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# FROM PAGANISM TO CHRISTIANITY

BURIAL RITES DURING THE TRANSITION PERIOD

Edited by Rytis Jonaitis, Irma Kaplūnaitė

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# Pagan Customs in Christian Burial Grounds? Written Sources from the 12th to the 16th Century and their Possible Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

**Marius Ščavinskas**

Klaipėda University, Institute of Baltic Region History and Archaeology  
Herkaus Manto g. 84, LT-92294, Klaipėda, Lithuania  
marius.scavinskas@ku.lt, scavinskas.marius@gmail.com

*The article analyses the question how to understand the definition of ritus paganorum/superstition which we can find in written sources from the 12th to the 16th centuries. In historiography it is generally assumed that the definition of ritus paganorum/superstition is understood as pagan rituals and practices. But in sources such as the sermons of Bishop Herman of Prague (12th century), in the Church edicts of Siegfried von Regenstein, Bishop of Sambia (14th century), in the sinodical statutes of the Diocese of Poznan (15th century), and other sources, nothing is mentioned about paganism. In contrast, other sources mention diabolical songs over the bodies of dead persons at night, long Prussian drinking bouts in cemeteries or during funerals, and erecting inappropriate crosses at the graves of the dead and demanding their removal and other things. The question naturally arises whether in the case of all these obscure rituals, commemorations of the dead, marking of graves, etc. we can talk about pagan customs that still existed in Christian communities of West and East Slavs or Balts? In the written sources from the 12th to the 16th centuries discussed in the article, under the pagan expressions ritus paganorum/superstition, we see images relating to Christianity, the content of which already has a Christian, but not pagan, meaning.*

**Keywords:** Christianisation, ritus paganorum/superstition, pagan customs, burial grounds.

The burial of uncremated dead bodies in pre-Christian cremation cemeteries, or, as it is often put in sources, in fields and forests, the placing of grave

goods, the long mourning or lamentation for the dead, and the commemoration of the dead<sup>2</sup> in cemeteries known from written sources, have often been

<sup>1</sup> This project received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT), agreement No S-LIP-22-74.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. Opatovický=Homiliarum quod dicitur Opatovicense, *Slovenske pohanstvi ve středověkých latinských pramenech*, Vybral, přeložil, uvodem a poznámkami opatřil J. Dynda, Praga, 2017, pp. 251–260; *Preußisches Urkundenbuch. Politische Abteilung. Bad. I: Die Bildung des Ordensstaates, Erste Hälfte (PUB)*, eds. R. Philippi, C. P. Wölky, t. I, Vol. 1, No 218, Königsberg, 1882; Ch. Krollmann, Eine merkwürdige samlandische Urkunde, *Altpreussische Forschungen* 11, Bd. I, 1934, pp. 36–38; Sembos vyskupo Michaelio Junge's įsakas 1426=Artikel des Bischofs von Samland Michael Junge 1426, *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai (BRMŠ)*, ed. N. Vėlius, t. I, Vilnius, 1996, pp. 480–485. For more details, see: A. Radzimiński, *Chryścianizacja i ewangelizacja prusow. Historia i źródła*, Toruń, 2011, pp. 33–46; H. W. Goetz, *Die Wahrnehmung anderer Religionen und christlich-abendländisches Selbstverständnis im frühen und hohen Mittelalter (5.– 12. Jahrhundert)*, Berlin, 2013, pp. 158–159; A. Caune, *Jazyčestvo drevnej Rigy, Slovjanskaja arheologija. Jetnogenez, passelenie i duhovnaja kul'tura slavjan. Materialy po arheologii Rossii, Moskva, 1993, pp. 205–216.*

understood in historiography as relics of paganism, which allegedly existed for centuries in communities that adopted Christianity.<sup>3</sup> This approach has often been based on researchers' belief that funeral rites, the commemoration of the dead, the placing of grave goods, etc, which at first glance resembled pagan times, were perceived in a Christian community as being of a non-Christian origin, or having nothing in common with Christianity, or at least being of a syncretic nature. This conception that formed in historiography as early as the 19th century was best expressed in Lithuania by Vytautas Urbanavičius, one of the most famous Lithuanian archaeologists of the 20th century: 'After the introduction of Christianity, the cremation of the dead, burials in old pagan cemeteries, and the placing of grave goods (clothes decorated with pagan ornaments, work tools, weapons, food, household items, money) in the graves of the dead survived.'<sup>4</sup> Further debates in historiography are intended precisely to support or dispute the quoted statements, when some researchers consider Christian burials in cemeteries from pagan times as pagan relics, while others do not emphasise these relics too much.<sup>5</sup> Since arguments are sought not only in archaeological material but also in historical sources,

the latter often become of particular significance, especially for archaeologists for whom the discerning of relics of paganism in 15th and 16th-century, and even later, sources and historiographical works, is a 'self-evident' thing.

Without claiming to provide an all-encompassing study, we shall focus merely on Medieval written sources in order to find out to what extent information about the so-called pagan funeral rites/customs (*ritus paganorum*) contained in them is accurate, and possibly correlating with archaeological material. Before starting to examine individual examples in written sources that deal with so-called pagan manifestations in the 'New European' society, which had already adopted Christianity, it is first necessary to make a few comments on the written sources themselves, and the methodological provisions for reading them.

