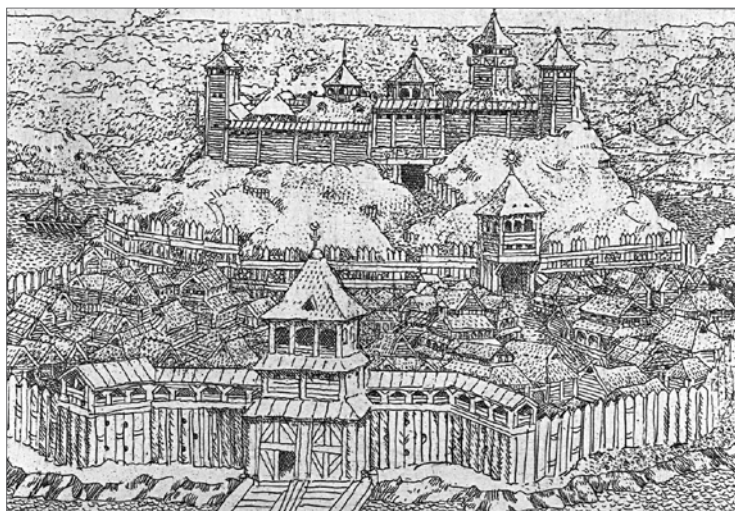


# BALTŲ KULTŪRA



# The Myth of Sovijus and its Relation to Lithuanian Cultural Memory

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**Abstract:** The article overviews the literature about a medieval, presumably Baltic, myth of Sovijus. The relation of the myth of Sovijus with Lithuanian cultural memory is analysed according to the ideas expressed in the secondary literature. The sum of literature is divided into several phases of research according to their treatment and contextualization of the myth. The phases of revival, integration and reinterpretation of the myth are distinguished. The active research of the myth started in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the works of an exile Lithuanian Greimas and a Russian scholar Toporov, their work constitutes the phase of revival. Starting with late 1980s with the works of Vėlius, Beresnevičius and others myth was being integrated into the larger narrative of medieval Lithuanian history. Over the last decade a tendency of reinterpretation is evident, the Baltic origins of the myth are questioned; more detailed analysis of the original sources has appeared. This case study of the myth of Sovijus illustrates the changing situation of a cultural form in relation to the cultural memory of a nation.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, Lithuania, Baltic mythology, chronographia of Ioannes Malalas, medieval Slavonic literature, myth of Sovijus, cremation.

## Introduction

Cultural memory, according to Assman, together with communicative memory forms the collective memory of a group.<sup>1</sup> Focus on such phenomena as cultural memory and their construction might offer one of multiple paths to understanding national identity.

1 Assman, J. *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*. *New German Critique*, 65, p. 129.

Cultural memory, according to Assman, is “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation.”<sup>2</sup> For Assman this cultural memory is separate from what he calls communicative memory which relates to everyday communications. Cultural

2 Ibid, p. 126.

memory, in contrast, is formed from fateful, historically important events in the past. The memory of these events is objectivised and mediated through texts, rites, monuments etc.<sup>3</sup> This type of cultural memory works through the formative and normative impulses that it evokes shapes the common identity of a group. “The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose “cultivation” serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.”<sup>4</sup> Rubavičius suggests looking at the collective and cultural memory and the way it contributes to the construction of national consciousness and identity.<sup>5</sup>

The history of a particular nation is supposed to form the basis of its shared cultural memory. Lithuanian history that relates to national identity could be regarded as complicated because of several reasons. A prominent Lithuanian historian E. Gudavičius sees Lithuania as the last political unit to join the Western European civilization<sup>6</sup>. The delayed incorporation into European civilization meant that the European scien-

tific, cultural, artistic achievements had to be absorbed unnaturally rapidly. Such late adoption of European culture led to quick Polonisation of elite Lithuanian culture. Lithuanian language remained the language of peasants, since mainly religious textbooks were printed in it. This led to the division of a nation, not only socially and politically, but linguistically as well. Aleksandravičius and Kulakauskas have demonstrated how this linguistic division led to the rejection of a large part of cultural and historical heritage, since national identity of the modern Lithuanian nation was based on linguistic criteria. The nobility that used Polish as their vernacular, but identified themselves with the political body of Lithuanian Grand Duchy were excluded from the modern nation.<sup>7</sup>

These cultural peculiarities only reflect the specific evolution of Lithuanian statehood. Having created a large political unit in the beginning of 15<sup>th</sup> century, the sovereignty of Lithuania became rather ambiguous after the Union with Poland in 1569. The complete loss of statehood and sovereignty under Russian empire 1795–1914 and as part of the Soviet Union up to 1990, also contributed to the complicated national identity and concern over preserving it. The problematic stemming from the Soviet occupation was clearly expressed by Kuzmickas, who argues that the loss of statehood is traumatizing for the citizens, because they fall into an ambiguous state of an inadequate or insufficient nationhood.<sup>8</sup>

3 Ibid, p. 129.

4 Ibid, p. 132.

5 Rubavičius, V. Neišgyvendinamo sovietmečio patirtis: socialinė atmintis ir tapatumo politika. *Lietuvių tautos tapatybė: tarp realybės ir utopijos*. Ed. S. Juknevičius, R. Repšienė, V. Rubavičius. Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2007, p. 12–40.

6 Gudavičius, E. Lietuvos kraitis stojant į Europos Sąjungą. Ed. A. Andrijauskas, V. Rubavičius, *Nacionalinio tapatumo tęstinumas ir savikūra eurointegracijos sąlygomis*. Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2008, p. 16–25.

