

Nijolė Laurinkienė

## ŽEMYNA AND HER MYTHICAL WORLD

### Summary

From the very first record of Žemyna's name and her description in a sixteenth-century historical source to her conception in twentieth – twenty-first-century studies this goddess has been portrayed as one of the most distinctive and reliably documented Lithuanian deities. She is an important component of the Baltic religion and mythology. Its reconstruction offers the possibility of broadening the scope of academic studies on, and reaching a deeper understanding of, the archaic spiritual culture in an international context, especially that of related cultures. This can be achieved by building on the rich comparative field starting with the ancient religion of the neighbouring Slavs to those of the peoples of southern Europe, which had retained the remains of a similar deity cult. In the modern and almost completely secularized society the spiritual and religious ties with the Earth and natural surroundings in general are breaking. That is another reason why this study is relevant, as it should restore and revive basic values preserved by ethnic culture and the associated spiritual practices which join man and nature and harmonize their mutual living relationship.

Most of the information about Žemyna and her cult was found in sixteenth–eighteenth-century historical written sources which were published in a collection (BRMŠ<sup>1</sup>) compiled by Professor Norbertas Vėlius. Abundant information about the goddess can also be found in linguistic material – the great treasury of the Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language with illustrative exam-

<sup>1</sup> Baltų religijų ir mitologijos šaltiniai / Sources of the Baltic religions and mythology; see 'Šaltiniai ir literatūra'.

ples of word usage (LKŽ<sup>2</sup>, LKŽe<sup>3</sup>, LKŽK<sup>4</sup>) accumulated by the lexicographers of the Institute of the Lithuanian Language. Another important document in this context is folklore stored in the Manuscript Department in the Archives of Lithuanian Folklore (LTR<sup>5</sup>) at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, as well as ethnography and the Card-index of Faiths (ES, ES TK<sup>6</sup>) kept in the Manuscript Department of the Ethnology department at the Lithuanian Institute of History. An exceptionally important source to this monograph is *Deliciae Prussicae oder Preussische Schaubühne* (Prussian Curiosities or Prussian Theatre, the title of the Lithuanian translation *Prūsijos įdomybės arba Prūsijos regyklai*), a work written in the second half of the seventeenth century by the historian and ethnographer Matthäus Prätorius from Lithuania Minor. It abounds with facts about Žemyna and manifestations of her worship (PrPI<sup>7</sup> II, III). This work is also valuable because it describes instances of the Žemyna cult in western Baltic territories – the lands between the Vistula and the Nemunas rivers which were inhabited by ancient Prussians and now extinct Baltic tribes, whose old religion was in many ways adopted by the Lithuanians of Lithuania Minor known as *lietuvininkai*.

An active attempt to gain familiarity with Žemyna and the agrarian and calendar customs and rituals associated with Žemyna took place during field research with the experienced folklore collector Rita Balkutė, which was carried out in various regions of Lithuania in 2011/2012.

The monograph consists of two parts: ‘Main traits of the Earth deity’ and ‘Manifestations of Žemyna’s cult’, both of which are

<sup>2</sup> Lietuvių kalbos žodynas / Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language

<sup>3</sup> Elektroninis lietuvių kalbos žodynas / Electronic Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language

<sup>4</sup> Lietuvių kalbos žodyno kartoteka / Card-index of the Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language

<sup>5</sup> Lietuvių tautosakos rankraštynas / Lithuanian Folklore Manuscript department

<sup>6</sup> Etnologijos skyrius, Etnologijos skyriaus Tikėjimų kartoteka / Ethnology department, Card-index of Faiths of the Ethnology department

<sup>7</sup> See ‘Šaltiniai ir literatūra’.

further broken down into sections and subsections. The sections of the first part are 'The Earth goddess and her origin', 'Žemyna – earth and deity', 'The distribution of the Earth goddess cult in Baltic territories', 'Names of the Earth goddess', 'Sanctity of Žemyna and the Earth', 'Žemyna the Mother', and 'Žemyna and the reptiles'. The sections of the second part are 'The main ritual', 'Žemyna and agrarian festivities and labours', 'Žemyna and livestock farming', and 'Žemyna and human life'.

