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THE IMAGE OF HEAVEN AND THE MOTIFS OF CREATION OF THE SUN IN BALTIC MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract

The subject of the present article are motifs of the creation of the Sun in Lithuanian and Latvian cosmogonic theories. These motifs are presented in the framework of the conception of heaven in its entirety. Baltic creation stories are compared with those of the Finno-Ugrian mythology.

Keywords: Baltic mythology, Finno-Ugrian mythology, Cosmogony, Heaven, Creation of the Sun, Sun.

Resumen

El tema de este artículo es el análisis de los motivos de la creación del sol en los mitos cosmogónicos de Lituania y de Letonia. Estos mitos están comprendidos dentro del marco de la concepción general del cielo. Son comparados los relatos bálticos sobre la creación con los de las mitologías finougrias.

Palabras clave: Mitología báltica, Mitología finougria, Cosmogonía, Cielo, Creación del sol, Sol.

The investigation of ancient Baltic cosmogonic theories, related to the mythological world outlook, reveals an exceptional place of the stories about the creation of celestial bodies. The themes of the creation of heaven and its elements – the Sun, the Moon, the constellations and the peculiarities of their origin – are to be found both in Baltic folklore and in written sources.

The present article is devoted only to the study of the theme of the creation of the Sun and to the aspects of its liberation as its ‘birth’ or ‘rebirth’, and these motifs are presented in the framework of the conception of heaven in its entirety. An attempt is made to offer some ideas, which might serve as a stimulus in defining the perspective of the solution of some mythological problems.

In this study, Baltic cosmogonic stories are compared with those of the Finno-Ugrian mythology. Though the Finno-Ugrians are not genetically related to the Balts,

and their languages belong to different families, nevertheless their cultures contain analogies, which could be accounted for by affinities of typological character or as a result of prolonged contacts between these two ethnicities. The investigation of mythological archaisms on the basis of a wider area of their distribution enables more precise conclusions about their chronology, nature and semantics of the phenomena concerned.

A peculiar feature of Baltic mythology is the manner of its preservation – it is found mainly in folklore either as prose narratives or sometimes as certain semantic poetical stereotypes in songs and lamentations. However, historical sources, containing information about heaven, celestial bodies and their worship, are few. The extant written records indicate that the Balts venerated the Sun, the Moon and the stars, in addition to other objects of nature. Corresponding allusions can be found in the works of Peter von Dusburg and Nicolaus von Jeroschin in the fourteenth century, Jan Długosz, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini and Marcus Antonius Coccius Sabellicus in the fifteenth century (BRMŠ p. 333, 344, 358, 367, 546, 566, 591, 595, 606–609). True, the testimonies of foreign authors often present the conception of the ancient Baltic religion in an oversimplified way. Failing to perceive the veneration aspect of the objects of nature, they (with the exception of Piccolomini) did not record any detailed comments about the place of celestial bodies in the Baltic world outlook.

The Baltic viewpoint towards heaven is actually inherited from the Indo-European mythological thought. In Indo-European mythology, heaven is one of the three components of the universe (the heavens- the earth – the nether worlds), and it is accorded particular importance. Heaven is associated with the Supreme God of the pantheon, God the Father (Old Indian *Dyáus pitâ* ‘God the Father’, ‘God the Heaven’), because that was the way heaven was conceived, that is, a power ruling the world, equal to the role of the father in Indo-European patriarchal society¹. Heaven and its gods were conceived as furnishing the necessary surroundings for the existence of humans – light, water (in the shape of rain), and to a great degree conditioning the welfare, which in its turn influenced the spiritual state of the being. Therefore, heaven and the light emitted from there as well as the meteorological phenomena having to do with heaven were under constant observation in all the periods of the year day and night, while the celestial bodies were frequently personified and treated as deities or their manifestations.

¹ Т.В. Гамкрелидзе, В.В. Иванов. *Индоевропейский язык и индоевропейцы*. Тбилиси, 1984, т. 2, р. 791.