First of all, we need to see what images of paganism were left to us by Medieval written sources, and how we can understand them. In historiography, it has already been mentioned more than once that authors from the Middle Ages, whether West or East Slavs, Balts or Finno-Ugrians, described paganism based on two literary models: *interpretatio Romana*

- 3 H. Valk, Christianization and Changes in Faith in the Burial traditions of Estonia in the 11th–17th Centuries AD, *Rom und Byzanz im Norden, Mission und Glaubenswechsel im Ostseeraum während des 8.–14. Jahrhunderts*, ed. M. Müller-Wille, Bd. II, 46–50, Stuttgart, 1997; T. Kala, Rural Society and Religious Innovation: Acceptance and Rejection of Catholicism among the Native Inhabitants of Medieval Livonia, *The Clash of Cultures on the Medieval Baltic frontier*, ed. A. V. Murray, Burlington, 2009, pp. 184–189; A. Pluskowski, *The Archaeology of the Prussian Crusade. Holy War and Colonisation*, London, New York, 2013, pp. 247, 287–291; J. Sikora, Miejsca sacrum pogańskiego i chrześcijańskiego oraz procesy chrystianizacji Polski Centralnej we wczesnym średniowieczu, *Sacrum pogańskie – sacrum chrześcijańskie. Kontynuacja miejsc kultu we wczesnośredniowiecznej Europie środkowej*, eds. K. Bracha, Cz. Hadamik, Warszawa, 2010, pp. 279–281; A. Radzimiński, *Chrystianizacja i ewangelizacja prusow*, pp. 59–61; A. Radzimiński, The Contribution of the Teutonic Order to the Evangelisation of Prussia. Some Remarks Based on Synod Legislation, *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 11, 2006, pp. 85–86; Cf. I. Voznij, Elementi jazichnictva v duhovnij kul'turi naseleennja litopiskoi 'Oukrainy Galichskoj' u XII pershij polovini XIII st., *Religions and beliefs of Rus' (9th–16th centuries). Publication from the 8th International Scientific Conference, Lviv, 15th–18th November, 2017= Religii i viruvannja Rusi (IX–XVI stolittja). Materiali VIII Mizhnarodnoi naukovoï konferencii, Lviv, 15–18 listopada 2017 p.*, ed. V. Nagirny, Krakow, 2018, pp. 179–188.
- 4 V. Urbanavičius, Lietuvių pagonybė ir jos reliktai XV–XVII amžiais, *Liaudies kultūra* 3, 1994, p. 6.
- 5 Cf. E. Svetikas, *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės christianizacija XIV a. pab. – XV a. Archeologiniai radiniai su krikščioniškais simboliais*, t. I, Vilnius, 2009; Examples from Livonia: R. Spirģis, Archaeological Evidence on the Spread of Christianity to the Lower Daugava Area (10th–13th century), *Rome, Constantinople and Newly-Converted Europe. Archaeological and Historical Evidence*, Vol. I, eds. M. Salamon, M. Wołoszyn, A. Musin, P. Špehar, Kraków, Leipzig, Rzeszów, Warszawa, 2012, pp. 689–712. Examples from Prussia: J. Bojarski, *Obrzędowość pogrzebowa w strefie chełmińsko-dobrzyńskiej we wczesnym średniowieczu* (series Mons Sancti Laurentii, t. 9), Toruń, 2020.

and *interpretatio Christiana*.<sup>6</sup> In the first model, paganism was depicted based on clichés of ancient paganism, and therefore it is not surprising that in the 12th century Czech paganism was presented by the Czech chronicler Cosmas of Prague, in the 13th century Baltic paganism by Bishop Oliver of Paderborn, and in the 15th century Lithuanian paganism by the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz, as similar to ancient (Roman) paganism.<sup>7</sup> The first model also portrayed paganism as *silvensis ydolatria* ('paganism of the woods'), which was allegedly characteristic of ancient paganism.<sup>8</sup> The *interpretatio Christiana* model depicted paganism based on its images found in the Holy Scriptures (see especially Exod. 20:3–6; Isa 2:20; 16:12; 44:9–12; 30:22, etc; 1 Rom. 24–27, etc). Thus, Peter of Dusburg, a German chronicler from the first half of the 14th century, depicted Baltic paganism based on the lines of the Holy Scriptures.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, when examining written sources from the Middle Ages, it should always be kept in mind that Medieval authors spoke about paganism and its customs in such a way that they could be properly understood

by readers/listeners, and also depending on the goals of the chroniclers. In other words, Medieval authors did not seek to depict Slavic and/or Baltic paganism accurately and honestly, they did not engage in 'field ethnographic' research, and for this reason they described paganism with the help of images of Antiquity or of the Holy Scriptures that functioned in Medieval writings.

Second, in the Middle Ages, paganism was perceived primarily as an error of disbelief (*peccatum infidelitas / peccatum idololatriae*) that could and should be corrected.<sup>10</sup> Ancient pagans were often depicted as being inclined towards the true, that is Christian, God,<sup>11</sup> and in the works of Medieval Christian authors, pagan nations were included in true history, that is, the history of salvation.<sup>12</sup> It was attempted to remove previous obstacles to salvation (such as impermissible funeral practices, superstitions or pagan rituals) not only through the implementation of Christian missions (and especially through depaganisation, *abrenuntiatio diaboli*),<sup>13</sup> but also later through the process of the so-called Latinisation, that is, the

