Latvian *Laumas*: Reflections on the Witchisation of Tradition

https://doi.org/10.51554/TD.21.62.03

**SANDIS LAIME**
Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia

**ABSTRACT.** In Baltic languages, the word *laume/lauma* initially referred to a certain supernatural being (Lithuanian *laumė*, Latvian *lauma/laume*, Prussian *laume*). The analysis of written sources and folklore related to this supernatural being allows for the conclusion that Lithuania is both the core and the relic area of the *laumė* tradition, where the original beliefs have been retained; while Latvia, located at the periphery of the tradition territory, is the innovation area, where the perception of this supernatural being was substantially transformed. It was humanised and incorporated in the witchcraft belief system prior to or during the period of witch persecution (the 16th to 18th centuries). The article attempts to analyse the corpus of *lauma* tradition in order to clarify its position in the historical typology of Latvian witchcraft beliefs. The first chapter briefly describes three chronological stages of the development of Latvian witchcraft beliefs (night, dairy, and diabolic witches), characterises the *lauma* folklore sources and previous research. The second chapter analyses the *lauma* text corpus and attempts to find out which stages of the historical typology of witchcraft beliefs are reflected in the *lauma* folklore of the 19th–20th centuries. In the third chapter the hypothesis about the transformation of *laumas* from supernatural beings to dairy witches is argued.

**KEYWORDS:** beliefs, *lauma/laumė*, legends, witchisation, witchcraft belief system

**INTRODUCTION: LATVIAN WITCHCRAFT BELIEF SYSTEM**

Latvian witchcraft beliefs, as they circulated in rural society in the 19th–20th centuries, had developed over several centuries and existed prior to the period of witch persecution. According to Éva Pócs, traditional witchcraft beliefs of central and south-eastern Europe were integrated with older beliefs based on various demonic spirits and fairies and on people with magic powers, such as wizards or shamans. On the basis of these beliefs, countless variations of witch characters developed that reflect different transition stages of various beliefs, as well as contaminated and local variants. Consequently, what is known as the witch character can by no
means be considered as being homogenous or unified (Pócs 1991–1992: 308–309). Ülo Valk argues that the records of Estonian witch trials and folklore show three coexisting types of witchcraft beliefs: 1) folk belief that is not influenced by Christian demonology; 2) folklorised demonological concepts, and 3) new beliefs and narrative motifs resulting from the interaction between the two belief systems (Valk 2008: 270). The same conclusions can be drawn regarding Latvian witchcraft beliefs which fall in three chronological stages:

1) The belief in the night witch is the oldest of the stages and can only relatively be included into the traditional concept of witches (see Mencej 2017: 349–399 for the definition of night witches and examination of Slovenian beliefs). Night witches are supernatural rather than human or social beings, characterised by their residing in nature and interactions with humans mostly in cases when the latter enter the place where the night witches live or act. Such places were specifically marked and named in the landscape, and any human presence there at the wrong time (at night or midday) could lead to punishment. Within this study, night witches are included in the witchcraft belief system because these beliefs have a certain link with both raganas and laumas, which is detailed further on.

2) The belief in the dairy witch is the oldest of the “classic” stages of witchcraft beliefs which, based on the comparative analysis of the motifs and types of witchcraft legends, existed before the witch persecution period and, depending on the region, survived during that period and after it either in a more conservative or a more or less diabolised form. Dairy witches are closely related to the daily economic life of peasants, especially dairy farming, but also to the economic success in the widest sense. The dairy witch is a human, most commonly a woman, who through magic acts deprives others of their wealth (most commonly of dairy products or “dairy luck”), hence multiplying her own economic success. Nearly all folklore genres deal with dairy witches (legends, beliefs, folksongs, magic spells, etc.), and each of the genres have their own role in settling the witchcraft conflicts. The wide range of customs, beliefs, magic spells, and ritual songs testify to a well-developed set of magic devices, which people used to prevent the harmful acts of dairy witches in advance or to reduce their consequences afterwards. Beliefs in dairy witches are found in all the main Latvian witch traditions (ragana, lauma and spīgana), yet by the 20th century their least modified form was preserved in the spīgana tradition in north Vidzeme (Laimė 2019).