7 Aleksandravičius, E., Kulakauskas, A. *Carų valdžioje: XIX a. Lietuva*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1996, p. 359.

8 Kuzmickas, B. Lietuviškasis tapatumas: kultūra ir valstybė. *Nacionalinio tapatumo tęstinumas ir savikūra eurointegracijos sąlygomis*. Ed. A. Andrijauskas,

This brief outline of several peculiarities of historical development illustrate that the cultural and historical sources, which potentially could have been introduced and incorporated into Lithuanian cultural memory, have been consciously avoided or unconsciously forgotten. Therefore currently in Lithuania, as a relatively recently reconstructed country, new symbols, narratives and images are being constantly included into the large body of shared cultural memory, and by this they are employed in shaping the collective consciousness and national identity of a nation. Myths are one of these cultural forms.

Most of the myths analysed in anthropological literature are the still “living” myths that have actual ties with the social world. In such context a statement that myths have the power to regulate actual life has become almost axiomatic. According to Lévi-Strauss myth “explains the present and the past as well as the future”<sup>9</sup>. Mircea Eliade similarly states that in traditional societies a “living” myth “supplies models for human behaviour and, by that very fact gives meaning and value to life.”<sup>10</sup> So a myth is a narrative that has actual power of regulating and controlling the social world, by providing mythical ancestral behaviour as an example. Naturally, this is the role of myth in more traditional societies where myths are still “living”. In modern societies various other, not necessarily religious,

myths exists. Juknevičius discussed the role of scientific, social, philosophical, and religious myths in modern societies. These as well as other types of myths have an orientational function – they guide the behaviour of social actors. If identity is concerned, the integrational role of myths is more important. They provide common imagery, goals and ideas for a group, and stimulate social integration.<sup>11</sup> It is obvious that myths taken from medieval historical sources hardly play any active role of social regulation. Nevertheless, they can be integrated into a collective memory of a group, and provide symbolism and imagery that contribute to the formation of collective identity.

The present article aims at analysing the myth of *Sovijus*, known from 13<sup>th</sup> century historical sources, as a cultural form that can potentially be included into the Lithuanian cultural memory. The author hopes to provide an example of how a cultural form is brought back to “life” and what procedures it undergoes in such a situation. The historical complexities mentioned above and the recent Soviet occupation makes Lithuanian culture particularly vital and open for such inclusions. The changes in the analysis of the myth throughout the discussed period indicate the relevance of the myth and the extent to which this myth was accepted at the time of analysis. This article focuses on such changes that indicate a threshold in the general approach to the myth. Despite some efforts to promote the myth of *Sovijus*, such as its inclusion in

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V. Rubavičius. Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2008, p. 174.

9 Lévi-Strauss, C. The Structural Study of Myth, in *The Journal of Americal Folklore*, 1955, vol. 68, no. 270, p. 430

10 Eliade, M. *Myth and Reality*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975, p. 2.

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11 Juknevičius, S. Mitų reikšmė formuojant tapatumus: istorinės patirtys ir dabarties iššūkiai. *Lietuvių tautos tapatybė: tarp realybės ir utopijos*. Ed. S. Juknevičius, R. Repšienė, V. Rubavičius. Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2007, p. 176.

the electronic textbook “*Įdomioji Lietuvos Istorija*”<sup>12</sup>, it still remains relatively unknown to the broader Lithuanian society. Because of this reason comparative method is applied only to the academic literature. In order to clarify the development of the approach to the myth several phases, more or less correlating to chronological sequence, are discerned. Works by Greimas and Toporov constitute the phase of revival of the myth, the large amount of literature produced by Vėlius, Beresnevičius, Vaitkevičius and Vaitkevičienė represent efforts to integrate the myth into cultural memory of Lithuanians. Roughly during the last decade more sources became available and the research of the myth has taken several new turns. The latest research is more specialised and more thoroughly conducted, this leads to the fact that Lithuanian or Baltic origins of the myth is no longer unanimously acknowledged and it is being situated in a more international context.

### **The myth of Sovijus: plot**

One of the myths that has been and still is being gradually incorporated into Lithuanian collective memory is the medieval myth of Sovijus. The myth of Sovijus, transcribed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, explains how rites of cremation were established among the Baltic tribes.

Sovijus was a man. After killing a marvellous boar, he ripped out 9 spleens out of the boar and gave them to his sons to fry. After they had eaten them<sup>13</sup> Sovijus got

angry with his children. He tried to descend to Hell. He did not succeed passing through eight gates and only managed to reach the hell through the ninth ones, with the help of his son. When the brothers got angry with him, he resolved to find the father, and ventured to Hell. After the father had dinner with him, he made the bed for him and dug him under the ground. In the morning, when they both woke up, he asked him, whether he had a good sleep. The one replied that he slept terribly and was eaten by worms and slugs. The next day, again he made the dinner and placed him to sleep in a tree (trunk). In the morning he again complained, that he was stung by bees and mosquitoes and had a terrible night. The following day, he prepared a large stake of fire and threw him in there. In the morning, when asked, he replied: “I slept like a log.”

The myth is followed by a commentary, which names the ethnic groups that follow the cremation rites established by Sovijus and contains a list of 4 deities – Anda(o) jas, Perkūnas, Žvorūna and Teliavelis worshiped by the contemporary Lithuanians.

The following analysis of the literature about the myth of Sovijus, will be given in a more or less chronological order.

