



Book Review: The God Perkūnas of the Ancient Lithuanians

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Nijolė Laurinkienė, *The God Perkūnas of the Ancient Lithuanians in Language, Folklore, and Historical Sources*, FF Communications 327, Helsinki: The Kalevala Society, 2023. 336 p.

Over the last several decades, not many books about Lithuanian mythology have been published in English, and they can easily be listed: two books by Lithuanian mythologists – “The World Outlook of the Ancient Balts” (1989) by Norbertas Vėlius, and “Of Gods and Men: Studies in Lithuanian Mythology” (1992) by Algirdas Julius Greimas, and one by the Czech linguists Marta Eva Běťáková and Václav Blažek titled “Lexicon of Baltic Mythology” (2021). A few more studies of Baltic religions can be added to this list including research about ancient Lithuanian sacred places by archaeologist Vykantas Vaitkevičius, a publication of Baltic religion source materials from the 15–16th centuries with a broad introduction by historian Francis Young (2022), and a book by mythologist Rimantas Balsys about Lithuanian and Prussian religion (2021). Therefore, it is delightful that The Kalevala Society Foundation published this monograph by Lithuanian folklorist and mythologist Nijolė Laurinkienė, dedicated to a very important figure in Lithuanian mythology – the god Perkūnas, as part of their FF Communications series. This is the first publication in English to give a broad and in-depth analysis of a single Lithuanian deity.

True, the book itself is not new as the Lithuanian version was published over a quarter century ago in 1996. Nevertheless, the new publication is not a direct translation of that publication. The author reorganized the book's structure, renewed the bibliography, and what is most important, provided a review of the new research that has appeared over the last several decades, thus supplementing the original publication.

The book is constructed in a way that presents the god Perkūnas as a character of Indo-European mythology. Alongside the Lithuanian version, the author also looks at Latvian and Old Prussian materials and seeks parallels with Slavic, Germanic, Greek, and Indo-Iranian mythology. She also devotes attention to the connections with Uralic peoples and discusses the name and function equivalents in Estonian, Finnish, and Karelian mythology. Nevertheless,

the book is not a comparative study: Lithuanian folklore materials remain at the center of the research around the folkloric figure of Perkūnas, and it is research by other scholars that comprises the comparative context that the author draws upon when interpreting Perkūnas in an Indo-European context.

Nijolė Laurinkienė is not a pioneer in folkloric studies of Perkūnas. Even before World War II, the Lithuanian folklorist Jonas Balys wrote a dissertation titled “The Thunder and the Devil in Baltic and Scandinavian Folklore”. He published two large volumes of folkloric texts about Perkūnas in Lithuanian. In one of them, Balys compiled Lithuanian tales about Perkūnas alongside analogous examples from the Baltic region – Latvian, Estonian, Livonian, Finnish, Sami, Swedish, and Danish folklore (Balys 1939). His second large publication was on folk beliefs (Balys 1937), which he classified into thematic chapters, i.e. “Origins of Perkūnas,” “Relationship between Perkūnas and the Devil (*Velnias*),” “Names of Perkūnas,” “Place names and personal names based on Perkūnas,” “Perkūnas's family,” “How people behave during a storm (forms and means of protection),” “The first thunder,” and others. These reflect the most popular themes of the times that were characteristic of folk beliefs about Perkūnas. Laurinkienė extended the tradition set by Balys in her own book by formulating similar thematic chapters, namely “Names of the Thunder God,” “Place Names Related to the Word Perkūnas,” “The First Thunder in Spring,” “Perkūnas Hunts the *Velnias*,” “Protection Against Thunder,” and others. The author's chosen primary source material (folk beliefs and tales) dictates such structural logic as does the descriptive nature of the book. The occasional comparison with Indo-European or Uralic mythological figures and tales demonstrates what the author calls a “historical-comparative method” (p.13).

On the other hand, Laurinkienė does not limit herself to folklore and aims to highlight the religious aspects of Perkūnas including his divine functions, rituals, sacred places, and position within the pantheon of Lithuanian (Baltic) Gods. The ninth chapter titled “Rituals, Prayers, and the Temple Dedicated to Perkūnas,” addresses these questions as do chapters 15 and 16, “Perkūnas's Place and Role in the Pantheon,” “Supervision of Justice” as well as the final, 19th chapter, which offers a summary of Perkūnas's divine

functions, and his cult and place in Lithuanian mythology. The book alternates between a folkloric-mythological and religious analysis of the figure of Perkūnas as the author switches between folkloristic and religious studies approaches. For this reason, the degree of reconstruction differs throughout the book – in some chapters, Laurinkienė describes Perkūnas as a mythical creature of folk beliefs and tales from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, while in others she sees him as a figure of the Lithuanian pantheon characteristic of the pre-Christian Lithuanian state that retained its beliefs until 1387. The author refers to Perkūnas in two ways: “The god of storms, thunder, and lightning” (p. 21), “God of the sky,” “God of nature,” “personified natural phenomenon,” “personified storm” (p. 99), “mythic personage” (p. 319). Hence, the book is not completely coherent, and the reader is left wondering which strata – the folkloric or the religious – is at the center of the analysis.

