

1. Introduction

Perkūnas, a pre-Christian Lithuanian deity, is one of the most popular and well-documented figures in traditional Baltic culture. Historical sources, folklore, and linguistic studies on toponyms, anthroponyms, and idioms all bear witness to the cult of Perkūnas, which was especially significant when Lithuanians were followers of their inherited religion. Lithuania was the last country in Europe to convert to Christianity, doing so as late as 1387 (1413 in Samogitia), but even after the conversion, religious syncretism in the country continued to leave evidence of the cult of Perkūnas. His image as a deity still exists in the subconscious of contemporary Lithuanians: the name of Perkūnas is used in proverbs, sayings, and curses, even if their true meanings are not always well understood.

Perkūnas was seen as dominating a specific realm tied closely to nature and the meteorological phenomena of the atmosphere. The aetiology of thunder was explained as the doing of Perkūnas, thus he is seen as a supernatural force in command of storms, lightning, and thunder. This fundamental aspect of Perkūnas as a deity is first and foremost acknowledged in Lithuanian oral folklore, which has preserved the main components of the archaic world-view and ensured its transmission from generation to generation.

The great deities reveal a world of imagery specific to their own realms of influence. According to the scholar of religious studies Herman Lommel, each of the Great Deities has their own world (1939: 8) that they reflect and represent. Perkūnas, one of the most important Baltic gods, reflects a whole mythic universe, as will be shown in this study. The world of Perkūnas is constituted of a certain time and space, certain attributes of the deity, and certain relations towards other mythic beings, as well as towards humans. The study aims to discover who Perkūnas really was, what his status and function in the pantheon were, what the rituals of his cult were, and, finally, what his role in the religion and mythology of ancient Lithuanians was.

The study is built on the historical-comparative method. As Perkūnas is of Indo-European origin, parallels are drawn with the mythological traditions of the peoples culturally connected to Lithuanians: Latvians, Slavs, the Germanic traditions, and also traditions of ancient India. Figures analogous with Perkūnas were also found in the traditions of Uralic (earlier commonly called Finno-Ugric) peoples with whom Baltic cultures had close historical contacts, especially Finns, Karelians, and Estonians. Finding such similarities and comparisons across different cultures aids in reconstructing the attributes of the Lithuanian deity and the imagery tied to him, understanding his origin,

genesis, and age – in other words, examining the object from a historical and genetic perspective. Such parallels are meant to reveal the evolution of the Lithuanian god of thunder in the context of traditions of other ethnic groups with which Baltic peoples came into contact.

Mythology is linked to language, into which an archaic worldview and world perception become integrated and thereby get recorded so that features of the past can be preserved and reconstructed through analysis. Therefore, place names and the names of natural objects with the root of the theonym *Perkūnas*, as well as the ones named directly after the phenomenon of the thunderstorm (Lithuanian *perkūnija*), are also examined. Based on linguistic data and previous linguistic studies, the etymology of the theonym *Perkūnas* is deconstructed.

The study aims not only to reveal the superficial features of the mythic imagery, but also to explore it from the perspective of religious studies and to highlight the fundamental spiritual meaning of the deity and his cult. Thus, the works of early-twentieth-century phenomenology of religion scholars Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade were of great use to me. One of the main requirements for religious philosophers in this field was to understand the core of a religious experience and to describe it, as accurately as possible, using the terminology of religious studies. This methodology was invaluable in exploring the meaning of the phenomena related to the deity of thunder in folk beliefs. However, an in-depth study of religious phenomena is impossible without a comprehensive review of empirical evidence. Therefore, numerous written and spoken sources were also used when drawing conclusions about the origins and attributes of the object in question. According to the religious scholar Friedrich Heiler, the worship of God and the relationship one has with Him all occur within a set semantic model (1961: 22). The corresponding “semantic model” for *Perkūnas*, reflected in folklore and in written sources, is thoroughly explored here.

The concept of *Perkūnas* is, of course, a reconstruction of the imagery formed in a certain cultural, historical, and social environment – one which the deity was imagined inhabiting. The reconstruction is based on surviving relics of the premodern Baltic worldview, as well as the worldview of related traditions, inasmuch as they were connected to the imagery of *Perkūnas*. Like archaeological finds, these relics were rearranged, combined, and connected with the aim of finding a fuller and more coherent image of the object examined.

The primary source material for this study is the abundant corpus of Lithuanian oral folklore: legends, beliefs, riddles, curses, proverbs, and, less commonly, folk songs. Historical sources that mentioned the deity were,

naturally, also examined. The oldest written sources mentioning the name of Perkūnas date back to the mid-thirteenth century. However, not all written sources are equally reliable; therefore, they were critically analysed, and the authenticity of some of the information they contain is called into question. The study benefits from the linguistic data found in the twenty volumes of *Lietuvių kalbos žodynas* ('The Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language', LKŽ), which is available in print and as a digital edition (LKŽe).