A close relationship between god and heaven is attested by the etymology of the I.-E. **t'ieu(s)* 'god'. This word is related to the root **t'ei-* 'to light, to radiate'². The same root is detected in Lith. *dievas*, Latvian *dievs*, Old Prussian *deiws* 'god'. Lexically the connection between 'god' and 'heaven' is quite obvious in the Baltic languages. The Finnish *taivas* 'heaven' and the Estonian *taevas* 'heaven' are undoubtedly cognates of the Lithuanian word, denoting 'god'. *Taivas*, *taevas* are loan-words from the Baltic languages. This word must have reached the Finno-Ugric tribes, when they, migrating from the Urals and the Volga River, came to the shores of the Baltic Sea and became the northern neighbours of the Balts (that migration must have taken place ca. 1200 BC). A question can arise: did the Finno-Ugric peoples have their own concept of heaven as god prior to their arrival or did they form it under the influence of the Balts? An etymological analysis of the Finno-Ugric theonyms could give the answer to that question. One of such names is - *Ilmarinen*, god of wind and good weather of the Finns. It can be associated with the Finnish word *ilma* meaning 'wind, storm, weather', and it can also mean 'sky, heaven'. Its equivalent in Udmurt mythology is *Inmar*, believed to have been composed of Udmurt *in*, *iñ*, *im* 'sky, weather'. The Udmurts treated Inmar as the God of sky and weather. The evident relationship of this theonym with the sky would suggest that the Finno-Ugric peoples had the same conception of the sky as god and closely associated these two concepts.

The next question concerns the Baltic god which could also imply the sphere of the sky and express the idea of heaven as embodying God the Father. Normally the historians of religion attribute the role of the god as heaven to the Supreme God of the pantheon. The data about the Lithuanian Supreme God are scarce. Written sources contain several theonyms denoting supremacy in the hierarchy: *Nunadej* (the Form in the Source *Нънадеєви*), *Andaj* (*Андая*), *Auxtheias Vissagistis*, *Ockopirmus* (BRMŠ p. 257, 260). Since the shapes and functions of the deities, bearing these names, are far from clear, it has been surmised that the role of such a god was that of *deus otiosus*, that is, an abstract and inactive god. However, there is much more information relating to another Baltic god *Perkūnas* (Latvian *Pērkons*, Prussian *Percunis*) – a god, ruling over the elements, thunder and lightning, and also having to do with heaven and, according to some suppositions, meaning 'heaven proper'³. Besides, God the Thunder, being closely connected with heaven, could also be conceived as God the

² Ibid.

³ Martti Haavio. *Mitologia fińska*. Warszawa, 1979, p. 137-138.

Father. The paternal function of *Perkūnas*, *Pērkons* is emphasized by his other names: Lith. *Tėtis* ('father'; Klvk p. 111), Lith. *vėšas tėvulis* ('old daddy'; BsFM p. 178), Latvian *vecāis tēvs* ('old father'; LTdz 7845).

Speaking about the Baltic and Finno-Ugric mythological parallels it is worth noting that the name *Perkūnas* has left a trace in the Finno-Ugric tradition. The Mordvin theonym *Pirgene* is considered to be a slightly modified loanword from the Baltic *Perkūnas*. According to one tendency of the Baltic mythological studies, God the Thunder is considered below the Supreme God, though there is also a viewpoint that 'initially God the Heaven (= Supreme God) and God the Thunder were one and the same personified being'. The divergence took place later, and the resulting God of the storm was subordinated to God the Heaven.⁴ Both suppositions lack definitive proofs, and only an *a priori* choice is possible at present. Nevertheless, it is a noteworthy fact that the Baltic God the Thunder was considered to have associations with heaven and could be perceived as father. Moreover, if account is taken of the presumption that God the Thunder could occupy the position of the Supreme God (or that the Supreme God could have relegated him certain functions, among them that of thundering), it would seem quite logical to surmise that at a certain period the image of God the Thunder could also incarnate the ideologeme of heaven as God the Father.

