

LEGEND OF THE ROMAN DESCENT OF LITHUANIANS IN PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL INTEGRATION

Summary

The legend describing Lithuanians being of Roman descent is anything but a solitary, simple, uncomplicated cultural phenomenon; instead, it presents a certain ideological and thematic complex displaying characteristic features of several cultural epochs. Prior to appearing in Lithuanian chronicles in the first quarter of the 16th century, it underwent several significant changes, which could be in a certain sense regarded as stages of development as well. Most probably the core idea of the legend does not belong to its first recorders, i.e. Jan Długosz and Philippus Callimachus. In their writings the suggestion of Lithuanians being of Roman descent remains just an idea. The later authors, primarily Matthias from Miechow, rendered it with features of legend as a certain narrative. Such development of the idea could be induced by the Viennese convention; it was beyond doubt also influenced by the travel of Bona Sforca and her companions to Krakow and her marrying Sigismundus II the Old. The third stage of the legendary development is related to the activities of Lithuanians, primarily the Gostautas circle, and their attempts at creating a treatise comprising the history of the state since times immemorial. Thus the legend was shaped to make part of the state historiography, even part of the state ideology in some cases, acquiring features of a political doctrine and remaining that way in Lithuanian writings for the whole 16th century. The language of the chronicles reveals themes and stories having reached Lithuania from the repository of the Latin culture. The Latin works by the autochthonous authors, e.g. Vaclavas Mikalonis (Michalo Lituanus), Venclovas Agripa (Venceslaus Agrippa) and others, testify for their good assimilation.

When appreciating this legend in the context of genealogical narratives of other European peoples, one more its characteristic feature could be established, namely, belonging to the third “etiological” generation, or the “youngest group”. The first generation comprises legends describing origins of the first Romanized European tribes: the Germanic peoples, inhabitants of Gaul, Britain and other Roman provinces. These legends are united by the main idea of having one’s own cultural hero come from Rome or Troy. The medium generation comprises genealogical legends of peoples accepting Christianity somewhat later and thus no longer associating their origins with the pagan Rome; these are mostly Slavs, the closest neighbors of Lithuanians. Seeking cultural heroes to be descendants of biblical personages, Noah’s sons, is the common feature uniting these legends. The third group comprises those East European legends, which are looking for and finding their cultural heroes in the pagan Rome again. Lithuanians, as well as Muscovites, belong to them.

One part of the above-mentioned political doctrine proclaimed the demand for establishing the dominance of the Latin language in education, in the state institutions (chancellery, courts) and the Church life. Today, although regarding this demand as a retrogressive one, we could nevertheless point out its one significant feature: namely, presenting evidence of the creative energy from the Latin part of the culture starting to penetrate into new spheres, created by use of the living national languages. Regarding such cultural response among the main features of Renaissance, it would be possible to note its beginning in Lithuania.