

BALTIC RELIGION TODAY

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The Baltic/ Lithuanian Religion

In each Lithuanian's heart there lies the same inherent religion that was respected by Gediminas, Kęstutis, and our other great ancestors. Baltic religion is the natural Lithuanian faith and is called many different things, including, but not limited to, paganism or "ancient Lithuanian religion." Our ancestors protected their religion from enemies over a thousand years ago, they fought for it in the battles of Saulė (1236), Durbė (1260) and others. In the last couple centuries, the old faith has experienced a revival. In 1992 a free Lithuania finally legalized the ancient Baltic religion. Why Baltic? Because our religious heritage is a part of not only Lithuania's history, but also that of Latvia, Old Prussia, Belarus... In short, we call our religion Romuva.

Those living in the countryside used to be called pagans, and they stubbornly held on to their forefathers' religion and were the last to give in to the new Christian religion. For this exact reason the Christian church created the negative meaning for paganism.

Our whole cultural tradition—folk songs, traditions, world-view, art, even in its modern form—is full of remnants of our old cultural heritage. This is why every Lithuanian consciously and sub-consciously has preserved our ancestral religion. This is why a Lithuanian doesn't see a reason to actually be baptized as a practitioner of Baltic religion, we keep it within ourselves as a given heritage.

Our ancient faith is reflected in our landscape—thousands of sacred places alkai, sacred wells and springs, oak groves. Our god Praamžis is the creator; Perkūnas is the protector of order and morals; fire is our most important symbol, Gabija—protector of fire; Laima is the guardian of fate; Žemyna is the earth goddess; Veliuona takes care of the dead. The gods and goddesses wait for our choices, decisions and loyalty.

The roots of Lithuania's and our ancestors' religion are hidden in the depths of history, in those times when the first people settled on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Over hundreds of years Lithuanians were able to preserve their inner religion, just as they keep their understanding of a moral and honorable life. The essence of religion is morality. Respect, gratefulness, and love have always been a part of humanity. Our ancestors' religion and morality is the reason for our existence.

Our religion survived the longest in the countryside, because the people there were closest to the earth. Why did people worship the Sun and Earth? Because these powers spread and shared goodness, asking nothing for themselves, doing so completely selflessly. This was understood a long time ago, and a person's relationship with their mother is of the same selfless nature. This for people is an example of the oldest type of goodness. Exchanging gifts is the oldest form of human interaction, and its goal was neither economic nor monetary, but moral. Therefore, our ancestors' relationship with the world around them was, first and foremost, moral.

The essence of religion is to unite us with the sacred supernatural. Gintaras Beresnevičius wrote: Religion is our relationship with sacrality and the consequential actions of a person influenced by sacrality. The Gods essentially belong to the supernatural world, to that which we cannot feel or touch. By honoring the Gods, we

can connect our lives to the Gods, they become a part of our lives. We talk about the Sun as the Sun Goddess. Even though the sun is a part of nature, she is also a part of our cultural tradition. The Gods have their own entourage—trees, plants, animals, weapons, tools. These are not Gods. But the deities can be reached via their mediators. Therefore, a connection with the gods can be reached via nature, and that is reflected in our culture.



A Bit of History

In 532 CE, in Honeda (Balga) the great Prussian gathering there took place. Krivis (High Priest) Brutenis announced the commandments of the gods on how people must live. Brutenis also established the most important home of the gods in Romuva, where a giant oak tree grew. Inside the oak tree, the statues of Patulis, Perkūnas and Patrimpas were housed. In front of the statue of Perkūnas the sacred flame burned night and day. At this same time, the institution of kriviai (high priests) and vaidilutės (virgin priestesses) was established.

At the end of the 10th century Christian missionaries attempted to enter Lithuania, but they were stopped at the border, and those who disregarded the order to leave were killed. For a while this stopped the spread of Christianity.

In the 12th century, Šventaragis founded a sacred place where the Neris and Vilnia rivers converged. The first rulers of Lithuania were cremated there. Šventaragis is considered the father of the new religious traditions, founder of the Lithuanian religious center. At that same time, the Christian hordes began to attack the Baltic lands.

For 300 years the Balts fought for their freedom and their faith. Their battles formed the nation of Lithuania. It is believed that millions of Balts (Prussians, Jotvingiai, Lithuanians, Latvians) died for their land. Nowhere else in Europe did Christianity encounter such fierce resistance as it did in the land of the Balts.

