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The God Perkūnas (Re)Introduced

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Nijolė Laurinkienė, *The God Perkūnas of the Ancient Lithuanians in Language, Folklore, and Historical Sources*, (*Folklore Fellows' Communications* 327), Helsinki: The Kalevala Society, 2023, 336 p., ISBN 978-952-9534-08-1

A Lithuanian scholarly work on folklore published in English always feels like a shared victory for the research community, especially when it becomes part of the legendary series *Folklore Fellows' Communications* (FFC),¹ which has been publishing important works on folklore since 1910. Being No. 327 in the series, the book *The God Perkūnas of the Ancient Lithuanians in Language, Folklore, and Historical Sources* by Nijolė Laurinkienė is merely the second title by a Lithuanian author released under the FFC flag, the first being *The Structural-Semantic Types of Lithuanian Folk Tales* by Prof. Bronislava Kerbelytė (in two volumes, Nos. 308–309 in the FFC series, Kerbelytė 2015). N. Laurinkienė's book is the first monograph by a Lithuanian author in the series as Prof. Bronislava Kerbelytė's works are a published catalogue. Although the book on Perkūnas is based on the Lithuanian

1 "Folklore Fellows" was established in 1907 by Professor Kaarle Krohn and Axel Olrik, the first international publication was released in 1910 under the name of *FF Communications* series. Currently, the goal of the "Folklore Fellows" as a global network of folklorists is to connect researchers, to continue publishing work, and to engage in research training. More about the history of the organization and its list of publications can be found on their website: <https://www.folklorefellows.fi/>.

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version published in 1996, the English version is considerably updated and offers an in-depth analysis of the thunder god in the Baltic region. It is useful for the folklore and mythology scholars both abroad and in Lithuania. The illustrations for the monograph, which add a visual dimension to otherwise strictly structured scholarly narrative, were provided by the archaeologist Prof. Vykintas Vaitkevičius.

Before I dive into the matters of the book, a couple of words about the author. Nijolė Laurinkienė is one of the most prominent Lithuanian mythology scholars, who dedicated her whole academic life to the research on Lithuanian deities and pre-Christian traditions. In 2019, she was awarded the National Jonas Basanavičius Prize, the highest state award to people researching Lithuanian folklore and mythology. Since 2021, she is an emerita at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. Nijolė Laurinkienė has published around 50 articles and is the author of the study *Mito atšvaitai lietuvių kalendorinėse dainose* (Mythical Reflections in Lithuanian Calendar Songs, 1990) and of three monographs: *Senovės lietuvių dievas Perkūnas: kalboje, tautosakoje, istoriniuose šaltiniuose* (The God Perkūnas of the Ancient Lithuanians in Language, Folklore, and Historical Sources, 1996), *Žemyna ir jos mitinis pasaulis* (Žemyna and Her Mythical World, 2013), and *Dangus baltų mitiniame pasaulėvaizdyje* (The Concept of the Sky in the Baltic Mythical Worldview, 2019).

In order to briefly overview the context of the most recent research in Lithuania² related with the Baltic god of thunder (or other celestial deities), it is important to mention the work *In Search of National Memory (Tautos atminties beiėškant)*, 1990) by the semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas, in which he discussed the relationship between the Prussian god Pergrubis and the Lithuanian god Perkūnas. Gintaras Beresnevičius, a prominent scholar in the field of religious studies, explored Perkūnas's connections with the world of the dead in his book *Dausos: Pomirtinio gyvenimo samprata senojoje lietuvių pasaulėžiūroje* (Heaven: The Concept of Afterlife in the Old Lithuanian Worldview, 1990). As I have already mentioned, Nijolė Laurinkienė released her monograph on Perkūnas in 1996. In the twenty-first century, the god of thunder was analysed in the works of Rimantas Balsys (2010) and Dainius Razauskas (e. g., 2018). In 2022, Rokas Sinkevičius defended his PhD thesis "Saulės dukros vestuvių motyvai XIX a. pr. – XX a. latvių dainose: tautosakinė ir lyginamoji mitologinė analizė" (Motifs of Sun Maiden's Wedding in Latvian Songs of the Early Nineteenth and the Twentieth Century: A Folklorist and Comparative Mythological Analysis), in which he also analyses the image of Perkūnas in Latvian folksongs. Meanwhile, most of foreign research concentrated on the perception of the thunder god in the Indo-European context, e. g., Calvert

2 In an attempt to decolonise this review, I am using this term in a broad sense and referring to the latest 34 years, the period of Lithuania's regained independence.