- 6 S. Rosik, *Interpretacja chrześcijańska religii pogańskich Słowian w świetle kronik niemieckich XI–XII wieku (Thietmar, Adam z Bremy, Helmold)* (series *Histora*, Vol. CXLIV), Wrocław, 2000, pp. 26–42. More about term *interpretatio Romana* and its usage – A. Clifford, *Interpretatio Romana, The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire*, eds. A. Clifford, B. Asfaw, 2008, pp. 43–58.
- 7 Cosmae Pragensis, *Chronica Boemorum, Scriptorum rerum Germanicarum*, ed. Bertold Bretholz, Berlin, 1923, Lib. I, cap. 4: '*Haec siulto et insipienti populo Oreadas, Driadas, Amadriadas adorare et colere, et omnem superstitiosam sectam ac sacrilegos ritus instituit et docuit*'; O. Paderbonietis, *Šventosios Žemės karalių istorija, apie 1220 = Oliverus von Paderborn, Historia regnum Terrae Sanctae, BRMŠ*, t. I, pp. 224–225: '*Nam gens Livonum, Estonum, Prutonum variis erroribus delusa, ignorans dei filium et incarnati verbi mysterium, numina gentilium colebat, Dryades, Amadryades, Oreades, Napeas, Humides, Satyros et Faunos*'; Jonas Dluogošas, *Lenkijos istorija = Jan Długosz, Historia Polonica, BRMŠ*, t. I, 555: '*[...] videlicent sacrum ignem, et qui falsa credulitate ab illis perpetuus habitus est, et in illo Iovem tonantem [...] in silvisque huiusmodi Deum Silvanum, caeterosque Deos [...]*'.
- 8 M. Brauer, *Die Entdeckung des 'Heidentums' in Preußen. Die Prußen in den Reformdiskursen des Spätmittelalters und der Reformation* (series *Europa im Mittelalter*, Bd. 17), Berlin, 2011, pp. 55–64.
- 9 M. Brauer, *Die Entdeckung des 'Heidentums' in Preußen*, pp. 55, 57, 59, 61, 63–64, 199.
- 10 Cf. St. T. Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica* (Columbia MD, 1981), Lib. I, pars II, q. 109, article 2; Lib. II, pars. II, q. 11, article 1; *Doctoris irrefragabilis Alexandri de Hales Ordinis minorum Summa theologica*. Vol. III, tractatus 8, q. I, titulus I (De idololatria), cap. 5: '*Omne peccatum est immunditia animae, sed idololatria maxime. Quare idololatria est maximum peccatum*'.
- 11 For more on this, see: J. Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers. The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz*, Princeton, Oxford, 2015, pp. 27–30, 32–35, 40–41, 124–126, 131–133, 138–139, 151–153, 155–156, 161–167.
- 12 Ebonis Vita S. Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis, *Pomniki dziejowe Polski*, ed. Jan Wikarjak, seria II, t. VII, cz. 2, Lib. III, 27, Warszawa, 1969: '*Nam cum Petrus Iudeam, Paulus Greciam, Andreas Achaiam, Iohannes Asiam, Thomas Indiam, Gregorius Angliam, ceterique dominici gregis arietes, singuli suos eterno iudici reportant manipulos, Otto etiam inter eos Pomeraniam gaudens adducet [...]*' Cf. J. Kanapariusz, *Świętego Wojciecha żywot pierwszy*, ed. J. Karwasińska, K. Abgarowicz, Gdańsk, 2009, cap. XXVIII: '*Sum natiuitate Sclaus, nomine Adalbertus, professione monachus, ordine quondam episcopus, officio nunc uester apostolus*'.
- 13 S. Rosik, *The Pomeranian Mission of St. Otto of Bamberg. Remarks on the Doctrine and Practice of Christianisation, Christianization of the Baltic Region* (series *Castri Dominae Nostrae Litterae Annales*), Vol. I, ed. J. Gąssowski, Pułtusk, 2004, p. 171.

process of establishing the norms of Christian life and world-view.<sup>14</sup> Other pagans were depicted as people influenced (seduced) by the evil spirit: paganism was depicted not only as the error of naive people, but also as a result of the devil's activities.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, even 100 or more years after the official conversion, in Medieval sources, let alone the works of historiographers of the 16th to the 17th century, we can still find terms expressing certain pagan customs (*ritus paganorum* or *superstitio*) alluding to old pagan rituals or customs. Pagan customs were often directly linked to the activities of the devil/'satanic delusions', as the anonymous author of the 'Chronograph of 1262' defined the custom of the Balts and Finno-Ugrians to cremate their dead.<sup>16</sup> The quotation from the archaeologist Vytautas Urbanavičius reveals that in historiography the terms *ritus paganorum* and *superstitio* were often understood directly, that is, regardless of either the *interpretatio Romana* and *interpretatio Christiana* models of paganism, prevalent in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, or of the information actually hidden behind these terms.<sup>17</sup> By relating these *ritus paganorum/superstitio*, as the results of the devil's activities, to grave goods found

by archaeologists in ancient cemeteries, we can indeed come to the same conclusion that Urbanavičius drew in his time. However, questions arise as to where 'pagan customs', or even 'pagan enclaves',<sup>18</sup> officially come from in a Christian community, how and at what level they function, and, most importantly, whether these 'pagan customs/enclaves' are still identical to the pagan customs or paganism that functioned before the conversion.

Given the literary models depicting paganism (*interpretatio Romana* and *interpretatio Christiana*), as well as comments on 'naive' pagans and pagans affected by evil spirits, it is necessary to find out what kind of image associated with paganism is presented by some Medieval sources that speak of improper rituals or superstitions in West and East Slavic and Baltic communities that officially adopted Christianity, while simultaneously recognising that there are too few written sources to be able to draw broad conclusions. For analysis, we selected written sources from the 12th to the 16th centuries from the neighbouring countries/lands of Lithuania in which pagan rituals relating to burials and/or commemorations of the dead are clearly alluded to as supposedly

