). Possibly this is a later development from a document of as early as 452 AD (quoted in Rollestone 1916), when the synod of Arles condemns the Celts who still “venerate trees, wells and stones”. More than half a millennium later, in 1199 Pope Innocent III attacks pagans who “give the honour that God only deserves to dull animals, leafy trees, clear waters and evil spirits”. It is quite likely that the particular descriptions introducing quite a few accounts of Baltic paganism are in fact nothing but a quotation from an authoritative document, while the words of the text reflect the perception of what a pagan religion was thought to be, not its true description.

Still the principle of a text being “the best there is” has urged quite a few researchers to use Grunau’s work as a source. Even Marija Gimbutas without any comment or caution quotes Grunau’s description of Patollo as the image of the devil in Baltic mythology and also uses the Peter von Dusburg’s description in the chapter on the sanctuaries of the ancient Balts (Gimbutas 1994: 197, 202).

As hopefully obvious from the above, Romow with its several elaborate cults and classes of priests cannot be taken for a reliable Baltic temple to search for resemblances to which would be the task of archaeologists. Even less can it be attributed to the Latvian tradition. Though one deity mentioned there proves to be a true deity of all the Balts, two more appear on most of the lists of the Prussian deities and one can be traced in a historical document, we cannot rely on the particular composition. We cannot deny that there may be truth in the account, but at the same time we cannot identify it with certainty. We must be either very cautious using such a text (as it indeed is “the only and the best there is”) or not touch upon it at all in order to avoid further misinterpretations.

**The first list of pagan gods**

In 1530 a clergyman (though the author is not clearly indicated it is believed that it must have been Paul Speratus) in his description of pagan traditions called “Episcoporum Prussie Pomesaniensis atque Sambiensis Constitutiones Synodales” gave a list of Prussian deities from one of the regions (Mannhardt 1936). He gave both the names of the gods and their counterparts in Roman tradition, to some extent following Julius Caesar’s practice established in his description of the
gods of the Gauls (though Caesar gave just the names of the corresponding Roman gods). This list is important for several reasons. First, it includes all three names of gods given by Grunau. Second, the list is larger and positions a different god as the highest, while the “god of the dead” is placed in accordance with the Christian view – at the bottom. Third, this list of gods, though going through a number of different documents and undergoing changes in phonetic forms, was later included in the descriptions of Latvian mythology, mostly with the same functions of the deities as indicated on this list. Thus we can consider Speratus as a founder of a tradition, at least on the Baltic scale. His list is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occopirmus</th>
<th>Saturnus</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suaixtix</td>
<td>Sol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ausschauts</td>
<td>Aesculapius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autrympus</td>
<td>Neptunus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potrympus</td>
<td>Castor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bardoayts</td>
<td>Pollux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piluuytus</td>
<td>Coeres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parcuns</td>
<td>Juppiter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pecols or Pocols</td>
<td>Pluto, Furiae</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also this document is a result of a visitation, intended to evaluate the level of “disgusting paganism” revived in the Christianised lands in order to counteract it. Still such a detailed description of this belief is a step forward from the perspective of a modern scholar – this document does not just ascertain that the locals have some pagan gods and a religion of their own but also provides information. Though there are indications that Speratus must have made a mistake in the placement of parallel deities, it does not lessen the importance of this document. At the same time it has negative implications as well – the numerous similar listings of Prussian gods found in other later works may be nothing but a borrowing from this one.
### Historical Sources for the Study of Latvian Mythology

**Maeletius**

- **Pergrubrius**, who supervises the flowers, plants and all of the flora. The ceremonies held in order to worship this deity and appeal to him are described in detail. It is indicated that these activities are led by Vurschayten “a sacrificer”.

- Occopirnus, god of the skies and the earth
- Antrimpus, god of the seas
- Gardoaete, god of the sailors, called Portunnus by the Romans
- Potrympus, god of rivers and springs
- Piluitus, god of wealth, called Plutus in Latin
- **Pergrubrius**, god of the spring season
- Pargnus, god of thunder and storm
- Pocclus, god of hell and darkness (or dark places)
- Poccollus, god of air spirits
- Putscaetus, a deity that looks over sacred places
- Auscautus, god of health and illness

**Einhorn**

- Deity of flowers, corn and other fruits of the soil, worshipped with different ceremonies.
- God of the skies and the earth
- God of the sea
- God of the seafarers
- God of brooks and rivers
- God of wealth
- God of thunder and storm
- God of hell and eternal darkness
- God of sacred places and forests
- God of weakness and illness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAELETIUS</th>
<th>EINHORN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pergrubrius</strong>, who supervises the flowers, plants and all of the flora. The ceremonies held in order to worship this deity and appeal to him are described in detail. It is indicated that these activities are led by Vurschayten “a sacrificer”.</td>
<td>Deity of flowers, corn and other fruits of the soil, worshipped with different ceremonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occopirnus, god of the skies and the earth</td>
<td>God of the skies and the earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antrimpus, god of the seas</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putscaetus, a deity that looks over sacred places</td>
<td>God of sacred places and forests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auscautus, god of health and illness</td>
<td>God of weakness and illness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
We must wait another century before the first significant works dealing with Latvian religion and life-style are published. These are the books by the superintendent of Courland, Paul Einhorn, that can be considered as a kind of series of instructive works for Lutheran pastors, all written in German despite the Latin main titles of two of them. The first book, published in 1627, *Wiederlegunge der Abgötterey . . . (Refutation of Idolatry . . .)*; the actual title is much longer, containing virtually all of the contents list, as was customary for the period) gives a general overview of the “superstitions” that must be fought against, along with some indications of particular Latvian pagan deities and rituals. His next work *Reformatio gentis Letticae (Reformation of the Latvian People)*, published in 1636, is a manual for the local Lutheran pastors, advising them on actions they should take when faced with superstition among the local population. And then the last, *Historia Lettica (History of Latvia)*, published in 1649 is indeed a general account of the land and its inhabitants, describing both the past and present. Though Einhorn takes the chance to display his classical education and compares “all of the pagans”, mentioning Persian and Greek beliefs and ritual practices as explanation of the practices of the local people met in Latvia, at the same time there are grounds for believing that he knew the Latvian language and had encountered personally most of the phenomena he describes.

But again, probably the education acquired – Mannhardt (1936: 460) describes Einhorn as “the best-educated theologian of his time in Livonia” – makes Einhorn display what would have been considered knowledge in his time, but from the modern perspective is just the same practice of quoting without any criticism. Although Einhorn expresses disbelief in many of the “superstitions” he mentions and describes, each of his works includes a list of the “loathsome” deities that this nation had had in former times.

The longest of such lists is found in Einhorn’s first work, *Wiederlegunge der Abgötterey*, published in 1627. Still this list’s credibility is greatly reduced by its similarity to a similar work by a different author. When compared to a work by Joannes Maeletius who wrote about Prussian, Lithuanian and Samogitian tradition it is obvious that Einhorn’s description is actually taken from this work unchanged. Furthermore, Einhorn has taken over the description
superficially, overlooking both the fact that Maeletius wrote about other Baltic-speaking tribes and that prior to giving a full account of the deities known he devotes a passage to a single deity – Pergrubrius – who is not the highest deity among those listed further. Einhorn overlooks this strange sequence, but though he does not give the names of the deities in his list, he – demonstrably – ceases the numbering of the deities at the point where he reaches the unfortunately misplaced deity Pergrubrius, who would otherwise have appeared on the list twice. Beyond that point he only adds that “they also have . . .”. Thus “the god of the skies and the earth” comes only second. The lists retaining the sequence of both works, with the name of Pergrubrius in bold type to make finding the name easier, are given in Table 1.

Einhorn’s second book, Reformatio gentis Letticae (1636), first lists by function the deities worshipped by “all the pagans”, without particular proper names, but indicating that the deity of bushes and growth guards forests and groves so that no-one shall enter them. The list of “not yet exterminated” deities consists of:

1) forest gods and goddesses,
2) Mother of Fields,
3) Mother or Goddess of the Garden,
4) Mother of the Road one should turn to in order to ensure a safe journey.

These deities are not called by their names in this first list. Still Einhorn emphasises that they are frequently mentioned in the Latvian songs described by Einhorn as peculiares hymnos deorum (“special hymns to gods”). This is followed by a list in Latvian containing:

1) Laukamāte (Mother of the Fields)
2) Mežamāte (Mother of the Forest)
3) Lopumāte (Mother of the Cattle)
4) Jūrasmāte (Mother of the Sea),
5) Dārzamāte (Mother of the Garden)
6) Vējamāte (Mother of the Wind).

Thus both the lists of “mothers” and “devils” of the previous work is repeated and commented on (“as they are actually no deities but in fact devils and evil spirits”).
Einhorn also makes his contribution to the debate regarding the place of a goddess named Māra in Latvian mythology. Many scholars have agreed that her particular image, functions and position are the result of syncretism and the impact of Christianity (Maria). Still it is also admitted that there must have been some deity before this influence, that then has enlarged its range of functions. Being a Lutheran, Einhorn wants to demonstrate the futility of the Catholic approach, so he describes “confusum chaos or mixed up religion”, as the result of which the Virgin Mary has been mixed up with a pagan goddess.

Einhorn also adds some new data when he notes the most disgusting remnants of paganism that he intends to root out. Among these is the offering of goods called Zobars or Sobars, explained as something put together (“sa–” prefix meaning “together, in one place”, “bērt” – “to pour”). Einhorn also mentions names (perhaps euphemisms) used to denote a wolf, Mežavīrs and Mežadievs (“Forest Man” and “Forest God”), and gives a description of the dragon, a flying being gathering goods for its master.

In Historia Lettica (1649), the worship of the gods is discussed in chapter 3 which opens with some comparisons to paganism in ancient times that allow the author to demonstrate his knowledge of classical literature and languages. Einhorn then mentions that Herodotus in his description of the Persians tells of them having no specific temples and altars and says that the same is also true of the Latvians. He also states that the Latvians worshipped the sun, the moon, thunder, lightning and the wind. ([Die Letten haben] der Sonnen, dem Monde/Donner/Blitzen un[d] den Winden Gottes-Dienst bezeiget.) This list is the shortest of all. Though one may speculate about the causes of this brevity and suggest what deities might correspond to the natural phenomena, there is no proof that this would have any grounds as the wide range of comparisons found permits us to suppose that this list also is nothing but a generalised example. It is followed by a similar set of the Mothers as lower deities, but again we can ask if Einhorn is giving a complete list of the Mothers known in his time:

- Mother or Goddess of the Sea (Jūras Māte, Jūras Dieve)
- Mother of the Fields (Lauka Māte)
- Mother of the Forest (Meža Māte)
- Mother of the Road (Ceļa Māte)
Mother of the Gardens (Dārza Māte)

Einhorn states that those who have any connection with these places turned to the appropriate Mother for blessing, and later adds that women would turn to both the Mother of the Gardens and the Mother of the Cattle (Lopumāte). Also in this case “the Latvian songs” are mentioned, called again *Hymni Deorum*. There is no data about Māra, but there is a significant description of a women’s goddess called Laima, translated as Fortuna.