Žemyna mirrors the imagery and ideology alive in the consciousness of an agrarian society because her formation was influenced by the worldview, religious attitudes, and mentality of said society. The main form of the deity and her field of activity is the earth itself, especially the cultivated and harvested earth. The religious person perceived her not only as a passive and lifeless material substance, but also as an element in possession of an inherent and rationally inexplicable mysterious power. This cyclic element regenerates every year, thus providing the opportunity for new life to appear and the chthonic creation to be reborn. That is the fundamental manifestation of Žemyna as the earth and a goddess in the cosmic plane. It usually reveals itself by way of silent seasonal apparitions accompanied by annual rituals periodically repeated by the community. Earthly vitality ever present in flora, fauna and humanity had since ancient times been regarded by peasants as the highest value of the temporal world and was linked to the creative power of Žemyna. Therefore this phenomenon was surrounded by various consecrating and protective religious rituals.

Judging from sixteenth-seventeenth-century written sources and folklore from much later times, the cult of the Earth goddess was well established in most of the Baltic territory. The name by which the ancient Prussians, individual families of whom probably still lived in the seventeenth-century Lithuania Minor, called her is unknown. However, building on the knowledge of their descendants, Prussian Lithuanians, in whose old religion chthonic deities and imagery comprised quite an expanded system, it can be said that she was one of the most important deities to the western Balts. Žemyna as imagery of the old faith or language was traced

in eastern and western Upper Lithuania and Samogitia, as well as in the southeastern parts of ethnic Lithuania, in the sixteenth and later centuries. In the latter territory the occurrences of Žemyna's worship have been discovered even in the twenty-first century.

The Latvians called their earth goddess *Zemes māte* (Earth mother). Her role and field of control are the same as those of Žemyna. This deity was once influential and popular, but now her traces are not easy to trace. As the importance of this deity waned, her role could have been taken over by other Latvian goddesses. Very likely in the past, while they were still undivided, the Balts had a single feminine chthonic deity. As the Balts differentiated this deity acquired some slightly different names, but her essence remained the same. Information about *Zemes māte* in eighteenth-century written sources and folklore from much later times largely comes from northeastern (Vidzeme) and western (Courland) Latvia.

The word *žemyna*, the main meaning of which is 'earth', is usually a common noun, but in some instances the context of this word shows that it can represent a godly entity. Many discourses, especially those related to agricultural themes and reflecting various manifestations of the *žemyna* (sometimes simply referred to as *žemė*) cult, reveal the *Žemyna* / *Žemė* conception as a sacred reality or the object of a cult. This gives a reason to perceive and recognize the once instilled origins of divinity in the reconstructed mythical image in question. Incidentally, the words *žemyna* and *žemė* are semantically identical (from the point of view of the reference object) as long as they are used in the same context. On the one hand, *žemyna* can mean 'earth'; conversely, if the rituals intended for her have a foreword that names the addressee, *žemė* is *žemyna*. It is assumed that on the religious and mythological plane *Žemyna* is a generic term; however, in this context the word *Žemė* also becomes religiously charged. Therefore, according to the methodological approach, both of these terms can represent a mythologized and personified *Žemyna* / *Žemė*.

*Žemyna* was a deity of the peasantry (farmers and cattlemen), thus she is to be linked to the social class of rural dwellers. The rituals intended for her were performed in a home environment

and sometimes in an open space outside the farmstead if that was what the situation called for. There are no records of the existence of shrines, in the literal meaning of this word, intended for Žemyna worship. According to the descriptions by Matthäus Prätorius, in Lithuania Minor offerings to this deity were usually made at home and attended by family members or the community. Sources of Lithuanian folklore tell of offerings to Žemyna being made in cultivated fields by placing the offering on the soil or burying it. A sacred space of the Latvian Earth goddess could have been a special place in a field, close to a tree, a rock, or a pile of rocks. August Wilhelm Hupel<sup>8</sup> wrote about rituals which were performed for the Latvian Earth goddess (die Erdgöttin) in the afore-mentioned places in the Valmiera district in his times. He wrote that the Latvians had a custom of fencing off an old tree, a small pile of rocks, or an empty field, especially one in the site of a burned-down house. There they would sometimes give the Earth goddess offerings of milk, butter, wool, money and various other things. Before 23 April, a black rooster would be slaughtered for her on a special offering stone in the sacred site. The space was held in esteem: climbing over the fence, picking a wild strawberry or raspberry that had grown there, cutting down the sacred tree and the like were seen as offences guaranteed to bring an inescapable misfortune or sudden death. According to Hupel, this superstition is very old and was probably shared by the Latvians, Livonians and Estonians.

The plane of the functioning of the goddess and of the expression of the cult was quite broad. It embraced not only the earth and all connected to it (first of all the agrarian culture), but also cattle farming and the micro-universe of the peasant – his family and home. The historical sources that have records of the Žemyna cult confirm that the traditional village community used to contact this deity both at the start and the end of seasonal agricultural labour, and during the key events – birth, wedding and death – of the human life.