In 1336 the people of Pilėnai fortress committed suicide by burning themselves and their home, rather than being enslaved by the Teutonic Knights.

In the beginning of the 14th century, King Gediminas built a temple for Perkūnas in Vilnius—the most important religious spot in Lithuania—next to the Šventaragis altar. In 1980, the ruins of the altar and steps were discovered in the crypts of the Cathedral.

In 1387 the Christians destroyed this temple, extinguished the Eternal Flame and banned the old faith. However, Lithuanian people still honored the goddess Gabija in their homes, paid respect to their ancestors and old gods.

The 19th century saw the resurgence of the old religion. Simonas Daukantas in his writings praised the old faith, and in 1870 Andrius Vištelis founded a temple for the old religion, wrote down prayers for the old gods.

In the beginning of the 20th century, Vydūnas wrote about the beauty and value of Romuva and the Eternal Flame.

In 1930, Visuomis (Domas Sidlauskas) and Gediminas Beržanskis started a new movement of Romuva.

In 1967, while celebrating Rasas (Midsummer Solstice), Romuva decided to expand the old faith's movement.

In 1980, the ancient hand-fasting rituals were renewed by the altar of the Eternal Flame.

In 1991, the fire of Šventaragis was ignited again.

In 1992, the Baltic religious community was registered in Vilnius. The public rebirth of Lithuania's Baltic religion began. Through the centuries Lithuanians proved that even while living under oppression they were still able to preserve their spiritual wealth, inherited from their ancestors. And just as people regain their freedom, so too does their old faith step out into the light.

The Main Tenets of the Baltic Beliefs

1. The world is alive. Life is understood in a much wider perspective than just biological life. The Sun is alive, as are trees, rocks, water. We must love and respect life. That is why our world-outlook must be respectful. The ancient Baltic religion is a religion that respects life.

2. The world is harmonious, but this harmony isn't regular, it sometimes weakens and disappears, therefore it is important to hold on to it, to create and expand it. A person's duty is to reach for harmony, to protect it. Harmony (Darna) is the basis of our ancient culture and religion.

3. We honor Gods and Goddesses. There are the great deities—Dievas (Pramžius), Perkūnas, Žemyna, Laima, Saulė. But the world is varied, and many powers and deities work within it, so people hold on to tradition or choose what is nearest and dearest to them personally. The deities are associated with nature, but they are invisible, supernatural. The gods and goddesses can be associated with a particular place, with the traditions of that place, and even with historical events.

4. The world is eternal. It is continuously created by the eternal godly powers. According to Lithuanian mythology, the world is created and re-created by at least two gods—light and darkness, creation and destruction (Dievas and Velnias). Their relationship created harmony and vitality.

5. The most important aspect of morality (the golden rule) teaches that one must do unto all other living things what they would want to be done unto them, i.e. never do anything that you wouldn't want done to you. The Balts call this type of morality humanism. This is the avoidance of forcefulness and revenge, maintaining selfless love and pity for all living things. Man is born good, and evil appears only when harmony falls apart. A person evolves spiritually if he lives right and selflessly.

6. We are thankful to our Ancestors for our existence, our language, our homeland. This is why we constantly have to remember them and express our respect. The Baltic faith unites all those who believe — the living and deceased. Death is a part of nature. When the body dies, the soul can continue on by moving into another form. After death, the spirit joins the rest of our deceased family, and during rituals the dead and living meet.

7. Nature is sacred, and sacredness is the most perfect characteristic of life, it unites everything. Our people grow and cultivate their land. Lithuanians consider their home sacred. Without its land, a nation cannot survive and remain as itself. Therefore we must love and respect our Earth, and protect it.

Gods and Goddesses

Baltic culture and religion is one of the few in Europe which has retained a constant spiritual heritage. The Balts view the whole world as one living united whole, steeped in the powers of the deities. For us, modern Balts, just as for our ancestors, the sacred text is nature itself with all its fantastic diversity. Every year Nature dies and is reborn again. After winter comes spring, rebirth begins. The creative power of the Gods, from the primal force—water — allows life to be reborn and begin the cycle anew.