In chapters 4 and 5, Einhorn devotes space to Latvian religious festivals, notably one that takes place in the autumn when food is offered to the souls of the dead who come out of their graves to consume it. His entry for October runs:

**October, Wälla-Mānes oder Semlicka-Mānes, welchen Namen er bekommen, von ihrem abergläubigen Seelen speisen, denn in demselben sie die Seelen aus den Erdbern zu tuffen und zu speisen yflegen. Dieselben Tage haben sie auch geheissen, Deewa-Deenas, das ist, Gottes Tage.**

Einhorn calls the month Wälla-Mānes or Semlicka-Mānes. Mānes = *mēnesis* (month), and Zemlika is related to zeme (earth, ground, soil) and likt (to put), but Wälla is difficult to interpret. It resembles both velis (a soul of the dead) and velns (devil) and is considered etymologically connected in Latvian with Velns as the god of the dead, later turned into the Christian Evil One. As at that time there was no codified and general Latvian spelling or even grammar, the spelling could indicate either of the two. Or maybe it is a proof that at this period the two notions were not yet separated. The problems are still deepened by the later documents that are obviously using this text as their source.

Then Einhorn speaks of feeding the souls during *Dieva dienas* (God’s days), though Dievs is used only as a common name. Was dievs (god) indeed only a common name meaning deity or did Einhorn avoid indicating that the word used to denote the Christian God had earlier been the name of a particular pagan deity? The phrase *Dieva dienas* (“days of Dievs” or “days of the god”) he quotes as the term for the month of feeding the souls of the ancestors tends to indicate that Dievs must have had some special meaning. (Also the Finno-Ugrian words *taevas*, *taivas* meaning “the sky” are an
indication of this word having a distinctive meaning that could mean that the item of reality and its god were called by the same name.) It is also clear that the Latvians had the tradition of welcoming the returning souls of the dead in autumn and treating them to the fruits of the new harvest. But was there a deity impersonating the otherworld and all these souls as such? The folksong texts mention Zemes Māte (Mother of the Soil or the Earth) as the one overseeing the souls of the dead and life in the Otherworld, but Einhorn appears to knows nothing of this.

Thus the first fairly substantial document on pagan belief leaves scholars with more questions than answers. Still the information included in Einhorn’s works, although relatively slight, seems to be reliable; of course, with the exception of obvious constructions.

*Jacob Lange and Gotthard Friedrich Stender*

It appears that for the next century the issues of old (pagan) religion lost their significance. Lutheranism prevailed in the greatest part of the territory of modern Latvia. No big changes occurred so there was no extraordinary driving force for any fight against the old beliefs. But Lutheranism brought about a different requirement – the church language had to be that of the people. So the pastors, who were mainly German, had to learn the language to be able to comply with this requirement. The full text of the Bible was translated into Latvian in the second half of the seventeenth century and manuals and texts were produced to help the pastors to learn and use Latvian. The most used descriptions of Latvian mythology are found in works of this nature, the dictionaries by Jacob Lange (1711-1777) and Gotthard Friedrich Stender (1714-1796).

The two authors are often mentioned together though they never worked jointly and were in a sense rivals. They lived in different administrative territories. Lange reached the position of superintendent general of Vidzeme (the central part of the modern territory of Latvia, a separate *guberniya* of the Russian Empire) and Stender was a pastor in several parishes in Courland (the western part of Latvia, at that time including also a portion of modern Lithuania). Though of different background and attitude, they both had a good command of the Latvian language. In order to hand down their knowledge they compiled dictionaries and linguistic manuals, but their works contained also data on mythology. Lange includes entries
on pagan deities in his *Lexicon* published in 1777 (the manuscript was finished in 1757, but different obstacles hindered the printing of the book). Stender first includes a limited number of similar entries in his manual of Latvian grammar published in 1761, and later, in a second edition of his grammar published in 1783, gathers all available data (including the data of Lange’s dictionary published in the meantime) in a separate chapter entitled “Lettische Mythologie” (Latvian Mythology). This is the first ever article with such a title in Latvian literature.

Of later scholars none would appraise either of the works for the data on mythology. In brief, for the most part they repeated the same lists of gods (actually foreign to Latvians) as given by Speratus, just expanded them. At the same time they also included data gathered in the Latvian environment, so not all of it is worthless. But there is one more aspect making these works (especially those by Stender) important – the first learned Latvians greatly relied on them, using them in their romantic poetry. This is just another indication of the poverty of information on the subject, a state of affairs that remained unchanged until the first significant collections of folklore were made available to the public.

Let us discuss briefly the development of Latvian mythology in the above-mentioned works. In the first – the original edition of Stender’s grammar in 1761 – there is no stand-alone chapter on mythology; all of the information must be searched for in the included dictionary. Mostly these are quotations from Einhorn, as shown by the wording. There are also direct indications, e.g. in his entry on *laimallaime* Stender gives *Historia Lettica* as his source, but indicates that currently this word means just “fortune, fate” (*Glück*, *Schicksal*), while for the “pagan Latvians” Laima was a goddess. At the same time the words for natural phenomena like *pērkons* (thunder) and heavenly bodies like *saule* (sun) are translated without any indication of divinity. Though the dictionary features the name *Dievs* (*Gott*) it bears no trace of paganism, and Māra is glossed as Maria. Still there are *Zemes Māte*, *Jūras Māte* and *Meža Māte* (that were also featured in Einhorn’s work), all of them explained as corresponding goddesses. Describing *Miķeļu mēnesis* (“the month of Michaelmas” = October) Stender like Einhorn indicates that the Latvians used to call it *Wella mēnesis*, but this is translated as “devil’s month” by Stender.
Jacob Lange publishes many more descriptions of allegedly Latvian deities. Beyond the few deities mentioned by Einhorn he adds a number of gods from the descriptions of other people, including even the same work by Joannes Maeletius mentioned in conjunction with Einhorn’s erroneous list. Mannhardt (1936: 618) states that Maeletius is the one who initiated the belief that all the Baltic peoples have had similar mythological systems.

Maletius in his opening to the letter to Sabinus (that through Paul Oderborn became also known in Livonia and Courland) stimulated a belief that the Prussians, Couronians and Livonians were equally aware of the gods named by him, so that it was close enough to make their catalogue of gods the basis of a Latvian mythology when other information is scarce.

Lange’s work is an example of this approach.

But it is not only this approach and the lack of folklore material backing Lange’s data that makes this work unreliable. There are entries indicating that the dictionary was compiled over a lengthy period and that the author was not too good an expert in the field of mythology that he attempted to describe. The list of suspicious borrowings is also lengthy. It includes Auskuts – “Latvian and Prussian god of health and illness, and Okkupiernis = Auku piere (forehead of tempests) – “pagan Livonian (Liefe) and Latvian god of sky and earth, causing tempests, possibly the same that the pagan Prussians called Potrimp” (but then Potrampus is “pagan Latvian Bacchus”).

But Lange has also included Laime/Laima as the pagan Latvian birth goddess, indicating that laimes likkums means “fate”. Dēkla is the goddess of orphans and small children. Mājas kungs (master of
the house) is an idol worshipped in every home, the wolf is meža vīrs or meža dievs (man or god of the forest), and Jods is a forest devil.

There are also some names borrowed from other descriptions, thus making them more important than in the original texts. But also Lange includes dievs translated as “Gott” without any indication of “pagan Latvians” (used by Lange to discern between the “pagan” past and the “Christian” present). Also saule is just “the sun”. Lange distinguishes in his spelling between Wels, the devil, and Wellu Laiks, the time of feeding the souls in autumn, the same as described by Stender – the time in October, when the zemlikka festival is held. He mentions also vilkacis, “werewolf” in this connection.

Stender’s second edition of Lettische Grammatik in 1783 as mentioned before contains the first ever chapter entitled “Latvian Mythology”. Unlike the previous sources, where the scarce descriptions were scattered all over the text, this chapter is compact and easily readable. And it establishes another tradition in Latvian scholarly literature by which “mythology” corresponds to a list of gods. The character of this ten-page chapter may have made it the most used source until the first real research.

Stender’s chapter includes practically everything from Lange’s dictionary, but not only that. Basing on his excellent knowledge of Latvian, Stender adds etymologies, or in fact – explanations of the names. These are added to the most unreliable ones, as if trying to convince the reader (and himself) that these still do belong in the Latvian tradition.

But Stender’s work is also innovative in several aspects: 1) it does have references to the actual tradition, though in rather few cases; 2) the entries have etymologies (though most of those being invented); 3) entries telling of some possibly pagan ritual usual have a characterising passage speaking of lack of enlightenment). Also the Stender’s material can be divided into three groups: non-Latvian, borrowed from descriptions of other peoples, including Scandinavian; borrowings and quotations from other authors (like Einhorn); and Stender’s own material, gathered from the Latvian people of his parish.

These groups have different levels of reliability, but also the reliability within a group may differ. It is Stender who first indicates that Dievs is a pre-Christian deity. Stender writes that the same deity – Dievs – is called Wels when he deals with the dead (is this a hint to Grunau being right when placing the god of the dead as the highest?).
Dievs has a family and his lands, as the old Latvian bardic songs sing much of Dieva dēli, Dieva zirgi, Dieva vērši, Dieva putni (Diev’s sons, horses, bulls, birds). At the same time Stender adds an etymological explanation, saying that Latvian dievs has nothing to do with the Latin Deus. Stender’s list includes Pērkons as god of thunder and fire, “one of the best-known idols by Prussians and Lithuanians”.