3) The diabolic witch character emerged during the witch persecution period. The most active wave of institutionalised witch persecution in Latvia began in the mid-16th century and ended in the early 18th century, although legal conflicts based on the witchcraft beliefs, just like the church attempts to fight them, continued through the second half of the 18th century and through the 19th century (Straubergs
Starting in the mid-1500s, demonological concepts and case law following the new legal regulation (Constitutio Criminalis Carolina) not only introduced paradigmatic changes to vernacular witchcraft beliefs and practices, but also affected the way in which conflicts related to witchcraft were handled. Witch persecution became institutionalised, with a legal framework tailored specifically to the crime. At this period, vernacular witchcraft beliefs related to dairy witches more or less blended with the diabolised image of a witch defined by learned demonology. While preserving the set of harmful qualities attributed to dairy witches, Christian demonology widened the definition of a witch. According to it, witches, when entering into contract with the devil, devoted their soul to the devil in exchange for material well-being, whereas they were assigned to perform a variety of harmful activities and participate in witches’ Sabbaths on a regular basis. Although the doctrine of Christian demonology reached peasants in various ways, including the church and secular court, the beliefs in diabolic witches were integrated only partly into the Latvian witchcraft beliefs. Diabolic witches are reflected almost exclusively in legends – largely in the form of internationally circulating fabulates, mostly retold because of the exciting plot rather than adapted to the local peasant environment, hence closer to the genre of folktale by their function. Judging by the Latvian folklore records of the 19th–20th centuries, the witch diabolisation process all over the territory of Latvia was neither simultaneous nor homogeneous. The process of diabolisation mainly affected the ragana tradition.

The witchcraft beliefs of the period featured regional differences, and various names to designate witches were in use. One of the research tasks related to the historical typology of the Latvian witchcraft beliefs is to determine which of the names are associated with an inherited tradition and which of them are only used as synonyms (mostly names, borrowed from other languages). Tradition is characterised by four main criteria: linguistic (witch’s name), narratological (the set of folklore motifs and types associated with the name, i.e., tradition corpus), geospatial (tradition area), and chronological criterion (origin and transformation of the tradition over time under the influence of various factors). Ragana is the most widely used word for a witch in Latvian folklore and the modern language (LLVV), although the popularity of this word has differed region-wise. There are areas where this word was rarely used. Burve has also been a relatively widespread name for a witch, although its basic meaning is “a sorceress”. As a name for a witch, this word substituted the word ragana in the regions where ragana was less popular (the central part of Vidzeme, the middle and southern parts of Kurzeme). Spigana was locally used and distributed in a rather small area. The core area of spigana tradition was northern Vidzeme, the territory of the Valmiera district and adjacent
Lauma was another regionally used word for a witch in the western part of Latvia, mostly in Kurzeme. Viegle is only mentioned in the lexicographic sources of the 18th century. This word is not documented in folklore, yet it is mentioned in the literary works of the 20th century (Kursīte 2009: 520). In Latgale, the easternmost region of Latvia, the words known elsewhere in Latvia (ragana, burve), as well as various loanwords from the neighbouring Slavic languages, such as čaraunica, plāšnica, etc. were used to refer to witches.

Lauma tradition sources and previous research

The earliest Latvian lauma text was recorded in the mid-19th century or shortly before (J. B. 1850). It is a didactic article targeting a superstition, which gives a negative example of a man who wanted to baptise his child before laumas could swap it with their child, as had happened to the man’s relatives. Since then, a review of published and unpublished sources lists at least 104 lauma texts: 38 legends and memorates, 35 belief records, and 31 folksongs. Considering the relatively vast area of the lauma tradition, the number of sources is small, which can be related to the fact that, in this area, the word lauma was but one of several witch names in use along with ragana and burve, and that in the 20th century the lauma tradition gradually faded away.

