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# English Translations of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Latin Sources on Baltic Religion and Mythology

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*Pagans in the Early Modern Baltic. Sixteenth-Century Ethnographic Accounts of Baltic Paganism*, edited and translated from Latin by Francis Young, Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2022, 192 p., ISBN 978-1-64189-437-1

Francis Young is a UK-based historian and folklorist focusing on Church history, popular religion, and folklore. He is the author and editor or co-author of over 20 books on the history of Early Modern English Catholicism, monasticism, the cult of St Edmund, the history of exorcism, witchcraft, magic, and British folklore. He has a PhD in history from Cambridge University. He is a professional indexer of academic books, and a translator specialising in Medieval and Early Modern Latin. He is also a reader and lay canon in the Church of England [1].

*Pagans in the Early Modern Baltic. Sixteenth-Century Ethnographic Accounts of Baltic Paganism* is a collection of translations into English of ten historic sources on Baltic paganism in Latin. Although the book's subtitle states that it covers the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in fact the timeframe is broader by almost half a century, and covers the period from 1458 to 1582,<sup>1</sup> and is called by the author 'the "long" sixteenth century'

1 The summary in Lithuanian states inaccurately that the book consists of translations of 11 sources, and the time frame is rounded off, i. e. 1450 to 1590 (p. 171). If this is not a proofreading error, it would certainly be interesting to know what other sources the author planned to publish in this

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(p. 2). The main body of the texts is preceded by an introduction, which gives a general overview of the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the specifics of the Christening of the country, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation. It outlines the idea of Baltic paganism, and the relationship between the concepts of gods (in Latin *dii*) and spirits (*numina*), as well as the implementation of the two ‘pillars of late medieval and early modern religious hermeneutics’ (p. 24), *interpretatio Romana* and *interpretatio Christiana*.

Young explains his choice of sources by several reasons. Firstly, he was driven by a personal research agenda that focused on expressions of popular Christianity and the question of ‘pagan survivals’ in the long and arduous period of the transition from the Middle Ages to the Reformation and the Post-Reformation era, and his longstanding fascination with the pagan past of Lithuania. He adds later that the importance of such books about the borderlands became particularly apparent after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Russia’s threats against the Baltic States, since they ‘sharpen many scholars’ awareness of the urgency of communicating the history and culture of East-Central Europe to a Western European and North American public to whom the region is still largely unknown’ [2]. The apparent realisation that this region is still visible through the colonial gaze was, I think, an unexpected and unpleasant discovery for many of us. This way, the book by Young not only reveals the hierarchical relationship between the authors of the texts and the ‘barbarians’ they describe, which can be scientifically explained in terms of the period of Christian missionary expansion and European geographical discoveries, but it also serves as a sort of reminder that atavistic plumes of imperial ideology can erupt even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such unexpected parallels between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries add symbolic value to this book.

Secondly, Young chose texts which represented the growing interest in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe in the Baltic peoples of Prussia and Lithuania as a result of political and ideological considerations. What is more, it represented a rise in humanist thought when the curiosity of Early Modern European scholars partially overcame the abhorrence of alien ancestral belief systems and led ‘from anti-pagan polemic to humanist proto-ethnography’ (p. 1). Young formulates the valuable assumption that Early Modern writings on the Baltic peoples could later serve as a model for future works about the indigenous peoples of the New World: ‘The ethnographic discourse developed by writers on the non-Christian peoples of Europe, whether Baltic pagans or Muslim Tatars and Turks, created the space for positive evaluations of indigenous cultures in the aftermath of European contact with the Americas, and provided a language, conceptual framework, and

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 edition, or if, for example, Jan Malecki and Hieronim Malecki were counted as two authors in the original draft of the book.

range of imagery for scholars seeking to describe beliefs very different from their own' (p. 1–2).

The authors whose works were chosen for translation, though, came from diverse ethnic and professional backgrounds, and the different degrees of connection and familiarity with the Baltic in fact reprised all these criteria. Five of the featured authors were Polish (Jan Długosz, Maciej z Miechowa, Jan and Hieronim Malecki, and Jan Łasicki), three were Italian (Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Filippo Buonacorssi and Alessandro Guagnini), two were Lithuanian (Martynas Mažvydas and Michalo Litanus), and one was German (Johannes Stüler, better known as Erasmus Stella).