### **Sources, early analysis and publications**

The myth is known from a medieval Slavonic chronograph written in 1262 (or 1261). This chronograph is a compilation of various sources dealing with ancient history, stories from Old Testament etc. The myth of Sovijus in the chronograph is included among the chapters of a translated Byzantine chronographia by Ioannes Malalas.

<sup>12</sup> <http://mkp.emokykla.lt/idomioji/vadovelis.php?page=tekstas&subject=18>

<sup>13</sup> Most scholars believe that they were eaten raw – an improper way of consuming the supposedly ritual meal.

The chronographia of Iones Malalas was translated to Old Slavonic under the command of Bulgarian tsar Simeon at the verge from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century. The translation was often included in medieval Russian chronographs. Currently, there are four known copies of the chronograph of 1262: Archival chronograph, dated to 15<sup>th</sup> century, held in Moscow, Vilnius chronograph dated to 16<sup>th</sup> century, Warsaw chronograph, which is a precise copy of the Archival chronograph and a handwritten 17<sup>th</sup> century book by I. J. Zabelin.<sup>14</sup> Recent analysis by Lemeskin has shown that the differences between these transcripts are insignificant, only the transcript of Zabelin differs more markedly, but still can be treated as an abbreviated version of the same myth.

The text with the myth of Sovijus was first published in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. M. Obolensky published the text by archival chronograph and F. Dobriansky published the version held in Vilnius, the main translation into Lithuanian language, used by most researchers, is based on Obolensky's 1851 edition.<sup>15</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was analysed by German, Russian and Polish philologists and ethnographers, such as E. Wolter, L. A. Dindorf, A. J. Mierzynski. Among these the most important probably was V. Istrin, who analysed the whole chronograph.

The myth received some attention during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by

Zenonas Ivinskis, P. Klimas etc. Nevertheless it remained more or less unknown until the works of V. Toporov and A. J. Greimas.

### The phase of revival: Toporov and Greimas

V. Toporov analysed the myth of Sovijus as a myth establishing the rites of cremation in Lithuania and among the Balts. As a linguist he paid a lot of attention to the etymology of the name of Sovijus and other divinities mentioned in the original chronograph.

He considered cremation to be the archetypal way of body disposal among the Proto-Indo-Europeans. The myth of Sovijus was therefore interesting as it established this particular tradition among the Balts. Concerning the etymology of the name of Sovijus, Toporov proposed an idea that the name Sovijus might come from the Lithuanian /Baltic base *šauti* meaning 'shoot / shove / tuck into', the person who performs this action is *šovėjas* in Lithuanian.<sup>16</sup> From Lithuanian ethnographic evidence and use of language it is evident that the word *šauti* is used in a phrase *pašauti duoną į krosnį* meaning 'to tuck the bread into the oven'. In this case the function of Sovijus is seen as reflected in his name – Sovijus is the one, responsible for placing the body into the fire. Toporov notes that the same motifs of peel (Russ. *Совка*), oven, intention to burn the hero is evident in many Russian tales about Baba-Yaga. While describing the core model of burial ritual, he notes that both the subject

14 Lemeškin, I. *Sovijaus sakmė ir 1262 metų chronografas: (pagal Archyvinį, Varšuvos, Vilniaus ir I. J. Zabelino nuorašus)*. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2009, p. 332.

15 *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai. I tomas: Nuo seniausių laikų iki XV amžiaus pabaigos*. Sud. N. Vėlius. Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidykla, 1996, p. 265.

16 Toporov, В. Н. (1987). Заметки по похоронной обрядности, *Балто-славянские исследования*, 1985, p. 25–26.

of the ritual (the priest) and the object of the ritual (the deceased) are equal with reference to the death itself.<sup>17</sup> Sovijus was seen as special because he took the role of both the priest performing the ritual and the sacrifice as he was the deceased. In addition, Toporov proposed that Sovijus might be a version of an Indo-European ritual term formed from the root *\*sauh*,<sup>18</sup> this enabled him to compare Sovijus with Indian deity Savitar – the prime mover of the universe.<sup>18</sup> He also tried to link the name of Sovijus with Proto-Indo-European stem *\*saue-* meaning ‘sun’.

Toporov saw the myth of Sovijus as a raw material for comparative analysis of Indo-European burial rites, rituals, and mindset. At the same time, he saw the myth in its historical context – as a part of Baltic religious reform conterminous with the formation of the Lithuanian state. The presumed religious reform is reflected in the myths of Sovijus, Šventaragis, growing importance of the cult of fire.

Quite a lot of attention Toporov has drawn on the analysis of the pantheon of Lithuanian gods, given at the end of the myth. He noted that this list and the list of gods worshiped by Mindaugas from the Ipatian chronograph are particularly important because they are approximately 200 years earlier than most of the sources about Baltic mythology and therefore should be more reliable.<sup>19</sup> Particularly rel-

evant is his analysis of Perkūnas / Diviriksas and Teliavelis / Velinas. Perkūnas is often mentioned in the context of burial rites and traditions as in “Заметки по похоронной обрядности“, in „Vilnius, Wilno, Вильна: miestas ir mitas” he analysed the growing importance of Perkūnas and his relationship with the cult of fire. Teliavelis or Velinas<sup>20</sup> has been analysed together with Ivanov from an etymological point of view and in relation with burial rituals in “A Comparative Study of the Group of Baltic Mythological Terms From the Root *\*vel*” – here Baltic linguistic data was compared with instances of use of the same root in other Indo-European languages.

