

The First Thunder as a Hierophanic Experience in Lithuania

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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 neišgirdavę pirmojo perkūno. Kas to nepaisys, to javai nederėsia.

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)¹

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 kūrente.

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 sėstis ant žemės 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:

Dzūkijoje, Merkinės, Liškiavos ir kitose apylinkėse, sakoma, jog kai pavasarį išgirsti pirmą griaustinį griaunant, verskis tuoj per galvą, kad visą tą metą turėtum 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. (BrčNR: 475)

Panevėžio apylinkėje kalbama, jog, kai pirmąkart išgirsti perkūną griaudžiant, tuoj pasiviliok žemėje, tai tada niekados perkūnas tavęs nemuš.

In the region of Panevėžys 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 – pasiviliok (pasiritenk) ant žemės - nebijosi perkūno. Žmonės voliojas. Voliotis reik nuogam tris kartus: pasiviliok, 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 pirmąkart 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:

Pirmąkart griaudžiant 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 moteros, 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 pirmąkart perkūną griaudžiant, paimk nuo žemės akmeniuką, patrink juo sau galvą ir padėk iš kur buvai paėmęs, 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.

Pirman kart’ pavasarije išgirdus grausman, žmonės skubinas’ tekini pas buto langan ir klausia: “ar namie blusos? “Namuos’ asantis atsako, kad ten ir ten jos nuvėjusios. Kuriuos namuos šin paprotin pildo, sako, blusun per visan kiauran metan neasant: jus nuveinan ten, kur klausiant buvo pasakyta.

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 pradeda 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 žemi 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 gračiau 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 žemi 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 pavasarį perkūnas sugriaudžia, tai žmonės sako: "Jau atatrenkė medžiam žievę, todėl dabar bus galima karnos plėšti 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 pavasarį atitrenkia žilvitį, ir vaikai tada gali iš žilvičio dūdas sukti.

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 gališ 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 trinksi.

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 žaibuoja, negalima rodyti pirštu tam, kuris nematė žaibuojant.*” (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:

Kada yra perkūnija, tai negalima su kepure troboje sėdėti, nes perkūnas tą žmogų gali nutrenkti. Kartą trys vyrai sėdėjo ant vieno suolo troboje ir vidurinis jų buvo su kepure, tai kaip trenkė perkūnas, tai tą kepuriuotą nutrenkė negyvai. O jo draugai liko sveiki.

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:

Aja trys vyrai i užėja didelis griaustinis. Vyns už kožną griaustinia trinktelėjimą, už kožną sužaubavimą vis žegnojasi ir saka: “Aš didelei bijau griaustinia”. Antrasis saka: “Aš nei tai

bijau, ale I dransus nesu". Saka: "Aš nei velnia to griauštinia nebijau. Kan jis muon gali padaryti?" Tik ant to žodžia griauštinis 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:

Griauštinio sudaužytas medžio skeveldras žmonės vartoja apsisaugoti nuo velnio, nes velnias bijo Perkūno trenktų daiktų. Ant sudaužyto akmens skeveldrų 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 nuodėgulus 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 Diewartis užmuštu/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. Perkūnėlis!

May St. Perkūnėlis [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 geriausiai 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)

Pikelių apylinkėje, Mažeikių apskr. senieji žmonės tvirtina, kad jei kuriais metais kovo mėnesį pasigirdo pirmasis perkūnas, tai karvės tą metų 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: “*Jeį 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 metų 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 sugriauš griauštinis ir spirs: jei pietuose spirs – bus geri metai, jei žiemuos 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 griaušmas ašgriaudžia rytuos, tai bus sausi metai, žiemuos – 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 šiaulėniškiai 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. (BrėNR: 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 cancrorum*): “*Neužgriausta vėžia girmela išėma krislų iš akės.*” (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:

Pavasarij, 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, išeinąs 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:

Pavasarij, kol dar griausmas negriaudžia, reikia nuveiti kimsynan, pasigauti rudoji gyvatė ir įsispraudus kuokan parsinešt namo. Tada to gyvatį paimi, galvą ikiši butelin ir visa įlenda. Kai gyvatė jau butely, tai reikia užpilt arielku, o jeigu jos nėra, tai ir vandeniui, tegul ji ten mirksta. Paskui, kai pastovi, tai nėra niekur geresnės liekarstos kaip tas skystimas. Duoda jį vaikam nuo priemėčio, gyvuliam nuo pelių, nuo išpūtimo, kiaulėm, kai nėra, deda į ėdalą visur. Tik reikia, kad būtų neužgriausta. Bo gyvatė, kaip tik užgriaudžia, tai tuoj maino savo skūrų ir tada jau nebeliekarsta.

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)

Pavasarij, kol griausmas neažgriaudžia, gyvatė yra didžiausias vaistas, o ažgriaudus jas gydamoja 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 gyvatė 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 jch ohne einige schmerzen auffgelöset seyen and dort im Himmel meinem Gott dienen, und daraus hätte jch schliessen können, dass jch Gottes Kind wäre, weil Er mit seinem Kinde dem Dievaite mich zu sich nehme.*” (BRMŠ 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

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- BRMŠ – *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai*. (2003). Sudarė Norbertas Vėlius (Sources of Baltic Religion and Mythology. Compiled by Norbertas Vėlius). Vol. 3. Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas.
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- LT – *Lietuvių tauta*. (Lithuanian People. Journal of the Lithuanian Scientific Society). Vilnius, 1923, 3.

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