- 14 S. Seidl, J. Zimmermann, Jenseits des Kategorischen. Konzeptionen des 'Heidnischen' in volkssprachigen literarischen und chronikalischen Texten des 13. Jahrhunderts, *Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen im europäischen Mittelalter* (Europa im Mittelalter Bd. 18), eds. M. Borgolte, J. Dücker, M. Müllerburg, B. Schneidmüller, Berlin, 2011, pp. 328–329, 331, 334–358. Cf. H. W. Goetz, *Die Wahrnehmung anderer Religionen und christlich-abendländisches Selbstverständnis*, pp. 144–187.
- 15 For more details, see: L. Padberg, *Mission und Christianisierung: Formen und Folgen bei Angelsachsen und Franken im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart, 1995, pp. 37–41; H. W. Goetz, *Die Wahrnehmung anderer Religionen und christlich-abendländisches Selbstverständnis*, pp. 45, 51–59, 76–77. Cf. M. Ščavinskis, 'Dobrzy/chrześcijańscy' i 'źli / barbarzyńscy' poganie na obrzeżach chrześcijańskiej Europy: kilka uwag na temat asymetrii semantycznej w konstruowaniu obrazu pogan w literaturze średniowiecznej Europy Zachodniej i tradycji latopisarskiej Rusi, *Religions and beliefs of Rus' (9th–16th centuries) = Релігії і вірування Русі (IX–XVI століття)*: Publication from the 8th International Scientific Conference, Lviv, 15–18 November, 2017 (series Colloquia Russica, series I, Vol. 8), ed. V. Nagirny, Krakow, 2018, pp. 131–148. Cf. A. V. Murray, Heathens, Devils and Saracens. Crusader Concepts of the Pagan Enemy during the Baltic Crusades (twelfth to fifteenth centuries), *Crusading on the Edge. Ideas and Practice of Crusading in Iberia and the Baltic Region, 1100–1500* (series Outremer. Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East Vol. 4), eds. T. K. Nielsen, I. Fønnesberg-Schmidt, Turnhout, 2016, pp. 205–222.
- 16 Jono Malalos kronikos intarpas = Hronografija 1261, *BRMS*, Vol. I, pp. 266–267 (in the language of the original), pp. 267–268 (in Lithuanian). See also: I. Lemeškin, *Sovijaus sakmė ir 1262 metų chronografas pagal Archyvinį, Varšuvos, Vilniaus ir I. J. Zeaelino nuorašius*, Vilnius, 2009, p. 294. Cf. Herbord Dialogus de Vita S. Ottonis, *Pomniki dziejowe Polski*, ed. J. Wikarjak, K. Liman, Warszawa, 1974, seria II, t. 7, cz. 3, Lib. III, cap. 7: 'Nam que convencio Christi ad Belial, aut que communicacio templo Dei cum templo ydolorum?'
- 17 For more details about the usage of the terms *superstitio* and *ritus paganorum* in sources from the Late Antique and Middle Ages, see: B. Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*, Toronto, 2005, pp. 105–118.
- 18 Pagan enclaves have been discussed by the Polish researcher Henryk Łowmiański, for more details, see: H. Łowmiański, *Religia słowian i jej upadek (w. VI–XII)*, Warszawa, 1979, pp. 312–313.



still existing in societies that have adopted Christianity. Pagan rites from pre-Christian times will not be touched on here.

Thus, as early as the 12th century, in a surviving collection of sermons, Bishop Herman of Prague reprimanded the Christians of his diocese for singing diabolical songs over the bodies of dead persons at night.<sup>19</sup> In the same work, he warned against worshipping the dead, because even if they did anything good, it was only by God's will. In the so-called 'Gutov law' (*Guta lag*) from Gotland, possibly written between the 13th and the first half of the 14th centuries, anonymous rites are mentioned at graves, in forests and other holy places<sup>20</sup>. The 1387 Statute of the Synod of the Archdiocese of Prague mentioned that the practice of burning candles at home or candle magic on the occasion of the anniversary of a death were not acceptable, without further detailing what specifically was meant by it.<sup>21</sup> In the first half of the 15th century, the Bishop of Poznań Andrzej Łaskarz from Gosławice, in addition to all other superstitions, only very abstractly hinted at the existence of some superstitions during funerals, but he never went into detail about their character.<sup>22</sup> In the Church edicts (orders)

of Siegfried von Regenstein, the Bishop of Sambia, at the beginning or in the first half of the 14th century, we find a mention of long Prussian drinking bouts in cemeteries or during funerals.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, John Marienau, the Bishop of Kulm, described the proper way to bury the dead, including the clergy, continuing to consider them guardians of life in heaven.<sup>24</sup> The best-known case in the historiography of the first half of the 15th century was the edict of Michael Junge, the Bishop of Sambia, which indicated that Prussian converts performed some rites over the graves of the dead; however, like the Bishop of Poznań, he did not specify what rites were meant.<sup>25</sup> He also wrote that the Prussians erected inappropriate crosses by the graves of their dead, and demanded their removal.<sup>26</sup> He also hinted at the Prussians feasting and performing some kind of ceremony over graves (in the cemetery *Cappyn*, called *Geten* by the Prussians<sup>27</sup>). Finally, one more interesting source from the second half of the 16th century is worth mentioning, born in the cultural environment of Moscow. The 'Life of Constantine of Murom' provides information that allegedly the pagan inhabitants of the city of Murom used to bury their dead in the ground with horses

19 Homiliář Opatovický, I, 31, 252: '*Carmina diabolica, que super mortuos nocturnis horis vulgus facere solet, et cahinnos, quos exercet in contestacione dei omnipotentis, vetate.*'

20 *Guta lag. The Law of the Gotlanders*, translated and edited by Ch. Peel, London, 2009, cap. 4: 'No one may pray to either groves or howes or heathen gods, nor to holy places or ancient sites'.

