

Summary

THE CONCEPT OF THE SKY IN THE BALTIC MYTHICAL WORLDVIEW

Common to almost all cultures, the mythical concept of the sky reflects a once-dominant archaic worldview. This scholarly study describes and reconstructs the ancient Baltic model of the sky, as well as the imagery and motifs that comprise, connect, and unite it. The concepts of the Sun, the Moon and the Rainbow, alongside other observable astronomical objects and phenomena, are also recreated, and their relation to each other is explored. The research is based on linguistic information, written sources on the Baltic religion and mythology, and Lithuanian and Latvian folklore. The reconstructed Baltic imagery of the sky has preserved some elements of the Indo-European sub-ethnic worldview, therefore, potentially, it is an important source for the recreation not only of Baltic mythology, but also of spiritual culture of the Indo-Europeans.

In the Lithuanian language, the word *dangus* ('sky') originates from the verb *dengti* ('to cover'). Western Baltic Prussian tribes used the same word *dangus* (acc. *dangon*, *dengon*, *-an*), whereas the Latvians' word for it, *debess*, is based on a different root. Only the Lithuanians and the Prussians used the same lexeme to describe the sky, which suggests that they saw it as a vast cosmic lid covering all people and the world they inhabited. Based on studies into the archaic religions, the sky might have been imagined to be made of a hard substance, like stone. The archaic imagery of a stone sky is connected to the etiology of thunder, especially its powerful sound of crashing and rumbling that was perceived as cutting across the entire universe. The sound of thunder is

reminiscent of moving boulders: rolling, falling, crumbling, and crashing against each other. Thus, according to prevalent beliefs, there were huge rocks up in the sky the collapse of which caused the crashing noise of thunder. Alternately, it was the work of the god Perkūnas, who was either driving his chariot on a cobbled stone road, carrying boulders in his chariot and then emptying them out, or simply rolling the stones along.

In Baltic mythology the sky also symbolises the paternal God figure, as the light that shrouds the human world and the mysterious force and energy that affected it. The connection between the Sky and God is confirmed by the etymology of the Indo-European **d̥iēus* (*dijēus*), ‘*dievas*’. This word is associated with the root **dei-*, *deiǵ-*, *dī-*, *dīā-* meaning ‘to shine, to sparkle’. The Lithuanian word ‘*dievas*’, Latvian ‘*dievs*’ and Prussian ‘*deywis*’ are also derived from the same root.

In a mythical worldview, the Sun was considered the central astronomical object and one of the dominant forces of Cosmos surrounding the humans and perceived by them. Both in Lithuanian and Latvian, the nouns denoting the Sun are both of feminine grammatical gender (*saule* and *saule*, respectively); in folklore, the Sun is also depicted as female. Traditionally, the Balts deified not only the sky, but also its various celestial objects, including the Sun. The view of the Sun as a deity is supported by folk songs where her imagery is of a figure wearing a crown, and legends where the Sun dominates over other personified celestial bodies. Omniscience was also attributed to the Sun, as she was regarded to be ‘the eye of God’. The adoration of the Sun is also expressed by the presence of a solar cult in annual cyclical celebrations and in daily rituals: small prayers and addresses (that later evolved into ritual songs), ritual dances, bowing to the Sun on certain occasions, and the existence of sacred hills devoted to the Sun. The high-ranking status of the Sun is also seen in the way she is addressed as ‘mother’ in folk songs (Lith. *motinėlė*, Latvian *māmuliņa*). This suggests a connection between the Sun and the role of the Mother in the family. The parallel with the Mother is probably the best description of the Sun’s status in the

archaic worldview that reflects both the folk conception and the commonly used terminology.

An excerpt (1261) from the chronicles of John Malalas records a fragment of the myth of the Sun's origin: a blacksmith named Teliaveli forged and then tossed the Sun into the sky. The motif of the Sun being forged in the blacksmith's hearth is also common to Finno-Ugrian and North American mythology, making it a relic of an archaic world perception which connected the Sun with the cult of metal. The idea that the Sun had a link with metal might have become common once the Eastern Baltic region had already become familiarized with metal, and the craft of smithery had become valued and widely practiced.

In Lithuanian and Latvian mythology, the Moon was the masculine force thus the nouns in both languages (*mėnulis*, *mėnuo* in Lithuanian and *mēness* in Latvian) are of the masculine grammatical gender. The Moon was seen as a somewhat lower ranking celestial body compared to the Sun, perhaps due to its volatility and unending fluctuation of its phases, or maybe because it reigned in the dark night sky that was less observed by the human eye. Regardless, the Moon was also deified: he was addressed as *dievaitis* (young god), referred to in prayers as *Dievo sūnus* (the son of God), *karalius* (the king), *dangaus karalaitis* (the prince of the sky), *kunigaikštis* (the duke). In religious imagery the Moon was pictured as either wearing a crown, or as a being with little horns. Beliefs tied to the woman's existence, its cyclical nature, which was seen to mirror the cycles of the moon, its reproductive function and also confirmed the deification of the Moon, as did practices and superstitions regarding the natural world of flora and fauna. The human's specific behaviour in the presence of the new moon like tipping one's hat or saying a short prayer bear witness to the reflections of a lunar cult in the Baltic tradition.