<sup>8</sup> August Wilhelm Hupel, *Die gegenwärtige Verfassung der Rigischen und der Revelschen Statthaltschaft*, 1789

Any decisive activity related to work, festivities or other occasions was begun by performing a ritual to Žemyna. The religious person of those times was familiar with a set of ceremonial actions and prayers specific to this goddess. A more or less modified version of this set could be applied in many different situations. Matthäus Prätorius described this in great detail, referring to ethnographic materials of the descendants of the ancient Prussians, as well as those of the Western Lithuanians.

The main ritual devoted to Žemyna was the libation of beer, which involved pouring the beverage on the ground while saying the following prayer:

‘Zemynele, Zedkellei, žydek ruggeis, kweczais, mežais ir wissais jauwais, buk linksma Diewel’ ant musu pritû musu darbu. Sžwents Angelas pristotu, pikta zmoğu pro szalia nukreipk, kad mus ne apjoktu <...>’<sup>9</sup>

Next would come the so called ‘greeting’, where all the participants acknowledged each other by shaking hands and asked the deity to bless the libation. The prayer to Žemyna, said during the libation, reflects the goddess’ close relationship with corn and its vegetation, as well as the apotropaic function of the deity. The strong link between the libation of beer and Žemyna is demonstrated by the name that the people of Lithuania Minor used for this ritual – *žemynėliauti* (*žemynelauti*) derived from the theonym *Žemyna*. The choice of beer being used in the libation could not be accidental: the deity that protected corn was given a representation of the yield in one form or another. The tendency to offer harvested goods or products made from them (apart from beer there was also bread and others) to agrarian deities has been observed in many traditions of ancient Europe. While in many cases Žemyna was not mentioned in them by name, later descriptions of Lithuanian ceremonial beer consumption confirm that there was

<sup>9</sup> .Žemynele, raiser of blossoms / flower in rye, wheat, barley and all corn, be happy / God, overlook our labours. Holy Angel, stand close, / direct evil men around us, so they will not cause us harm <...>’ (PrPĭ III: 482; also see BRMŠ III: 177-178, 284).

a belief in the positive effect that such drinking activities had on the harvest of crops.

On the plane of agrarian customs and beliefs Žemyna was strongly linked to the so-called 'history' of corn, from the first shoot to mature corn, and later threshed grains suitable for a new transformation into bread or beer. Žemyna's divine protection was actualized at the main phases of the 'existence' of corn: first during the sowing, then the flowering, later – during the reaping and, finally, during the threshing.

Before ploughing and sowing an offering to Žemyna would be made by burying some bread and sometimes salt or an egg in the soil. There was a belief that such an offering would strengthen the deity's procreation, which in turn would lead to a greater yield of corn. In seventeenth-century Lithuania Minor after the sowing a feast would be held. A pig's head, its feet and especially its snout were served in a bowl on the table, in the hope that the ploughmen could turn the soil as easily as the pig did it with its snout. Of course, the pork eaten before and after sowing was a ritual dish whose connection to the earth goddess is verified by other sources of Baltic religion and mythology. A soil-digging pig raised associations with the process of cultivation: it moved the earth with its snout much like the ploughman turned the soil with his plough. Because of this ability since the time of Ancient Greece the pig was linked to old mythopoeic traditions and to agrarian goddesses. Lithuanian and Latvian beliefs recorded in the twentieth century confirm the link between corn sowing and the pig, as its tail, ears and feet were also only eaten at that time in the hope that it would improve the yield of corn.

St John's Eve, the celebration of thriving and flourishing verdure, was the culmination of earth vitality. According to Matthäus Prätorius, on this day libations of beer followed by a prayer were performed in honour of Žemyna. The goddess was also mentioned during religious rites performed by the traditional attribute of the celebration, a special pole called a *Kupolė*. It is observed in some folklore narratives that celebrations of St John's Eve were meant to guarantee fertility, especially that of corn, therefore they were

indirectly connected to Žemyna. At Pentecost or St John's Eve, when the rye was usually earing out or flowering, it was ritually visited and a small feast with food and drinks would be held next to the rye field. This ritual was supposed to protect the rye and ensure its ripening. Some food supplies (like eggs, bread, etc.) could have been symbolically offered to the soil to strengthen its fertility. This small feast was called a *sambaris* and was probably connected to the cult of Žemyna. Visits to the rye while it was earing out, flowering and flourishing usually consisted of walking or running round the field and having a small feast complete with drinking of beer and ritual dances next to it. This was an essential part of agrarian celebrations that occurred between the end of spring and the beginning of summer. The purpose of it was to maintain and encourage the growth of rye and the formation of grains, as well as to protect and sacralize the corn by communicating with the deities in charge of it through the ritual.