Watkins's work *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (1995), Michael Witzel's *Vala and Iwato: The Myth of the Hidden Sun in India, Japan, and Beyond* (2005), or M. L. West's book *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007). The god of thunder or some aspects of the related mythology in the Baltic Sea region was discussed in publications by Baiba Meistere (1995), Unto Salo (2006), Frog (e. g., 2011, 2017), and others.

The pantheon of Baltic pre-Christian gods is one of the most intriguing and most challenging research objects that a mythology scholar can choose to delve into. According to N. Laurinkienė, Perkūnas, the Lithuanian god of thunder, played one of the central roles in the system of the indigenous religion, and therefore she sets herself the aim to discover “who Perkūnas really was” (p. 13) throughout all the nineteen chapters of the book (including the introduction and closing remarks). By analysing and comparing various folkloric, linguistic, and historical sources that mention the name of this god, attribute certain functions, describe dedicated rites and customs related to Perkūnas, the author also aims to delve deeper into the mythological imagery by encompassing the point of view of religious studies as the means to extract the spiritual significance of the deity to his followers. Without a doubt, one of the most compelling traits of this book is the author's determination to keep Lithuanian theonyms and original names of mythological creatures, because translation obscures if not completely loses important nuances, such as in the case of Velnias (plural *velniai*), the main adversary of Perkūnas, as the English *devil* is closely tied with the concept of Christianity versus the vernacular concept of the devil that is still alive in Lithuanian culture.

The figure and the myth of the god of thunder is widely known in the area inhabited by the Indo-Europeans; however, as the author of the book aptly points out, the Lithuanian context alone is insufficient to analyse the impact of this mythological figure on the local culture. By drawing examples from different Indo-European and Uralic cultures (briefly mentioning even possible ties with East Asian cultures, namely Japan), in chapter 3 (“Perkūnas in the Context of Indo-European Culture”), N. Laurinkienė takes noticeable steps in decolonising the scholarly stance towards Baltic mythology, exhibiting that the connections extend far beyond the Slavic parallels. She also points out, that although the plots of the myths have their differences, it all boils down to the scheme of “two opposing agents, their attributes, actions, and the outcomes of those actions” (p. 37), whose origins can be traced back to the Proto-Indo-European culture.

In chapter 4 (“Etymology of Perkūnas”), N. Laurinkienė exhibits current research practices among Lithuanian folklorists and mythologists by including linguistic data in the search for the possible meanings of the theonym Perkūnas. By incorporating a broader linguistic context, the author questions some of the earlier

etymologies raised by linguists (in particular, those proposed by Ernst Frenkel and Pranas Skardžius). She supports Martin Litchfield West's interpretation of the name of Perkūnas being related to the Latin counterpart of *quercus* (En. 'oak'), which explains the appearance of the formant *k* in the name (p. 46–47). A similar approach is used a bit further in the book, when the author describes and briefly examines 125 toponyms, eonyms, agronyms, and drymonyms in Lithuania that use the theonym *Perkūnas* as an integral part of the name. Prof. V. Vaitkevičius has already demonstrated the effectiveness of combining folkloric, linguistic, and archaeological data in his works (Vaitkevičius 2003, 2006, 2017, 2019), and N. Laurinkienė's book also gains many useful insights by employing this approach. The author herself points out that "in people's memories, place names and the names of natural objects last longer than the motivation of mythonyms by narratives" (p. 66).

Continuing with the linguistic topic, chapter 6 focuses on the synonyms that allowed referring to Perkūnas without actually mentioning his name. With 27 names in total, the author examines possible relations between the euphemisms and the theonym of Perkūnas: by highlighting the onomatopoeic origins, noting the possible ties between the name substitute, the status, and the functions attributed to the deity, N. Laurinkienė convincingly reconstructs the snippets of the mythical worldview of pre-Christian Lithuanians. In my opinion, noteworthy is the analysis of the thirteen naming variants that have a clear relation with the Christian religion (when certain narratives have Perkūnas replaced by God, various saints, and other Biblical figures): having the distilled images and attributes of Perkūnas in the pre-Christian Lithuanian worldview, the author adroitly exposes the unavoidable shifts in the vernacular worldview, which were brought about by historical circumstances.