21 Pražská synodální statuta=Concilia Pragensia, *Slovanske pohanství ve středověkých latinských pramenech*, 266: '*Item mandatur omnibus plebanis et eorum vices gerentibus, ut in anniversariis mortuorum in domibus plebesianorum ipsorum non permittant ut faciant fieri aliqua offertoria cum luminibus per se vel alios nec etiam cantent responsoria in talibus fieri consueta, nam hec consuetudo vel potius abusio dicenda est.*'

22 Synodální statuta Poznaňského biskupa Ondřeje=Statuta synodalia Andreae episcopi Posnaniensis, *Slovanske pohanství ve středověkých latinských pramenech*, cap. XL, 327: '*XL. De abusioibus circa funera. Item superstitiosas consuetudines, quae consueverunt fieri circa funera, prohibeati.*'

23 Ch. Krollmann, Eine merkwürdige samländische Urkunde, *Altpreussische Forschungen* 11, (1934), Bd. I, §16, p. 37: '*Item a crapula et ebrietate et illo abusu potandi, que se at equales potus et immoderatos obligant, et a potacionibus Pruthenorum, que serme dicuntur, et ab illis etiam, que fere ad medium noctis vel ultra se extendant, absterneant diligenter.*' For a translation of the source into Polish, see: A. Radzimiński, *Chrzystianizacja i ewangelizacja prusow*, p. 92.

24 Ibid. Cf. M. Czyżak, A. Radzimiński, Earliest Synod Statutes of John Marienau, Bishop of Chełmno, from the First half of the 15th Century, *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae* 24, 2019, pp. 133–134 (Statuta antiqua diocoesis Culmensis, §11–12).

25 Edict of Michael Junge, Bishop of Sambia, of 1426 = Articul des Bischofs von Samland Michael Junge, 1426, *BRMS*, t. I, 484: '*Item ut omnes abusus, abusiones seu ritus gentiliū circa mortuos suos, quos quibusuis modis exercent [...].*'

26 Edict of Michael Junge, Bishop of Sambia, of 1426: '*Item ut nullam crucem circa sepulchra mortuorum locent, et ut quilibet iam posita abscindant.*'

27 Edict of Michael Junge, Bishop of Sambia, of 1426: '*[...] presertim iuxta tumulos et sepulchra eorum, qui uel que Geten uel Cappyn iuxta ydeomata eorum nuncupantur.*'

and rope ladders and belts.<sup>28</sup> The historiographers from the 16th to the 17th century would repeatedly mention certain rites, described as pagan, during which certain things were placed in the coffin of the deceased (such as coins, symbolic keys of St Peter, etc).<sup>29</sup> Moreover, some foundation documents of Lithuanian churches argued that the Lithuanians buried their dead in swamps or on the edges of forests, that is, places not sanctioned by the Church.<sup>30</sup> However, nowhere in the foundation acts of churches was it mentioned that the dead were buried after cremation, or that burials were accompanied by human or animal blood sacrifices.

We could refer to several other Medieval sources; however, it is clear from what has been said that some unnamed rites (*ritus paganorum*) were usually referred to, and much less often the sources indicated what kind of grave goods people were buried with, and even less often, how anniversaries of deaths were commemorated, and how graves were marked. All these sources are united by the stance taken by historiography that in all these cases, pagan customs or syncretic phenomena were meant that existed in communities that had adopted Christianity a long time ago (with the exception of the ‘Life of Constantine of Murom’, where the unusual burial method was attributed to the pagan residents of the city of Murom, but not to converts).

The question naturally arises whether in the case of all the aforementioned obscure rituals, the commemoration of the dead, the marking of graves, etc, we can talk about pagan customs that still existed in Christian communities of West and East Slavs and Balts. Thus, the expression ‘diabolical songs’ can be understood as lamentations for the deceased or the worship of the dead, but not hymns sanctioned by the Church. After all, while condemning ‘diabolical songs’, Bishop Herman of Prague never mentioned that the dead were buried with grave goods, or that their cremation was accompanied by human or animal sacrifices, as we know from earlier sources dealing with the paganism of the West Slavs.<sup>31</sup> True, another author from the 12th century, Cosmas of Prague, while describing the superstitions of Czech peasants, casually mentioned that they still performed pagan practices, although, like Herman, he did not elaborate on them.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Bishop Herman found fault with songs not sanctioned by the Church, possibly lamentations, while Cosmas of Prague, based on the *interpretatio Romana*, rather abstractly hinted at some pagan practices performed in order to get the protection of the gods. Although both sources hint at some impermissible rites/superstitions, they remain unexplained, and thus puzzling even to contemporary researchers. In any case, neither Herman nor Cosmas of Prague ever wrote about Czechs in

28 *Pamjatniki starinnoj russkoj literatury, izdavaemye grafom Grigoriem Kushelevym-Bezborodko, Sankt-Peterburg, 1860, Vyp. 1, 235: ‘Тдъ коня закалающеи и по мертвыхъ перенная плетения древолазная с нимъ (и) в землю погребаяющеи, и битвы и кроения и лицъ натресканія творяциу!’*

29 Jan Łasicki, a historiographer from the second half of the 16th century, stated in his work *Pasakojimas apie žemaičių dievus (De Diis Samagitarum)* that the Samogitians allegedly buried their dead with various small items: needles, threads, beer jugs, coins, kerchiefs, etc, see: V. Ališauskas, *Jono Lasickio pasakojimas apie žemaičių dievus* (series *Baltų mitologijos ir ritualo tyrimai* 6), Vilnius, 2012, pp. 130–131 (in the original and Lithuanian languages). It is true that Łasicki copied the data from other historiographic works of the 16th century.