The creator deities

The Lithuanian legends about the creation of the world tell us about the creator deities. These were Dievas, god of the sky, and Vėlinas, god of the earth and underworld. The birth of the world was the result of opposite powers working together. The oldest knowledge tells us of the Mother Goddess, and her descendants were the female goddesses of the Balts.

The creator deities are mentioned only during the Winter Solstice, when the Sun awakens, and the spirits of ancestors (vėlės) visit our homes, where they are offered a seat at our feast table.

In the ancient Baltic faith, the mysterious origins of the world and its constant rebirth are mentioned with other names as well: *Praamžis, Andojas, Pradžiapatis, Sutvaras, Kūrėjas*.

Dievas — the god of the sky, of light and life, the creator god. The word „dievas“ („god“) is used in the general sense as well, and the word „šventas“ (“holy/sacred“) is of a similar origin.

Vėlinas — god of the earth and underworld, protector of our ancestors. With Dievas he creates and influences the world. This sort of collation between the work of Dievas and Vėlinas expresses the essence of world creation and human existence.

Perkūnas — the giver of nature’s living and creative powers. As the source of power in battle, he is compared to an armed warrior on a horse. The symbol of our nation, the Vytis, is an image of Perkūnas. Perkūnas refreshes and protects our land. As a cosmic deity, Perkūnas cleanses the world and rescues it from the destructive powers, he helps keep the peace and stability. He influences the everlasting battle for Harmony. In spring he provides heavenly light, with thunder and rain he awakens the earth and all living things. His symbol is the swastika, the whirling cosmic fire, and his home is the oak tree, the strongest tree of all trees. One can communicate with Perkūnas through prayers to fire, oak trees, hills, through song and dance.

There are several days for Perkūnas during the year, times when he is especially honored: Graudulinės (February 2), Jorė (the last weekend of April), Rasos (June 23), Autumn Solstice (September 21).

The great Prussian rebellion began in 1260, on September 20—the Solstice and Day of Perkūnas. Today it is also the day of Baltic Unity. The Prussian deity Patrimpas and Samogitian Jorė are the spring forms of Perkūnas.

In the everyday human realm, the godly powers that are expressed to people in various forms are expressed through the names inherited from our ancestors—Žemyna, Laima, Gabija, Medeina, and others.

Žemyna — the goddess of earth, birth, growth, and ripening. She protects life. Žemyna is the mother of all. In the morning and evening she is greeted (kissed) as a mother. Mother Earth is pure and right, she cannot be disrespected or harmed. Since Žemyna gives life, in rituals she is the first to receive sacrifices. Žemyna's power is within flat stones, sometimes they can have a hole in the center. Rain water that gathers in these little holes gains magical powers.

The Earth is also the mother of the dead. As from a mother all come from her and will return to her.

Vydūnas always noted the importance of our connection to the earth—*Lithuanians are people who longer than anyone else have lived in their country. People who live with the power of the earth can feel much deeper the depths of being.*

The earth and all creation must be respected and protected, while we, people, must see ourselves as a part of the whole of life. Žemyna is honored on many holidays, but especially during Žolinės (August 15).

Laima — the all-knowing goddess. She decides the fate of all men, knows the length of their lives, their good luck and bad luck. The fate that is decided by Laima is sometimes known as Dalia.

Laima decides the fate of a newborn child and makes sure that their destiny comes to pass. Wanting to gain more from goddess Laima at the birth of a child, the ritual includes sacrifices and

prayers to not only Laima, but also Žemyna. Laima's bird is the cuckoo. It's cuckooing could determine the length of someone's life, predict good luck and bad luck. The home of the goddess Laima was the linden tree. Under linden trees women would pray and sacrifice, asking for success for themselves and their families, for their own fertility and that of their land. Laima's power dwelled in special upright standing stones.

Gabija — the goddess of fire, of the hearth, protector of the family. At the same time she is a form of the eternal flame of the universe, with her powers uniting not only the living with each other, their family, tribe and nation, but also with the spirits and deities. Fire is the most sacred thing in Baltic rituals. During holidays she is ceremoniously ignited, awakened, fed, and lulled to sleep.

Medeina — goddess of the forest, of the power and natural resources therein. She is the protector of the primeval forces of nature. Her home is the depths of the forest untouched by human hands, full of life and order without people.