In chapter 7, Nijolė Laurinkienė makes noteworthy remarks about Perkūnas's appearance: (usually) depicted as having an anthropomorphic appearance, Perkūnas assumed various forms in Lithuanian folklore, ranging from a youth to an elderly man (yet the dominating image is that of a middle-aged man). The author highlights how the position of the god of thunder and connections to lightning during a thunderstorm manifested through Perkūnas's fire-related attributes (e. g., fiery clothes, a crown of fire, a flaming sword, or other). Nijolė Laurinkienė skilfully combines the mythological material with paroemiological data and folk beliefs when analysing the character traits attributed to this particular deity. By taking all the known information about Perkūnas into account and combining it with the contextual material, the author pieces together a complex picture of Perkūnas: she emphasises how the appearance and the character attributed to the Lithuanian deity nicely encompass both the properties of a god and a natural phenomenon (p. 99). She also points out an important trait of the pre-Christian worldview, namely, that the recurrent mention of various objects in Perkūnas's possession as made of stone

signifies that “the sky may have been perceived as of stone in the ancient Baltic and Finnic worldview” (p. 113). These are indeed noteworthy observations in the context of research into the Indo-European celestial deities.

The two major topics discussed throughout the remaining chapters of the book that I would like to point out are (1) the analysis of Perkūnas’s relationships with other deities (and people), and (2) the place of Perkūnas in the pre-Christian Lithuanian pantheon.

In chapter 11, N. Laurinkienė examines the possible reasons behind the eternal conflict between Perkūnas and *Velnias*. Although the justifications themselves are rather poorly reflected in the Lithuanian folklore, the motive of theft, which is common across the Baltic Sea region, is also present in Lithuanian folk narratives: the author concludes the chapter by proposing an idea of more universal roots of the conflict, highlighting that both Perkūnas and *Velnias* embody the two mythological, cardinal oppositions (sky *vs.* underworld, order *vs.* chaos), and it is from this tension that discord stems.

Naturally, the motive of Perkūnas hunting *Velnias* in Lithuanian folk narratives is discussed next. One of the ideas that the author introduces throughout this chapter is the implicated superiority of the heavenly deities in Lithuanian mythology, which aligns with a more general Indo-European context regarding values. Later in the book, the reader comes across this important thought that “it is possible that the *velnias* [...] found himself in opposition to the gods of the sky only in a later stage of mythic thinking, when the chthonic plane of the mythical world was belittled and new values – along with the celestial world and its gods – rose” (p. 275).

The relationship between Perkūnas, *Velnias*, and people is once again examined in the last chapter of the book, in which the author takes a closer look at the practices and rituals against the thunder described in the archival material. The main focus of this chapter is on various taboos that existed in the Lithuanian society and were connected with the *Velnias*, and how catering to his needs (even unknowingly) could have placed a person in danger. The analysis of etiological narratives reveals some intriguing details, for example, the different species of trees that were seen as connected to Perkūnas or *Velnias*, as well as plants that were attributed various powers, such as dispersing the clouds of a rising thunderstorm. N. Laurinkienė registers important nuances in folklore, for instance that the fire that was caused by a lightning could be put out only by upholding certain measures, e. g., extinguishing it with sour milk, which, as the book reveals, potentially could be related to the traditions of sacred fire and offerings to Perkūnas.

In the context of the relationship with the other gods in the Lithuanian pantheon, Nijolė Laurinkienė also addresses the question of Perkūnas’s spouse. As the folklore material is contradictory and offers a couple of figures as the most

possible candidates for this role, the author meticulously documents this aspect and offers its in-depth analysis, concentrating on the mythological being / goddess *Laumė* and the goddess of earth and fertility *Žemyna*. Perkūnas's involvement in marital matters is also discussed in chapter 14, in which the author analyses the myth of the celestial marriage between the Sun and the Moon. The author notes that this narrative is – once again – rather weakly represented in the Lithuanian tradition, and the inclusion of Latvian examples helps raise an important idea of Perkūnas's role as a judge of the mythical community.