Along with the first records of ragana, spīgana, and lauma folklore, the first remarks of folklorists regarding these traditions were published in the 1870s–1890s. Although no detailed studies on laumas have been carried out by Latvian scholars, short comments on the matter were made by Fricis Brīvzemnieks (Трейланд 1881: 163) and Dāvis Ozoliņš (Ozoliņš 1893: 21–22) in the late 19th century, as well as by Pēteris Šmits (LPT XV: 207–208), Kārlis Straubergs (Straubergs 1941: 562) and others in the first half of the 20th century. To sum up, these brief comments refer to the lauma tradition as a local one (Brīvzemnieks, Šmits); they conclude that laumas were partly diabolised (Brīvzemnieks, Šmits) and state that in the 19th–20th centuries, the distinction among ragana, lauma, and spīgana had vanished in Latvian folklore (Brīvzemnieks, Šmits, Straubergs).

CHARACTERISATION OF LAUMA: NAME, FUNCTIONS, TRADITION AREA

Name. Laume/lauma is a Baltic word which initially referred to a certain supernatural being (Lithuanian laumė, Latvian lauma/laume, Prussian *laume). In Prussia, the former belief in the existence of this supernatural being is attested only by place names. This word is also shared by modern Latvian and Lithuanian
languages, yet it bears significantly different meanings in the standard language usage. While the basic meaning of Lithuanian laumé is “a mythological being” (LKŽ), in Latvian it means a human being – a witch, capable of affecting human life and actions (LLVV). Nowadays, the word has lost the negative connotation that it used to have until the late 19th century. Lauma is a women’s first name, and, according to the Database of Personal Names maintained by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, 1,789 women with this name are currently registered.\(^1\) It has been increasingly common to use a diminutive form of the word, laumiņa, in translated fiction, animated films and elsewhere as the Latvian translation of the English word fairy. The word lauma is commonly employed in the names of companies and institutions – “Lauma” is a producer of ladies’ lingerie in Liepāja\(^2\), “Laumiņas” is a youth centre in Liepāja\(^3\), and “Laumiņas rezidence” is a private nursery school in Riga\(^4\), among many other examples. A century ago, such a choice of a personal or company name would have seemed bizarre, as only one meaning of the word prevailed – a witch.

**Tradition area.** In the 19th–20th centuries, folklore about laumas was recorded only in the western part of Latvia (Kurzeme), and, less commonly, in the central part (Zemgale). The mapping of places where folklore has been recorded shows that the spread of beliefs and belief legends, recorded mostly at the beginning of the 20th century, is more concentrated and covers a smaller area in the Ventspils district in Kurzeme, whereas lauma folksongs, recorded earlier, in the second half of the 19th century, were scattered across a wider area. It is interesting to observe that the easternmost folksongs use a compound name “lauma raganiņa” illustrating the transition from the lauma to the ragana tradition area. Meanwhile in the southwestern Kurzeme (Liepāja district), the word lauma is replaced by the phonetically similar word lauva (“lion”) which makes the folksong texts senseless and illustrates the extinction process of the lauma tradition in this area (Fig. 1).

**Typology of lauma beliefs**

In the analysed text corpus, the word lauma is employed to denote both supernatural beings and humans with supernatural powers. Hereinafter, both beliefs are characterised in detail along with their popularity and geographical spread.

**Lauma: A supernatural being.** Judging by the abundant Lithuanian folklore material (Vėlius 1977: 83–128), Lithuania was the core area of the laumé tradition,\(^1\)

---

2 Available from: https://laumalingerie.com/, [accessed 19.01.2021.].
4 Available from: https://lauminas-rezidence.lv/, [accessed 19.01.2021.].
hence the beliefs about laumė as a supernatural being should be regarded as the oldest belief layer. These beliefs characterise laumės as ambivalent nature spirits, which, in certain situations, may become dangerous to humans. Such interpretation of lauma is very rare in Latvian folklore; only six relevant legends and beliefs have been recorded, whereas no such interpretation has been found in folksongs. In this material, laumas are called meža spoki (“forest ghosts”) (LFK 1968, 3930, Bēne). They check the spinners’ work during fasting (LFK 1136, 1469, Padure), they beat laundry (LFK 450, 2225, Sventāja), wash in a bathhouse (LFK 450, 1924, Sventāja), and, most frighteningly, swap or kill children (J. B. 1850; LFK 1968, 3930, Bēne; LFK 450, 1923, Sventāja). Laumas become active during dusk (LFK 450, 1923, Sventāja; LFK 450, 1924, Sventāja; LFK 450, 2225, Sventāja). The only text describing the appearance of laumas was recorded in 1961, which characterised them as anthropomorphic beings with long hair and animal legs (LFK 1955, 4549, Rucava). Two of the six cases (LFK 450, 1923, Sventāja; LFK 1968, 3930, Bēne) represent the legend type “Laumas and infant” which make up about 25% of all laumė legends in Lithuania (Vėlius 1977: 100).