Thus, the image of heaven as god, as God the Father, as the conception of the light encircling the human world and of the power mysteriously influencing it, has been preserved in Baltic mythology. Heaven, on the one hand, was imagined as an indivisible entity, as the god occupying the upper sphere of the mythological world. On the other hand, this entire celestial plane was further articulated, divided from the viewpoint of mytho-poetical consciousness into certain significant objects – the heavenly bodies (the Sun, the Moon, Venus, the Great Bear/*Ursa Maior*, the Pleiades, etc.), which were treated as separate mythological personages or their attributes.

A specific mytho-poetical thinking of the human beings is revealed in the Lithuanian and Latvian folk stories having to do with the creation of celestial bodies. It is noteworthy that some of the texts originated under the influence of the Bible. All in all, in Lithuanian and Latvian narrative folklore, related to the creation of the elements of the world, there are rather many Christian fragments, often intertwined with ancient mythological motifs. These are very interesting phenomena of religious syncretism, which are not always easy to disentangle and identify.

Lithuanian and Latvian legends contain a story about the creation of the Sun. It

was forged by a smith:

Senais laikais gyveno žmogus kalvis. Tada buvo visur tamsu, naktis ir naktis. Tai šis kalvis nutarė nukalti saulę. Paėmęs blizgančią geležį, kalė kalė ir nukalė per šešerius metus. Tada, užlipęs ant aukščiausios trobos, įmetė ją į dangų. Ir iki šios dienos ji ten tebestovi.⁵

Agrāk ticēja, ka Dievs licis kalējam uzkalta apaļu ripu. Kalējs uzkalis. Tad Dievs nokrāsojis apaļo ripu zelta krāsā un pakāris to pie debesīm. Tā radusies saule. (LTT p. 35)

The Lithuanian legend tells that in olden times, when it was pitch dark everywhere, a certain smith made up his mind to forge the Sun. Out of iron he hammered it for six years. Then he climbed up the tallest hut and threw his work into the sky where it can be found up to the present day. According to a similar Latvian legend God asked a smith to make a round flat object. The smith did as he was told. Then God painted the disk red and hung it in the sky. That was the way the Sun appeared. These two legends are connected by the figure of the smith and his cosmogonic work – the making of the Sun and its placing in the sky.

This motif is recorded in a historical source, too – as an insertion in the Chronicle of Joannes Malalas in 1261. In it the smith is called Teljavel' (Телявели). In the Chronicle this insertion is located next to a list of Baltic and Finno-Ugric deities. Teljavel' is reported to have made the Sun and flung it into the sky (BRMŠ p. 266). The existence of this motif both in folklore and in one of the oldest and considered most reliable records of Baltic mythology attests to the authenticity of the motif. Though in the legends the smith is not referred to by name, he nevertheless can be identified with Teljavel' on the basis of the same creative action.

The Baltic mythological smith as a demiurge could be compared to the Finnish and Karelian smith Ilmarinen. Both Teljavel' and Ilmarinen are creators, considered to be the producers of the heavens, the upper mythical sphere of the world or of its objects. Teljavel', makes the Sun, Ilmarinen forget the sky, Sun and Moon (Klvi 49). In historical sources both of them are identified as gods.⁷ Besides, the two mythical figures are characterized by ambivalence – the ties with the opposite extremes of the mythical universe, that is, heaven (they create it and its elements) and the netherworld (this is attested by the image of the Lithuanian smith as Velnias (the devil) and by the fact that Ilmarinen performs his creative function in Pohjola (Klvi 49). A further

⁴ Jonas Balys, *Lietuvių tautosakos skaitymai*. Tübingen, 1948, d. 2, p. 14.

⁵ *Kaip atsirado Žemė: Lietuvių etiologinės sakmės*. Sudarė ir parengė Norbertas Vėlius. Vilnius, 1986, p. 15.

investigation of the parallels of Baltic and Finno-Ugrian mythology should prove whether the analogies between these smiths are accidental or not.

The motif of the creation of the Sun is related to the story about its capture – both motifs could be treated as tattered and altered fragments of the myth. A similar story is found in Latvian narrative folklore and in a Baltic fifteenth-century record, describing some Lithuanian beliefs (BRMŠ p. 595).