Synchronically, A. J. Greimas applied his semiological analysis to the myth. A. J. Greimas is a Lithuanian – French scholar, therefore, a representative of a rather different school of mythology. As he was mostly focused on semiotical studies he used Lithuanian mythology as a field for applying his theoretical ideas.<sup>21</sup> He focused on the analysis of the myth in its broader cultural context, therefore, his analysis is less comparative, but Greimas broadly uses various linguistic and ethnographic data from Lithuania.

Concerning the etymology, he, independently from Toporov, associates Sovijus with Lithuanian *šauti* and reconstructs the original version of the name as ‘Šovys’. He draws certain parallels between the myth of Sovijus and the myth of Šventaragis – both were cremated by their sons and both

17 Toporov, V. H. (1987). Заметки по похоронной обрядности, *Балто-славянские исследования*, 1985, p. 16.

18 Toporov, V. *Baltų mitologijos ir ritualo tyrimai*, sud. N. Mikhailov. Vilnius: Aidai, 2000, p. 219.

19 Toporov, V. *Baltų mitologijos ir ritualo tyrimai*, sud. N. Mikhailov. Vilnius: Aidai, 2000, p. 31.

20 (the distinction and relationship between these two deities is complicated and will be discussed later).

21 Greimas, A. J. *Lietuvių mitologijos studijos*, sud. K. Nastopka. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005, p. 750.



established sovereignty in the realm of the dead.<sup>22</sup> Greimas was the first to seriously analyse the meaning of the spleens and wild boar. The chthonic nature and the sexualized image of the male swine in Lithuanian folklore allowed Greimas to conclude that the boar can be seen as a sexual partner of the earth and a figure representing the primeval chaos. Nevertheless his idea that the boar might be an enemy of Sovijus was criticised in more recent publications by Beresnevičius<sup>23</sup> and Walter<sup>24</sup>. The spleen was seen as an internal organ associated with anger and aggression, the act of frying it, was interpreted in the structuralist manner as representing the essential transformation from natural to cultural spheres. In addition Greimas paid quite a lot of attention to the kin relationships between father and his sons, nevertheless, as Walter notes, Greimas's interpretation in this case might possibly be overtly psychological.<sup>25</sup>

Separate publications were devoted to analysis of the panteon of Gods mentioned at the end of the myth, his suggested reconstructions of the names of Žvorūna / Medeina, Kalevelis and Andojas are currently in use. According to Greimas the reconstructed pantheon partly fits the trifunctional scheme of Indo-European mythology proposed by Dumézil. In the Lithuanian version Andojas would represent the first – sovereignty / juridical

function, Perkūnas – also sovereignty and fertility, Kalevelis – military (Medeina / Žvērūna according to Greimas does not fit the expected third function, which is an exceptional feature of Lithuanian mythology)<sup>26</sup>. The fact that Greimas considers Teliavelis / Kalevelis, but not Perkūnas to be responsible for the military function<sup>27</sup> has been criticised by many Lithuanian scholars, who see Perkūnas as an especially militarized figure.<sup>28</sup> In his unfinished study Greimas draws attention to the fact that Teliavelis / Kalevelis (Lithuanian smith that hammered the sun) could be seen as a successor of Vel(i)nas (Lithuanian Devil).<sup>29</sup> This hypothesis was pushed forward by Vaitkevičius and Vaitkevičienė, who reconstructed the mythical defeat of the Devil by Kalevelis in the context of the establishment of official religion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Lithuania. They see Teliavelis not in opposition to Perkūnas (as Greimas did) but as close to his celestial sphere.<sup>30</sup> Greimas's analysis of Medeina / Žvorūna remained unfinished, nevertheless in the published version the underlying nature –

22 Greimas, A. J. *Lietuvių mitologijos studijos*, sud. K. Nastopka. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005, p. 360.

23 Beresnevičius, G. *Dausos*. Vilnius: Taura, 1990, p. 79.

24 Walter, P. The ditty of Sovijus (1261). The nine spleens of the marvellous boar: an indo-european approach to a Lithuanian myth, *Archaeologica Baltica*, 2011, Vol. 15.

25 *Ibid*, p. 73.

26 Greimas, A. J. *Lietuvių mitologijos studijos*, sud. K. Nastopka. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005, p. 397–398.

27 In his unfinished works there are evidence that he agrees with the traditional scheme, in which Perkūnas is responsible for the military function, Dievas (mėnulis dievaitis) and Kalevelis / Velnias share the first function, third function is possibly catered by Mėnulis Dievaitis, p. 568.

28 For example Vaitkevičienė, D. Vaitkevičius V. XII a. Lietuvos valtybinės religijos bruožai, *Lietuvos archeologija*, 2001, Vol. 21, p. 323.

29 Greimas, A. J. *Lietuvių mitologijos studijos*, sud. K. Nastopka. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005, p. 402.

30 Vaitkevičienė, D. Vaitkevičius V. XII a. Lietuvos valtybinės religijos bruožai. *Lietuvos archeologija*, 2001. Vol. 21, p. 311–334.



culture opposition is evident. The single female deity Žvorūna / Medeina is seen as a she-wolf, associated with hunt and forest.<sup>31</sup>

The detailed analysis by such prominent scholars as Greimas and Toporov, brought back the myth into the horizon of Lithuanian ethnologists, religious historians, etc. Therefore the phase of Greimas and Toporov research could be tentatively called 'revival'.