The texts typical of the oldest layer of the lauma beliefs have been recorded in Sventāja (Lithuanian Šventoji, now administratively a part of Palanga town municipality), which was a part of Latvia until 1921 when it was transferred to Lithuania after the new borders were established (three texts); two other texts were documented in Rucava (the southwestern part of Kurzeme, bordering with Palanga.
district) and in Bēne (Zemgale), i.e., in the parishes bordering Lithuania, whereas one text was recorded in the middle of Kurzeme, in the village of Padure. Such sporadic geography of the recorded texts shows that in the 19th–20th centuries, the oldest lauma beliefs existed in frontier parishes where the cultural exchange between Latvians and Lithuanians, as well as the population migration over the border, were more active; while elsewhere in Latvia these beliefs either had disappeared or had never existed.

**Lauma: A human with supernatural powers, a witch.** In most Latvian lauma texts, laumas appear as humans (mostly women) with supernatural powers who harm their neighbours and increase their own wealth at the expense of other people. In this layer of beliefs, they hardly differ from other “dairy witches”, otherwise known as raganas and spīganas. Laumas are usually women of an older age. 17% of all legends identify lauma as a specific person. The corpus of spīgana texts has a similar ratio. Referring to specific persons in witchcraft legends indicates the bad reputation that these people had in their immediate or distant neighbourhood and reveals that the narratives were used as community tools to construct the reputation of a witch and to provoke social conflicts that resulted in (legal) accusations and sometimes even executions. According to the presumption of social anthropology, the reputation of a witch is socially constructed, and witchcraft suspicions grew into specific accusations in response to the rising social and interpersonal tensions (Goodare 2016: 104–106; Stewart, Strathern 2004).

About one third of the lauma texts deal with the harmful impact that laumas had on dairy farming and livestock wealth in general, as well as with the protective magic used against such harmful actions. A distinctive detail, one not characteristic to other dairy witches, is that several lauma texts mention that laumas not only milk but also suck out the cows. The most popular motif in the corpus of lauma legends and beliefs is “Witch’s spittle or vomit” (~20% of all texts). This motif refers to various substances of natural origin (foam nests of spittlebugs, mushrooms, slime molds, etc.) and their sudden emergence, which raised suspicions about the harmful activities of laumas. To protect oneself against these harmful activities, a vast range of magic means existed: lauma’s spittle was usually collected in a closed vessel, then drowned in water, cured in smoke, or burned, thrashed with nettles, ground, etc.:

A man put lauma’s spittle in a bottle and goodness knows what he did with it, threw it in the stove or somewhere else. But the guilty being could not find peace anymore. On the morrow, the old hag arrived and demanded that the farmer return her spittle or replace it with some other thing. But the farmer knew the trick and refused. He called his dogs and sicced them on her. The hag ran to the dunghill, put some of it in her mouth and
left. For her, it was enough. She needed to get but some scrap from his estate though. But, if she gets nothing from the home, she is in deep trouble (LFK 647, 2152, Tārgale).

In the lauma text corpus, another popular motif is “Witch releases the soul from the body (in the shape of an animal)” (~11% of all legends and beliefs) and “Witch flies as a bright object” (~15%):

*Lauma.* Once, my grandmother’s sister was walking along the beach and saw an old wife sleeping, when a little mouse ran out of her mouth, wearing a silver bell around its neck, and ran away. She thought it might be a lauma and turned the old hag around to put her legs where the head was before, and the head where the legs were before, and then she left. When returning, she saw that the hag was still sleeping, and the tiny mouse was running around her legs but could not find the mouth to enter. Right away, she turned the old wife as she had been lying at first, and the mouse ran into the mouth. When the mouse ran into her mouth, the old hag woke up and said: “What a sweet sleep it was.” Then got up and left (LFK 680, 11, Tārgale).