Most folklore used in this study has been accessed at the Lithuanian Folklore Archives of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (LTR; also see ARUODAIe). The following folklore card indexes, compiled by the employees of the institute, were used to collect information: the card index of the catalogue of Lithuanian narrative folklore compiled by Bronislava Keberlytė, the index of the catalogue of Lithuanian idioms and sayings compiled under the supervision of Kazys Grigas, and the index of the catalogue of Lithuanian folk song compiled by a team of the Institute's employees (see also Kerbelytė 2002; 2015; eLPP). The sources on archaic beliefs at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore and at the Ethnology Department of the Lithuanian Institute of History are also used. Linguistic information about Perkūnas was found at the Institute of the Lithuanian Language, where the toponyms connected to the proper or common noun *perkūnas* were selected in the Research Centre of the Baltic Languages and Onomastics at the Institute of the Lithuanian Language.

The material is extremely diverse. Folklore was not only collected through oral interviews done by researchers and enthusiasts; people also wrote down their own knowledge and sent to the archives, sometimes independently, sometimes answering questionnaires; school children were mobilised, turning them into interviewers and transcribers as part of their homework that could be sent to the archives, and so on. It was therefore necessary to investigate the reliability of each folklore record of this kind. All unreliable archival folklore material has been excluded from this study.

The adversary of Perkūnas is the *velnias* (plural *velniai*). *Velnias* is commonly translated 'devil' today and it is common in type systems developed for international comparison that terms like English *devil* are used to refer to vernacular supernatural agents like the *velnias* that disrupt order or are adversaries of God or Thunder. Although this type of category may be convenient and practical when making comparisons, the English term *devil* is bound up with Christian cosmological and moral ideas that are often irrelevant to the folklore material concerning the *velnias*. Theonyms and terms for mythic creatures become encoded with concentrated conceptions through their usage, which is obscured if not completely lost in translation. In this study, *velnias*

is retained as the lexeme used in Lithuanian for this mythic creature in order to retain the nature of the *velnias* as a distinct vernacular concept when discussed in English.¹ The Lithuanian language lacks articles, so the distinction between “a *velnias*”, “the *velnias*”, and “*Velnias*” that would be salient in English is lacking in the sources. As a consequence, the differentiation between *velnias* as a general type of agent and as a singular adversary of the thunder god is fluid and based on interpretation. In other words, any use of *velnias* may be interpreted as either “a devil” or “the Devil”, which makes it possible for some stories to be imagined as telling of Perkūnas’s encounters with a singular adversary *Velnias*, whom he may also slay, and others to be imagined as telling of Perkūnas’s hostility toward *velniai* generally. This ambiguity is in tandem with the ambiguity of whether *Perkūnas* refers to thunder as a phenomenon or Perkūnas as a god.

The study mainly focuses on narrative folklore, primarily legends. Bronislava Kerbelytė’s index of the catalogue of Lithuanian folktales (2002; in English 2001; 2015) shows that there are about twenty different types of plots that treat Perkūnas as one of their main characters. This number does not include legends in which *perkūnas* is mentioned merely as a natural phenomenon. Different types of legends are attested in different numbers of variants: while some plot types are found in seventy or eighty examples, others are found in only a few; still others are found in but one isolated written record. Some legends enjoy an intricate plotline, whereas others are just a couple of sentences long and more strongly resemble what is classified as beliefs than as legends with a narrative component. Furthermore, some legends have analogues in the folklore of other peoples, and their motifs and imagery may be considered international. Later legends and beliefs about Perkūnas show a significant influence from Christianity, with some storylines borrowed from the Bible.

Among folktales of international ATU tale types, there are Lithuanian folktales in which Perkūnas is one of the main characters: *Žmogaus, Perkūno ir velnio draugystė* (‘The Friendship of Man, Perkūnas and the *velnias*’, ATU 1147*: Thunder God) and *Velnias bijo muzikanto griaustinio* (‘The *velnias* Fears the Musician’s Thunder’, ATU 1165: The Troll and the Baptism). In some folktales, Perkūnas or thunder are only mentioned in passing (ATU 465A, 1416A). Magical folktales (ATU 300, 300A, 301, 302, 315) also warrant

1 Norbertas Vėlius (1938–1996), one of the most prominent scholars in Lithuanian mythology and ethnic culture, also uses the Lithuanian word *velnias* in the extended summary of his monograph *Chtoniskasis lietuvių mitologijos pasaulis: folklorinio velnio analizė* (‘The Chthonic World in Lithuanian Mythology: An Analysis of *Velnias* (Devil) in Folklore’, 1987: 288–293).

mention, as it is believed that they may contain the transformed relics of myths of the thunder god and his adversaries. Imagery of Perkūnas is found in two songs of mythic content, both of which were published in the first Lithuanian folksong collection *Dainos, oder littauische Volkslieder* compiled in 1825 by Liudvikas Rėza, a professor in Königsberg. These songs are *Mėnesio svodba* ('The Moon's Wedding') and *Aušrinė* ('Venus, the Morning Star'). However, Rėza may have edited them prior to their publication. The problem of their authenticity is further discussed in the chapter "Perkūnas in the Context of the Myth of the Celestial Marriage".