### **The phase of integration: Vėlius, Beresnevičius, Vaitkevičius and Vaitkevičienė**

Lithuanian ethnographer N. Vėlius was the first Lithuanian in LTSR (the Soviet Republic of Lithuania) to describe the myth in the context of Baltic burial traditions and to raise relevant problems and issues that can be further analysed. Vėlius generally focused on research of ethnographic material which is much more recent in comparison to the myth of Sovijus. Therefore his key contribution to the myth was an overview in "Kultūros Barai"<sup>32</sup>. In the article, together with a translation by Savukynas and Tumelis, Vėlius briefly mentioned key points and ideas related to the myth:

- relation to the cremation rites and their spread in the Baltic lands, possible compatibility with the archaeological remains;
- analogies with the mythical Baltic figures of Šventaragis, Brutenis and Vaidėvutis, and Indian Yama and Manus;
- some notes on the Baltic imagery of the netherworld...

The article was not a major scholarly contribution, but having in mind that "Kultūros Barai" was and still is a popular journal among Lithuanian intelligentsia or people simply interested in culture and art, it contributed to the presentation of the myth as a source about Lithuanian antiquity and medieval mindset and religion.

All the problems briefly mentioned by Vėlius were more thoroughly analysed by his pupil Gintaras Beresnevičius. He firmly established the myth as an important historic – mythological source about the 13<sup>th</sup> century Lithuania. As an adherent of religious studies, Beresnevičius applied analysis of archetypal symbolism and a comparative approach. He analysed this particular myth in two overlapping contexts. In the monograph about the afterlife and netherworld in Lithuanian mythology, the myth of Sovijus was one of the oldest sources of information and was used interchangeably with analysis of folklore and later historical accounts. The main idea is that the myth of Sovijus signifies the transition in the perception of the netherworld. According to Beresnevičius's analysis, the belief in metempsychosis – "the supposed transmigration at death of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a different species"<sup>33</sup> is traceable in the Lithuanian folklore and is presumably later than the belief in a separate sphere of the netherworld. So the myth of Sovijus in this context signifies the establishment of the conceptually separate world of dead. Cremation is tied with this conceptual tran-

31 Greimas, A. J. *Lietuvių mitologijos studijos*, sud. K. Nastopka. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005, p. 535–549.

32 Vėlius, N. Kaip baltai laidojo mirusiuosius, *Kultūros barai*, 1988, Nr.1, p. 56–59.

33 <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/metempsychosis>

sition, because the belief in the qualitatively different netherworld required a qualitative transition of the body.<sup>34</sup> A rather novel hypothesis is that the myth of Sovijus can be associated with a belief in the afterlife in an anthropomorphic state.

Even though, there were two major periods when cremation spread in the territory of present Lithuania (c. 1300/1200 – 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century BC and from 4/5<sup>th</sup> – 12/13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), Beresnevičius associates the earliest layers of the myth with the first one. This is related with the core idea in Beresnevičius's analysis is that the myth of Sovijus represents the transition from the Neolithic, hunter-gatherer, chthonic mother-goddess sphere to the agrarian, celestial sphere and is associated with the Indo-European migrations. The detection of these two layers is reflected in his interpretation of certain symbols in the myth. Wild boar is interpreted as a necessary sacrifice representing the mother-goddess sphere. The number of spleens and the layout of the myth are compared with several shamanistic traditions and their rituals in Eurasia.<sup>35</sup>

Concerning the list of gods given at the end of the myth, Beresnevičius has drawn exceptional attention to the role of Kalevelis / Teliavelis and Velinas as they were most of all related to the netherworld and the afterlife, in the context of reconstructing the possible official version of the 13<sup>th</sup> century religion, role of Perkūnas was emphasised.

In general, Beresnevičius's analysis is distinctive because of his broad com-

34 Beresnevičius, G. *Dausos*. Vilnius: Taura, 1990, p. 84.

35 Beresnevičius, G. *Baltų religinės reformos*. Vilnius: Taura, 1995, p. 48–51.

parative approach as well as focus on reflections of shamanistic beliefs and traditions in the Lithuanian folklore. In both “Dausos” and “Baltų religinės reformos” he compares the structure and symbolism of the myth with Eurasian / Siberian shamanistic traditions. In the aforementioned and other works<sup>36</sup> the myth of Sovijus is associated with the fire cult and the Lithuanian data is compared with other Indo-European traditions, including Finnic, Ossetin, Indo-Arian.

In a relatively recent article Aleknaitė debated with Beresnevičius concerning his shamanistic comparisons. She argued that the presumably shamanistic symbols in the myth of Sovijus actually represent the universal stages of rites of passage.<sup>37</sup>

In “Baltų religinės reformos”<sup>38</sup> the myth of Sovijus is seen as a reflection of ideological means for reforming the Lithuanian religion during the formation of the state of Lithuania. In the book the myth is analysed separately and later compared with the myth of Šventaragis and religious reforms by Brutenis and Vaidevutis among the Prussians. Such an approach to the myth and the development of Lithuanian religion is almost engrained in the current historiographic tradition and is further

36 Beresnevičius, G. Šventosios ugnies chronologija. Kulto steiginių atspindžiai dangaus kūnų mitologijose: baltai, iranėnai, finai. *Tautosakos darbai* XVIII (XXIV), 2002, p. 78–87.

Beresnevičius, G. Priešmirtinės Eurazijinės vizijos: užstrigusieji. *Rytai–Vakarai: Komparatyvistinės studijos* V. Vilnius: KFMI, 2006, p. 14–27.

37 Aleknaitė, E. Šamaniški elementai baltų religinėje tradicijoje. *Liaudies kultūra*, 2008/3 (120), p. 13.

38 Beresnevičius, G. *Baltų religinės reformos*. Vilnius: Taura, 1995, p. 221.

developed in the earlier mentioned article by Vaitkevičius and Vaitkevičienė<sup>39</sup>, other works by Beresnevičius<sup>40</sup>.