The importance of this book was clear even before it was published. This is evident from the financial support it received in the form of a Book Publication Subvention from the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies. The book has also already attracted the attention of researchers of Baltic studies. First of all, in the spring of 2022, an online presentation of it was organised by the Lithuanian Embassy in London [3]. Francis Young was welcomed by Renatas Norkus, the Lithuanian ambassador to the United Kingdom, and joined by several panel guests: Toms Kēncis PhD, a researcher in mythology and folklore at the University of Latvia's Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art Archives of Latvian Folklore, Vytautas Ališauskas, a professor of cultural history at Vilnius University, and Pavel Horák PhD, a visiting researcher at the University of Cambridge. The book was also reviewed by well-known scholars in the field of religion and mythology from the Baltic States: Eglė Aleknaitė, an anthropologist of religion, from Lithuania (Aleknaitė 2023), and Aldis Pūtelis, a folklorist and mythologist, from Latvia (Pūtelis 2023).

This summer, Francis Young gained even more notoriety, and has become widely known as an expert on Baltic religion in the United Kingdom. He was approached by numerous media outlets to comment on the appearance of a mysterious carved pole on a coastal path in Kent which had the inscription 'Perkūnas', referring to the Baltic (or more specifically, Lithuanian) God of Thunder [4, 5, 6]. We can say that Young's knowledge of Baltic religion is profound, and his popularity is indeed well deserved.

I first came across the name of Francis Young a few years ago when I read his essay 'The Myth of Medieval Paganism', where he critically explores the idea 'that something called "paganism" existed in Medieval society as a mode of conscious resistance to Christianity', and argued about the myth of the pagan Middle Ages that it:

dates back centuries, with beginnings in the Middle Ages themselves, when the charge of paganism proved useful in theological controversies. The idea that sects of sorcerers worshipped the devil and offered sacrifices to him emerged in the writings of

fourteenth-century demonologists. This legend allowed individuals accused of sorcery and witchcraft to be tried for apostasy, since they were said to have switched from worship of God to worship of the devil. In the sixteenth century, Protestant critics of the Catholic Church made heavy use of the accusation that Catholicism was a form of paganism, since it permitted practices such as veneration of saints and relics. For post-Reformation Protestants, the Middle Ages were pagan because they were Catholic.

In the nineteenth century, anti-Catholicism combined with a Romantic fantasy of pagan sorcery as a rebellion against the institutional power of the Church [...]. Nineteenth-century folklorists classified many folk customs as relics of a pre-Christian past, creating the impression that Europe's peasants had remained essentially pagan beneath a cultural veneer of Christianity throughout the medieval period and beyond (Young 2020).

Young's focus on the fact that researchers often tend to label old phenomena as 'pagan' when they do not seem obviously Christian has a basis. As he puts it further, 'the fact that a person had been baptised and had ceased to sacrifice to ancestral gods did not necessarily mean that he had abandoned other pre-Christian cultural practices, perhaps including some forbidden by the Church' and 'it is likely that for many baptized ex-pagans and their descendants, the continuation of some form of ancestral worship simply happened, without reflection or argument' and therefore 'a person who was securely Christian by medieval lights might look awfully pagan to us' (Young 2020). These arguments resonate with me, as an important and cautious methodological assumption.

However, on the other hand, this quite rigorous approach to paganism is generally more characteristic of historians than scholars of religion, both worldwide and in Lithuania (see, for example, the works by Rowell [1994], and by Rowell and Baronas [2015]). It seems that Young also supports their view that 'organized paganism was essentially extinct in Lithuania by 1387. The idea of pagan Lithuania 'was, rather, a rhetorical *topos*' (p. 8–9) necessary for ideological reasons. Thus, he seems to think that Christianity took root in Lithuania quickly and easily enough, and that all the ancient remains described in historical sources were in many cases the results of *interpretatio Romana* or *interpretatio Christiana*, and represented ethnographic relics, rather than the still living rudiments of Baltic religion and mythology not long after the official christening of Lithuania and Samogitia and the still weak catechesis of the peasantry in rural areas. As Eglė Aleknaitė summarises in her review of the book, these two approaches represent 'a long-term tension between Lithuanian historians and ethnologists, mythologists, historians of religion, and scholars of religious studies, with the former devaluing the methodologies and conceptual frameworks used by the latter' because of 'the politics of disciplines and differences of disciplinary perspectives' (Aleknaitė 2023: 146).

We can add that due to the lack of substantial *emic* sources on Baltic paganism, as well as accounts written by the pagans themselves, the usual methodological approach by Lithuanian scholars of mythology is to study paganism not so much diachronically as synchronically, by juxtaposing historical *etic* sources with late ethnographic and folklore material. As the researcher on Baltic religions Gintaras Beresnevičius puts it in his seminal article ‘On the Possibility of Reconstructing the Lithuanian Religion and Mythology’, everything we know about the ancient Lithuanian religion and mythology is based only on fragmentary sources, combined with late folklore and ethnographic material. He shares the idea that this is a rather dangerous scientific stance, because in the very wide field of folklore and ethnography we can find whatever details we want, confirming or denying any hypothesis. Unfortunately, it is not possible to do otherwise (Beresnevičius 1998: 29–30). Therefore, we should bear in mind that the results we get at the end of our research can never be considered as a final and definite reconstruction of the pagan mythological system. Thus, only a never-ending process of reconstructing is available (Beresnevičius 1998: 32).