The religious connection with Žemyna was in certain ways maintained throughout the harvesting. In some parts of Lithuania it was customary to leave offerings of bread and salt on the ground where the first ears of rye were reaped. An obvious connection between Žemyna and the beginning of corn harvest is seen in Matthäus Prätorius' description of beer libation rituals performed on the first day of harvest by Prussian Lithuanians. The rituals were performed while celebrating the start of the harvest, after the family had returned from the day's toil. According to the sources of Lithuanian ethnography, when the rye harvest was about to end, specific offerings were made to Žemyna next to the very last ears of rye still to be reaped (these ears of rye were called *jievaras*, *jovaras*, *barzda*, *niška*, *niuka*, *nuobaigos*). The purpose of this offering was to protect the reproductive powers of the goddess in the hope that they would be revived in the following agrarian season. The last ears of rye were either braided or tied in a knot and then wined round the offering of bread and salt after which for *Žemelė* (Žemyna, the earth) was addressed. For example, in the vicinity of Dieveniškiai<sup>10</sup>, bread was placed next to the last of the

<sup>10</sup> Village of Žižmai, district of Šalčininkai, LTR 6447/1168

rye and the following words were said: 'Žemela, žemela, duok kitus metus mumi derliū <...>'<sup>11</sup>.

Threshing, the final stage in the process of corn cultivation before storing it in the granary, also required a certain kind of religious conduct if one hoped to gain the favour of relevant deities, and especially of Žemyna. The core of threshing rituals consisted of actions which consecrated the grains and guaranteed divine protection to them. Since Žemyna was the patron of corn, an entire complex of rituals was dedicated to her. According to Matthäus Prätorius, at the start of December, when the threshing would begin, the inhabitants of Lithuania Minor used to have a celebration called *Sqbarios* / *Samborios*. It was meant for the consecration of the corn, the threshing of which had already started. The main components of the *Sambariai* rituals were pouring the grains into a pile, making bread and beer out of different grains, and offering the products of grains to the gods. When beer was made, the host would pour it into a jug and, before drinking, would perform three libations in honour of Žemyna by saying the usual praises: 'Zemynele, Zedkellei žydek ruggeis, kweczais, mežais...'<sup>12</sup> Having done that, he would go to a room in which a hen and a rooster were tied up in preparation for being sacrificed. The sacrifice was made for God (*Dievas*; very likely, Christian) and for Žemyna. While celebrating the end of the threshing, peasants would again say a prayer to Žemyna, perform a libation of beer, and sacrifice a hen and a rooster.

In the seventeenth century Žemyna's cult was present not only in the agrarian, but also in the livestock-rearing world. To the knowledge of Matthäus Prätorius, rituals in her honour were performed in these domestic situations: sacrificing the first calf of the first cow to give birth, weaning calves, herding the cattle into pastures in the spring, finishing the grazing season, and consecrating horses. Žemyna was seen to have a firm connection with cattle not only because of her consecrating and apotropaic functions,

<sup>11</sup> 'Žemela, žemela, give us a good harvest next year <...>'

<sup>12</sup> 'Žemyne, the raiser of blossoms, flower in rye, barley...'

but also because it was believed that one of the main processes of the chthonic world, the phenomenon of growth, depended on her – the deity of vegetation. The religious peasant saw this mystified phenomenon as having a divine origin and understood it as a universal principle which involved not only him and the vegetation he cultivated, but also the domesticated animals. Matthäus Prätorius wrote that Žemyna was the divine source and the main reason behind various life forms, including cattle. If a horse or a calf was born on a peasant's farm, Žemynėlė was worshiped, because she 'gives life to everyone and maintains it'.

Žemyna was also imagined as the giver and supporter of human life, because like flora and fauna, humanity is a part of nature. Man's close relationship with the Earth and his earthly origins are reflected in folk beliefs concerning the origin of infants in Lithuania and other parts of Europe. The folklore narratives that comment on childbirth tend to conceal the physiological fact and focus instead on the place where new life is found. It is usually linked to lakes and forests, that is, to untamed nature. The baby was said to have been found there and then brought home. The newborn would immediately be laid down on Mother Earth as if she were its biological mother, so that she could 'accept' and 'embrace' the infant as her own earthly creation and give it vegetative power and vitality on a cosmic plane. As confirmed by Matthäus Prätorius, in his times the Nadrovians, Sudovians and Scalovians celebrated birth with a libation of vodka as an offering to Žemyna. The midwife, the mother and the father, who all participated in this ritual feast, would address the goddess with prayers and ask her to protect the baby. Libations in honour of Žemyna were also performed before the christening by the midwife and the godfather. According to Matthäus Prätorius, other deities to be called upon while celebrating birth and christening could have been Laimė, the goddess of birth, and in some cases the Virgin Mary.