The descriptions and explanations based on language and folklore are the valuable part of Stender’s work. Mention of “bardic songs” indicates the author’s knowledge of the genre, though he himself translated numerous German ballads with a view to replacing the old dull, rude and pagan songs of the Latvians. At the same time, Stender may be the last author to present his vision of Latvian mythology without the explicit backing of traditional material. In 1807 the first collection of Latvian folksong texts was published, introducing a new era in the study of Latvian folklore and mythology.

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Notes

1 Rollestone 1911: 418. The passage is much longer, describing the social difference between the two.


3 As Tacitus writes about gentes Aestiorum, Estonians also tend to consider this passage as relating to their history. The passage is in Germania 45.

4 The translation by Ā. Feldhūns (1993) has been used in this article.

5 Two different editions have been used in this article, the verse translation by J. Saiva (1936) and the edition by Bisenieka (1998).

6 See also, Velius, ed., 1998-2003, where the early sources for the study of Baltic mythology are given in the original languages with Lithuanian translation.

7 Mannhardt 1936: 207. Similar evaluations are repeated several times in the chapter devoted to this work.
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Prussian Romuva Decoded

VYKINTAS VAITKEVIČIUS

The description of Romuva\(^1\) in the Chronicle of the Prussian Land ("Chronicon Terræ Prussiae") written by Peter of Dusburg in 1326 has been the subject of debate by scholars for decades. There is hardly any work on Baltic religion without at least a reference to the sacred site called Romuva.

Researchers have usually focused on one aspect of Romuva, that is, whether it was a real or fictitious temple or what the competence of the chief priest Krivis was, etc. This article probably for the first time presents parallels to Romuva in the region of the Baltic Sea and draws the conclusion that the subject-matter of the Romuva legend cannot have been invented. The institution of assembly (in modern Lithuanian called "sueiga") was very well known in the lands of the Prussians and other Balts. There is a strong presumption that the Prussian Romuva actually existed in the thirteenth century.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Chronicle of the Prussian Land is indisputably considered to be a reliable source for Prussian history. Peter of Dusburg already referred to some earlier sources (Labuda 1982: 161-4; Batūra 1985: 36-49; Matuzova 1997: 231-40), but both they and his own chronicle drew on oral tradition for material on the Prussians, their character and religion (Mannhardt ed. 1936: 90-1; Matuzova 1997: 239). Actually it is not quite clear whether the legend about Romuva was first recorded by Peter of Dusburg or by the chroniclers before him (cf. Friederici 1876: 251).

The legend about Romuva and Krivis is differently regarded by different researchers. It is thought to be either an invention of the author or a legend based on true facts. Within recent years the priest Peter of Dusburg has been represented as an ideologist and the creator of a twisted image of Prussian religion (and hence of Romuva as well) (Rowell 1994: 38-9). This view is discussed at the end of the article.
Nicolaus of Jeroschin in his Chronicle of the Prussian Land (*Kronike von Pruzinlant*) written in 1335 repeated the major part of what had been written by Peter of Dusburg (Vėlius ed. 1996: 358-60). He also reiterated the story about Romuva without any significant changes or supplements. The Prussian Chronicle (*Preussische Chronik*) written in 1529 by Simon Grunau is quite another matter. The theme of Romuva and Krivis is very significant here. The chronicle provides plenty of new data from other sources and minute details of the legend about Romuva. The chronicle of Simon Grunau calls for exhaustive study, but work on this is only in its early stages (cf. Šimėnas 1994: 42-56), and so this article refers only to Peter of Dusburg.

Let us read again very closely:

In the middle (of the populated lands) of this perverse [Prussian] nation – in Nadrovia – there was a place which was called Romuva (*Romow*) which was named after Rome. A person lived there who was called Krivis (*Criwe*). He was respected as a Pope because in the same way as his Holiness manages the Church, Krivis has power not only among the tribes already mentioned but also among Lithuanians and other nations living in Livonia-lands. His authority was so great that not only he himself, and his kin, but also his messenger with a staff or other well-known sign when travelling . . . received the greatest respect from the dukes, nobles and populace.²

Another paragraph of the same chapter reads as follows:

The illusion of the devil with regard to the dead was such that, when relatives of those who had died went to the aforementioned Pope-*Criwe* and asked whether he had seen anyone going to their house on such a day and such a night, he would answer without doubt what were the clothes, weapons, horses and relatives of the dead . . . . After a victory they sacrifice to their gods an offering of gratitude from all the spoils that were won during the war; one third of it was given to the already mentioned Krivis which he would burn.

Scholars differ in their interpretations of this legend, some basing their conclusions on a literal reading of the text, and others on a
critical reading. If Peter of Dusburg recorded only a historical legend with some features of myth, his account cannot be expected to have the accuracy which is mandatory for historical sources. However, it is important that Romuva is located in Nadrovia (Lith. Nadruva) “in the middle” of the Prussian lands. Both the name of Romuva and its meaning were reminiscent of Rome as Krivis who lived there was said to be as highly esteemed as the Pope. The Prussian and Lithuanian tribes and also other tribes of “Livonia-lands” obeyed Krivis’ will. His token was a “travelling” staff. Krivis showed extraordinary knowledge and he was entitled to one third of the war spoils, which he would sacrifice by burning.

The name Romuva

The name Romuva is said to have originated from the Prussian *rāmā “serenity”, *rāman “serene”, Lithuanian rómus or romūs, romā “serene”, “serenity”, “to calm down” (Fraenkel 1955: 695-6; Mažiulis 1997: 32; Pèteraitis 1997: 335). According to K. Būga (1959: 33), the Prussians would pronounce this name as *Rōmavō and V. Mažiulis claims (1997: 32) that *Rāmāvā “was the place of serenity, calmness”. There are more toponyms and hydronyms of the same root (Būga 1958: 169; Vanagas 1981: 272, 280).

The location of Romuva

The opinions regarding this issue differ widely. Some of them are based on general assumptions, which are not exposed to a more thorough discussion, and others refer to place-names, well-known archaeological monuments or sacred places which have the root ram-, rom- in their names. Various regions of East Prussia were searched for Romuva with the results listed below and shown in Figure 1.


2) Natangen, Romitten (Slavianovka) area. Romuva has been localised in the area called Patollen (Groß Waldeck, Osokino) where the Teutonic Order established the St Trinity monastery (cf. Vėlius ed. 2001: 335-7).

3) Barta, Romsdorf (Romankowo) area (cf. Mierzyński 1900:}
4) Samland, Romehnen area. The village and the sacred place in it were mentioned in several sources of the fourteenth century (see Vėlius ed. 1996: 323-4).

There are certainly more places in which place-names with the root *ram-* or *rom-* can be detected but few of them have received attention from researchers. Several such places can be found in the territory of the Kaliningrad Region and in the northwest of Poland.

In Nadrovia, which is the area indicated by Peter of Dusburg, there are three regions that have place-names with *ram-* or *rom-*-, namely: Rominten woods, the Stallupönen (Nesterov) area and the region between Insterburg (Chernekhovsk) and Wehlau (Znamensk).
Scholars long ago drew attention to the region around the Auksinė (Goldflieβ) River (which flows into the River Pregel) and the Dittowa River (which flows into the Goldflieβ). This region is situated to the west of Insterburg and to the east of Wehlau. Having found the only pair of toponyms with *rom-* and *kriv-* in Nadrovia (namely Romanuppen and Kreywutschen), Friederici assumed that Romuva had been located in this area (1876: 249-50).

Notice should also be taken of Romaw (otherwise Romau or Rovnoye) Village, which was situated in this area, though a little further to the northwest on the right bank of the Pregel in the vicinity of Kaukelawke (otherwise Kuglacken or Kudrevcevo) (see Pėteraitis 1997: 334). To the south-west of Romanuppen village in the upper reaches of the Bundsze River (a tributary of the Goldflieβ) there is also the Romehlis rivulet (Froelich 1930: 46), the diminutive name of which can be associated with the still undiscovered place *Roma or *Romė.

The prevailing opinion in the historiography of Lithuania is that Romuva should be localised in the Insterburg area. This region can be described as densely forested but situated near the river Pregel as well as near an important overland route from Königsberg to Insterburg and further on to Tilsit (Sovetsk), Gumbinnen (Gusev) and Goldap. Batūra noticed in the legends of the sixteenth century that the bank of the river Goldflieβ near Norkitten was once under the patronage of the high priest Vaidila (Batūra 1985: 357). Schlossberg hill fort which is situated to the south of Norkitten near the Goldflieβ is estimated to be the largest hill fort in East Prussia (and even in the Baltic Region provided that no mistakes occurred in its measurements) and it is distinguished by the nature of its fortifications as well as the size of protected territory. Its plateau is estimated to be 250x350 m in extent; besides, there are two ramparts 5 and 12 m high and a two-metre deep moat behind them (see Kulakov and Šimėnas 1999: 341-2).

At first sight, the localisation of Romuva in Nadrovia is quite unexpected. The life of Prussian tribes was associated with the Baltic Sea for many centuries (cf. Kulakov 1994: 19-23). Nadrovia, as can be seen from the current level of information about this territory, was a sparsely inhabited area. Actually only hill forts with settlements which lie along the Pregel, Goldflieβ and Angerapp rivers show that the Nadrovians lived there at the end of the first millennium and the beginning of the second millennium AD. Linguistic and historical data demonstrate close relations between Nadrovia and Lithuania.
The presence of traces of the Lithuanian language in the linguistic materials from Nadrovia (as well as those from Scalovia) has long been discussed. From the linguistic point of view, it is quite possible that these regions already before the war with the crusaders (which ended c. 1277) and the subsequent Lithuanian colonisation had been closer to Lithuania than to the rest of the Prussian lands (cf. Zinkevičius 1987: 220-4). In the 40s of the thirteenth century, King Mindaugas of Lithuania already had suzerain rights over Nadrovia as well as over Scalovia and part of Sudovia (Gudavičius 1998: 203-4). In 1253 and 1257 when transferring these lands to the Livonian Order, Mindaugas called them lands adjacent to the Kingdom of Lithuania (Gudavičius 1989: 78-9). It is possible that Peter of Dusburg found a particular Lithuanian territory (territorium Leto) in the Nadrovia area back in 1274 (see Hirsch et al. 1861: 131-2). It should be mentioned that the nobility of Nadrovia did not surrender to the crusaders and was totally defeated by 1277 (Gudavičius 1989: 162-3).