Vaitkevičius and Vaitkevičienė assumed that an official state religion existed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Lithuania<sup>41</sup>. They use various historical, ethnographic and archaeological sources to support this position. Since the myth of Sovijus deals with the establishment of cremation it is closely tied with archaeological research. Vaitkevičius and Vaitkevičienė<sup>42</sup> among other historical sources tried to link the myth of Sovijus with available archaeological evidence about burial rituals in the territory of Lithuania. But from Luchtanas and Vėlius<sup>43</sup> remark we can see that not that many early medieval cemeteries have been excavated to date and the archaeological evidence is very unequivocal. Nevertheless, in their article Vaitkevičius and Vaitkevičienė does not seem to question the origins of the myth of Sovijus or the assumption that after a certain religious reform a state religion existed in the 13th century Lithuania.

A similar line of thought and reflections of Beresnevičius's ideas are evident in a large, heavily illustrated synthesis of

the history of Lithuanian Grand Duchy by Bumblauskas<sup>44</sup>. The key question in the chapters dedicated to paganism in Lithuania is whether and how much was the Baltic religion institutionalised.<sup>45</sup> The myth of Sovijus plays an important part in the description of the afterlife. A translation of the myth as well as some additional information about the chronographia by Ioannes Malalas is given, in addition possible reconstructions if the Lithuanian pantheon are briefly summarised.<sup>46</sup>

A crucial step in the inclusion of the myth into Lithuanian collective consciousness<sup>47</sup> that particularly contributed to the easier access of the myth was its publication in the ontology edited and compiled by N. Vėlius "Sources of Baltic Religion and Mythology" in 1996. The translation of the myth into Lithuanian by Bronys Savukynas and Juozas Tumelis had existed before, but was published only sporadically and was available to a relatively narrow circle of academia. With the edition of "Sources of Baltic Religion and Mythology" the myth was introduced to the broader Lithuanian society. The extract was placed among other important medieval historical sources, the Baltic origin was naturally assumed.

The publication in "Sources of Baltic Religion and Mythology" and numeral works by Beresnevičius, attempted to

39 Vaitkevičienė, D. Vaitkevičius V. XII a. Lietuvos valstybinės religijos bruožai. *Lietuvos archeologija*, 2001. Vol. 21, p. 311–334.

40 Beresnevičius, G. *Lietuvių religija ir mitologija: sisteminė studija*. Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2004, p. 291.

41 Vaitkevičienė, D. Vaitkevičius V. XII a. Lietuvos valstybinės religijos bruožai, *Lietuvos archeologija*, 2001, Vol. 21, p. 311.

42 Vaitkevičienė, D. Vaitkevičius V. XII a. Lietuvos valstybinės religijos bruožai. *Lietuvos archeologija*, 2001, Vol. 21, p. 311–334.

43 Luchtanas, A., Vėlius, G. Valstybės gimimas ir mirusiųjų deginimo paprotys. *Archaeologia Lituana*, 2002, Vol. 3, p. 157–161.

44 Bumblauskas, A. *Senosios Lietuvos istorija: 1009–1795*. Vilnius: R. Paknio leidykla, 2007, p. 485.

45 Ibid, p. 94–97.

46 Ibid, p. 98–101.

47 Collective consciousness here is understood as a set of shared beliefs, ideas and values that facilitate social integration.

place the myth of Sovijus in Lithuanian historical consciousness and inextricably tie it with Baltic paganism, folkloric deities and political turmoil of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Lithuania. This period constitutes an especially relevant part of Lithuanian national historical narrative. At that time (13 – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries) Lithuanian Grand Duchy (or Kingdom during the reign of Mindaugas in 1253–1263) already existed as a firm political unit in the region, and its rulers had not experienced Polonizing and Christianizing Western cultural influences, therefore were seen as distinctively Lithuanian. Such approach to the myth contributes to the image of modern Lithuanian nation as having a firm and independent progenitor with its distinctive cultural tradition.

### **The phase of reinterpretation: most recent research**

Nevertheless in the most recent scholarly literature, the approach to the myth is more equivocal. This is partly an outcome of a more detailed study of the sources in the case of Lemeškin and Temčin and a more international background of the authors.

Recently I. Lemeškin<sup>48</sup> as a literary historian published prints of all four remaining sources and provided detailed textological and palaeographic analysis of them. Ilja Lemeškin included other, previously vaguely analysed parts of the chronograph that deal with Sovijus and his kin, namely:

48 Lemeškin, I. *Sovijaus sakmė ir 1262 metų chronografas: (pagal Archyvinį, Varšuvos, Vilniaus ir I. J. Zabelino nuorašus)*. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2009, p. 332.

- an extract from the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Ioannes Malalas chronographia, that introduces Sovijus and provides shorter version of the myth,

- extract from the 33 chapter in which Sovijus is mentioned among other characters from the Old Testament;

- the mention of the name of Sovijus in chapter 107.

In addition to this, author has made several groundbreaking conclusions about the place of the myth of Sovijus in the structure of the chronograph and the nature of it. “So far, Chronograph of 1262 has been understood as a banal compilation, which accidentally combined rare and mutually unrelated texts (...).The present work offers a new and essentially different outlook on the Chronograph as on a harmonious whole, an exceptional literary achievement, a vivid example of ancient Lithuanian literature.”<sup>49</sup> Author treats the chronograph as an original piece of literature aimed at establishing a more ancient view of Lithuania and Baltic history.