The book devotes a lot of attention to the problem of Perkūnas’s name. Laurinkienė indicates that the name Perkūnas has specific equivalents in Latvian, Old Prussian, Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Polish, Slovak, Czech and Serbian mythologies. The etymology is explained in two ways: on the one hand, it comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *per* meaning “to beat, strike” (yet this version has its limitation due to the uncommon formant of -k-), or on the other hand, from **perk^wu* meaning “oak” (see the Latin *quercus* meaning “oak”) (p. 40–45). Linguists who are in favor of the latter etymology draw an explanatory link between Perkūnas and oaks: in Indo-European mythology, the oak is considered to be the tree of Perkūnas, and “the suffix *-no-* is characteristic of Indo-European divine nomenclature, generally interpretable as ‘master of’” (p. 47). Laurinkienė agrees with this etymology, yet later states for some reason that the theonym originates from the Lithuanian common word for thunder, *perkūnas*: “a phenomenon of nature named by common word became mythologized: *perkūnas* (‘thunder’) acquired the meaning of *Perkūnas* (‘thunder God’)” (p. 45). This turn of logic is not fully explained, perhaps it is just an oversight on the part of the author.

Overall, there are only a handful of words for thunder in Lithuanian, which itself is understood as a complex phenomenon, however, Laurinkienė does not devote much attention to that. There are three important interrelated aspects that describe thunderstorms from different perspectives. The word *perkūnas* in standard Lithuanian and dialects means a bang, a striking, while the word *griausmas* refers to the sound, and *žaidas* – to lightning. The fact that the word *perkūnas*, which is also the name of the deity signifies power can be seen in the verbs that are often associated with it including verbs *trenkti* (to strike), *mušti* (to hit), *daužti* (to shatter), *spirti* (to strike) and *šauti* (to shoot). The name Perkūnas as well as the word *perkūnas* points to the most important quality of this deity – his mighty power to

strike. It should be noted that other names used to refer to Perkūnas, mostly through euphemisms, indicated not so much the striking, but only the sound, for instance, *Dundulis* (from the word *dundėti* – to rumble), *Trinkulis* (from the verb *trinksėti* – to stomp), *Bruzgulis* (from the word *bruzdėti* meaning to clamor) and others. The Lithuanian concept of Perkūnas as a phenomenon is quite complicated; in addition to what was already mentioned (fire, rumbling, and striking powers), two more components play an important role – *rūdė* (rust) and *amalas* (heat lightning), which Laurinkienė does not mention. *Rūdė* is mythologically understood to be an atmospheric metal: lightning strikes only when there is a high concentration of such metallic particles in the air in a specific place; folk sayings explain that without *rūdė* there can be no lightning. The expression of *amalas* is a sweet dew that falls from the sky when there is lightning but no thunder (in Lithuanian people say *amala meta* “the *amalas* is cast”). Bees bring lots of honey from such a sweet dew, however, this lightning is dangerous to plants because the heat can scorch the blossoms and cause a disease to befall the plants known by the same aforementioned name – *rūdys*. Hence, when talking about this sort of lightning, people say rust is sprinkled (*rūda krečia*), or that rust is falling (*rūdys krinta*) (Vaitkevičienė 2019: 127–128). Both the *amalas* and *rūdys* are anomalies that appear wherever there is a lack of the dominant aspect of thunder (*perkūnija*) – the striking power of *Perkūnas*; such lightning is not even dangerous since it doesn’t strike.