The era of Romuva

In historiography several approaches to the question of the period when Romuva was active can be observed. Different opinions could partially co-exist on the assumption made here that, when Romuva was destroyed at one location, the centre and its name were transferred to another (the wide distribution of place names with ram-, rom- supports this assumption). Thus, the Romuva which was established at the beginning of the sixth century AD by the legendary knights Vidowut and Bruten in Warmien, near Heiligenbeil (Kulakov and Šimėnas 1999: 327-8), was destroyed by King Boleslav III of Poland c. 1110 (see Vėlius ed. 2001: 68-9). Then Romuva was moved to Samland, from there to Nadrovia, and finally to the territory of Lithuania, to a location in the lower reaches of the Nevėžis River (Mierzyński 1900: 104). Here, however, it was also destroyed in 1294 and was moved to several other places until it is said to have been demolished near the Dubysa River in 1413 when the Christianisation of Samogitia began. By an alternative interpretation made by Voigt (1827: 597), different Romuvos that are “found” in different places should be viewed as separate temples, forming a kind of network.

Friederici (1876) and Mannhardt (1936) were the first to dwell more upon the period at which Romuva could have been in operation.
Reasonably, they drew attention to the collective military action of the Nadrovanians, Scalovians and Sudovians in 1255 against the crusaders that occupied Samland and to the construction of Wehlau Castle near the Pregel river that followed – both these facts can serve as evidence that the religious centre was still active in Nadrovia and that consolidated force sought to defend its approaches from the west, which was already under the control of the crusaders (Friederici 1876: 248-9).

Mannhardt considered the period of the unification of the Baltic tribes to be around 1260 (Mannhardt, ed., 1936: 93-4); according to this author, in localising Romuva “in the middle of Prussian lands”, the period between 1260 and 1274 should be the focus since by that time, in terms of political geography, Nadrovia had turned from periphery into the centre. Furthermore, Mannhardt argued that the respect shown by the kings (reges) to Krivis, which was mentioned in the Chronicle by Peter of Dusburg, could be explained by the fact that at that time the Lithuanian State was already situated to the east of Nadrovia (the author of the Chronicle did not use this term in other places; he only mentioned Samogitian regulos (Mannhardt, ed., 1936: 93-4).

In the second half of the twentieth century the problem of Romuva was not discussed further but researchers were more or less agreed that in the thirteenth century in Nadrovia there was an intertribal religious centre which, when under threat by the crusaders, was moved into Lithuania, to Romainiai near Kaunas (Łowmiański 1932: 195-7; Gudavičius 1983: 63; 1999: 179).

The functions and status of Romuva

The comparison of Romuva to the capital of the Pope’s empire Rome (which undoubtedly belongs to Peter of Dusburg) first of all implies the general view of Romuva as the central temple of the Balts. Further descriptions present more detailed information: spells were cast and the future was predicted, the sacred fire was guarded and part of the spoils of war was sacrificed to the gods (cf. Gaerte 1959: 639). These features are typical of the Baltic sacred places at various religious and social levels.

Quite another matter is the second function of Romuva, that is its function as the place of meetings. This is obvious from the name Krivis (Criwe), attributed to the person who lived in Romuva and
whom Peter of Dusburg compared to the Pope, and from his messengers who travelled with staffs (Łowmiański 1932: 196; 1989: 91). The pre-eminent status of Romuva as the place of meetings can be seen from the universal respect from knights, nobility and populace to his person, will and token (the staff) manifested in all surrounding regions.

The religious side of Romuva has received sufficient attention from scholars (cf. Batūra 1985: 358; Vėlius 1996: 331). Besides, the features of the temple listed above are not specifically Baltic (cf. Huth 1939: 108-34) and in any case do not account for the particular status of Romuva. Analysing the story of Peter of Dusburg, it becomes obvious that the pre-eminence of Romuva is primarily attributable to its second function, that of being the place of general assembly, and to the fact that the organiser of the religious activities, Krivis, resided in Romuva.

ASSEMBLIES

Lithuanian *krivē, Prussian *krivē “the one which is involute, curved” and the assembly under the same name; a staff with curved roots towards the top (Fig. 2) handed around is a call for people to gather into a circle. It seems that the Baltic stick krivē is a variety of a European tradition of summoning people to meetings by means of a stick handed around. In comparison, a straight stick with engraved signs or a club-shaped (knobstick-shaped) stick is more typical of the old Scandinavian regions (cf. Mierzyński 1895: 378-80; Stender-Petersen 1932/1933: 188-91). Such names of these sticks as old Scandinavian klubba, kolf, German Keule and others reveal a different aspect of semantic relationship between stick and assembly; a stick with a thick end up handed around is a call for people to gather into a swarm, into a “fist”
In fact, *krivē* is not the only Baltic name for an assembly that has been established. In the Prussian region of Pomesania the assembly was called *vaitjan* (*vaitjā*) “conversation; counsel; assembly” (< Prussian *waitiāi* “to speak”) (Mažiulis 1993: 124).

Shortage of data hinders a more exact definition of the relationship between Krivē and Vaitē (the two names for assemblies). Is it possible that Vaitē was typical only of Pomesania where its function was to solve the most important social problems (cf. Wenskus 1984: 446; 1986b: 424-5). Assuming that Krivē and Vaitē are chronologically identical and comparable, there still might be differences in their functions.

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![Fig. 2. Krivēs from Prussia and Lithuania dated back to the 17th-19th centuries (after Baldauskas 1935: 204, fig. 1).](image-url)
Reverting to Romuva and Krivis (who is responsible for the fact that all Baltic assemblies as a generalisation will be called *Krivės*), it can be said that there are no substantial obstacles to the verification of assemblies in Romuva because: 1) Prussian social relations were a favourable environment for their activities; 2) assemblies were a well-known institution in ancient Greece and Rome as well as among barbarians later in Europe; 3) written sources prove the existence of various assemblies organised by the Balts; 4) the tradition of assemblies of various forms in Prussia, Poland and Lithuania lasted up until the nineteenth or even the twentieth century.

*Features of Prussian society*

In the first half of the thirteenth century, the Teutonic Order found plenty of freemen and few representatives of an aristocracy in Prussia (see Łowmański 1989: 75-7). Wenskus (1986a: 267-7; 1986b: 419-20) rightly considered this period transitional in terms of Prussian social relations. The inner consolidation of the nobility actually had not started; at that time, Adam of Bremen wrote (c. 1075) that Prussians did not want to tolerate any master (*dominus*) (Vėlius ed. 1996: 190-1). The Prussian political system indeed had some evident forms of a democratic republic. The highest institution of territorial community was the assembly where questions of war and peace, relations with neighbours, construction of castles and other important issues were discussed (Łowmiański 1989: 65-8). When necessary, the same assembly would elect military commanders and people to take charge of rituals. A classic example is considered to be the election of the leaders for the Prussian uprising in 1260. Less notable is Hennenberger’s story about six villages in Pobethen parish the people of which gathered in 1531 and elected a priest (*Weydelotten*), who sacrificed a pig to the gods to ensure success in fishing (see Wenskus 1986b: 276).

The situation of the Prussians at the beginning of the second millennium was a little unexpected if viewed from the south (the Polish kingdom) but not at all so if viewed from the north (the neighbouring Baltic tribes). It seems that at that time the Curonians lived under similar conditions (cf. Žulkus 1997: 22), and the political system of the Samogitians, as shown by the 13th-15th century sources, was especially reminiscent of that of the Prussians. Back in 1413 Samogitian noblemen stated that for a hundred years “in the
land of Samogitia there had been no lord or king but there had been one community that lived under certain laws, way of governing and the right of nations” (see Almonaitis 1998: 59-72, 84, 85). The population of Samogitia was dominated by freemen who lived in steadings. There was almost no centralised government there.

Assemblies in Indo-European lands

The institution of assembly was so widespread in the past that it would be interesting to find out where and for what reasons it was rejected. Speaking about the fate of assemblies, one general tendency can be observed: with the development of feudal relations and with the centralisation of power, the importance of assemblies decreased whereas the significance of small nobility councils increased. The principle of representation was introduced for the commoners. Traditionally assemblies still maintained a certain importance for a while (usually to approve the decisions made by the leaders) but later they were deprived of it (cf. Wenskus 1984: 444-7; Stefánsson 1984: 463).

The connection of assemblies with pre-Christian religion is particularly close. The fact that places used for the summoning of assemblies often coincided with religious centres, that religious rituals were usually held simultaneously and that the meetings were often presided over by people who had religious authority make the relationship obvious. Besides, assemblies were accompanied by a strong belief that gods guarded them and that the institution is a part of the mythical organisation of the world (Wenskus 1984: 451-3; Fabech 2000: 458). The whole process of arranging meetings was highly ritualised (cf. Sawyer B. and P. 1993: 82). The periodicity of assemblies depended on the number of participants and on the significance of the meeting; smaller assemblies used to take place more often. Bigger ones were held only a few times a year or once a year or even once in several years (Wenskus 1984: 452).

Quite a few details about old Scandinavian assemblies can be found in Icelandic sources that date back to the 10th-12th centuries. At the end of the ninth century, immigrants from Norway reconstructed in Iceland the exact order of assemblies as they were organised in their homeland. The assemblies had their organisers and leaders called goðar (singular goði). All freemen had the right to participate in them. A goði could request the participation of every
ninth farmer in the general assembly (*Alþing*). Like all other assemblies, this one had a regular place to meet, which was in this case a valley with perfect acoustics. The assembly would start on the Thursday of the ninth week of summer (between the 18th and the 24th of June) and it would last for two weeks. Apart from the rites that were organised there (the sagas mention sacrifice and the collective eating of horseflesh; Baetke 1950: 7) these meetings were aimed at the speaking of the laws that were already in force (until the twelfth century none of these laws were written down) as well as at the passing of new ones. Initially the law-making function was performed by 36 *goðar* from all over the island who would sit in a circle or in a square on a platform in the centre. The rest by means of a simple majority of votes would approve or reject decisions. Goods were traded during the meetings and, generally, the Althing can be defined as a legal, religious and economic assembly (Foote and Wilson 1970: 56-61; Stefánsson 1984: 462-3; Schroeter 1994: 31-5). In July, after the general assembly, local meetings, that lasted for one or two days were held. During these meetings everyone who had not had the chance to participate in the general assembly was informed about the issues discussed and the laws passed.