In contrast to most previously conducted research Lemeškin pays particular attention to all the other motives, episodes and characters that frame the myth of Sovijus in the text, such as Abimelech, Melchizedek, Haran etc. This leads to a different treatment of the chronograph and to novel interpretations of the origins of the name of Sovijus.<sup>50</sup> Author discusses

49 Lemeškin, I. *Sovijaus sakmė ir 1262 metų chronografas: (pagal Archyvinį, Varšuvos, Vilniaus ir I. J. Zabelino nuorašus)*. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2009, p. 326.

50 This question has also been addressed in Lemeškin,

several hypothesis – the name of Sovijus might be:

- a construct of the author, made according a parallel of various characters from ancient history (most likely Sosibius);<sup>51</sup>
- a Russian transcription of a Lithuanian pronominal adjective *savojo* meaning ‘his / our own’;
- the name Eusebius that has undergone certain transformations;
- a result of an inversion, where a construction *бесовий человек* - ‘devilish man’ was turned into *Совий бе человек* – ‘Sovij was a man’<sup>52</sup>.

This question is deliberately left open, since neither of the hypotheses could be sufficiently supported. Lemeškin’s publication received positive responses in the press by Razauskas and Bučys.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Razauskas has criticised the before mentioned hypothesis about the genesis of the name from *бесовий человек*. But not only has the question of the name of the main character remained open.

In the most recent literature there are

I. Dar kartą apie Sovijaus vardo etimologiją. *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, 2006, Nr. 30, p. 586–595.

Lemeškin, I. Sovijaus vardo etimologizavimo problematiškumas, *Kalbos istorijos ir dialektologijos problemos*, 2008. [D.] 2, p. 357–365.

51 Lemeškin, I. *Sovijaus sakmė ir 1262 metų chronografas: (pagal Archyvinį, Varšuvos, Vilniaus ir I. J. Zabelino nuorašus)*. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2009, p. 35.

52 Ibid, p. 37.

53 Bučys, A. Kaip vadinsime „1262 metų chronografą“ – lietuvišku ar judejišku (žydišku)? *Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos mėnraštis „Metai“*, 2012, Nr. 5–6 (gegužė–birželis). Razauskas, D. Ledkalis tuo aukštesnis, kuo daugiau jo po vandeniu nematyti: Iljos Lemeškino *Sovijaus sakmė ir 1262 metų chronografas\**. *Tautosakos darbai*, 2010. T. 39, p. 269–274.

still some unresolved problems and discussion regarding seemingly fundamental questions. Firstly, the place of origin of the chronograph and the myth are still unclear. Lemeškin, according the parallel in Lithuanian folklore found by Kerbelytė, believes that the myth is originally Baltic, but the chronograph was created in a Russian monastery. A Ukrainian historian T. Vilkul treats the chronographia of 1261 as a literary piece compiled by a bookman of Rus’ and traces various motives from other contemporary literary works, that the scribe might have read<sup>54</sup>. Temčin argues that the myth is not Lithuanian or Baltic at all, according to him it is an adaptation of description of pagans that were known as “sabii” in 8<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century Mesopotamia.<sup>55</sup> Bučys completely disagrees with this hypothesis and believes that the myth is a preachment created by Lithuanian priests that was later transcribed by a Russian scribe in Laurušavas monastery, established by Vaišelga<sup>56</sup>, although his arguments for this claim seem rather unscholarly.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> volume of the “Lithuanian History” historians Baronas, Dubonis and Petrauskas acknowledges the complexity of the question of origins and are more in sup-

54 Вилкул, Т. Создание Славия: работа составителя Иудейского хронографа (XIII в.). *Istorijos šaltinių tyrimai*, Vol. 2, 2010, p. 11–32.

55 Темчин, С. Ю. О возможном восточном происхождении мифа о Славии, изложенного в иудейском хронографе 1262 года, in *Senoji Lietuvos literatūra*, 29 knyga, 2010, p. 19–28.

56 Bučys, A. Kaip vadinsime „1262 metų chronografą“ – lietuvišku ar judejišku (žydišku)? *Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos mėnraštis „Metai“*, 2012, Nr. 5–6 (gegužė–birželis). 2012; Bučys, A. *Seniausios lietuvių literatūros istorija ir chrestomatija*. Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2012, 655 p.

port of the hypotheses proposed by Temčin or Vilkul rather than simply attributing to myth to the Balts<sup>57</sup>. This turn of opinion is justified as a turn from anachronistic and weakly supported views of previous Lithuanian mythologists<sup>58</sup>.

The archaic style of the myth (use of pronouns, avoidance of proper nouns, and extensive use of dative absolute) makes the text very ambiguous. This has caused several problems. Firstly, it is unclear whether the son or the father is put into the fire. Greimas and Toporov believe that it is the son who burns the father, whereas Lemeškin thinks that the son is being burnt.<sup>59</sup> In addition cross-cultural comparisons need to be pushed further. Some academics (Vėlius<sup>60</sup>, Beresnevičius<sup>61</sup>) mentioned functional similarities to Indian Yama, or compared Sovijus with other Slavic, Finnic, Germanic (Toporov, Beresnevičius) traditions. Recently a French mythologist P. Walter<sup>62</sup> has drawn a parallel with Celtic myth of Finn and Germanic myth of Fafnir. By using a broad comparative approach he reinterpreted the myth as a variation of “primordial myth of

initiation”<sup>63</sup>. He sees the boar as a mediating animal which endows the son with the gift of divination. Using Levi-Strauss’s idea about the culinary triangle and the opposition between raw and the cooked, the rites of roasting the spleens and cremation are seen as essential in the transformation from natural to cultural sphere.