The discussion of the judicial function of Perkūnas continues in chapter 16 by examining the perception of the people struck by Perkūnas: apparently, they were either complete scoundrels (a punishment), or they were the lucky ones (a blessing). As N. Laurinkienė points out, according to the folk beliefs, there were several reasons for being struck by lightning: making fun of the deity, violating societal norms (e. g., threatening other's well-being, stealing, torturing other, etc.). Drawing from the numerous folkloric texts, the author convincingly argues that although Perkūnas acts like an autonomous deity with a punitive function, it is possible that Christianity may have influenced the perception of Perkūnas as the one who performs on God's will. As it was mentioned before with regard to Perkūnas as the keeper of order, it is only natural that he maintained “order and harmony in the human being and the mythic world” (p. 284).

Returning to the second major topic of the book – Perkūnas's place in the pre-Christian Lithuanian pantheon, in chapter 15, N. Laurinkienė offers the reader an in-depth overview of two prevalent theories regarding the perception of the Baltic religion and mythology in Lithuania from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The first theory treats Baltic mythology as a pre-Christian worldview, while the second one depicts it as a structured system, similar to the Christian one. By including contemporary archaeological data and various historical documents, the author indicates that with the passage of time, the latter of the theories seems to be receiving growing support, as the archaeological evidence suggest that places of cult, including the ones dedicated to Perkūnas, existed in Lithuania. Based on this, N. Laurinkienė proposes a noteworthy idea: to consolidate Lithuania as a state in the thirteenth century, having a powerful pantheon was a must, thus Perkūnas was seen as one of the major gods who even might have been singled out, as the archaeological evidence of a temple in the heart of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania suggests.

In the same chapter, Perkūnas's place in the pantheon is addressed again in the context of his relationship with God the Father. As the author attentively pieces together the pre-Christian mythological landscape from the earliest known historical documents, she points out that in the lists of gods, Perkūnas was usually placed the second or the third, hence, to quote, “it becomes more difficult to draw

conclusions about his place in the pantheon” (p. 251). However, in my opinion, these sources also demonstrate the changing concept of the thunder god and his position in what could be considered as a pantheon. Nevertheless, one can just agree with the author of the book that it is hard to argue that Perkūnas was one of the most important, relevant, and multifaceted deities of the ancient Lithuanians.

Connected to the aspect of Perkūnas’s holiness is chapter 17, in which the author tackles the question of the plurality of Perkūnas, as the Lithuanian folklore texts mention four, five, seven, nine, or a hundred *perkūnas*. N. Laurinkienė concludes that this depiction might be perceived as an amplification of an emotion, applied to “what is intense and abundant” (p. 292). What is no less important, the author also discusses the kinship ties between those several images of Perkūnas and provides texts in which this particular deity is imagined as having brothers, sons, or a mother. According to her, multiplication of the agents in the case of Perkūnas in Lithuanian folklore is unique and unwitnessed in neighbouring Latvia. This observation is significant in the context of distinguishing specific traits related to the image of the Lithuanian god of thunder.

I would also like to address a couple of minute details that I have marked as questionable while reading this book.

First of all, the repetition of material or / and ideas from one chapter to another left me with an impression that either the lack of some particular source material forced the author to include it more than once or these parts of the chapters were somehow overlooked while editing. Yet as the Latin saying goes, *repetitio est mater studiorum*.

Slightly more problematic is the selection and inclusion of some source material. Although at the very beginning of the book the author states that “all unreliable archival folklore material has been excluded from this study” (p. 15), some bold claims in chapter 13 (“Perkūnas’s Spouse”) are based on manuscript LTR 832 which, as the author herself notices, was composed by students, thus making it “important to recognise that the material of collection LTR 832 is often only in fragments of decontextualised information and the reliability of individual items is unclear” (p. 222). Although the author tries to justify the inclusions of this collection by noting that “each example was recorded by a different person, which reduces the likelihood that they all were made up independently” (p. 223), there are, however, quite a few cases known in the Lithuanian Folklore Archive (from where the folklore material was taken), when pupils (and adults) copied from newspapers, books, calendars, from one another, or just wrote down their fantasies and passed them as authentic recordings, because during the interwar period, collecting the folklore material was a paid occupation. For a more observant reader, this might leave an impression that the author’s criteria for selecting material might have been not objective but influenced by a preconceived idea.