An interesting institution is that of the leaders of the assemblies – the *goðar*. The name is related to the old Scandinavian *guþ*: *goþ* “God” (cf. Gothic *gudja* “priest”), and is known in other Scandinavian lands, too (Ebel 1998: 260). This post was hereditary but it could also be transferred, given as a present or shared with another person. The *goði* would represent the people who elected him (usually from about a hundred steadings and who had the right to replace him with another. Their electors, who had to pay taxes similar to tithes, supported the *goði*. Furthermore, the *goði* and frequently his large escort received full sustenance when travelling around his electors. Thus, before the loss of independence in 1264 in Iceland a few *goðar* had concentrated power in their own hands. They can be justly treated as leaders. Their power was not territorial – it was directed only towards people; besides, from their own means they had to maintain the temples and organise sacrifices there (Sawyer 1989: 3-4; Miller 1990: 22-6; Sawyer B. and P. 1993: 87; Ebel 1998: 260-3).
Sources about Baltic assemblies

The information on Baltic assemblies (which were called in German and Latin, in the singular, rât, colloquia, placita, parlamento) dating back to the 13th-15th centuries is generalised (Łowmański 1932: 191-204). It points at several sorts of assemblies: councils of free adult men and the councils of noble (nobiles). The former were widely spread at the domestic level but the chroniclers obtained more information about noble councils which were aimed at the discussion of political problems. The distribution of assemblies from the point of view of territorial and representational principles is not exactly clear. Nonetheless there are some data on large, national assemblies. For example, in 1409 the Samogitians reported to the Teutonic Order that they had decided to resist the crusaders in their assembly where “the whole Samogitian land was present” (Almonaitis 1998: 172).

It is known that only the most noble of all the participants spoke at the assemblies and put forward their proposals (Łowmański 1932: 198). It is mentioned that in 1259 there were three thousand men present at the assembly of Samogitians who took an oath to attack Curonia. It is important to note that their priest (blutekirl) sacrificed animals and ordered the sacrifice of one third of the spoils of the war to the gods, thus trying to ensure the success of this campaign (Vėlius ed. 1996: 298-9). It can be assumed that Baltic assemblies had fixed places. For example, documents show that such places were in Samland and Natangia. In eastern Lithuania place-names with kreiv- and kriv- can be found near the old administrative centres.3

The sources give the most thorough coverage of the general assembly of the people of Samland in 1255 at which the plan for a military action was discussed. Three scouts elected in the previous assembly returned home and informed the participants of the assembly that there were “angry guests” in Klaipėda (Memel) who had built a castle which would need to be destroyed. The elders (dy wisten; dy besten) had a separate meeting. The oldest of them suggested a way out which was approved by the others. They returned to the rest of the participants and sat down among them. One of the elders addressed the assembly asking for the approval of their decision and proposed the death penalty for those who could fight but would not go to Klaipėda (Memel) on the day stated. The participants cheered and said that they were all ready to go there (Ditleb von Alnpeke 1853: 587-8).
Thus, the sources indicate the importance of assemblies in the organisation of defence from, and attack on, enemies as well as in tackling other important problems (Łowmański 1932: 202). There is no doubt that assemblies also had certain legal functions and dealt with criminals. This can be seen from the information about Pomesanian *vaidės* as well as from Lithuanian *kuopas* (another name of *krivės*) dating back to the 16th-17th centuries where trials were arranged alongside the discussion of economic and administrative problems (Jurginis 1962: 172-3).

Until the nineteenth century in Prussia, a staff (*krivė, der Schulzenstab*; in East Prussia – *Kriwa, Kriwule, Kreiwa lazda*) was the token and attribute of the elder who was appointed by the villagers. Its form ranged from an absolutely straight stick to a stick with curved roots. The most important news was transmitted by sending such a stick around (Mierzyński 1895: 363-77; Paulsen 1941: 56; Toporov 1984: 203). The tradition of the elder’s staff dates back to ancient times; it is believed that such a staff is in the hands of the person standing in front of the squad of Prussians depicted on the bronze door of Gnezno Cathedral in Poland. He speaks to Bishop Adalbert who also has a staff in his hands (Paulsen 1941: 56; Gaerte 1959: 640-1). It is worth noting that in the first account of the life of St Adalbert it is mentioned that the Bishop was guided into the village by the *dominus villa* (Vélius, ed., 1996: 172).

The situation of the assemblies documented in the 19th-20th centuries in Prussia, Poland, Lithuania, and episodically in Latvia (see Mierzyński 1895: 373-4), was indeed different but their common features had changed little. The curved staff existed (“a simple stick can be made by everyone”). This staff and its bearer were treated with appropriate respect. The importance of the village assemblies held several times a year and the necessity of participating in them were generally understood. Assemblies were usually held in bigger steadings near the centre of the village so that those who came to the meeting would have to travel more or less the same distance. Assemblies were aimed at the election of elders and at the discussion of such questions as the construction and maintenance of bridges and fences, assistance to beggars, etc. During the discussion each rightful participant in the meeting had the right to speak. When the housefather could not participate in the Krivė of the village, his adult son was sent there; if there was no son the family would be represented by the mother (neither the son, nor the mother, however,
acquired the vote). The execution of resolutions approved by the assembly was obligatory (Baldauskas 1935; Vyšniauskaitė 1964: 528-9; Mačiekus 1996: 238-62).

CENTRES IN THE REGION OF THE BALTIC SEA SIMILAR TO ROMUVA

Prussian Romuva, which functioned in the middle of the Prussian lands and which obviously had the highest rank as a place for religious rites and assemblies, was not unique in the region of the Baltic Sea or elsewhere in Northwest Europe. There is information about several centres of political-administrative and/or religious importance which were in operation in the 8th-13th centuries, and until the introduction of Christianity performed functions similar to those of Prussian Romuva. Places of general assemblies in Gotland (Roma), Estonia (Raikküla), Saxony (Marklô), Denmark (Ringsted, Odense and Viborg), Sweden (Linköping, Lund, Skara and Strängnäs), as well as Lejre (Denmark) and Uppsala (Sweden), and finally the West-Slavonic centre Rethra in Polabia, are discussed below (Fig. 3)

![Map of centres around the Baltic Sea](image)

Fig. 3. The sites of centres around the Baltic Sea mentioned in the article.
Gotland

Until the twelfth century the nearest “relative” of Romuva was active at a distance of approximately 400 km from Nadrovia. There still exists a place called Roma right in the centre of Gotland. The old recorded form of this place name is Rumum (<rum “open area; field”); however, it was pronounced as räume or rämme, i.e. in the same way as Rome (Olsson 1984: 47). This was the place of the most important assembly of the people of Gotland called Althinget Gutnalia, or alternatively Gutnalthinget (Müller-Wille 1984: 211; Peel ed. 1999: 13, 29). In the 12th-13th centuries, Gotland was the republic of so-called “bonds”, which were free and economically independent farmers lived in steadings scattered around the island. The Althing in Roma was attended by the representatives of the twenty “tings” into which the island was divided. This assembly had the highest authority on the island. It is definitely known that this centre ceased to exist before 1164 when a convent was built on that site. Initially the convent was even called by the Latinised name of the assembly Guthnalia (<Gutnalthinget) or Sancta Maria de Guthnalia (Yrwing 1974: 368-9; Östergren 1992: 58).

A guess can be made that the two places of general assemblies and religious rites called by the similar names, Roma in Gotland and Romuva in Nadrovia, operated according to the same model: both of them were in the “middle” and representatives from neighbouring lands used to gather there. There is no exact information on who was invited to Althinget Gutnalia but the excavation reports on the burial grounds around Roma (Kvietorp or Halla-Broe, Björke and others) and the treasure found in them make it obvious that people of very high rank lived near the place in the Viking Age (see Thunmark-Nylén 1995: fig. 127-37; 2000: 313-50, 583-92, 1050-1).

Estonia

Speaking about the military actions of the Livonian Order on the 15th of August 1216, Heinrich of Lettland mentions (1959: 202-3) the invasion into the land in “the centre of Estonia” where there was a village called Raigele which was yearly attended by all the tribes of the area. This place is thought to have been near Raikküla, approximately 50 km south of Tallinn. It is possible that this place was the centre of the confederation of Estonian lands at that time.
Saxony

The life of St Lebuin (dating from the middle of the ninth century) contains a description of the Althing of the Saxons and the missionary’s participation in it c. 770. Scholars agree that the story, which was heard from a noble family, had a factual basis (cf. Hauck 1964). It also represents the standard of Saxon society. When it is borne in mind that Charlemagne in 782 banned the general assemblies it can be assumed that these meetings were a highly important part of the political life of the Saxons (Hofmeister 1967: 30-1).

Thus, in the life of St Lebuin it is noted that old Saxons did not have a king; their lands were governed by a vicegerent (satrapus). It was traditional for them to gather once a year in an assembly held in the centre of Saxony, at a place called Marklô near the Weser River. The assembly was aimed at the revival of laws, the resolution of the most important legal problems and decisions regarding relations of war and peace throughout the year. On the day of the assembly Lebuin and a nobleman arrived in Marklo. When everyone had gathered, the Saxons according to their pagan customs prayed and made sacrifices to their gods; they asked them to protect their homeland and to grant that all the decisions arrived at during the assembly would be beneficial to them and pleasing to the gods (Das alte Leben 1982: 386-9). The site of Marklo has not been identified yet.

Denmark

This example once again shows that every land had assemblies of the highest level which were held in the middle of the region. Centres like the one in Gotland existed on the islands of Zealand and Funen and on the peninsula of Jutland in the 10th-11th centuries. As can be observed from such names as Odense (<> Odin) and Viborg (< old Scandinavian *wī, *wæ “shrine”) these centres had a direct relation to the old religion and cult (Sørensen 1992: 234-5). Viborg at the crossroads of the main overland routes and Odense on the island of Funen also played an important economic role. In the middle of the eleventh century they became the residences of archbishops (Levin Nielsen 1974: 64-81). Elnot gave a vivid description of Viborg as the place of assemblies in the life of St Knut (c. 1120). According to
Elnot there was a very famous place near the centre of Jutland. It was prominent partly because of its position on a hill and partly because sacrifices were frequently made there in ancient times. Huge crowds of people from all around Jutland would often gather there to discuss common problems, to get acquainted with new laws, and to reinforce established ones. What was decided with the general approval of all participants could not be violated in any part of Jutland (Levin Nielsen 1974: 64). It is interesting to note that Jutland assemblies for a long time had the decisive vote in electing the king of Denmark and approving laws (Levin Nielsen 1974: 76).