The Afterlife and Spirits

Based on the old Lithuanian beliefs, a person's soul doesn't die, so the afterlife is just a continuation of life. After death, the deceased, as a "guest of the spirits" travels the road of the Ancestors. Funeral mourning songs say: *oh, open the gates of the spirits, open the doors of the spirits ... take them by their white hands, sit them on the spirit's bench.*

After burying the deceased, the family organizes a feast, because it is important to properly say goodbye to the dead. The earth receives only the body, while the soul waits for attention, it wants to be honored and led into the afterlife with all the proper rituals in the ways of the Ancestors. Therefore, during the funeral feast, the deceased's soul is invited to participate. The person's good works and achievements are remembered, and the soul is wished a safe journey into the spirit world.

Believing that the soul lives on after death, people until recently brought with them to the cemetery not only candles and flowers, but also food and drink. The living feed the spirits, and the spirits express their thanks invisibly, although we can still feel their support and help during hard times, health, prosperity, and other good things at other times. Our deceased family is always near us, they matter to us and we will always be important to them. We can communicate with them and the spirits can see us, answering our questions via dreams, for example. They long for

us, and vice versa, in turn inspiring us with their spiritual powers. We have someone we can rely on during hard times and the most important parts of our lives, when no one else on earth can help us. Life becomes easier then.

The afterlife isn't guaranteed for all. The body is already dead and destined to decay, while the soul is gone—so it remains uncultured. There is no one to care about the body, nothing can separate from it... This is the eternal demise, the absolute non-existence. Isn't this what we are afraid of most? Not only soulless people, but those with weak souls cannot enter the afterlife, they simply can't reach it. One must earn the right to an afterlife while still alive. It is important to have a strong spirit that would be able to travel to Anapolis [world of the afterlife]. All religions and mythologies speak of the difficult journey after death. There are many tests and hardships. One must cross many thresholds in this life, and they don't end in the next. When a child is born and the seed of the soul enters it from the realm of the gods, we begin our journey from life on this earth towards the mountain of light, a journey with the goal of growing a soul. We receive this opportunity, because only in this worldly and contradictory life, with our vital powers and our will to open the way for inner light, can we ignite the star of our soul. And when our bodies wither, it will rise to the heavens carrying to the celestial world our unique life experience and spiritual achievements. (Jonas Vaiškūnas)

Dausos — the Lithuanian realm of the dead. It is thought of as the home of the ancestors, a place where the souls of the dead dwell and birds go to winter. This world is the home of the sky god Dievas. Dausos are on the top of the world mountain, and it is connected to the world of the living by the Milky Way (known in Lithuanian as "Paukščių takas" – "path of the birds"). The family

that holds on to the traditions and faith of their ancestors will live on forever.

In the afterlife every person hopes to meet and will meet their deceased relatives. The living see off the deceased not into a frightening unknown, but rather to a faraway, yet dear homeland, where no one will feel alone. (Gintaras Beresnevičius)

The basis of the Lithuanian nation is the family. The nation will live on as long as the family thrives. The family is made up of the living and the dead. The connection to the dead is kept alive through rituals. Until our own time the holidays that remember the dead, Vėlinės and Kūčios, are still very important. During this time the cemetery is visited, the deceased are offered a seat at the feast table. The ancestors are still remembered on other holidays as well — Užgavėnės, Velykos, Sekminės, Žolinės. During these holidays presents are exchanged. By the altar's fire prayers are directed towards Perkūnas and Žemyna, wheat and salt is offered.

Harmony and Morality

The depths of Baltic culture hide the idea of Darna (harmony). This is the root of many important concepts, expressed in the roots of such Lithuanian words as *“daryti, darbas, derlius, derėjimas, dermė, dora”* (“to do, work, harvest, to go together, concord, morality”).

People's and nature's communities (families) create harmony and morality through their concord. The words above show the importance and universality of harmony. It is the main goal of man and nature, achieved and held on to only through hard work and perseverance.

All that is moral is good, and morality is expressed where people are in concord. Good is all that serves the family, the community. *A person who is suited for all good deeds is a moral person (LKŽ)*. A moral person is one who can live in a community; this is the oldest meaning of morality. A moral society or community is one where concord, peace, and understanding reign. It is important to note that there are no absolutely good or evil gods or goddesses. Goodness is born with the interaction of opposite and different powers, with the active participation of man. This type of interaction is the basis for the existence of the cosmos.