30 Thus, in 1531, when founding a chapel in Panevėžys (which in a short time developed into the independent parish of Panevėžys), it was indicated in the foundation act that one of the reasons to found a place of worship was the custom of people to bury their dead somewhere in swamps. For more details, see: M. Paknys, *Ankstyvasis LDK krikščionėjimo laikotarpis: XIV a. pabaiga – XVI a. vidurys, Krikščionybės Lietuvoje istorija*, ed. V. Ališauskas, Vilnius, 2006, pp. 110–111 (translation in Polish *Dzieje chrześcijaństwa na Litwie*, ed. V. Ališauskas, tłum. K. Korzeniewska, Warszawa, 2014).

31 Cf. the description of pagan Polish funerals, *Thietmari Merserburgensis episcopi Chronicon*, ed. I. M. Lappenbergii, Hannoverae, 1889, Lib. VIII, p. 3.

32 *Cosmae Pragensis, Chronica Boemorum*, Lib. I, cap. 4: ‘[...] sicut hactenus multi villani velut pagani, hic latices seu ignes eolis, iste lucos et arbores aut lapides adorant, ille montibus sive eollibus litat, alius quae ipse ydola surda et muta rogat et orat, ut domum suam et se ipsum regant.’

the 12th century still burying their cremated dead with blood or other sacrifices, which is a very serious signal that makes us rethink the possibilities for the interpretation of such customs, undescribed but attached to paganism.

The aforementioned Andrzej Łaskarz, the Bishop of Poznań, never said anything bad about burial customs in general, although the Statute of the Diocese of Poznań stated that certain superstitions existed that should be fought against. It is difficult to say what kind of superstitions he meant, because he never specified his comments; however, it is quite possible that he was talking about superstitions that arose in the context of Christian folk piety, but not about pagan ones, because he chose the term *superstitio* to name them, and not *ritus paganorum*. Incidentally, the abstract *superstitio* can very often be found in various ecclesiastical statutes, which were copied from one another, as was noted by Patrick Hersperger,<sup>33</sup> a researcher of Medieval German Canon Law. Thus, anonymous superstitions could have found their way into the Poznań Statute from other Church statutes, and therefore in this case we do not find any specific descriptions of superstitions attributable to paganism. Otherwise, the Bishop of Poznań would certainly not have tolerated pagan practices among the faithful of his diocese.<sup>34</sup>

Let us take a closer look at the rebuke by the Sambian Bishop Michael Junge to the converted Prussians for marking the graves of their dead with crosses. Let us note that the graves were marked with the symbol of the cross, and not with other pagan symbols. Since the erection of such crosses was not sanctioned by the local Church hierarchy, Michael Junge demanded their removal as they were inappropriate. When speaking of anonymous practices by the

graves of the dead, the Bishop of Sambia used the expression *ritus gentilius*, but not *ritus paganorum*. But in another place, when talking about rites performed in forests, the expression used was *ritus paganorum*, and in yet another place, when talking about long-lasting mourning by the graves of the dead (cf. Bishop Herman's reproaches), the expression *ritus pauoris* was used. The most interesting thing is that, for these or similar offences, in addition to monetary fines, Prussians accused of paganism were threatened with not being allowed to be buried with Church rites, which meant excommunication.<sup>35</sup>

If the Bishop of Sambia threatened people with such punishments, it is clear that under the ominous-sounding expressions *ritus gentilius* or *ritus paganorum* he meant the popular practices of folk piety not sanctioned by the Church, but not actual pagan practices, because one would hardly scare a pagan and/or apostate by not allowing them to bury their relatives in a Christian manner. It should be noted that Bishop Michael Junge never wrote about cremating the dead, blood sacrifices for the deceased, placing grave goods in a grave or a coffin, or other pre-Christian burial customs typical of the Old Prussians.<sup>36</sup> He disapproved of erected crosses, lamentations by graves, and anonymous rites in cemeteries (perhaps commemorating the dead), and nothing more. Michael Junge simply did not mention (did not know) the rites and rituals attributable to classic paganism, although he used the terms *ritus gentilius* and *ritus paganorum*, that is, he referred to pagan rites. Thus, even if the lamentations from the 15th century can be related to pagan times, we are not sure if these lamentations would still express the same content known from the 1249 Treaty of Christburg.

33 P. Hersperger, *Kirche, Magie und 'Aberglaube'. Superstitio in der Kanonistik des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts* (series Forschungen zur Kirchlichen Rechtsgeschichte und zum Kirchenrecht, Bd. 31), Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2010, pp. 452–454.

34 S. Bylina, *Chryścianizacja wsi polskiej u schyłku średniowiecza*, Warszawa, 2002, p. 171.

35 Edict of Sambian Bishop Michael Junge of 1426: '[...] et priuacionis ecclesiastice sepulture'.

36 See *PUB*, No 218.

Now let us look at the pagan practice of placing rope ladders in coffins and horse burials referred to in the ‘Life of Constantine of Murom’. As has already been mentioned, the author of this source related the rope ladder placed in a coffin to rituals and superstitions that allegedly existed in pagan times. The question arises why a rope ladder is mentioned in a 16th-century source? Is this the reality of pre-Christian times reflected in the 16th century, or the reality of the 16th century transferred to the 11th century, when Murom residents could still bury their dead with a pagan ritual? It should also be noted that another source from the first half of the 16th century, the Bychowiec Chronicle, also reflects the idea that after death the soul will have to go somewhere upwards, that is, up a mountain, only this particular source mentions bear and lynx claws instead of a ladder.<sup>37</sup> It should be emphasised that the anonymous author of the Bychowiec Chronicle described Lithuanian paganism based on the *interpretatio Romana* literary model, and Lithuanian pagans themselves, as quasi-Christians, who believed in the only God and even in the resurrection of bodies from the dead. The anonymous author of the ‘Life of Constantine of Murom’ also presented the pagans of the city of Murom as quasi-Christians, rejecting pagan errors. Then why, according to the anonymous author, did ancient Lithuanians need bear or lynx claws, and why did the inhabitants of Murom need rope ladders? What mountain were they both determined to climb?