The case of Ringsted is a bit different. Despite the fact that it occupied the centre of the island of Zealand, at the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century there appeared Lejre – the legendary centre of political power and the cult of the royal dynasty which was situated near Roskilde about 100 km from Ringsted (Christensen 1991). The Chronicle of Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg (c. 1016) states that once in nine years on the 7th of January there were general meetings in Lejre during which plentiful sacrifices of people, horses, dogs and roosters were made (1970: 20-1; also see Müller-Wille 1984: 217).

**Sweden**

Swedish lands also had their places for assemblies (tings). In Östergötland assemblies were held at a major crossroads, Linköping (Kraft 1965: 603-4), in Skåne they took place at Lund (Randsborg 1980: 78-9), in Västergötland at Skara (Liedgren 1956: 90), in Södermanland at Strängnäs (Modéer 1974: 339) and in Uppland at Uppsala (cf. Calssendorff 1971: 2). In the pre-state period it seems that only the general assemblies of the regions called Götars and Svears were of higher rank than the landsting; later, however, meetings summoned by the king or his council acquired the highest rank (Modéer 1974: 339-40; Dahlbäck 1984: 464-5). Tings were mentioned in the eleventh century in inscriptions on runic stones, and more information about them appears in the thirteenth century and at the beginning of the fourteenth century. In Sweden, tings remained an important institution for some time (see Wildte 1926).

As for the largest general assemblies, it should be mentioned that they were attended by the inhabitants of the two main regions of historical Sweden, namely Götars (with the assembly at Skara) and
Svears (with the assembly at Uppsala) (Liedgren 1956: 90). The latter became the focus of state formation, and so Uppsala became the centre of Sweden.

Adam of Bremen (1961: 470-3) noted that Uppsala was a particularly important Swedish temple where the idols (statuas) of three Swedish gods – Thor, Odin and Freyr – were worshipped. A priest was assigned to each of the gods. Every nine years at the spring equinox a festival of all Svears was held in Uppsala. No-one was excused from participation in it; “kings” and common people together and separately carried their sacrifices to Uppsala. In the twelfth century an archbishopric was founded, and a cathedral was built at Uppsala in 1138-1150.

The Icelandic author, Snorri Sturluson, remarked (c. 1220) after his visit to Uppsala that it was the capital of pagan Sweden where once a year “all Swedes” would gather in an assembly which lasted for a week and would make substantial sacrifices as well as engage in trade. Such assemblies, called distingen, were still held in his time (Calissendorff 1971: 2). In the 12th-13th centuries the king of Sweden was still called “the king of Uppsala”. Assemblies near the royal barrows that date back to the 5th-6th centuries AD and are situated in Gamla Uppsala (Old Uppsala) were held in the modern period as well (Lindqvist 1936: 333).

In the historiography of the second half of the twentieth century quite a few reproaches were directed towards Adam of Bremen who did not actually visit Uppsala. The results of archaeological excavations under the cathedral of Uppsala received critical evaluation and additional explorations were carried out (Olsen 1970: 265-9; Müller-Wille 1999: 75-6; Nordahl, 1996). A new view that the religious centre in Uppsala should be seen in a “royal demesne” context has been forming during the last decade. The existence of a royal demesne was proved by the remains of a wooden building (a hall) dating back to the middle or the second half of the first millennium AD which was found 60 m north of the cathedral (see Brink 1996: 269-71; Nordahl 1996: 72-3).

Thus, both written sources and archaeological data place Uppsala on the same level as Lejre. Both of them are appropriate as comparisons for Romuva although, by contrast with the other places of assemblies and/or religious centres already mentioned, they also were significant centres of political power – this was because active rulers took care of religious centres at their residences. Another
possibility is the case when political power is genetically related to religious power and under certain circumstances a religious centre becomes the political capital. This possibility can be illustrated by an episode in the history of the West Slavonic tribes.

Polabia

If it were not for the (sometimes contradictory) information about this place contained in several chronicles, it could be regarded as mythical, just as Romuva has been. The sources indicate that Rethra was a castle and a town but its exact location is unknown (Schmidt 1974: 366-7, 372).

It is believed that as early as 983 when the Slavonic tribes in Polabia rebelled against the power of the Saxon king and bishops they massed around the religious centre. After these events the union of tribes that called itself Liutici (Leutici < old Slavonic ljut “ferocious”) was associated with Rethra. Its name can be reconstructed as Slavonic *Redigošč (German Redigost) (Witkowski 1970: 371). It may be associated with the god Redigost or Zuarasici who was worshipped there (Adam von Bremen 1961: 392; Thietmar von Merseburg 1970: 268). According to Thietmar, Rethra occupied an exceptional place among temples (Thietmar von Merseburg 1970: 268). Adam of Bremen (c. 1075) claimed that it was the place of West Slavonic tribes who lived between the Elbe, Havel and Oder rivers, in the middle (Adam von Bremen 1961: 252).

Generalising the information received from the sources about the functions of Rethra it becomes obvious that it was the place of assemblies of the highest rank – there was a temple with idols of gods in the pantheon, the residence of priests and the place where sacrifices were made, spells cast and the future predicted (Słupecki 1993: 262-3; 1994: 51-65).

In 1057, during the civil war, the union of Liutici fell apart and around 1068 Rethra was destroyed without leaving a trace. In recent years, scholars have become increasingly confident that among Christian feudal lands there existed an “alternative” union of Polabian tribes, which was based on ethnic or even national self-consciousness and existed for a hundred years (Lübke 1995; 2001: 384, 387-8). There are more examples of this kind and of even more successful unions in the history of Europe but in the 10th-11th centuries the Liutici that lived in central Europe did not have enough time to create
anything more substantial (Słupecki 1994: 51).

There is evidence which permits the assumption that the functions of Rethra as a centre were taken over by the Ranians that lived on the island of Rügen. Around the same time as the sources cease mentioning Rethra, they point out Arkona (Schmidt 1974: 369; Dralle 1984: 47). This seems to be the only political and religious centre that has been mentioned as a parallel to Romuva (Mannhardt ed. 1936: 92-3). However, the features of the Arkona centre were quite different from those of Romuva: the stories about Arkona in the Danish history by Saxo Grammaticus (written in the thirteenth century) and in the Slavonic Chronicles of the priest Helmold of Bosau (c. 1172) pointed to its religious power being related to political dominance. The Ranians were in the lead as compared to other Slavonians; they had a king and the famous temple. Many other tribes were oppressed by them whereas Ranians were independent because of their well-defended territory which kept them out of anyone’s reach. The tribes that were oppressed by the Ranians had to pay tribute to the temple at sword point. The high priests were said to have received more respect than the king. Spells helped them decide in which direction they should send their army. In case of victory, they would bring gold and silver to the treasury of their god; and they would share the remaining part of the treasure among themselves (Helmold von Bosau 1963: 148; Herrmann 1974: 204). In addition to the tribute paid by the oppressed lands, each Ranian man and woman, as well as the merchants that came to Arkona, had to pay a coin to the temple. The temple also received one third of the war spoils, provided the victory had been predicted in it (Helmold von Bosau 1963: 370-4; Saxo Grammaticus 1981: 496-7). According to Saxo, the priests of Arkona who managed the treasure of the temple had three hundred horsemen under their command and possessed land (Saxo Grammaticus 1981: 496-7; Leciejewicz 1998: 318). They could be compared to the Icelandic godar.

Once a year after the harvest time, the inhabitants of the island would gather in Arkona in front of the temple to sacrifice animals and to feast (Saxo Grammaticus 1981: 494-5). These festivals can be compared with general assemblies (Zernack 1967: 225).

At the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century Arkona was destroyed. Rebuilt with fortifications, it survived until 1168 when it was demolished by King Waldemar I of Denmark and Bishop Absalon (Herrmann 1974: 201-7).
ONCE AGAIN ROMUVA: FOR AND AGAINST

Little information about Romuva can be learned from Peter of Dusburg. According to S. C. Rowell (1994: 38, 126), his story is a moral *exemplum* presented from the point of view of an ideologue of the Order, in which he aspired to show the pagans as pious and their religion as anti-church. Naturally, Peter of Dusburg was not the first to act in this way. Various authors, including Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg, Adam of Bremen, Helmold of Bosau and many others presented stories about pagan religious centres. They were also full of fable and various comparisons; for instance, Adam of Bremen called Rethra *metropolis Slavorum* (Schmidt 1974: 393; Dralle 1984: 37) just as he called Magdeburg, that was the main seat of the church in that region, the centre of the archbishopric. The same author covered the temple of Uppsala in gold and begirt it with a golden chain most probably according to the model of the temple of Solomon (Müller-Wille 1999: 75). Nonetheless, this does not make scholars doubt the factual existence of these places (cf. Rosik 2000: 97-134, 191-204, 325-34).

Having completed the account of Romuva and gone on to Prussian religion Peter of Dusburg must really, as Rowell claims, have re-written the paragraph from the Christburg peace treaty that dwells upon the priests *Tulissones* and *Ligaschones*, calling them by the name of Krivis (Rowell 1994: 126). He may have borrowed the statement about one third of the war spoils being given to the priests from the Chronicle of the Livonian Order (Rowell 1994: 126) although, as has been mentioned, the same was said by Saxo about the Arkona priests. However, what agreements of the Order and prior chronicles could have given Peter of Dusburg the idea of Romuva and Krivis? How could he have made them up and recorded information about them that is in keeping with the broader picture we now have, as discussed at the opening of this article?

Even though there are place-names with *ram-*, *rom-* mentioned in the independent sources of the Order (see the section on the location of Romuva above), there are no data about the Romuva religious centre in them. The question this raises was answered in a general way by the research findings of the linguist Gerullis and the historian Wenskus: there is very little information about the densely forested and sparsely populated region called Nadrovia in the secret archive of the Order.
In Lithuanian annals, the person who allegedly had the greatest power was not described either (Rowell 1994: 126). The author of the Chronicle of Bikhovets (written in the early sixteenth century) knew East Lithuania very well, and so pointed out its sacred places and mentioned its chief priest Lizdeika. However, he had little knowledge of the lands lying further to the west (Ochmański 1967). There are quite a few objective reasons that can be offered to explain why Romuva has not yet been found by contemporary archaeologists: the political status of the Kaliningrad Region has up to now been unfavourable for international projects and it has been of little interest to researchers from Moscow.

The fact that the exact location of Romuva has not been found does not diminish its value. Rethra centre has been unsuccessfully searched for since 1378 (i.e. the search was started a few centuries after its destruction) and thirty localisations have been suggested to date (Słupecki 1994: 57-9, fig. 16). The place of the Saxon assemblies, Marklo, as well as the meeting site near Viborg in Jutland have also been forgotten.