Most of the texts about laumas flying as bright objects are memorates, i.e., narrators’ experience stories where the extraordinary apparition is deemed as a supernatural encounter with a flying lauma. Contrary to the spīgana legends, where the motifs are usually interrelated (a person lies down, lets out her/his soul, which in the shape of a fiery ball flies to milk cows), these motifs are usually narrated separately in the lauma legends. There is only one occasion when the release of the soul and flying are mentioned in the same text (LFK 428, 206, Tārgale). Less common in the lauma tradition are the beliefs related to their capacity of turning into various animals and birds.

Compared to raganas, the diabolisation affected laumas on a considerably smaller scale. The corpus of narratives includes just a few texts exhibiting signs of diabolisation. One link to the image of a diabolic witch is the legend type “Baptism of a witch’s child”, which tells about the confirmation of a witch’s child into the arts of witchcraft for which the devil must be paid through a human sacrifice or some other offering (3 legends). In the Renda area, the legends refer to *Laumu kalniņš* (“Laumas hill”) as the place of the witches’ Sabbath, while the participants of the Sabbath are called raganas. Similarly, the signs of diabolism can be found in the folksong type LD 34060 recorded in three variants in Skrunda, Lielezere, and the Kuldīga area, which tells about a lauma’s daughter who is riding a horse and using

---

5 Flying, fiery objects (i.e., shooting stars) in folk beliefs were also associated with the wealth-bringing spirits like Latvian *pūķis* (these beliefs were most popular in northern Vidzeme, i.e., the area of spīgana tradition) and Lithuanian *aitvaras* (Būgienė 2011: 101).
reins woven by the devil and a plaited whip made of grass snake. All in all, a certain impact of Christian demonology may be observed in only approximately 9% of all lauma texts.

DISCUSSION: TRANSFORMATION OF THE LAUMA TRADITION

As stated in the previous chapter, most of the folklore motifs and types in the lauma text corpus conform to the characteristics of dairy witches. Compared to the conservative spīgana tradition, certain details of the beliefs in dairy witches (e.g., the process of practising witchcraft through releasing one’s soul and moving around in the shape of a fiery ball) seem to be slightly less well preserved in lauma legends, yet the representation of these motifs is proportionally high enough to conclude that in the 19th–20th centuries the lauma tradition in Latvia existed in this stage of witchcraft beliefs. Regardless of the fact that, during the witch-trial period, the word lauma was actively used by the authorities (mainly – clergymen) representing the demonological discourse, the learned ideas never deeply influenced the lauma beliefs. Although the impact of the learned demonology on the lauma tradition is slightly stronger than on the spīgana tradition, this layer of beliefs never achieved a considerable impact on the tradition in general.

While Latvian laumas in the 19th–20th centuries are typical dairy witches, the tradition corpus of the same period pertaining to Lithuanian laumės is characteristic of night witches. The aim of the following chapter is to find out the reasons why, according to the linguistic criterion, the seemingly common Baltic tradition represents different stages of witchcraft beliefs (Lithuanian night witches versus Latvian dairy witches) and to illustrate the hypothetic mechanism of transformation of the tradition.

Night witch transformation into dairy witches: example of ragana tradition

One of the crucial questions regarding the character of lauma within the context of Latvian material is whether lauma as the dairy witch developed as a result of the transformation of an older belief layer. Taking into account the Lithuanian laumė tradition, the answer to this question may be affirmative. In the territory of Latvia and, presumably, also of Lithuania, a similar process of tradition transformation has developed with regard to raganas. Geospatial and motif analyses indicate that at the beginning of the 20th century, the ragana tradition still existed in several forms. In north Vidzeme (except for the area of the Livonian dialect) and north Latgale, ~300 legends and beliefs have been recorded where, instead of women with supernatural power, the name ragana referred to supernatural beings (night witches) usually
residing in various natural locations, e.g. in swamps, lakes, brooks, on hills, near boulders, etc. These places often have the name *ragana* included in the toponym, and frequently coincide with the burial sites of the 12th–18th centuries or are located in their immediate vicinity (Laime 2013: 190–195). Similarly to Lithuanian *laumės*, these *raganas* are active between sunset and sunrise, and also at noon, when they mostly beat laundry and bathe, swing on tree branches, comb their hair, sing, dance, and carry out other activities not typical of human witches. They only become dangerous to people when the latter wander into the areas resided by *raganas* during the night-time. In such cases *raganas* lead these people astray, strangle them or tickle them to death (Laime 2013: 95–172). According to the most recent etymology of the word *ragana*, this word initially had a rather obscure meaning and referred to “what is raised, therefore visible”, namely, “a haunting ghost” (Gliwa 2003: 5). With respect to night witches, this fact conforms with the belief reflected in several folklore texts that the *raganas* of this type originated from the souls of the women who, while living, killed their children. Such interpretation also conforms with the comparative data, namely, in the folklore of numerous nations across Europe the so-called “night washers” derive from “restless souls”, i.e., souls of the women who died during labour, never married, or killed their children, or had a “bad death” (drowned, were killed, executed, etc). These women’s souls were not able to transition to the afterlife for a certain period of time, therefore they wandered the earth and haunted people (Laime 2013: 207–212).