Beliefs about Perkūnas must also be addressed. Things classified as "beliefs" in the folklore archives are usually one- or two-sentence-long statements on a variety of themes and reveal the origin of Perkūnas, his appearance, personality traits, location on the earth or in the sky, his means of creating thunder, and his weapons. There are also descriptions of his family, his relationship with the *velnias*, the punishments he issued if societal norms were not upheld, and, finally, the ways one would protect oneself against him. These beliefs are plentiful in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives. The study by the ethnologist Jonas Balys *Perkūnas lietuvių liaudies tikėjimuose* ('Perkūnas in Lithuanian Folk Beliefs', 1937) alone captures about 1,000 beliefs. Some beliefs are reminiscent of fragmented legends, raising the question of whether they should be categorised as beliefs or as legends. However, that is not the key issue of this study; more important is the content of the narratives and the extent to which they enrich our understanding of Perkūnas.

This monograph consists of nineteen chapters, most of which are subdivided into sections. The chapters form a progression. They begin with a history of research and contextualisation of the god in long-term linguistic and cultural perspectives. A series of chapters then explore characterisations of the god in the diverse source materials. The study advances from the characterisation of Perkūnas as an individual agent to his relations with other mythic agents. The resulting perspectives build to approach Perkūnas's position in the pantheon, his fields of authority, and additional dimensions of the traditions to be considered on the backdrop of the emerging image of the god.

After the introduction and an overview of research on the Lithuanian thunder god, the place of Perkūnas in the reconstruction of Indo-European culture is explored in order to uncover the international context of Perkūnas and his origins ("Perkūnas in the Context of Indo-European Culture"). The discussion of the problem of the origin of the theonym itself is based on the data from the Baltic and other related languages ("Etymology of Perkūnas"). This chapter covers Lithuanian place names, names of natural objects related

to the word *perkūnas*, which reflect the relationship of the cult of this god to a certain natural environment, to specific places, and the distribution of the cult in the country (“Place Names Related to the Word *perkūnas*”).

The Lithuanian god of thunder is characterised by an abundance of euphemisms that name him and encode the conception and often the functions of this character. The formation, meaning, and context of these euphemisms are commented on in the chapter “The Names of the Thunder God”. As Perkūnas is an anthropomorphic god, his appearance, age, and traits of his personality are characterised, and the god’s imagined location and his attributes (weapons, means of transport, living creatures, and plants associated with him) are addressed in the chapters “A General Description of Perkūnas” and “Perkūnas’s Attributes”. The nature of the cult of the Baltic thunder god is shown through the rituals dedicated to him, the temples associated with him, and the fourteenth-century temple of Perkūnas in Vilnius, which is attested to by historical sources (“Rituals and the Temple Dedicated to Perkūnas”). A particular phenomenon of the cult of this god in the Baltic lands is the conception of the first thunderstorm in spring as a mythologised natural event, as a hierophany, and the behaviour connected with that event (“The First Thunder of Spring”).

The core of the complex of mythological motifs and plots investigated are the folklore narratives about the confrontation between Perkūnas and his chthonic adversary, the *velnias*, and the reasons for it (“The Reasons for the Discord between Perkūnas and the *velnias*”, “Perkūnas Hunts the *velnias*”). Perkūnas has an oppositional relationship with yet another chthonic mythical creature, his unfaithful spouse Laumė, the goddess of fertility and vegetation. The thunder god’s contact with his other presumed spouse, the Earth Mother Žemyna, is of a different nature and is described as a *hieros gamos* (“Perkūnas’s Spouse”). A separate topic is the involvement of the god of thunder in the scenario of the myth of the celestial marriage (“Perkūnas in the Context of the Myth of the Celestial Marriage”).

Resorting to the data from written sources and, to some extent, folklore, the place of Perkūnas in the pantheon in relation to the reconstructed structure of the Indo-European pantheon (“Perkūnas’s Place and Role in the Pantheon”). As reflected in beliefs, the legal function of Perkūnas reveals him as a god who judges humans and mythological beings and as the guardian of the kingdom of the afterlife (“Supervision of Justice”). The multiplication of this god – the image of several (four, seven, or nine) Perkūnai is an exceptional phenomenon in the Lithuanian folklore tradition (“Perkūnas: One or Many?”). Finally, the chapter “Protection against Perkūnas” discusses folk remedies to protect

against thunderstorms, mostly reflected in later folklore, much of which is influenced by Christianity.

As mentioned above, all of these topics are essentially approached from a comparativist and genetic point of view, looking at the subject matter – as far as possible – not only from a synchronic perspective but also, in some cases, from a diachronic one. In this way, on the basis of the abundant information preserved in the Lithuanian language, folklore, and historical sources, the image of Perkūnas, a prominent Lithuanian mythological character and one of the most popular pre-Christian gods, as well as his context and, in general, the folk conception of him are reconstructed.