Evil is the lack of Darna, or the inability to create and preserve it. These are the deeds of people aimed against nature and its order. This is why harming nature is clearly evil.

The most important requirement for morality is respect for all life, and its protection. From here comes the commandment, Do not Kill. Since the world surrounding us is alive, we must respect every manifestation. This is why Lithuanians honor the earth, water, the sun, moon, fire, trees, birds, animals... It is a sin to do anything that disrespects life. This is why it's a sin to pollute water (a spring, for example), fire (the hearth), to beat or harm the earth.

In human relationships, respect for your mother, father, and elders is most important. During the reign of Gediminas (1275–1341), in his letters we can read that respect for one's elders is the central moral commandment.

Lithuanian culture has preserved a very important characteristic of human interaction. This is **talka**—working together without pay; **bičiulystė**—beekeeping based on moral, not economic ties; **vaišingumas**—welcoming and caring for guests. Seeking interest, or living on usury was not only foreign to our culture, but amoral.

Morality is best described not by a list of rules for good behavior or by punishments for bad behavior, but via a world outlook. In other words, life is predetermined by how you view the world—with trust and love, or with pessimism. Folklore preserves a special feeling of love for the world, which in its turn, and tenderness with love, replied and thanked moral people.

Alkai

We communicate with the gods indirectly, through mediators. The most important role of sacred spots is to make man's connection to the gods easier. The old Lithuanian sacred places were called "alkai." They exist in nature—hills, springs, rivers, trees, rocks, and other things that people have regarded as sacred from the most ancient times. In Lithuania there are a lot of these places, so Lithuania itself is considered as sacred land. Vykintas Vaitkevičius wrote about these sacred spots in his books *Ancient Lithuanian Sacred Places. Samogitia* (1998) (about 1000 sacred places) and *Ancient Lithuanian Sacred Places. Aukštaitija* (2006) (about 1500 sacred places). Many of these alkai existed until recently, as is referred to in local legends.

The famous and unique Lithuanian mountains and hills of Gediminas, Šatrija, Rambynas, Birutė are places where big festivals and rituals took place. The gods and goddesses were honored on these hills, the sacred flame burned. Today these sacred places are again the locations of rituals, and the sacred flame again acts as a mediator between the gods and men.

The most important Lithuanian temple is in Vilnius, where Šventaragis founded the cult of the Eternal Flame, and is today known as Šventaragis valley. Here Gediminas built the temple of Perkūnas with an altar for the eternal flame. On Gediminas Hill there was a sacred spot for the deity Andajus, or Praamžius. The



Christians extinguished the Sacred Flame in 1387, destroyed the temple and in that spot built their church. Today there stands the Cathedral, and the steps of the old temple are hidden underneath the Cathedral.

In modern times, rituals are performed at the grave on Gediminas hill or at Lizdeika's altar in Verkiiai. More and more people in Lithuania build alkai in the countryside, and there they celebrate holidays, perform rituals, and communicate with the gods and ancestors. The most commonly visited are Jonas Vaiškūnas' alkas in Molėtai, which is an observatory for the celestial bodies, and Romuva's alkas in the village of Dvarciškes, in Švenčionys region.

Home alkai are built in a corner. The corners of the home are important because they are visited by the souls of the ancestors and the home deities. In modern homes and apartments it is possible to build a personal family altar—alkas. A little table or shelf is suitable for the alkas, it is convenient for performing rituals and burning the sacred flame. The home altars in Hinduism are a good example to follow, as they house statues of the most important deities, as well as objects used in rituals.

Dainos (Songs)

Over the past 200 years, a vast treasury of Lithuanian folk music has been collected, over 700 000 songs. Unfortunately, the live folk tradition at the same time slowly began to disappear, unable to withstand the pressure of civilization. This process slightly ceased in the mid 20th century with the beginning of a folklore revival, and in 1967, with the rebirth of the old Baltic religion, so too was reborn the living folk song tradition. Folk songs became an integral part of Romuva.

All the Baltic religious rituals are performed to the accompaniment of folk songs, and the words can be expanded to include the names of the gods of the Baltic pantheon, which were banned during the years of Christian occupation, so people had to hide the names of their gods. Now we no longer have to hide.

The songs unite one generation with the next and preserve the wisdom of the Ancestors, their understanding of beauty and morality. The sacral symbols are also preserved in the hymns, songs, and especially sutartines. Singing and music are a religious ritual.