Almost nothing is known about the Slavic belief in souls climbing a mountain after death. It would only be possible to refer to the bits and pieces of Indo-European myths about the fight between the thunder deity and the chthonic creature over the animals locked in the cave. This fight allegedly took place somewhere in the mountains, and the heavenly deity is associated with the mountain, which represented heaven. According to Mircea Eliade, in the ecstasy the shamans climbing into tree, pillar or mountain to meet the gods, but is not the same as the soul climbing the mountain in Other world.<sup>38</sup> At that time, Christianity boasted a very vivid image of the souls climbing the mountain of the Lord, see Isa.2–3; 11, 9; 25, 6–8; 33, 15–16; 35, 10; 40, 9; 56, 7, etc, as well as Ps 9, 11; 24, 3; 84, 6; 132, 13, etc; see also Ezek. 20, 40, Heb. 12, 22, Rev. 21, 9–11; 21 10–12, etc. The biblical mountain is Mount Zion. The pagan townspeople of Murom in the ‘Life of Constantine of Murom’ and the pagan Lithuanians in the Bychowiec Chronicle were depicted as quasi-Christians, eager to accept Christianity, and adhering to pagan practices only out of ignorance. Therefore, the authors of both sources attributed to those quasi-Christians the Christian folk belief that souls climbing the mountain should be helped by physical means: rope ladders, bear claw amulets, etc. Moreover, the image of Jacob’s ladder is well known in Christianity: God’s angels climbed up and down it (see Gen. 28, 12).<sup>39</sup> We may remember the anonymous author of the

37 Hronika Byhovca, 1520–1530, *BRMS*, ed. N. Vėlius, t. II, Vilnius, 2001, pp. 373–374: ‘Y koli kotoroho kniazia litovskoho abo pana sozżeno tito, tohdy pry nich kladywali nohty rysij abo medweżyi dla toho, iż wiru tuiu mili, iż sudny deń mił byty, y tak znamenali sobi, iż by boh mił pryty y sedyty na hory wysokoy y sudyty żywych y mertwych, na kotoruii ź horu trudno budet wzoity bez tych nohtey rysich abo medweżych, y dla toho tyie nohty podle nich kladywali, na kotorych mili na tuiu horu lesty, y na sud do boha yty.’ Original edition – Hronika Byhovca, *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisej*, T. 32: *Hroniki Litovskaja i Zhmojtskaja, i Byhovca*, ped. N. N. Ulašhnik, Moskva, 1975, p. 134. Cf. the belief attributed to Old Prussians about souls climbing the mountain using claws, see: M. Murinius, *Kronika mistrzow Pruskich*, ed. Z. Nowak, Olsztyn, 1989, cap. VI: ‘Rysie też albo niedźwiedzie paznokcie palono z umarłymi, bo wierzyli, iż na gorę wielką a przykrą ku sądnemu dniowi wstępować mieli, który jakiś bog wszechmocniejszy nad wszystkim światem czynić miał, a przeto iżby tym snadniej i bezpieczniej tam wleźć mogli, paznokciami rysimi myślili sobie pomagać.’ A comparison of this information with the Bychowiec Chronicle makes it evident that Murinius either made use of the Broad Lithuanian Chronicle, or, what is more likely, he had read Strykowski’s Chronicle, in which, when retelling the plot about souls climbing the mountain from the Bychowiec Chronicle, an analogous plot is presented.

38 M. Eliade, *Shamanism: archaic techniques of ecstasy*, Princeton, 2020, pp. 170, 263–269.

39 For more details, see: M. Ščavinskas, *Kristus prieš Belialą*, t. I: Lietuvių anapusinio pasaulio vaizdinių christianizacija Viduramžiais, Klaipėda, 2021, pp. 207–236.

Bychowiec Chronicle saying that Lithuanian pagans, incidentally, the descendants of Romans, believed in the resurrection of bodies, God's judgment and an only God, because, according to Paulus Orosius, the Romans believed in this too.

In other words, in the case of the 'Life of Constantine of Murom' and the Bychowiec Chronicle, the quasi-Christianity attributed to pagans had nothing in common with real paganism; therefore, placing the grave goods mentioned (rope ladders, bear claw amulets) expressed the Christian attitude of helping the soul to climb the mountain, that is, to fall into the Lord's hands, by physical means. Such physical means were not recognised by the official Church, because the salvation of the soul did not depend on physical means, as was emphasised under paganism,<sup>40</sup> but on the ratio of moral deeds/sins of the lived life, which the pagans of the 'New Europe' did not know.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, some auxiliary physical means were considered inappropriate, as they resembled the pagan custom of placing things in graves.<sup>42</sup> Still, for converts who had recently adopted Christianity, any means were good for the soul to reach the place of eternal bliss, that is, Christian paradise. It is interesting that grave goods were often placed in the graves of vulnerable social groups: women and children. In other words, the relatives of the dead were interested in ensuring better conditions for the soul

in the next world through physical means, although they already had in mind the Christian afterlife. In fact, bear claw amulets appeared in the 'New Europe' just as Christianisation was taking place (in the neighbouring lands of Lithuania, in the 13th to the 14th century, and in Lithuania itself around the late 14th to the 15th century<sup>43</sup>).