*The link between night and dairy witch traditions: genetic or linguistic?*

Dairy witches seem to belong to the oldest layer of the beliefs in human witches. Their characteristic witchcraft technique is releasing the soul from the body and travelling in the form of a fiery object. The essence of these beliefs is reflected in the name of the most conservative Latvian dairy witches – *spīganas*, a word derived from the verb *spīdēt* (“to shine”, Karulis 2001: 897), i.e., the most characteristic trait of these witches is their appearance as a shining flying object. The first evidence of this tradition comes from the witch persecution period. Namely, the trial of July 22, 1631 examined the case of a fourteen-year-old handmaid named Katrīna accused of theft and binding of a flying *spīgana*. The record of this trial includes magic spells written down in Latvian, which were used to bind and release a flying *spīgana* (recorded as *spidan*) (Straubergs 1939: 65–66). These spells do not contain any Christian formulae characteristic to the subsequent records of magic spells,

---

6 Two other hypotheses have been put forward about the origin of the word *ragana*, namely “one who sees the future, i.e., a seeress” (Hirt) and “a mythological being with horns” (Otkupshchikov). Unlike Gliwa’s etymology, these hypotheses are not confirmed in Latvian folklore (for more details, see Laime 2013: 49–56).
which indicates that in the first half of the 17th century, when the onset of witch trials started in Vidzeme, the folk tradition already featured magic means to bind a flying spīgana (Laime 2019: 191). Folklore sources prove that in many cases the words ragana and spīgana denoted the released, flying human soul rather than the body or the very woman whose soul it was (Laime 2019: 184).

The above conclusion is significant within the context of the etymology of the word ragana, as the explanation proposed by Gliwa can be extended. Initially, the word ragana denominated not only the human (restless) soul wandering the earth after death but also the soul temporarily released from the body. In both cases it is a short-term apparition, which flashes before the eyes and disappears again. While the beliefs containing this witchcraft technique were gradually disappearing, the meaning of the word ragana, which initially referred only to a flying soul, gained the meaning related to the human body itself. Therefore, it can be established that, from the point of view of tradition, the link between night witches and dairy witches is more of a linguistic rather than genetic nature. The various, sometimes even radically disparate ragana beliefs originated as the result of narrowing of the word meaning. The subsequent development of the ragana character continued during the witch persecution period, when the characteristic traits of dairy witches were supplemented by the features of the diabolic witch.

The correlation between ragana and lauma tradition areas

The example of the ragana tradition illustrates the transformation process that the meaning of the word ragana went through, which allows for a better understanding why laumė/lauma designate such different beings in Lithuania and in Latvia. As explained above, the ragana tradition in Latvia has both its relic territory, namely, a conservative area where the beliefs in night witches and the initial meaning of the word were preserved up to the mid-20th century, and its innovation territory where the word ragana was used in its transformed meaning and denoted dairy and diabolic witches. The innovation territory is located in the areas where the preceding beliefs in night witches once existed. The former night witch area in Latvia is indicated by the distribution of more than 210 ragana toponyms; these are the territories of Eastern Balts (Latgalians, Selonians, Semigallians), however, the lack of ragana place names suggests that the belief was unknown to Western Balts (Curonians) and the Baltic Finns (Livs) (Laime 2013: 81–84). The distribution of legends about dairy and diabolic raganas presents a picture similar to the toponym map; fewer records are detected in the areas that bear no traces of the night witch tradition (legends and/or toponyms).