Each song has its place and time under the tree of life. The ever-rotating cycle of the seasons had different songs for each time. While singing, a person communicates with the gods, with trees, birds, the stars.

Since the old religion is a religion that aims to conserve life, it is most closely connected to calendar traditions and family holidays, and to the songs that have become an inseparable part of those holidays.



Communities and Family Holidays

Lithuanian culture and the old religion survived only because, all the way up to the 20th century, the rural communities thrived. These communities preserved the most important values of the ancestors, and connected people to them through holidays, visiting sacred places, the honoring of sacred objects, folklore and traditions. We should understand community as a deeper spiritual relationship between people—that is good faith, friendship, helping one another, and the feeling of unity.

In independent Lithuania, over the past two decades, Romuva communities were founded one after another. Presently there are about 30 in Lithuania. These communities celebrate calendrical holidays, organize summer camps, conferences, build altars and temples. More and more families choose to have traditional christenings, weddings, and even funerals.

Weddings

Creating a family is the most important event in a person's life, because it prolongs the existence of their kin, guaranteeing its survival, and, in perpetuity. The ancient Lithuanian weddings were very varied and full of meaning. We know of more than 10 000 wedding songs, and many rituals and traditions have

survived to this day. Nowadays more and more we rely on the ancient traditions. The most important Baltic ritual is a wedding over the altar of the Eternal Flame. The couple chooses the location for their wedding. There are quite a few beautiful and suitable locations in nature: in Vilnius—Verkių park by Lizdeika's altar; not far from Vilnius—Karmazinas sacred hill, in Kernavė—on the ancient burial mounds; in Kaunas—on Palemonas' burial mound; in Palanga—on Birutė's mountain, as well as Rambynas and Šatrija. The rituals can also be performed at the family's personal altars.

Namegiving

As with weddings, the location for namegivings (christening) is chosen by the parents, usually a lovely place in the countryside. The ritual is most commonly performed by women (vaidilės). The ritual requires a fire altar and water. A tree is often planted, an oak tree for a baby boy, and a linden tree for a girl. The parents and child receive good luck wishes.

Funerals

While saying farewell to the deceased by the coffin (or a cremation urn), the folk songs are accompanied by the music of kanklės (a zither-type instrument). At the front of the funeral procession, a portable mini fire altar is carried, which is extinguished when the coffin or urn is buried. In this ancient tradition, the funerals of Marija Gimbutienė, artist Algimantas Švažas, religious historian Gintaras Beresnevičius were performed, and Vydūnas was re-interred this way as well.

Aistuva*

Life is an opportunity to awaken. We awaken as Lithuanians, because the meaning of existence is expressed in different forms and through individuality. Only death can destroy that individuality. But death is only a curve in the road of life. Life is eternal. Our nation is also eternal.

Aistuva is giant country—you can walk nine times for three days and nights through rustling forests and still not reach the end. Lakes stretch between the forests, moody rivers flow, green meadows and wheat fields sway in the breeze. Burial mounds and castles dot the landscape. As you approach the fence of the castle or temple, you can see the smoke from the eternal flame rises skywards, vaidilos meditate, sacred symbols glitter in the sunlight. Giant oak trees rustle—these are the sacred groves. Knock on the door, don't be afraid, you will be welcomed. This land knows no bad people.

Everything that we see is sacred, this is the flow of eternal life, the smoldering of the sacred world flame.

The whole sky glows with the god's light, life is awakened by the sky gods Saulelė (Sun), Mėnulaitis (Moon), Aušrinė (Dawn), Vakarinė (Twilight). You make us happy, we honor You. Sacred Gabija is always with us, smoldering day and night.

We know many things, because our relatives are the trees, grass, birds, animals. They hide nothing from us. The forest is our home.

We know thousands of songs. These are hymns for our gods and goddesses, for our ancestors, parents, brothers and sisters. We sing as the birds sing. We were taught this by our parents. As the forests rustle, so the kanklės play and horns sound.

There are no better farmers than us, we love the earth, and She loves us. Glory to Mother Žemyna. Our granaries are full, there is enough for our neighbors and guests. The herds that we watch over pasture on the riverbanks.