Moreover, it is said that Peter of Dusburg falsely attributed structural form to the religion of the Balts the main feature of which was “decentralized variety” (Rowell 1994: 39, 126). Extensive research in the last decade into landscape and society in early Scandinavia shows that in decentralised pre-Christian space central places (such as Romuva supposedly was) did actually exist. They were not only residences of the elite but also the sites of assemblies of a temporary nature and meetings of the army and fortified places (Fabech 2000). As regards the structure conveyed by Peter of Dusburg, he did not have to create it. At that time, assemblies at various levels were still an integral part of the social life of the Balts (and were also practised in already Christianised lands).

Thus, it would be prudent to take the moderate position between the extreme evaluations of Romuva and to read the story of Peter of Dusburg like many other texts which exist as myths that have an actual basis but are subject to alteration when passed from mouth to mouth depending on the time and circumstances.
KEY TO ROMUVA

Once again the case of Romuva has been examined and the place has been given a look from afar. This perspective, which expanded the discussion of the problem geographically and culturally, showed that there was a suitable environment for the institution of assembly in Prussian lands. It was aimed at the discussion of the most important social issues. The relation of assemblies to religion became obvious from the analogues that pointed at their organisation during festivals. Assemblies were frequently held close to temples. Their proceedings were regulated and, as can be seen from the sacrifices (as well as blessings and spell-casting) made there, were directly related to religion. The oldest and the wisest men were elected as the leaders of the assemblies. Sources present little information on the organisers and/or leaders of the assemblies. The name of Krivis of Romuva can be considered authentic, marked in Prussian anthroponymics (for example, Herman Krywyen (= the son, heir of Krivis), recorded in 1419) (Gaerte 1959: 639; Toporov 1984: 205). The significance of the institution of assembly makes it obvious that its leaders had extensive administrative, legal, religious and other authority. All resolutions approved at the assembly by consensus were obligatory on everyone.

It is believed that Romuva was in the region of the confluence of the Pregel and the Goldfließ. The name of Romaw was detected to the northwest and the places Romanuppen (Romovuppen) and Romehlis were found to the southeast of the hill fort Norkitten which was of exceptional size. The location was in a convenient geographical location: the Pregel flows through it and there are routes leading from the west (Samland), north (Scalovia), south and southeast (Bartovia, Sudovia, Lithuania). Supposing that Romuva was active in the thirteenth century, it can be seen that the geopolitical situation of Nadrovia at that time was quite strong: Prussian tribes lived to the west and to the south of the alleged Romuva region and the territory to the north and to the west of the place was occupied by Scalovinans, Curonians, Samogitians, Lithuanians, Sudovians and/or Yatvingians. Since the middle of the thirteenth century the regions of Samogitia, Lithuania, Sudovia and Yatvingia had been incorporated into the western part of the Lithuanian state. King Mindaugas, through rights as suzerain, most probably had Nadrovia at his disposition.

In fact, the interrelation of Baltic tribes (later of Lithuanians and
other tribes) in the thirteenth century was weak (Gudavičius 1989: 163, 169) though information provided in some sources allows speaking about concerted military actions, including Livonians, Estonians and Russians (Batūra 1985: 13, 17; Gudavičius 1989: 26). These military movements can hardly be related to Romuva for, as already mentioned, territorial communities and military allies would gather at local assemblies. Another function, however, can be attributed to the Romuva centre: once a year (or once in several years) the representatives of various regions could gather there to revive political and legal agreements and to discuss their amendments or other debatable problems (Łowmiański 1932: 195). In case of necessity extraordinary assemblies to discuss issues of similar character could be summoned at Romuva by means of the “travelling” stick. Even though the apparent significance of this central place undoubtedly was related to religion (maybe there was a temple in its vicinity?), it is difficult to detect it. It seems that the factor of religion was only one of the several factors that would bind the neighbouring tribes together (until the thirteenth century the religious systems of the Baltic tribes had regional varieties – this is obvious from burial monuments). It is also difficult to estimate the circumstances of the foundation of Romuva as well as the term of its operation. This could well be a short episode in the history of the Baltic tribes, a project that failed or that was not implemented because of the shortage of time. This central place in Nadrovia could only have been in operation up until 1274-77 when the region was occupied.

The view that Romuva was transferred into Romainiai, Lithuania, is quite well substantiated. The location of Romainiai in the lower reaches of the Nevėžis River would correspond with the new “middle” of the Baltic lands, having in mind the alteration in the geopolitical situation in the second half of the thirteenth century. According to Peter of Dusburg in c. 1294 crusaders burnt down the village of Romainiai (Romene) that, according to pagan tradition, was considered sacred (Vėlius ed. 1996: 339). Nicolaus von Jeroschin added that it was a wealthy and majestic village that according to a silly tradition was considered sacred (Vėlius ed. 1996: 365).

In the second half of the fourteenth century crusaders attacked the village Šatijai (Sethen) which was situated to the northeast of Kaunas and which was also considered sacred and captured a priest there (Vėlius ed. 1996: 419). However, it is not clear why the village of
Romainiai was considered sacred. There must have been an important reason (or even several reasons) for that. After 1294 Romainiai most probably was restored; sources of the fourteenth century refer to a land (terra) under this name. Heiligenwalt (Sacred Wood) in the same region was mentioned as a landmark in an agreement dating back to 1398 (Mannhardt ed. 1936: 127). In 1413 when the Christianisation of Samogitia was begun, Grand Dukes Jogaila and Vytautas also directed their attention to a temple “beyond the Nevėžis” where they burnt a tower on top of the highest hill in which sacred fire was guarded and cut down the woods that were considered sacred (Vėlius ed. 1996: 559). The action, which had the aim of making the Samogitians wish to accept Christianity, was undoubtedly directed against their temples of the highest rank (Vaitkevičienė and Vaitkevičius 2001: 312-3).

The genesis of Romuva can only be guessed at. Such institutional forms in the 3rd-8th centuries could be observed in the societies of various regions in West and North Europe among freemen, warriors and noblemen; in the historical states of Poland and Russia in the twelfth century and later among the inhabitants of towns (Zernack 1967). The circumstances under which the same model was adopted (maybe implemented?) in Prussia are obscure. The period of the 6th-7th centuries was the time of great cultural changes there (Nowakowski 1996: 96-7), so it could hardly have happened before then. The circumstances and the time of the foundation of Romuva can be detected only by means of an extensive research into Prussian political history and culture of the 6th-13th centuries. In the meantime, it is reasonable to think that such a centre existed in the thirteenth century (until 1274-1277). It is possible that later Romuva was transferred into the lower reaches of the Nevėžis River in Lithuania, into the new “middle”

Considering the possibility of Scandinavian influence that manifested itself later, it would be necessary to thoroughly analyse the aspects of social geography in the light of Balto-Scandinavian relations (cf. Šterns 1996), to test the hypotheses of the consecutive series and/or the network of Romuvas and to accurately examine the derivation of the name Romuva.

The institution of assemblies (krivė, krivūlė) that tackled the most important social issues was in operation in the Baltic lands. As can be detected from the comparative data, general assemblies of the regional and national representatives usually had a fixed place in the
middle of the region. Subject to the historic period and environment, political, administrative, economic and religious significance was attributed to such places, i.e. they performed the role of the centre. Romuva can be confidently claimed to have been such a central place.⁴

Notes

1 Since we do not know how Romow and Criwe were written in Prussian I prefer to use one of the Lithuanian transcriptions (also reconstructed) Romuva and Krivis. Other alternatives would be Romovė and Krivė.

2 This and the following passage (III.5; Velius ed., 1996: 334, 334-5) have been translated by J. Gordon Howie who has also supplied the following normalised text of the Latin paragraphs. (1) Fuit autem in medio nationis huius perversae, scilicet in Nadrowia, locus quidam dictus Romow, trahens nomen suum a Roma, in quo habitabat quidam, dictus Criwe, quem colebant pro papa, quia sicut dominus papa regit universalem ecclesiam fidelium, ita ad istius nutum seu mandatum nonsolum gentes praedictae, sed et Lethowini et aliae nationes Lyvoniae terrae regebantur. Tantae fuit auctoritatis, quod non solum ipse vel aliquid de sanguine suo, verum etiam nuntius cum baculo suo vel alio signo noto transiens terminos infidelium praedictorum a regibus et nobilibus, et communi populo in magna reverentia haberetur. (2) Circa istos mortuos talis fuit illusio diaboli, quod cum parentes defuncti ad dictum Criwe papam venirent, quaedam, utrum tali die vel nocte vidisset aliquem domum suam transire, ille Criwe et dispositionem mortui in vestibus, armis, equis et familia <...>. Post victoriam diis suis victimam offerunt, et omnium eorum, que ratione victoriae consequitusunt, tertiam partem dicto Criwe praesentarunt (alternative form of /praesentaverunt/), qui combussit talia.

3 It should be kept in mind, however, that “krivė” (crooked one) might in certain cases refer to a natural feature such as a bend in a river.

4 This article is an abbreviated and revised form of Vaitkevičius 2003. It has been translated from Lithuanian by Lina Guobienė.
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Prussian Romuva Decoded


liche Studien 18, 187-221.


Reviews


This review responds to four of the five volumes in the series Vägar till Midgård – Roads to Midgård (volume 3 of the series was reviewed separately in *Cosmos* volume X). Of these four volumes, two are of particular interest in the context of cosmology, but it is impossible here to mention even all of the articles which are of relevance, and this review will discuss only a small selection of contributions to the series. All the articles are in Swedish, Norwegian or Danish; all quotes in this review have been translated into English by myself. The books will be dealt with in chronological order.

Volume 1 is aptly titled: *Myter om det nordiska. Mellan romantik och politik* (Myths about the Nordic. Between romanticism and politics), and the articles contained in this book explore the different ways in which Old Norse culture and beliefs have been used, abused and manipulated through the centuries, especially the political and quasi-political use of it in the twentieth century is given attention. The book as a whole is thought-provoking, it illuminates the dangers of sliding from interest in a subject into manipulation of it for political purposes, but it is generally of little relevance to the study of cosmology.