Perkūnas, the deity of thunder (*Perkūnas*, *Pērkons*, *Percunis* in Lithuanian, Latvian and Prussian respectively), was seen as one of the leading figures of the mythical sky, on par with the Sun. Not only was he seen as the executor of atmospheric phenom-

ena, but also as the overseer and guardian of justice, morality, and social norms, which applied to both the human world and the mythical realm above. Venus, known as Aušrinė (*Aušrinė/Vakarinė* in Lithuanian, *Rīta zvaigzne* in Latvian), was exceptional in its brightness and was also a prominent being in folklore. In the mythical worldview, stars were seen as the children of the Sun and the Moon, thus their origin was also illuminated by deific light.

The aforementioned mythical figures were all part of the family of celestial deities and beings, whose family model and the turns and twists of whose lives were closely modelled on the family life in the human world. The mythical deities also experienced challenges, treachery and betrayal, and dramatic outcomes. An example of such a storyline is the myth about the heavenly wedding between the Sun and the Moon, closely followed by the latter's infidelity with Aušrinė. The Moon was then chopped in half by either the Sun or Perkūnas as punishment for his betrayal, which explains the changing phases of the Moon and the transition of the full to the waning moon.

In folklore, the celestial bodies were represented either anthropomorphically or zoomorphically. In songs and tales, they were usually personified and pictured with human attributes, such as clothing and others, whereas in riddles they were shown as animals: a bull, a cow, a horse, a foal, a sheep, a pig, or a goat. Furthermore, even though the Sun and the Moon were considered the rulers of the sky, in riddles they could assume the roles of shepherds, the herders of the heavenly flock. The sky itself was imagined as a boundless pasture.

A typical attribute of personified celestial bodies and deities is a wagon, a chariot, and, sometimes, a boat. The two- or four-wheeled chariot drawn by flaming horses was commonly used by the Sun – the hypostasis of the female in Lithuanian and Latvian folklore. Wearing a star-spangled cape or a gold jacket, the Moon, would ride in a coachman-driven carriage across the night sky. Perkūnas had a two- or four-wheeled chariot similar to the Sun's only drawn by grey goats or white horses; he would

drive it along the cobbled roads of the sky. After nightfall, the Sun would board a golden, silver or copper boat, and sail the lagoon until dawn. The boat is also characteristic of the Moon, as he, according to Latvian folk songs, could spend 'days and nights' in it. The sky itself could be encoded as a vast lagoon, home to all the floating stars.

Even though the Baltic sky was both unknowable and endless, it was still imagined as having a rigid structure of several – three, seven or nine – layers. The higher the layer of the sky, the more blissful and mysterious it was. The heaven of the afterlife, attainable to the souls passing through the gates of heaven, was considered to be on one of the levels. According to prayers and tales, it was either the dominion of Perkūnas, or the Moon itself as a celestial body. However, these two posthumous places were not open to just anyone. The only souls to be admitted into the realm of Perkūnas were those of pagan priests (Lith. *kriiviai*) and other humans deserving heavenly posthumous existence. The Moon, on the other hand, was intended for wizards and sinners – their souls would be transported there by psychopomp Velnias himself (Eng. 'devil'; the deity of death and the underworld; *velnias* in Lithuanian, *velns* in Latvian). The journey to heaven had a solar aspect to it: the souls travelled a road lit up and blessed by the Sun. The gates of heaven, according to Latvian beliefs, opened at night, when, in a blinding flash, 'a strike of lightning slashed the sky in two'. When the gates to heaven were open, one could, connect with God for an incredible moment and communicate with him until the gates closed again. Thus the sky and the mysterious phenomena experienced before entering it facilitate a connection with a deity. There can be no doubt that in the mythical mindset the sky is linked with transcendence in that it encompassed the posthumous world and is associated with a deity.

The role of mediator between the Sky and the Earth might have been assigned to such objects of mythical meaning as hills, trees, or other shooting plants, most commonly the oak tree; also fire, due to its function in ritual offerings and cremation. In the

animal sphere, the most prominent mediators between the Earth and the Sky were birds that sometimes embodied souls soaring through the heavens, and some insects, especially bees. Both birds and bees were believed to be the reincarnations of human souls.

The phenomenon of the rainbow also had a place in the mythical worldview, as it was another link between the Earth and the Sky. Its appearance was perceived as a hierophany and a sign of immense beauty and harmony, or an expression of the sacred powers of deities and mythical beings. The rainbow had many names, the most common of which was *Laumės juosta* (the sash of Laumė), a link between the Earth and the Sky and a manifestation of a Balt deity in the upper zone of the mythical world. The Lithuanian words *smakas* (dragon) and *straublys* (proboscis), also used to refer to the rainbow, reflect its power of manipulating the waters of the Earth and the Sky, as well as controlling its circulation and, by extension, being in charge of rainfall. The Lithuanian names *Dievo juosta* (sash of God), *Dievo diržas* (the belt of God), *Adomo ir Ievos juosta* (the sash of Adam and Eve), and the Latvian *tēva josta* (the sash of the Father) all reveal the Rainbow to have been perceived as a sign of religious or mythical characters in the sky. The Lithuanian *dermės juosta* (the sash of harmony), *malonės juosta* (the sash of mercy) and *linksmynė* (merriment) all suggest the rainbow to be a sign of harmony, that made itself visible to the humankind.

The mythical imagery of the Balt sky ties into a coherent system and form its certain characteristics. The structures of this system can be recognized in the reconstructed semantics of the Indo-European spiritual culture. Some of the imagery, in particular the images of the solar cult, its origin, and associated ideology can be traced back to the second-first millennium BC, that is, the Bronze Age. The lunar cult and lunar proto-images are also archaic and have historical characteristics of both prehistorical times and later epochs. Late mythological layer of the sky in folklore, which is found only in Lithuanian and Latvian folklore, should also be distinguished.