It seems that Young’s approach is also marked by a certain cautiousness, and he calls it ‘a slender body of evidence’ (p. 9), from which an attempt to reconstruct Baltic paganism should be ‘undertaken with the utmost caution’ (p. 10). He pays attention to the fact that ‘Pre-Christian religion cannot be reliably reconstructed from practices in a Christianized society assumed to derive from pre-Christian religion, since whether practices are deemed “pagan” or not will depend, in most cases, on little more than subjective intuition and personal prejudice,’ and hence both the ‘attempts at reconstruction and systematization based on folkloric material and comparative mythology (such as the work of Norbertas Vėlius, Algirdas Greimas, Jonas Trinkūnas and Gintaras Beresnevičius)’ are debated and historiographically problematic (p. 9).

In compiling his publication, Young primarily draws on his expertise as a specialist in Church history, which is why he uses the phrase ‘ethnographic descriptions’ in the subtitle of the book, rather than the more usual reference to ‘Baltic religion and mythology’, which is commonly used by Lithuanian scholars when referring to sources for this period (e. g. the titles of the sourcebooks compiled by N. Vėlius [1996–2005] and V. Ališauskas [2016]).

Although Young continually emphasises changes in the views of the authors of the texts with regard to the establishment of a humanist world-view, it is nevertheless clear that this edition of sources presents primarily a Christian imagining of pagans in Early Modern Europe, the interaction between paganism and Christianity as it was seen by their respective authors of Christian affiliation, and ‘represent more of the author’s than the actual local people’s views’ (Pūtelis 2023: 177).

Although Young explains that he chose sources in Latin because it was then the universal language of scholarly communication in Western Christendom, it is obvious that the choice was also determined by his personal skills in Latin and his insufficient command of the Lithuanian language.<sup>2</sup> The book would therefore have benefited greatly from a special editor and a native-speaker Lithuanian proofreader, since it has some disappointing spelling errors and general inconsistencies. For example, some entries in Lithuanian in the bibliography are written according to English rules of punctuation, capitalising each word in the title, which looks weird to a native speaker (p. 165–170). Next to the article by Beresnevičius, the chapter title ‘Baltų mitologijos fragmentai’ is spelt erroneously, and is written in place of the title of the journal *Tautosakos darbai* in which the essay was published (p. 167). The name of Martynas Mažvydas is sometimes spelt ‘Martinas’, most likely by linking the Lithuanian name to the Latin form of the name Martinus. The Lithuanian word signified by Długosz’s *Znicz* is *žynys*, not *Žinis* (p. 45). A Lithuanian editor would probably have given some advice that Michalo the Lithuanian is not really such a mysterious and ‘obscure figure whose true identity remains unclear’ (p. 27), and that there are a number of studies that provide clues as to who is behind this pseudonym. The most overlooked point is the difference between the titles of sources in the table of contents (where the author is not even mentioned, only the title) and next to the sources. In fact, the titles of the chapters in Latin and English also vary greatly, the Latin chapter lacking the name of the author, which is indicated only next to the translation into English. Although the dates when the sources were composed or published are crucial to this edition, they are indicated only next to two translations (p. VI, Nos 5 and 6) in the table of contents, and in the book itself only next to the chapter titles of the translations into English. These weaknesses are not fundamental, but they are annoying, and at times call into question the value of the book as a serious scholarly source.

Due to the chosen period and the principle of selection, with Latin sources being chosen as the main ones, some important works have been left out, since they were written in German, Polish or Lithuanian. This principle has also completely left out documents about Latvian paganism, as in early sources Prussian and Lithuanian beliefs received much more attention (Pūtelis 2023: 177).

Therefore, for a local researcher familiar with these sources, it is evident that by presenting only the Latin preface by Mažvydas and omitting the Lithuanian one, the mythological information provided in his Catechism is somehow incomplete.

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 2 On his Twitter account, Young has said that for some time he has been learning Lithuanian, with slow success, and that he has also started learning Polish. Given his diligence and productivity, one can expect him to become fluent in these languages in the near future, and to continue the complex work of translating sources on Baltic religions from other languages.

In Lithuanian studies, these two prefaces are usually used to complement each other, and, what is more, the Lithuanian preface is referred to more often, as it provides a wider variety of mythological curiosities.

