

SUMMARY

The God Perkunas of Ancient Lithuanians

PERKŪNAS, THE GOD OF THUNDER, LIGHTNING AND STORM, IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR GODS OF ANCIENT LITHUANIANS. HE IS RATHER WELL-PRESERVED IN THE TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF LITHUANIANS. Researchers working on Lithuanian mythology and folklore, e.g. A. Botyrius, J. Basanavičius, J. Balys, A.J. Greimas, M. Gimbutienė and N. Vėlius have dealt with one or another aspect of this god, as well as the myth related to him. However, an exhaustive origin and nature study of the god has not yet been made. In an attempt to reconstruct a broader image of Perkūnas, a thorough analysis of him was undertaken. The work strives to find answers as to who God Perkūnas is; what were his origins, functions, role and place in Lithuanian mythology.

Earlier research of God Perkūnas focused mostly on the exterior features of this mythical character, on milieux and attributes related to him, yet failing to comprehend his real nature. In typifying Perkūnas, he was generally portrayed as an effusive, militant god and these features are certainly peculiar to him, though they do not fully reveal the idea of Perkūnas as a god or the true motives of the actions performed by him. The research also attempts to feature Perkūnas from a religious point of view. The author of the study finds especially acceptable a trend of religious phenomenology which, having been developed at the beginning of the 20th century, was followed by R. Otto and M. Eliade. An essential methodological requirement of the followers of this trend is the achievement of the quintessence of a religious experience and the revelation of the interior essence of mythical images. Therefore, this study endeavours to penetrate in depth and reveal the religious essence, rather than analyse the exterior form of the subject.

The presented concept of Perkūnas is, of course, a certain reconstruction of his image. In the process, reference was made to some aspects of the old world view. In laying out, combining and coordinating these segments, an attempt is made to arrive at a more general and complete image form. However, the work is based mostly on deductions and hypothetical statements. The reliability of the reconstruction of the god image will be tested by time and further investigation in Lithuanian mythology.

While writing this study, a historical-comparative method was employed. Since Perkūnas is a god of Indo-European origin, parallels were searched for in the traditions of nations akin to Lithuania, namely Latvia, Slavonia, Germany, as well as ancient India. Analogues were traced in Finnish and Estonian mythologies. Comparisons made and similarities found in different folk works enable the reconstruction of mythical images and the establishment of their exact age.

The main source for the investigation was Lithuanian folklore. Also studied were historical sources dating back to the middle of the 13th century, in which there is mention of Perkūnas though not all of them could be regarded as equally reliable. The study attempts to discuss the accuracy of the information presented in some sources and to critically evaluate it.

The research data was taken from the Manuscript Department of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. The indexes of the Catalogues arranged by the Institute's scholars were employed, e.g. the card index of the Catalogue of Narrative Folklore compiled by B. Kerbelytė, the Catalogue of Proverbs and Sayings arranged under the supervision of K. Grigas and the index of the Catalogue of Folk Songs arranged by the research staff of the Institute. The author also became acquainted with the materials at the Ethnography Department of the Institute of Lithuanian History housing beliefs referring to the God of Thunder; also with the linguistic material on Perkūnas contained in the Index of Proper Names at the Institute of Lithuanian Language, selecting place names related to the word *Perkūnas*. All available written sources on Perkūnas were studied.

In the study process narrative folklore, especially legends, were mostly investigated. On the basis of the index Catalogue of Narrative Folklore compiled by B. Kerbelytė, it was calculated that there exist 20 subject types in legends where Perkūnas is presented as the principal hero. The legend types where Perkūnas is only mentioned as a natural

phenomenon are not included in this number. The legend types on Perkūnas vary according to the number of variants. Some subject types possess a great number of variants (to 70 or 80), while some contain only a few, but there are also legends of which only single recordings exist. The plots of some legends are widely developed, while those of others are rather short, consisting of a few or several sentences and resemble beliefs more. The legends with a developed plot certainly serve as a more reliable folklore source. They also differ from the standpoint of archaity. Some of them possess equivalents in the folklore of other nations, since their images and motifs have evident links with Indo-European mythology. Other legends are already intertwined with Christian phenomena where even the plots are taken from the Bible. Here Perkūnas, as well as other characters of older religions are mentioned alongside Biblical personages.