It is indicative that the area where the lauma texts were recorded coincides with the territory with few or non-existent ragana place names, i.e., those regions of Latvia where the ragana tradition, most likely, never existed. The situation seems
to be rather similar in Lithuania. Norbertas Vėlius points out that in 11% of all texts in the laumė corpus, the supernatural being is called ragana, and this name for laumė has been the most popular in Aukštaitija (Vėlius 1977: 90). Considering the study of the Latvian night witches, it would be reasonable to presume that ragana in Aukštaitija represents a separate tradition rather than a synonymic name for laumė. According to the currently available data, the area of the Latvian ragana – night witch tradition, which once used to cover the eastern and central part of Latvia, but in the early 20th century had shrunk to north Vidzeme and north Latgale, as well as a small territory in Sēlija, also stretched into the eastern part of Lithuania; therefore, a wider territory of the ragana (night witch) tradition common for the Eastern Baltic area can be considered. Meanwhile the western part of Lithuania features more data on laumės, and, joined by Kurzeme, constitutes the area where, most likely, the oldest lauma beliefs were once distributed.

**Chronology of the lauma tradition transformation**

The above hypothesis regarding the existence of the older lauma beliefs in Kurzeme leads to the next question: when did the transformation of the initial lauma beliefs into the tradition of dairy witches take place? This question cannot be answered convincingly; nevertheless, it seems that, when the tide of witch trials reached the territory of Latvia, the transformation had already occurred. Linguist Daina Zemzare claims that, based on the first Latvian dictionary published in 1638 – Mancelius’ “Letts”, many trials of sorcerers, witches and werewolves in the early 17th century already had the necessary judicial terms elaborated in Latvian to designate the trial process, as well as the various categories of offenders (Zemzare 1961: 58–59). As confirmed by the earliest dictionaries, this terminology also included the words ragana and lauma/laume, the translation of which into German is die Zauberin (“a sorceress”) or die Hexe (“a witch”):

- **Raggana, laume** “fliegende Zauberin” (Mancelius 1638a: 217);
- **Ragganas, laumes** “fliegende Huren” (Mancelius 1638b: 404);
- **Laume (raggana)** “eine fliegende Zauberin oder Hexe” (Langius 1685: 136 [69a]);
- **Lauma** “eine Zauberin, Hexe; laumas slota” (Fürecker: 141).

Researchers are of the same opinion regarding the meaning of the word ragana – that, due to the impact of the demonology and witch trials of the medieval and early modern periods, the meaning of this word changed and gained a mainly negative connotation (Vêlius 1977: 255; Biezais 1991: 142–143; Karulis 2001: 732, etc.). The linguist Bernd Gliwa points out that the semantic change of the words, which designate malicious women in modern Latvian and Lithuanian (Latvian, Lithuanian ragana, lauma/laumė, Latvian spīgana, Lithuanian žiežula, viedma), but initially referred to mythological beings, may not have occurred before
the 17th century (Gliwa 2003: 12). However, it should be noted that the accused Latvian women were already called raganas in the witch trial records of the 16th century; the word ragana (raggan) was first mentioned in a witch trial record in 1574 in Riga (Straubergs 1939: 58–59). Meanwhile Haralds Biezais argues that the word ragana was incorporated into the terminology of the Christian Church and demonised during the period of the formal baptism of Latvians, already in the 12th–13th centuries (Biezais 1991: 142–143). These opinions suggest that not only the denotation of the word lauma, but also the lauma tradition itself had already transformed into the dairy witch tradition in the western part of Latvia at the beginning of the witch persecution period.

Svētmeitas – a relic of the lauma tradition?