Elements of a relationship with deities and offerings to them can be discerned in ancient wedding traditions of the Balts. The existence of the future husband and wife was greatly dependant on Žemyna because the cultivated fields and the harvest they yielded

were in her power. Therefore, by way of rituals, attempts were made to win her favour. It should also be mentioned that both the home that the bride would leave and the one she would enter were patronized by various deities, the most important of whom was Žemyna. When the bride bade farewell to her parents' home, she was separated not only from her family, but also from the deities and spirits that protected the house. Upon arriving at her husband's house she would be met by a new spiritual universe ruled by deities although familiar yet specific to that particular farmstead. The most sacred parts of the house where the gods were imagined to dwell were the fireplace or furnace, the grindstones, the head of the table, the threshold, and the dirt floor. The bride had to perform certain religious rituals which signified her respect and humility towards the gods that had welcomed her. To the knowledge of Matthäus Prätorius, ritual libations of beer in honour of Žemyna were performed twice during the course of matchmaking: firstly, when the matchmaker rode to the bride's parents' house for the second time bearing a bouquet of rues on a stick of hazel or birch, and later during the viewing of the bride's parents' farmstead, when the groom, the matchmaker and others arrived to have a look around and to make actual plans for the wedding. Descriptions of wedding customs of the twentieth century show that the key participants of a wedding continued to have a warm and respectful relationship with the earth. When the bride was leaving her parents' house, it was customary not only to walk round the buildings of the farmstead, the fireplace and the table, but also to perform a dramatized ritual of bidding farewell to the earth.

The Balts believed that their Earth deities – both the Lithuanian Žemyna and the Latvian Zemes māte – protected not only the living but also the dead. In other words, the power of these goddesses extended from the earthly world to the underground and to the souls that remained there after death. The dual plane (above and under the ground) in which the Earth goddess exercises her influence presupposes her different functions that are opposite by nature: on the one hand, she is linked to life, its beginning and creation, and on the other, to everything in the realm of death.

The belief that souls of the dead were in Žemyna's power is seen in a prayer that, according to Matthäus Prätorius, would be said at funerals: '*Zemynele, buk linksma ir priimk sze duszele, ir gerrai kawok!* <...>'<sup>13</sup> (PrPĮ III: 684, 685; also see BRMŠ III: 225, 322). Another thing that souls have in common with Žemyna and her chthonic realm and which included not only the underground but also flora, is that they were believed to reincarnate into plants. This belief is reflected in laments: *O mano dukrele, mano vėlių martele! Kokiais lapeliais laposi? Kokiais žiedeliais žydėsi?*<sup>14</sup> (JLD<sup>15</sup> 1189). Very likely this belief brought about the custom of planting a tree, a bush or a plant on the grave or next to it. This means that after receiving the deceased the earth gives him or her a chance of regeneration by becoming a different form of nature. When a soul merges with a plant it becomes its inner substance and manifests itself in its leaves and flowers. According to Matthäus Prätorius, Prussian Lithuanians not only performed beer libations in honour of Žemyna at the funeral repast, but also dropped some food: three bites of bread, three bites of meat and three spoonfuls of drink. Everyone wished Žemyna's graces and protection to the deceased.

The examined data also sheds some light on the mythopoeic conception of the souls. They were not only Žemyna's charges, but also her subordinates and, in a way, her companions. Like the goddess, they had an influence on agriculture, that is, the cultivated fields, cultivated cultures and their fertility. Therefore, *homo religiosus* imagined that land farming on the whole was in the power of mystical and sacred forces hidden in the depths of the earth. As noted by Matthäus Prätorius, beer libations and offerings of bread performed at funeral repasts in honour of Žemyna and of the souls of the dead demonstrate that the religious system linked to this goddess remained relevant not only at the peak of Paganism but also when Christianity was pervading the subconscious of the seventeenth-century peasant.

<sup>13</sup> 'Žemynele, be happy and accept this soul, and fight well!'

<sup>14</sup> Oh, my daughter, my daughter-in-law of ghosts! In which leaf will you burst? In which flower will you bloom?

<sup>15</sup> *Lietuviškos dainos*, recorded by Antanas Juška, vols. 1–3. Vilnius: 1954