Dancers twirl in the forest glades, they go in circles as does the earth and sky, kanklės echo. Brightly colored clothes flutter and jewelry glitters. Grey-haired elders negotiate, and only with the agreement of all can a decision be reached. In this manner issues are discussed in neighboring lands as well.

We had everything, we knew everything, we were happy.

But there were signs and warnings. There was something dangerous about to happen.

Perkunas' thunder was loud and angry, the sun and moon darkened, black shadows swept over the woods and hills. The voices of our ancestors warned us through our dreams.

From the south came strange people, maybe thieves, maybe beggars. In the beginning they settled close to the castles and villages, on the periphery. Black-robed people came as well, they claimed they were from Constantinople. There were stories of fires, wars, destruction in the lands to the south. The slaves of the new god marched to the north, east, west.

The Lithuanian krivulės gathered, riders went from town to town, men picked up their weapons, fortress walls were built, warning bonfires were lit. All in naught.

The merciless fire destroyed the sacred castles. The vaidilos and warriors who survived retreated to the lands of their as yet

untouched neighbors, others retreated into the dark forests, and the rest bowed down their heads to the invaders, served them, gave over their knowledge and skills hoping to regain their former lives. However, the black invaders knew their goal. Only in the most remote forests the sacred hymns still echo. The grey-haired elders hid and died in secret huts.

So our great homeland slowly disappeared and melted away. Some of the people moved to the still free coastline, where the sacred flame still burned and castles rose above the oak forests. But the songs were gloomy with sad memories of their ancestral lands.

But the sun still shone, and roadside shrines still stood, people were still free, the grass snakes still hissed about eternal life. The oak trees still awakened spiritual strength. But the ring of aggression continued to tighten. We became warriors because there was nowhere else to go. The proponents of the new black faith worked with no rest. There was one last pagan island that they had to conquer. Then they would finally be victorious. But this island was the gathering place of the most ferocious protectors of the sacred flame. The altar flame burned incessantly in Romuva. The Krivis and vaidilos kept watch. The last of all was the god Perkūnas, he was the most they called upon the most. Lies and wrong had to be punished. Perkūnas' lightning quaked over the free land and brought hope to people. Battle was most important, brave warriors gathered under the flag of Perkūnas, and they protected not only the borderlands, but also swept over the lands of their enemies. But in the name of Christ, tribe after tribe perished.

Gatherings of krivulės was no longer enough, we needed a brutal, unified government, as was elsewhere in Europe. Mindaugas attempted this, but the free warriors didn't want to lose their old freedom. The ring of oppression just got tighter. In Lithuania

the black invaders built an independent castle of their own, where they wove their traps.

The last ruler of free Lithuania was Kęstutis. He was a Lithuanian, faithful to the sacred flame and cult of the sun. In Šventaragis valley his remains sadly smoldered on the royal funeral pyre. He left us for the eternal land of our forefathers, to the realm of the gods and ancestors. The krivis and vaidilos wept, because this was the twilight before the dark night.

Finally, the last area is occupied. Some were pressured with privileges and gifts, others with force and threats. This was the start of serfdom, slavery for the Lithuanians. The elite hierarchy began spiritual slavery and betrayal of their own people. The newcomers taught that people should give up their native tongue, the traditions of their forefathers, and most importantly, the old faith.

Our land, our language, our songs, traditions and faith were kept alive by the simple people living in the countryside. And when in the 19th century country life began to decline, but the cultural rebirth began, people like Simonas Daukantas helped it continue. The generation that founded "Aušra" knew all too well that the old religion should be resurrected and they were the first ray of light in this revival. Basanavičius, Vištelis, and Vydūnas helped ignite anew the barely smoldering altar flame. Čiurlionis inspired our nation's creative spirit. Vydunas brought back the wisdom of our forefathers.

This is still the same vitality, the same national vitality that had seemed to die with Kęstutis. It burns eternally, and sometimes with an especially bright flame. Let us see that vitality, let us feel it, let us restore it.