The last question to be considered within this discussion is whether the relics of lauma beliefs have certainly left no trace in Kurzeme. The answer to this question seems to have been already given previously, in the discussion of the six texts from the lauma text corpus: based on the locations of their documentation (along the border of Lithuania), they, more likely, were borrowed through cross-cultural relations or cross-border migration. Therefore, it could be deduced that the oldest lauma beliefs in Kurzeme had disappeared by the end of the 19th century, leaving no trace. Still, there is another rather interesting fact to consider – the svētmeitas tradition that existed in Kurzeme up to the mid-20th century. Although no special study has been devoted to svētmeitas and the source material has not yet been purposefully compiled, it seems that the scope of the svētmeitas text corpus might amount up to approximately 100 texts. The most characteristic occupation of svētmeitas is spinning, less commonly – beating laundry; they live in various natural locations (caves, rocks, hills) and originate from the souls of spinsters or women who had “a bad death” (LTT 29924–29950 etc.). Although the svētmeitas text corpus is small in terms of scope, the characterisation of these supernatural beings is very similar to that of Latvian raganas (night witches) and Lithuanian laumės. The study of raganas (night witches) shows that in the 20th century, when the beliefs concerning these supernatural beings were rapidly disappearing and the name of ragana was acquiring the meaning of “witch” known elsewhere in Latvia, the word ragana was frequently replaced with various borrowed words like jumpravas, preilenes, mamzeles, etc. (Latvianised versions of German Jungfrau, Fräulein, Mamsell) (Laime 2013: 79–81). The compound svētmeita consists of two words: svēts which means “holy” in the Christian sense and meita or “maid” which is borrowed from German Mädchen.\(^7\) Hence it is clear that linguistically the

\(^7\) Similarly, one of the alternative names of Lithuanian laumės is deivės (“goddesses”; Vėlius 1977: 89).
The lauma tradition is one of the regional Latvian witch traditions, attested in a rather small number of records in the folklore collections of the 19th–20th centuries, approximately 100 legends, beliefs, and folksongs. This material characterises laumas as typical dairy witches, the representation of which was relatively unaffected by the diabolisation process during the witch persecution period of the 16th–18th centuries. Although, next to ragana, lauma was the alternative name for witches circulating in dictionaries, religious songs and sermons of the 17th–18th centuries, the ideas of the learned demonology of this period never took root in the folk tradition. Parallels with the transformation of the Latvian ragana tradition and the relation of lauma with an utterly different supernatural being, the nature spirit laumé from Lithuanian folk beliefs, provide the grounds for the hypothesis that in the western part of Latvia (most likely Kurzeme), there once existed the oldest form of the lauma tradition, but it had transformed into the dairy witch tradition by the 17th century. Nevertheless, it is likely that the oldest lauma beliefs did not vanish. As the word lauma acquired the denotation “witch”, the supernatural beings once called laumas could have been renamed svētmeitas whose tradition survived in Kurzeme up to the mid-20th century and can be documented sporadically even nowadays. A similar process of transformation affected the ragana tradition which was more typical of the eastern and the central parts of Latvia (Vidzeme, Latgale, and Zemgale). The transformation of the ragana character is better documented due to the fact that the older beliefs in night witches were preserved in the northern part of Latvia up until the mid-20th century. The former night witch area is indicated by the distribution of ragana toponyms; these are the territories of Eastern Balts (Latgalians, Selonians, Semigallians). The lack of ragana place names suggests that the supernatural being was unknown to the Baltic Finns (Livs) and Western Balts (Curonians). In the case of the latter, it could be explained by the fact that Curonians had their own very similar lauma/laume tradition.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research was conducted in the framework of the post-doctoral project “Latvian Folk Narrative Research: Elaboration of Geospatial Data Analysis Tool and Online Legend Motif and Type Index” (No. 1.1.1.2/VIAA/1/16/193; 1.1.1.2/16/I/001) co-funded by ERDF.

ABBREVIATIONS

LFK – Archives of Latvian Folklore, Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fürecker Christopher [undated manuscript]. Lettisches und Teutsches Wörterbuch zusahmen geschrieben und mit Fleiß gesamlet von Christopher Fürecker, available from: http://www.korpus.lv/senie/static/Fuer1650_70_1ms.html, [accessed 07.01.2021.].
This article has been translated into English by Ilze Knoka
nustatyti, kurie iš istorinės raganų tipologijos etapų atsispindė XIX–XX a. su lauma siejamame folklore. Trečiojoje dalyje pateikiamo hipotezė, kad lauma iš antgamtinės būtybės pavirto į pieno raganą.


Gauta 2021-01-25