

ELVYRA USAČIOVAITĖ

Certain Parallels between Antique and Baltic Religions

Summary

Today, seeking to learn more about the origins of ancient Lithuanian culture, it is worth turning back to antiquity – ancient Greek and Roman culture – to investigate its traces in the processes of our culture. A large number of these traces are found in the sources of Baltic religion and mythology. Foreign authors wrote about ancient Baltic religion using antique terms – they compared the Baltic gods and customs with the Greek and Roman data of that kind. This was determined by the then European Latin education when a person acquired compulsory knowledge of Latin language, antique literature and mythology at school. Carefully studied Greek and Latin paganism became a model of any non-Christian religion.

The present article analyses historical sources of the 13th-15th centuries where antiquity of the Balts is described namely in that way.

Oliver von Paderborn, northwestern Germany, Bishop of Paderborn, in his book *History of the Kings of the Holy Land* (around the year 1220) wrote that the Baltic (Prussian, Latvian) and Finno-Ugrian nations worshiped woods, which nobody dared to touch with an axe, and alongside they glorified nymphs of forests, trees and springs. Since the mentioned nations did not worship nymphs, the data presented

show that the bishop, making use of the nymphs of Greek mythology – chthonic deities of a lower rank, as well as Roman Faunus (the horned god of the forest, plains and fields) – defined the pantheistic nature of religion of the Baltic nations.

In the *Chronographia* by Joannes Malalas, a Byzantine chronicler of the 6th century, translated into the Old Slavonic language, and in the insertion written therein (the 13th century), we read that the custom of the cremation of the bodies of the dead people among the Balts (Lithuanians, Prussians, Yotvingians) came from ancient Greeks, and Homer's *Iliad* was provided as an example. The present author discusses it and notes that the similarity of the customs of this kind can be substantiated by the common origin of the Indo-European tradition of cremation.

In accordance with the Greek analogy, the Lithuanians were characterized in a similar way by the Byzantine historian Laonicos Chalkokondyles (the 15th century). In his work *Demonstrations of History*, he noted that the inhabitants of Western Lithuania (Samogitians) worshiped Apollo and Artemis. It is not easy to find a Lithuanian equivalent with which Apollo is identified. Since Apollo was the god of the Sun and light in ancient Greece, its Lithuanian parallel should be the Sun,

though Sun worship in historical times, judging from written historical sources, was not significant in Lithuania. Except for a letter of Grand Duke of Lithuania Algirdas to the Patriarch of Constantinople (the 14th century). Meanwhile, by indicating Samogitian Artemis, the historian had in mind the cult of the hunting and forest goddess Medeina, which existed there for a long time. The Sun and Medeina had to be of importance on St John's Day when initiation ceremonies were performed,

i.e., during the time of ritual examinations when young boys become adult males.

The religious significance of a forest is brought up-to-date in the article. As the Balts have lived in woods and beside them since olden times, certain places in the forest had a cult meaning. Believing that gods lived in the old trees, which had a distinctive appearance, offerings to gods were made in the forest; in addition, cremation, initiation and many other rituals were performed there.

Key words: Nymphs, Faunus, Sun, Apollo, Artemis, Woods, Goddess Medeina, Cremation.