From this brief overview a marked turn in the approach to the myth is evident. With the more specialized research from a more international background, even the basic issues, such as time and place of creation are being questioned. New hypothesis are being proposed and the older view of myth as undoubtedly Lithuanian or Baltic is being refused. The reinterpretation of the myth, based on newly available archival material makes the approach to the myth as part of Lithuanian cultural memory questionable. On the other hand, the growing amount of literature indicates the growing interest in the myth. Such articles as Walter’s only enrich the comparisons already drawn by Lithuanian scholars and provide an example for other comparative research. The specialized analysis leads to novel approaches out of which a new and more firmly grounded conceptualization of the myth might emerge. For the time being there is yet no basis in believing that the myth firmly is or is not Baltic.

## Conclusions

From the analysis of the secondary literature about the myth, several phases of academic analysis can be detected. These phases illustrate the changes in approach to

57 Baronas, D. et al. *Lietuvos istorija. XIII a. – 1385 m.: valstybės iškilimas tarp Rytų ir Vakarų*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2011, p. 518.

58 Ibid, p. 517.

59 Lemeškin, I. *Sovijaus sakmė ir 1262 metų chronografas: (pagal Archyvinį, Varšuvos, Vilniaus ir I. J. Zabelino nuorašus)*. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2009.

60 BRMŠ, p. 265.

61 Beresnevičius, G. *Baltų religinės reformos*. Vilnius: Taura, 1995, p. 33.

62 Walter, P. The ditty of Sovijus (1261). The nine spleens of the marvellous boar: an indo-european approach to a Lithuanian myth, *Archaeologica Baltica* 2011, Vol. 15, p. 72–77.

63 Ibid, p. 72–77.

the myth over roughly last 50 years. It can be suggested that Greimas and Toporov revived the myth. It became relevant to the Lithuanian academia, as an important historical source, that provides significant information for understanding the society of medieval Lithuania. Also their analysis provided a framework for further research of the myth. Works by Vėlius, Beresnevičius, and Vaitkevičienė and Vaitkevičius tried to establish the myth as the crucial part of a historical imagery relating to the early formation of the Lithuanian statehood and the pre-Christian period of Lithuanian history. They assumed the Baltic origin of the myth and by comparing it with other Lithuanian historical myths (e.g. the myth of Šventaragis), ethnographic material and archaeological evidence, tried to reconstruct the possible official religion of 13<sup>th</sup> century Lithuania. This line of thought represents attempts of integration of the myth into Lithuanian cultural memory. Roughly over the last decade new approaches to the myth appeared. Some of them withdrawn the myth from solely Lithuanian or Baltic context or the myth was treated more as a piece of literary heritage rather than a historically relevant source, reflecting the mindset of the Balts. Vilkul and Temčin offered new theories of origin of the myth, their research is reflected in a relevant synthesis of Lithuanian history by Baronas, Dubonis and Petrauskas. The detailed analysis of historical sources and transcriptions allowed Lemeškin to offer novel insights and interpretations of the plot of the myth. While a mythological analysis by a French scholar P. Walter provided a comparison with other motifs in Western European traditions.

From the current analysis a non-unilinear scheme of development of research can be offered. The phases in this article referred to as 'revival' and 'integration' reflect the path of gradual and in some cases deliberate inclusion of the myth into the Lithuanian cultural memory. Nevertheless, in the most recent research, the myth is addressed from a different point of view and the key assumption of the Lithuanianness of the myth is questioned. So the myth of Sovijus cannot yet be treated as a firm part of Lithuanian cultural memory. It can be suggested that such development might reflect the political realities in Lithuania. The myth has been actualised in Lithuania by Lithuanians only during the last years of the Soviet era (Greimas was living in France, while Toporov was Russian). The nationally – oriented strand taken by Vėlius and developed by Beresnevičius roughly correlates with the first 10–15 years of Lithuanian independence and reflects the tendency to assert Lithuanian nationhood after the 50 years of cultural suppression in the Soviet Union. The most recent research is conducted by a nationally-diverse group of scholars that mainly focuses on the context that cannot be contested – the actual historical source of the chronographia. The fact that complexities related to reconstructions of Lithuanian mythology and use early historical sources are discussed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> volume of key synthesis of Lithuanian history by Baronas et al, reflect a changing attitude and a strive for precision in interpretation of such sources as the chronographia of 1262 (1261). This turn might correlate with the greater sense of safety experienced by Lithuanians after becoming parts of the EU and NATO.



The aim of this article is to approach the myth as a potential form of Lithuanian or cultural memory. In addressing this issue author finds terms of 'archive' and 'canon' proposed by Aleida Assmann useful<sup>64</sup>. The 'canon' is seen as the sum of active cultural forms that are constantly reused and reinterpreted in shaping the cultural identity, 'archive', on the other hand, is comprised of all the cultural forms that simply exist – are not forgotten. They work only by

providing the context for the canonical forms.<sup>65</sup> Generally very few cultural forms constitute the canon and a multiplicity of them is in the archive. The myth of Sovijus due to the ongoing scholarly research and publications definitely exists in the archive of Lithuanian cultural memory. On the other hand, its Lithuanianness or Baltic origins are contested, in addition it is hard to link the myth with particular historical personalities and events. This makes the myth of Sovijus not as relevant so as to become an actively reused cultural form.

64 Assman, A. Canon and Archive. *A companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. Eds. A. Erll, A. Nunning. Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2010, p. 441, p. 97–108.

65 Ibid, p. 98.

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