According to the Latvian legend at the time when Velns / Valns (the devil) still lived on good terms with God, the former once boasted to God that he had extremely beautiful and bright things and showed the hidden Sun and Moon:

Kaidu reizi Dīvs ar Valnu dzeivojuši draudzeigi. Jī vīns uz ūtru gōjuši cīmūs. Dīvs līlejīs, ka šam asūt daudz labeibas. Valns arī stōstejis sovu bogoteibu. Valns pastōstejis Dīvam, ka šam asūt tik leli skaistumi un gaišumi, ka leidz šam taidus Dīvs naasūt vēļ redzējis. Dīvs reizi aizgōjis pi Valna, un Valns jam parōdejis sauli un mēnesi. Dīvs prasejis, lai īdūdūt šam pacilōt, vai šī skaistumi asūt arī smagi. Valns arī atļōvis. Dīvs paņēmis sauli lobajā rūkā un mēnesi kreisajā un, kai svīdis sauli, tai tū īsvīdis debesīs; arī mēnesi ar kreisū rūku īsvīdis debesīs. Tai Dīvs atbreivōjis sauli un mēnesi nu Valna, un vēļ tagad tī speid debesīs. (LTT p. 35)

On seeing the luminaries God asked for permission to try how heavy they were. Velns(*Valns*) agreed, and God took the Sun into his right hand and the Moon into his left and flung them into the sky. Since that time they had been shining there. Thus the legend accounts for the appearance of the Sun and the Moon in the sky. It is noteworthy that before that time these celestial bodies had been at the disposal of the Velns, a figure representing the netherworld and the world of the dead. They had been hidden and shut by him, and it was only God who managed to free them and place in the sky.

The motif of the Sun's capture has not been found in Lithuanian folklore. Nevertheless, as has been mentioned, a similar story was recorded by the historian and politician Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini in his work *Historiarum ubique gestarum locorumque descripto*, Venice, 1477. Piccolomini himself had not visited Lithuania, and the monk Jeronim Jan Silvanus Pražsky (b. ca. 1369) furnished him some material about this country. Basing himself on the information of that monk, he states:

Profectus introrsus aliam gentem reperit, quae Solem colebat, et malleum ferreum rarae magnitudinis singulari cultu uenerabatur. Interrogati sacerdotes, quid ea sibi ueneratio uellet, responderunt olim pluribus mensibus non fuisse uisum Solem, quem rex potentissimus captum reclusisset in carcere munitissimae turris. Signa zodiaci deinde opem tulisse Soli, ingentique malleo perfregisse turrim, Solemque liberatum hominibus restituisse. Dignum itaque ueneratu instrumentum esse, quo mortales lucem recepissent. (BRMŠ p. 591)

This extract informs the reader that during the voyage of Jeronim Pražsky through Lithuania a tribe was found which venerated the Sun and an iron hammer of enormous dimensions. ‘Asked about the meaning of that worship, the priests answered that for months they had not seen the Sun which the powerful king had captured and locked in the most strongest tower. Then the signs of the zodiac came to the aid of the Sun. They destroyed the tower with a huge hammer, freed the Sun and returned it back to the people. That is why the tool, with the help of which the mortals recovered the Sun, should be held in great esteem’ (BRMŠ p. 595).

The myth, recorded by Piccolomini, has not been investigated in more detail so far. Nonetheless, it is worth greater attention. This story, as well as the aforementioned about the creation of the Sun and the Moon, are quite extensively developed in the mythology of the northern Baltic neighbours – the Finns and the Karelians. *Kalevala* speaks about the capture of the Sun and the Moon. These two celestial bodies descend to listen to Väinämöinen playing kantele. Just then they are caught by Louhi, the ruler of Pohjola. She grabs the Moon from the birch and the Sun from the fir-tree, takes them to Pohjola and hides in a tall rocky mountain. The earth is enveloped in complete darkness (Klvi 47, 5-24). Afterwards Ilmarinen produces a new Sun and a new Moon, but cannot make them shine. Having learned that the luminaries are in the mountain in Pohjola, Väinämöinen sets out to free them. He cannot get inside the mountain and returns home for the tools. While he is making the tools, Louhi, filled with foreboding, lets the Sun and the Moon out of the rock. They immediately rise up into the sky (Klvi 49, 1-384). According to another variety of the myth, rendered in the Karelian hymn about the Sun’s liberation (which E. N. Setälä treats as ‘the most sacred pearl of our folk poetry’), the memory goes back to the times when everywhere was darkness⁶. Then the Son of the God (according to other version the smith’s daughter) decides to go and search for the Sun and the Moon, hidden in Hiitola, the ‘land of devils’⁷. The heavenly bodies are found and freed. The Sun is lifted into a tree and placed on its middle branch, where it has been shining for humans up to the present days⁸. The myth must have experienced the influence of Christianity – that is evident in the transformation of the Sun’s liberator into God the Son. The liberator of the other variety – the smith’s daughter must be a figure of an older version, preceding that of God the Son. The view that the Sun can be freed by somebody