* By Jonas Trinkūnas, 1967, the beginning of the revival of Romuva

Romuva Holidays



January

25 – Midwinter, Foal's Namegiving (during the new moon)

February

2 – Day of Perkūnas. 5 – Day of Gabija/Fire
Užgavenis (Spring carnival)

March

21 – Spring Equinox

April

Velykos (Easter)
Last weekend – Jorė

May

13 – Mildos/Aušrinis Holiday

June

23 – Rasos (Kupolinis, Day of Perkūnas, Summer Solstice)

July

7 – Day of Laima

August

15 – Žolinis (Day of Žemyna)

September

21 – Autumn Equinox, Day of Perkūnas
22 – Baltic Unity Day

October

19 – Day of Krivis

November

1–2 – Ilgės, Vėlinis (Day of the Ancestors)

December

21 – Saulėgrīža (Return of the Sun), Day of Praamžius
24 – Kūčios (Christmas Eve), 25 – Kalėdos (Christmas Day)

Thoughts

It is very important for us to understand what treasure we possess. We must learn to draw wisdom and beauty from it, everything that is within it. If we give this up, then we will give up ourselves... This is a global problem—how to return to the sacredness of the earth. The sacredness of the earth is still felt very strongly in Lithuania, we still haven't lost it. We are privileged, because we can quickly renew our bond with the past and feel the continuation of our ancient culture within us. We should keep this in mind and not call it ethnic fundamentalism. This is our guarantee of continued existence—how else can we survive, if not with the help of these springs, which are the springs of goodness and beauty. Therefore, I believe that it is our luck that we have that folk culture.

(Marija Gimbutienė)

We will only experience a full life if we respect the values of our forefathers, which rise from the whole of our land's life, like amber from the ancient forests, like the Lithuanian language and song— from Lithuanian nationality. Looking at the teachings of the ancient Lithuanian faith, we see that there is a deep understanding in this faith. Belief was simply the greatest vein of Lithuania's national vitality.

(Vydūnas)

Without denying the importance and meaning of the West's cultural principles, our culturalists must find their own Lithuanian cultural roots. The mythical beings of our ancestors were Žemyna as the ruler of Earth, the all-birthing Mother, and Perkūnas as ruler of the skies, demonstrating his power and the power of the sky through thunder and lightning.

(Vincas Vyčinas)

More literature:



The Way of the Old Lithuanian Religion
Jonas Trinkūnas
Vilnius, 2009

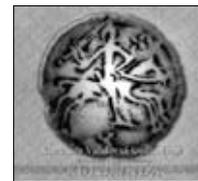


Words for Our Gods and Goddesses
Jonas Trinkūnas
Vilnius, 2007



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CD's:



„Hymns to King Gediminas“
„Kūlgrinda“, 2009

„Hymns to the Sun“
„Kūlgrinda“, 2007



„Prussian Hymns“
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„Sotvaras“,
„Kūlgrinda“ with Donis, 2003



„Hymns for Perkūnas“
„Kūlgrinda“, 2003

„Rites of Fire“
„Kūlgrinda“, 2002



Trinkūnas, Jonas

Tr-146 Baltic Religion Today (Baltų religija šiandien) / Jonas Trinkūnas

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EN / This book describes the Baltic religious community's worldview, holidays, rituals, and the roots of religious traditions. In defining the whole religious Baltic tradition, we must base it in the old Lithuanian religion. Today, the Baltic religion that is practiced is an expression of our modern Lithuanian spiritual life.

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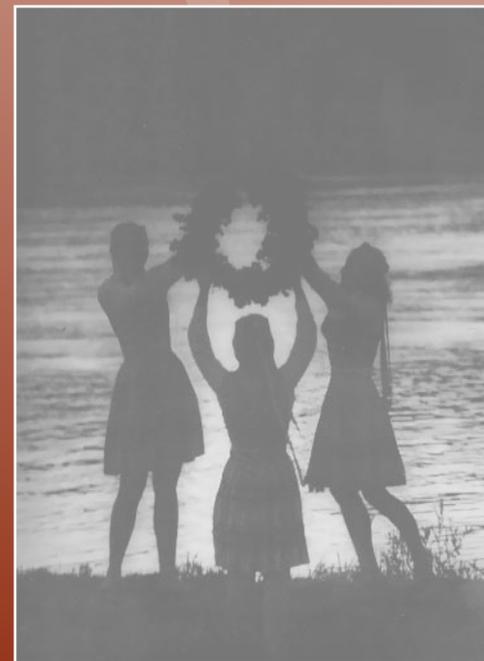
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*May the Eternal Flame burn through the ages,
May the spirit of our ancestors protect us
and may the gods and goddesses watch over us*

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