Two types of folk tales, in which Perkūnas is one of the heroes, are known: „Friendship of Man, Perkūnas and the Devil“ (AT 1147*), and „The Devil Fears a Musician-Thunder“ (AT 1165). In some other tales (AT 465A, 1416A) Perkūnas or Thunder is but briefly mentioned. Magic tales (AT 300, 300A, 301, 302, 315), in which some transformed relics of the myth about the God of Thunder and his rival were believed to have survived, were also included in the study. A majority of folk beliefs, some balads, folk songs, minor genres of folklore (proverbs, sayings, riddles, maledictions) contain references of Perkūnas – all of them have served as a reliable source in the process of the research.

The study starts with the analysis of language data related to the word *Perkūnas*. Since mythology is closely related to language, in the latter certain facts are noted which reflect a primitive world view. Thus place names, the names of nature objects preserving the root of the word *Perkūnas* were analysed, as was the etymology of the word *Perkūnas*.

The name of the God of Thunder *Perkūnas* is of Indo-European origin and the Baltic and Slavonic languages reveal the best examples of the names of the God of Thunder congeneric to the word *Perkūnas*. Etymologically related words with the same lexem have been traced in old Indian and German languages. The name Perkūnas is assumed to have been derived from an old Indo-European word *perti* ‘to beat, bang, shoot, throw’, the meanings of which fully comply with the functions performed by Perkūnas.

About 115 place names, which are derivatives of the word *Perkūnas* or constituent parts of the word, are known in Lithuania. The group of

hydronyms contain mostly the names of marshes, bogs and swamps; twenty names of mountains, hills and hillocks related to the word *Perkūnas* have also been recorded, as were some names of woods and trees having a link with the word *Perkūnas*, e.g. *Perkūno ažuolas* (Perkūnas' oak), *Perkūnelio ažuolas*. It was found that legends were made up about a majority of the places, revealing the tendency to mythologize them. Some place names of the mentioned type may be true witnesses and relics of the mythical world view.

Thirty eight names of Perkūnas have been recorded in historical sources, folklore and colloquial language, the most common being Dundulis, Griaustinis, Dievaitis, Dievas, Alijošius. To some extent the name of Perkūnas was a taboo subject – seldom was his name used in fear of enraging him. The majority of the names of the God of Thunder are derived from the verbs defining or meaning rumbling and throbbing. In later periods Perkūnas was called by Christian names as well.

For the identification of Perkūnas' place in the Pantheon, the earliest historical sources (dating back to the 13th century) were referred to in which Perkūnas has a presence. Perkūnas here takes second or third place after the Major God. The God of Thunder also follows the Celestial God in the Indo-European pantheon reconstructed by T. Gamkrelidze and V. Ivanov. It should also be noted that in some later Baltic mythological written sources Perkūnas gets demoted to the sphere of inferior gods. That might have been due not only to a particular situation but also to the attitude of historians interpreting old deities from a Christian point of view.

Fire burning is one of the most important rituals devoted to Perkūnas. Historical sources claim that oak logs were used for bonfires. Male goats, other domestic animals and fowl (an ox, a sheep, a pig, a rooster, a hen) were sacrificed to Perkūnas and some other Baltic gods. In prayers to the God of Thunder rain was pleaded for, also for protection from evil underground mythical creatures and from unexpected storm damage to fields and crops and protection from a thunderstrike. According to historical sources and archaeological data from the second part of the 13th century to the 14th century (until the 1387 Christening) at the location of the present Archcathedral of Vilnius, a temple to Perkūnas stood, with an idol of Perkūnas and an altar with twelve steps on which fire was burnt.

Perkūnas is the god possessing a human semblance, usually that of an elderly man but still mighty and strong, tall and brown-bearded.

His characteristic features are malice, resentment, vitality, strenuousness defining him as the god of storm and natural elements. The main sphere of Perkūnas' realm and existence is the sky, the heavens, or more precisely, the atmosphere. Only rarely does he descend to the earth – the world inhabited by people where his rival, the devil, hides.

Perkūnas is also characterised by certain objects with which he is closely associated. Peculiar attributes of Perkūnas' sphere are a mountain and an oak tree. On top of a mountain or by an oak some rituals dedicated to Perkūnas were performed. As can be deduced from legends, it was there that frequently Perkūnas' rival, the devil, would hide. Therefore it was the place which Perkūnas would strike. Objects at Perkūnas' disposal were a cart with harnessed horses or male goats, a whip and a hatchet (a bullet, an arrow). The latter was thought to be similar to an oblong stone or made of belemnite or flint, Perkūnas' hatchet bullets were believed to have protectional, curative, sacred powers.