It is fair to say that this book is like a direct reprimand to the Lithuanian academic community, and its inability to translate and publish key research titles and sourcebooks into English. Up till now, the most easily accessed sources on the pagan Baltic religion were the two late 19th-century volumes of *Źródła do mytologii litewskiej* ('Sources of Lithuanian Mythology') compiled by the Polish philologist and mythologist Antoni Mierzyński (1892, 1896), and *Letto-Preussische Götterlehre* ('Latvian and Prussian Mythology') by the German mythologist and folklorist Mannhardt Wilhelm, published in 1936. These books present the sources in their original languages, and are supplemented by detailed comments in Polish and German. Obviously, these titles are known and used by scholars of religion. On the other hand, in the world of contemporary research where English is the new *lingua franca*, as Pūtelis correctly notes (2023: 177), modern researchers cannot easily read either Latin or (alas!) German, Polish or Russian, and these were the languages that were mainly used to write about Lithuania until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not to mention such niche languages as Lithuanian and Latvian themselves.

Another edition of sources of Baltic mythology and religion in four volumes appeared only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century as a result of the huge efforts and long preparatory work by the late Lithuanian mythologist and folklorist Norbertas Vėlius and his assistants (Vėlius 1996–2005). The volumes present texts both in the original languages and in translation into Lithuanian. Every text is preceded by two concise introductions about the historical context and religious or mythological images. It is noteworthy that the first volume is supplemented by an informative introduction on the character of the sources of Baltic religion and mythology in three languages, Lithuanian, English and German (Vėlius 1996: 22–112). It has always been known that new, hitherto unknown sources on Baltic religion and mythology, or texts so far not in scientific circulation, may yet emerge. Such new discoveries in archives in Vilnius, Rome and Krakow, as well as in various corpuses of ecclesiastical or secular documents, were compiled by the Lithuanian diplomat, philosopher and mythologist Vytautas Ališauskas in 2016 in *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos relikvai Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje (XIV–XVIII a.)* ('Relics of the Baltic Religion and Mythology in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania [16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries]'). The book starts with a short preface in English, but the introduction is only in Lithuanian. The newly discovered sources are published in their original language and in Lithuanian translation; however, the edition somehow lacks a more elaborate scientific apparatus.

Moreover, research on Baltic religion and mythology is still mainly represented in the world by the works of Algirdas Julius (Julien) Greimas (1994) and Marija Gimbutienė (Gimbutas, 1995), whose most mature parts of their careers were spent abroad without access to archives and libraries in Lithuania, and who applied their own specific methodological approaches. The only monograph by Vėlius translated into English, *The World Outlook of the Ancient Balts* (1989), was published in Lithuania and is hence difficult to obtain in other countries. In addition, the book does not present the most important research by Vėlius, but is based on a very distinct approach, which on one hand was praised as the first study in the field of the geography of religions, but on the other hand was criticised as the author's pure fantasy. Last year, an Italian translation of a book about images of the afterlife in Lithuanian mythology by Beresnevičius was published (Beresnevičius 2022). Hopefully, this year yet another monograph on Perkūnas, the god of thunder, by Nijolė Laurinkienė in English translation will be published in Finland in the series Finnish Folklore Communications [7].

Since the time when in 1845 the German philologist Georg Nesselmann introduced the unifying term 'Baltic' and 'Balts' to denote the ethno-linguistic group of peoples who speak (or spoke) Baltic languages, there has been a certain tendency to write about the religions of the Baltic people and their worldview in general terms as an implicitly homogeneous phenomenon, not taking into account their differences. A recent example of such an approach to the Baltic people as 'a Baltic cultural and linguistic unit' might be the chapter 'Baltic Religion' by the Latvian literary scholar and orientalist Sigma Ankrava published in 2013 in Routledge's *Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe*. Although she supports the idea that 'in practice, each [Baltic] tribe may have had different rituals and practices. Nevertheless, there seems to have been a shared outlook on the world,' and therefore she chooses to describe Baltic religions with an emphasis on Latvian religious traditions (Ankrava 2013: 360), and presents books by Latvian authors only as suggested reading (Ankrava 2013: 371).

It is worth mentioning that Young also pays attention to this methodologically incorrect issue of merging the Baltic peoples and their religions into an artificially unified concept. He states clearly that 'in the first place, "Baltic religion" should not be understood as a single religion of Baltic peoples, each of whom had their own distinct religious practices; it is, rather a conventional term used for the pre-Christian ancestral religious beliefs and practices of the various Baltic peoples' (p. 7).

It could be stated that, in the context of the above-mentioned studies and research on Baltic religion and mythology, a book of sources on Baltic paganism is a necessary and long overdue publication in English. The principles of the selection of the texts, compilation, editing and commentaries meet the requirements for



publications of this type. Now we can only hope and look forward to the publication of new research on this region and its distinctive religious tradition. I also wish that Francis Young's passion and admiration for Lithuania will only grow stronger, and that we, the last pagans of Europe, will continue to have in his person a friendly chronicler.

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