

# GENESIS OF THE ROMAN DESCENT OF LITHUANIANS THEORY AND THE EARLY ETYMOLOGIES OF LITHUANIA'S NAME

## *Summary*

In the main focus of the article are several less investigated aspects of the theory of the Roman descent of Lithuanians: namely, the genesis of the above-mentioned theory from its sources till Lithuanian chronicles gets reviewed along with discussing the process of creating etymologies, which inevitably accompanied these explanations of origins.

The theory of the Roman descent of Lithuanians heretofore mostly used to be considered as emerging during Vytautas the Great times (1392–1430). Unfortunately, there is no evidence of such attempts having taken place. Only one thing is known for sure, i. e. that Lithuanian variant of the *origo gentis* was recorded as late as the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz. According to him, the Lithuanian ancestors were lead by the Roman noble Villius. The author of the article maintains that Długosz must have come upon this name in the writings of the Roman authors; besides, Villius is an eponymic hero, the founder of Lithuanian capital Vilnius. And *Lithuania* is just a “corrupted” *l’Italia*. But this was by no means the end to the creative process. The further links of the same chain were the Italian humanist Phillipus Kallimachus, partly – the Polish author Maciej z Miechowa and the papal legate Zacharias Ferreri. Still, Lithuanian chronicles are of special importance here.

The role played by the University of Krakow, the “molding place” of the Lithuanian intellectual elite, deserves special attention in this respect. This university was thriving during the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The increasing number of Lithuanian students, the interest in historiography (chronicle by master Vincent), studies of the Roman authors, and finally, the multinational atmosphere of the university itself (besides the Polish and Lithuanian students, there were many Germans and Hungarians as well) were the significant and favorable factors influencing both the appearing of the theory in question and its further development. Lithuanians, having acquainted themselves with other European myths, were positively striving for emancipation.

There is an interesting phenomenon: at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, explanations of Lithuanian origins along with etymologies became much more numerous than those of their neighbors. This should be attributed not only to the efforts of Lithuanians themselves, but also to the fact that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a relatively new phenomenon, nevertheless impressing its contemporaries by its size and military power. According to one Lithuanian “publicist” of the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was “a second Greece”.

Upon returning to Lithuania, the university graduates held various positions – from the high clergy till the State Chancellery, at the same time shaping the intellectual elite of the Grand Duchy. The entourage of the Vilnius’ palatine and the State Chancellor Albertas Gostautas in the third decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century created the Lithuanian chronicles, presenting the “canonic” version of Lithuanian *origo gentis* and Lithuanian etymology. Villius got replaced by the duke Palemon, as well as Romans from periphery – by the “noblest Roman families”. The etymology of *Litus tuba* > *Lietuva* (*Lithuania*) in turn echoes the poetry by Horace. This etymology had an earlier prototype, evidently devised by persons doubtlessly associated with an academic sphere: attention is drawn towards the commented upon edition of Horace’s *Works*, which could have facilitated the appearing of such etymology.