⁶ M. Haavio, p. 136.

⁷ Ibid p. 230.

⁸ Ibid p. 230-233.

associated with the smith is corroborated by a Lithuanian myth, according to which the Sun is freed with a hammer – a tool, peculiar to the craft of the smith. If the Sun is created with a hammer, the liberation of this heavenly body with a hammer would seem logical, too. The Sun's liberation could be treated as its 'birth or rebirth', that is, the renewal of its functions.

In Baltic mythology the abductor of the Sun and the Moon is a mythical creature of the underworld, associated with the realm of the dead – the Velnias/Velns (the Sun's hijacker can be a king as well), while in Karelian and Finnish myths it is Louhi, the ruler of Pohjola, belonging to the land of the north, 'the other world'. Thus, all the captors of these heavenly bodies are representatives of the mythical universe, having to do with darkness and the realm of the dead.

The liberators of the celestial bodies in Baltic mythology are God or the signs of the zodiac with a hammer, meanwhile in Finnish and Karelian tradition they are Väinämöinen, the smith's daughter or the Son of the God. They can transfer the celestial body from the realm of darkness to the opposite world, the sphere of heaven and light, and from there they can function illuminating the middle world, inhabited by humans.

The Baltic idea of heaven, having to do with God the Father – the male deity of the highest status – is considered to have dated back to Indo-European culture. However, such a mythologeme of heaven as god could be treated as rather universal and widespread not only in Indo-European culture, but among other archaic cultures as well. The relics of this viewpoint are also attested by Finno-Ugrian tradition. The image of heaven in Baltic and Finno-Ugrian mythology is connected with the image of the god-smith, who can do the function of the demiurge – the creator of celestial bodies. The themes of the sky, the god-smith, the creation of the Sun related ancient Baltic cosmogonic theories with Finno-Ugrian creation stories.

In general, the contacts between Baltic culture and Finno-Ugrian mythological traditions have not yet been subjected to any closer research, although the analysis of age-long neighbourly ties can produce interesting results, as has been demonstrated by the interpretation of the creation of heavenly bodies. The results of the contacts between the Finno-Ugrian peoples and the Balts were unquestionable. Therefore it can be stated that the investigation of the relations of these two cultures must be a rewarding field of research.

Abbreviations

- BRMŠ *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai*. T. 1 : Nuo seniausių laikų iki XV amžiaus pabaigos. Sudarė Norbertas Vėlius. Vilnius, 1996.
- BsFM Jonas Bassanavičius. *Fragmenta mithologiae: Perkunas – Velnias* // Mitteilungen der Litauischen Litterarischen Gesellschaft . Heidelberg, 1887, Bd. 2.
- KlvK Vilius Kalvaitis. *Lietuviškų vardu klėtelė su 15 000 vardu*. Tilžė, 1910.
- Klvl *Kalevala*. Vertė Justinas Marcinkevičius. Vilnius, 1972.
- LTdz *Latviešu tautasdziesmas*. Izlasi kārtojuši: A. Ancelāne, K. Arājs, M. Asare, R. Drīzule, V. Greble. Rīga, 1959, sēj. 3.
- LTT *Latviešu tautas teikas. Izcelšanās teikas*. Izlase. Sastādītāja un ievada autore Alma Ancelāne. Rīga, 1991s.