Volume 2 is entitled: *Plats och praxis. Studier av nordisk förkristen ritual* (Place and practice. Studies in Nordic pre-Christian ritual) and as such is particularly interested in ritual behaviour. Sources for our knowledge about pre-Christian ritual practices are many, if fragmentary of nature - literary and archeological, pre-historic as well as medieval source material.
exists, and all of these are represented in this book. Although the individual articles focus predominantly on one type of source material they all display a conscious awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary work as well as the value of other types of sources.

Rudebeck’s article, *Vägen som rituell arena* (The road as ritual arena), is of some cosmological interest. It discusses the cultural and ritual value of roads and pathways, not just as arteries linking places to other places as well as distancing them from one another, but also as places which are symbolically meaningful in themselves. The author argues that the road to and from a place carries some of the meaning which that place embodies, and she discusses in particular the idea of roads as linking and separating the living and the dead: “My opinion is that the roads and the placement of graves near roads, fords and crossroads had symbolic meaning, or that they acquired this over time (172).” Rudebeck’s central thought is that roads – of all kinds – were associated with the dead, with sacrificial places and with liminal areas (182), and argues that, in the landscape, they should be seen not only as a means of accessing ritual places, but as ritual places themselves.

Volume 4 of the series is cosmologically the most relevant one: *Ordning mot kaos. Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi* (Order against chaos. Studies in Nordic pre-Christian cosmology). This book offers a range of illuminating contributions to the study of Old Norse cosmology and it is characterised (as is the series as a whole) by the representation of diverse disciplines. It is difficult here to summarise the volume as a whole, because the contributors express many opinions - and not always ones which are mutually compatible.

Burström’s article, *Svunna världar och samtidsförståelse* (Bygone worlds and contemporary understanding), opens the book with a rather thought-provoking way of relating ancient times to modern ones. The author states: “I sympathise with an archeology which both seeks to interpret the past and also confirms the contemporary guise of those interpretations; the question is how these goals can be combined in practice (18).” He goes on to present some very striking examples of such ancient-modern combinations, one of which compares bronze age rock carvings to the icons on a computer screen – by striking or clicking on a certain icon or carving, particular forces are evoked and brought to life. This sort of approach has an immediacy about it, which the present writer finds attractive, and, as Burström points out, this also makes it clear that the person interpreting such rock carvings is aware that they see through their own contemporary culture. Thus, any influence from modern thinking on the interpretation of ancient thinking is
Raudvere’s contribution, *Delen eller helheten. Kosmologi som empiriskt och analytiskt begrepp* (The part or the totality. Cosmolgy as an empirical and analytical concept), reflects on how it is possible to study cosmology as a whole when that whole always consists of smaller parts. Old Norse cosmology, as we encounter it in the source material we have, is always attached to either myth, ideology or history (70-71) and is never recounted for its own sake. Thus, we never see the cosmology in a coherent, ‘whole’ or ‘pure’ form – indeed, that it ever had such forms is beyond what the material can prove. Focusing on the Gotland picture stones and the cycle of stories surrounding Sigurður Fáfnisbani, Raudvere shows how elements of cosmology and mythology has been used in different types of narratives and how this use of cosmology has enabled smaller parts of it to survive as narrative motifs through long periods of time. In this way, the smaller components of a cosmology exist like archeological finds, only in narrative format, which afford us glimpses of an assumed whole cosmology.

Jennbert’s contribution, *Människor och djur. Kroppsmetaforik och kosmologiska perspektiv* (Humans and animals. Body imagery and cosmological perspectives), looks at body symbolism, human as well as animal, in relation to cosmology. The author looks at accounts of human-to-animal transformations in relation to burials where humans and animals are buried together, stressing the idea that bodies of the dead (animals as well as humans) were dealt with in meaningful ways as material expressions of cosmology: “The borderlines between nature and humans, gods, giants, animals and other beings were fluid in Norse mythology. The world and human beings were like one another and were born from one mother (209).” Furthermore, Jennbert is of the opinion that kennings which body parts to different kinds of landscapes are more than just passive re-phrasings and are actually expressions of cosmic structures. Jennbert’s contribution, together with Hedeager’s (not discussed here), provides some interesting angles onto the symbolic and potentially cosmological values of human-animal relationships.

Brink discusses: *Mytologiska rum och eskatologiska föreställningar i det vikingatida Norden* (Mythological spaces and eschatological ideas in the Nordic viking period), challenging the established take on the Old Norse world view as a dichotomy between Miðgarðr and Útgarðr with some very convincing arguments. “The striking thing is that no scholars have tried the fundamental thought behind this theoretical opinion in the ancient North: did this binary opposition of Miðgarðr-Útgarðr actually exist in Old Icelandic society? And if so, can this ancient Icelandic mentality be readily applied to
contemporary Eastern Scandinavian society? (293)” What Brink actually finds in the literary texts is something which replaces the binary opposition with a spatial mythological conception consisting of several areas or spheres belonging to different types of beings, not just two. He refers to the ‘nine worlds’ mentioned in several texts – there is no mention of any ‘two worlds’ as might be expected were there a binary world view.

Brink also point out that the reason why ‘forest’ as a representation for what is ‘wild’ and ‘unknown’ in early medieval Iceland may well stem from the fact that this country was practically deforested by the first settlers. This meant that, in Iceland, ‘home’ came to be synonymous with an open, treeless landscape (301); however, this did not happen in the rest of Scandinavia, and there is little reason to believe that people living in heavily forested areas should consider ‘forest’ as ‘wild’ or ‘unknown’. Brink goes on to present some case studies of place names in local areas which indicate a view of landscapes as loaded with cosmological and divine meaning, but a view which diverges from that of binary oppositions. The article represents an interesting break with what has become an established and accepted theory. Brink’s thinking is lucid and his arguments completely logical, so that the ideas he presents look like plain common sense.

Andrén’s article, I skuggan av Yggdrasill. Trädet mellan idé och realitet i nordisk tradition (In the shadow of Yggdrasill. The tree between idea and reality in Nordic tradition), explores, through archeological evidence, the meaning of the tree as an axis mundi. Actual trees being difficult to substantiate via archeological means, the focus is on representations of trees. The central argument concerns the so-called ‘treuddar’, triangles, - archеological features in the landscape of Sweden, constructed of stone and soil with a post or pole in the centre to represent the tree. The three points of these ‘treuddar’ are thought to represent the three roots of the Norse world tree, Yggdrasill. These ‘treuddar’ in the landscapes are similar in shape to triangular buckles as well as to decorative features in ornaments and other material items, and Andrén relates these decorations to the landscape features, seeing them as smaller and larger representations of the same concept: the tree at the centre of the world. One of Andrén’s important thoughts is that there is no one original idea to be found behind these varying material expressions, but rather a group of associated ideas which are expressed differently in many contexts, also through the several names for the (or for the idea of a) world tree – Yggdrasill, Læraðr, Miötuðr and others.

Volume 5 deals with: Minne och myt. Konsten att skapa det förflutna (Memory and myth. The art of creating the past), with ways in which the
past is remembered in the present and how images, symbols and meanings of the past are constructed and re-constructed through the process of remembering. This collection of articles deals with very different topics from many different periods and geographical locations, some concern collective memories, others deal with very personal experiences of individual people. The book as a whole provides a lot of food for thought, and although it does not deal directly with cosmology it is nevertheless of some interest with regard to world views, past and present.

The five volumes of the series certainly manage to convey the interdisciplinary intentions of the Roads to Midgård-project, presenting articles by archeologists, historians of religion, philologists and others, weighing each contribution according to its own merits and without pre-conceived ideas about which opinions, disciplines or types of material should be represented. What this means is that even within any one of the four volumes reviewed here, there are many different opinions voiced; it also means that the reader is often provoked into considering exactly what their own convictions are, because although one article might confirm one’s own ideas, the next one might digress markedly from them. This very broad spectrum throws open all kinds of doors, and it is clear that this approach allows new light to be shed on Old Norse studies, clears the way for new thinking and brings with it a healthy through-draft which might blow away some old dust. The series provides lots of inspiration for further work in the field of Old Norse studies. (Karen Bek-Pedersen)


The Mordvinians are a Finno-Ugrian people, the next largest of the Finno-Ugrian groups after the Hungarians and the Finns. The population of over 800,000 lives in a number of different regions of Russia but is mainly concentrated in the Republic of Mordovia to the south-east of Moscow. The Mordvinian tribal group and common language split into two parts in the first millennium AD, and study of the mythology has to take account of materials in both Mokshan-Mordvinian and Erzian- Mordvinian. The information often comes from the recording of folklore since this is a society that has remained in touch with its archaic roots. The author is able to draw on massive fieldwork results, and mentions also that she had a family heritage of lore and acknowledges contributions from her mother.
The study now being made available in English has previously been published in Russian and Mokshan-Mordvinian. The first part consists of a discussion of the history, language and culture of the Mordvinians and the second, more substantial, part, consists of a set of short articles organised in alphabetical order. The coverage is described in this way:

[The articles] deal with the interpretation of images and the most important signs, objects of traditional intangible culture, as well as rituals, heathen and contemporary holidays, ceremonies connected with the animal world and natural phenomena. The articles also touch upon such notions as time and space, life and death, number, ancestor cultism, magical ceremonies, charms and spells, sacrifices, taboos, protective symbols, dream interpretation, etc., which were formed in different epochs due to the changes in the mythological worldview of the Mordvinians. There are also 40 heathen Gods and deities-patrons, their origin, appearance and functions are presented.

In general, an alphabetical encyclopedia makes a rather indigestible format for those unfamiliar with the material presented, but the book is not a big one and it is quite possible to browse with pleasure and profit through such entries as “Deity-patroness of the home”, “God-patron of thunder”, “Praying on a boundary-strip of neighbouring villages”, “Praying on the occasion of locusts” and “Rowan-tree”. An impression of the range can be given by listing the headings under “S” which run: “Shadow”, “Sky”, “Snake”, “Snake’s King / Great Snake”, “Soul”, “Spell / verbal formula” and “Stove”. The materials are richly detailed, although they are generalised without specific references to archive sources. Fire, for example, was used for protection and there was a tradition of creating new fire for a community at a ceremonial site and having all the households (who had extinguished their fires beforehand) receiving the fire for their homes from this one new fire. This concept is familiar in the Indo-European context as well but a more distinctive idea is that the fire spoke through its crackling and that some people, who had the gift of understanding its language, also had the power to control and extinguish it. The book is not always well served by the English translation and is occasionally hard to follow. Particularly puzzling is the “deuce”, who turns out to be our old enemy, the Devil. (Emily Lyle)