There is also a minor problem with one of the research articles quoted in the book: in chapter 6, “Names of the Thunder God”, the author aims to prove the relationship between Perkūnas and St George and includes a quote from an article written by the folk art specialist Vytautas Tumėnas (2016). In this article, he claims that there is a clear link between 23 April and “the thunder god Zeus Georgius (farmer)” (p. 88). However, one quick Google search could have proven a couple of things: (1) the correct term is *Zeus Georgos* (Gr. Ζεύς Γεωργός), and (2) in the Attic calendar, the festival dedicated to Zeus Georgos was celebrated on the tenth day of *Maimakterion* (Gr. Μαιμακτηριών), which could be placed around November / December of the Gregorian calendar. This factual mistake could be traced back to the article by Vanda Misevičienė in her book *Lietuvių liaudies dainų katalogas: Darbo dainos. Kalendorinių apeigų dainos* (Catalogue of Lithuanian Folk Songs: Work Songs. Songs of Calendar Rituals; 1972) that Tumėnas references in his work. This inaccuracy could have been prevented by looking into the articles about the calendar systems of Greece and Roman Empire that various scholars have written about in a copious number of books and articles, starting from W. K. Pritchett and Otto Neugebauer (1947), A. E. Samuel (1972), B. D. Meritt (1961), Robert Hannah (2005), and others.

The last problematic point that I would like to address in this review arises in chapter 11, in which the author discusses “The Reason for the Discord Between Perkūnas and the Velnias”. At the very beginning of the chapter, the reader is informed that, compared to the folklore of other cultures of the Baltic Sea region, the reason of the feud between the Velnias and the god Perkūnas is “poorly revealed”, therefore the author will incorporate not only the narratives with the motive of theft, but also the ones with the *velnias* trying to block the rivers with stones (p. 177). Undoubtedly, the given examples show a connection between the *velnias* and stones (e. g., he steals the stones from heaven, sits on a stone during a thunderstorm, etc.); however, when it comes to a type of Lithuanian legends about the *velnias* carrying stones, it becomes somewhat complicated. First of all, the highlighted reason for the *velnias* to carry stones is because he wants to destroy a particular church (p. 183). In another example, the stones that the *velnias* was carrying were put in a sack, but they fell out through a hole and were scattered along the banks of a river. The author’s interpretation is the following: “Although the *velnias* does not block the flow of the river, the stones scattered on its bank hint at the possibility of throwing stones in the water” (p. 184). However, the text itself gives no such implication, as the stones fall out due to a complete accident, and the stones are lost not only along the riverbank but also in a meadow of a village. Yet another example states that God ordered (!) *velniai* to collect stones and throw them in a lake, but Perkūnas started chasing them and one of the *velniai* scattered all

stones from his sack all over the place (p. 185). What this text confirms is that the action of gathering stones is attributed to the *velnias*, but there was no evil intention of throwing the stones into the lake: *velniai* were actually carrying out God's order. This implies the author's fixation on connecting the Lithuanian *Velnias* with Hindu Vritra in the aspect of blocking the flow of the river (p. 186), although many of the examples chosen explicitly tell that the goal was to crush a church, get rid of the stones by throwing them in a lake, or the stones in the water were dropped due to an accident. The author notes that "Indra and Perkūnas fill corresponding functions as slayers of demons who release the waters or prevent them from being captured" (p. 186); however, in the chosen examples, where the *velnias* does show an intention, for example, to build a bridge over a river, it is not Perkūnas who cuts the act short, but a crowing of a rooster.

The issues that I have addressed above by no means diminish the significance of Nijolė Laurinkienė's book. Her insights and a thorough review of Perkūnas's case is a massive undertaking, which still remains relevant and unchallenged to this day. Updated and translated into English (including a plethora of Lithuanian folklore material translated into a foreign language for the first time ever), this work unquestionably sheds a new light on the research into Baltic mythology and, hopefully, the Baltic sources will find their way to the works of other scholars.

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