In some beliefs there is mention not of a single Perkūnas but of several, most often four. Each one of them thunders and rules over separate countries of the world. This implies a certain personification of a natural element, a thunder, approaching from different cardinal points. These four thunders are sometimes interpreted by the legends as being Perkūnas' brothers or his sons. Some Lithuanian folk tales also mention Perkūnas' brothers and his mother (AT 465A). This might prove that Perkūnas really had a family. A witch, a long-haired and large-breasted creature, usually appearing on Thursday evenings (on Perkūnas' day) on river banks or by lakes, was believed to have been his wife. According to the plot of the myth presently under reconstruction, the witch had earlier lived in the heavens but, having committed adultery, was exiled to the earth by Perkūnas, where she still wanders homeless, frustrated, worrying about her neglected and possibly wronged children.

Perkūnas' main opponent is the devil, an underground creature possessing an antropomorphic or sometimes a zoomorphic shape (a male goat, a dog, a raven, a snake). The devil is closely connected with the dead and is thought to have been their patron. Lithuanian folklore though, fails to reveal the cause of the discord between Perkūnas and the devil; one of its pretexts could have been the crime of theft committed by the devil. Legends render the fact that the devil stole a stone from Perkūnas and thus fell into his disfavour. He, as well as Vala in the Indian mythology, disposes of cattle, and this might be the reason for Perkūnas' antagonism.

Several legend variants reveal the mention of the theft of Perkūnas' hatchet. This motif associates with analogous motifs in German mythology.

One of the main functions connected with Perkūnas' image on a religious plane is the sanctification of the earth, i.e. the milieu surrounding man. The idea is best revealed by the first Spring thunder, during which devils hiding on earth or in water were believed to have been expelled. Having been shaken and moved by a mighty thunder, the earth lost its evil power but received special vitality. Perkūnas' fight with the devil as suggested by folk beliefs and diverse legend plots, apparently not only during the first thunder but also in other cases, could be generally interpreted as related to Perkūnas' activity of purifying as well as saving the world from chaotic powers. Perkūnas, a representative of the celestial sphere and the maintainer of order on the earth, is opposed to the devil, a character of the chthonical mythical world sphere, who brings an element of chaos and destruction to human life and man's surroundings. A constant struggle, of both harmonizing and chaotic powers is a constant background of human existence and its main life problems. In this aspect its importance on the religious plane is also acute. This religious and ontological problem is by means of certain symbols defined by the myth that was extremely important and was regarded by some researchers (V. Ivanov, V. Toporov) as the main Indo-European myth.

On revealing and defining the sanctifying function of Perkūnas, the other spheres of his activity are not to be lessened. The management of atmospheric phenomena is one of the primordial functions closely related to the origin of this God. Thunder, lightning, rain have always been in Perkūnas' power. This function of the God of Thunder has been well-preserved and is reflected not only in earlier written sources but also in later ones and in folklore texts as well. Perkūnas' other functions of no less importance are the encouragement of fertility, the granting of vitality to the earth and to the people, as well as the maintenance of justice and order. All these define the actions of Perkūnas performed in the heavens and on the earth and reveal his origin.

Perkūnas as the god of Indo-European origin should interest mythology researchers of other nations. Even this work has noted and clarified some similarities of Perkūnas with the God of Thunder very close to our traditions. Through a more thorough investigation into this mythical character reaching back to the Indo-European pre-nation,

as well as a reconstruction of a certain model of Indo-European mythology, comparisons attained would be of inestimable importance. It would aid to reveal the origin and the role of one of the most important Indo-European gods. The problem of interrelation of the Major-Celestial God and the God of Thunder would be especially important for the process. The research of other traditions is likely to assist in finding the answers to the questions as to whether these two hierarchically superior gods could not be closely related in their origin. Another problem of interest is whether the God of Thunder in different traditions performed the same functions or perhaps one or another function discussed in the work is differently interpreted elsewhere. The circle of problems does not close. To the contrary, more questions arise especially when taken within a much wider, international research context. The number increases especially when bearing in mind a much wider, i.e. international research context of old myths.