Probably one of the greatest expectations for the reader of Laurinkienė’s book is to find out the position and role of Perkūnas in the pantheon of Lithuanian gods. This question has long interested mythologists who have been discussing it since the 19th century. Some researchers (Teodoras Narbutas, Simonas Daukantas, Gintaras Beresnevičius) claim that Perkūnas is the central figure of Lithuanian religion, the ruler of all gods, while others (including Algirdas Julius Greimas) consider that he is one of four sovereign gods of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania before the conversion to Christianity. A third branch of scholars believes that Perkūnas is subordinate to a higher deity called *Dievas*, i.e. God (Norbertas Vėlius, Vladimir Toporov). Does Nijolė Laurinkienė’s book clarify this complex question? Unfortunately, reading the book does not offer great clarity. The author, much like her predecessors Toporov and Vėlius, first seeks an answer in the lists of gods in historical sources, analyzing the sequences in which Lithuanian and Prussian gods are listed. Since Perkūnas is often not the first to be named, but rather second or third (the first-named varies according to the sources), Laurinkienė concludes that he was not the most important god. This conclusion raises doubts not only because of the questionable argumentation (there is no evidence that the gods are listed in order of importance in historical sources) but also because 200 years after the introduction of Christianity, the figure

of the Highest God also appears in the lists, indicating religious syncretism rather than naming the most important deity of the old pantheon. We see the latest stages of such syncretism in the ethnographic records of Matthaeus Praetorius at the end of the 17th century where he describes in great detail the holidays and rituals of peasants: first, the host addresses the Christian God, and afterward the patron god of the homestead, Žemėpatis, or other gods, such as the earth goddess Žemyna or the fire god Gabjaujis. It is common for historical sources of the 16th to 18th centuries that the Christian god is understood as the God of Heaven, while all the other old gods are called gods of the Earth. It comes as no surprise that in the folk beliefs of the early 20th century Perkūnas comes to be understood as the son of God, his servant, and so on, or else he simply hides behind the Christian God or prophet Elijah.

Considering the relationship between Perkūnas and God, Laurinkienė follows the ideas of Vėlius and Toporov about a subordinate dynamic. She differentiates between a high heaven and an atmospheric heaven: according to her, Perkūnas is the atmospheric god who lives “under the clouds” and rules the lower layer of the atmosphere (p. 98). Such a conclusion appears rushed and based on dubious sources of folklore recorded by school students in the 1930s and does not include more data such as ethno-astronomical information that the constellation Big Dipper (part of Ursa Major) is commonly called *Perkūno ratai* ‘the Wheels of Perkūnas’ (Vaiškūnas 1993: 330).

True, the author does include weighty arguments indicating the leading role of Perkūnas – she shows that Perkūnas is the only god to be called father (p. 279) who exercises justice, and therefore has a high juridical status in the world of the gods (p. 275 – 284). Nevertheless, she stands by the hypothesis that Perkūnas received his judiciary function from the Highest God. Laurinkienė seeks to mediate between conflicting ideas by drawing on Gintaras’s Beresnevičius’s notion that Perkūnas became the most important god only in the 13th–14th centuries when the Lithuanian religion gravitated toward monolatry, which is to say that the cult of Perkūnas became dominant, even though other gods were acknowledged (p. 272).

Reconstructing the role of Perkūnas in Lithuanian religion is a very difficult task indeed. It requires interdisciplinary research, involving a complex analysis of folkloric, ethnographic, linguistic, historical, and archeological data. Although Laurinkienė discusses place names related to Perkūnas and addresses the question of historical sacred places in different chapters of the book, this is not enough for a deeper comprehensive analysis. This complicated question remains for future researchers.

Yet let us get back to what makes this book such a delight. This book will be a very valuable resource for folklorists who do not read Lithuanian precisely for the extensive folkloric material that was carefully gathered from

published and archival sources. Numerous tales, legends, and folk beliefs are presented with accurate citations from original sources, and the translations are often juxtaposed with texts in their original language. Such is the case with place names as well as the euphemistic names of Perkūnas. The book unlocks a multifaceted folkloric world wherein Perkūnas is not only an important character of tales and legends but also a terrifying force, which persisted until the first half of the 20th century, as thunder reminded people of the existence of the deity Perkūnas, albeit the phenomenon gradually became associated with a wrathful Christian God.

Another delight is that the challenge to publish the book after a quarter of a century encouraged Laurinkienė to revisit, revise, and renew this theme in the context of comparative mythology and connect the research on the Lithuanian Perkūnas to those of Frog, M. L. West, Vaclav Blažek, Terry Gunnell, Lauri Harvilahti, Martin Golema, Tarmo Kulmar, Ülo Valk, Rudolf Simek, Vykintas Vaitkevičius and others. Such a renewal of the research on the Lithuanian god Perkūnas will hopefully encourage a broader interest in this topic.

Finally, the book makes an international discussion possible: from here on, researchers of mythology, religion, and folklore will be able to include the Lithuanian Perkūnas in their comparative studies of the Baltic region or other Indo-European cultures. Thanks to Nijolė Laurinkienė and the Kalevala Society Foundation, studies of Lithuanian mythology and folklore return to the arena after a thirty-year pause. Hopefully, there will be more to come.

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