We shall only add that coins in graves in the 'New Europe' also appeared during Christianisation, as we can also clearly see in the Baltic material.<sup>44</sup> True, the material attributed to the Balts of the first centuries AD would suggest the adoption of some ancient images of the afterlife (for example, the custom of placing coins in the grave is interpreted as payment for Charon's ferrying souls across underground rivers into the afterworld). However, in Late Antiquity, the tradition of placing money in graves soon ceased, and therefore we are not sure whether some possibly inherited ancient afterlife-related customs survived and became established in later times in the Baltic and Slavic world, since the second case of placing coins in graves appeared almost 1,000 years later, in the course of the Christianisation of the Slavs and Balts, and should be associated with Christianity rather than with ancient (or pagan) culture.<sup>45</sup>

What conclusions can be drawn? All the aforementioned written sources, although they refer to various inappropriate or impermissible pagan means

40 *PUB*, No 218; *Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*, trans. J. C. Smith, W. L. Urban, Bloomington, 1977, lines 3870–3877, 3885–3889, 4697–4709, 10103–10105 (original – *Livländische Reimchronik mit Anmerkungen*, ed. L. Meyer, Paderborn, 1876, lines 3870–3877, 3885–3889, 4697–4709, 10103–10105). Cf. The Story of an Old Pilgrim' by the French knight from the second half of the 14th century Philippe de Mézières, who came to visit Prussia ruled by the Teutonic Order in 1364: Philippe de Mézières, 'Songe du Vieil Pelerin 1389, *BRMS*, t. I, pp. 451–453; Cf. the message of the German chronicler from the end of the 14th century Vygand of Marburg describing the funeral of Grand Duke Kęstutis, when the ruler was burned together with different things, horses, hunting dogs, birds, clothes; *Die Chronik Wigands von Marburg, Scriptorum rerum Prusicarum*, ed. Theodor Hirsch, Max Töppen, Leipzig, 1863, cap. 133, p. 620.

41 Thus, Thietmar, a chronicler from the first half of the 11th century, and Bishop of Merseburg, very clearly indicated: West Slavic converts found it difficult to grasp that the afterlife of the soul depended on the life lived by the deceased. *Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon*, Lib. I, cap. 14.

42 See: V. Ališauskas, *Jono Lasickio pasakojimas apie žemaičių dievus*, pp. 130–131.

43 E. Svetikas, *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės christianizacija*, p. 398.

44 E. Svetikas, *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės christianizacija*, pp. 13–16, 23–24, 32–33, 417. Cf. J. Bojarski, *Obrzędowość pogrzebowa w strefie chełmińsko-dobrzyńskiej*, pp. 200–204, 218–219, 250–251, 260–261, 382–388, 418–420, especially see pp. 425–432, 435–439.

45 E. Svetikas, *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės christianizacija*, pp. 14–33.

or rites in the cemetery or during a funeral, in fact expressed Christian physical means to help the soul reach the afterworld, or else help to preserve the memory of the deceased (see the case of erecting crosses mentioned by Bishop Michael Junge). In other words, not all *superstitio* or *ritus gentilius/ritus paganorum* found in written sources should be directly understood as purely pagan, because none of the sources wrote about 'genuine' pagan rites during funerals or when honouring the dead (the cremation

of the dead, burials with human or animal blood sacrifices, etc). In the above sources, under these expressions, we see images related to Christianity, the content of which already has a Christian, but not pagan, meaning. This means that each written source should be looked into separately, and the context, symbols and expressions must be examined, instead of automatically attributing all of them *in corpore* to paganism or pagan customs.

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## Pagoniški papročiai krikščioniškuose senkapiuose? XII–XVI a. rašytiniai šaltiniai ir jų galima interpretacija

Marius Ščavinskas

Straipsnyje, remiantis XII–XVI a. rašytiniais šaltiniais iš Lietuvos kaimyninių šalių ir regionų (Lenkijos, Čekijos, Vokiečių ordino valdų Prūsijoje), nagrinėjama rašytiniuose šaltiniuose aptinkamų terminų *ritus paganorum* / *superstition* reikšmė, aiškinamasi, kokiam kontekste jie minimi ir ką galėtų reikšti. Tyrimui pasirinkti rašytiniai šaltiniai kalba apie laidotuvių, mirusiųjų atminimo / pagerbimo ritualus ar jų fragmentus, atliekamus jau krikščioniškuose senkapiuose, bet šaltinių autorių priskirtus pagoniškiems ritualams. Istoriografijoje įprastai manoma, kad šiais terminais bažnytiniuose sinoduose, pamoksluose, įsakuose Bažnyčios atstovai stengėsi išgyvendinti pagoniškas laidotuvių praktikas iš jau christianizuotų visuomenių, kurias kaltino netinkamai vykdant laidotuvių ir mirusiųjų pagerbimo ritualus. Archeologai, randantys Viduramžių senkapiuose įvairių, neretai smulkių ir / ar devocionalinės kilmės įkapių, papuošalų, buitines įrankių ar ginklų ir jų likučių, taip pat linkę manyti, kad krikščionybę priėmę asmenys laidoti laikantis pagoniško papročio ar jų elementų (kalbama apie vadinamąjį sinkretizmą). Tokia interpretacija leistų manyti, kad bent jau dalis pagoniško papročio galėjo ilgai egzistuoti krikščionybę priėmusiose visuomenėse.

Nagrinėtų rašytinių šaltinių informacija rodo, kad nors Viduramžių autoriai vartojo terminus „pagoniški ritualai / apeigos / prietarai“ (*ritus paganorum* / *superstition*), nieko neužsimenama apie „tikrąsias“ pagoniškas laidotuvių ar mirusiųjų pagerbimo / atminimo apeigas, vykdytas ikikrikščioniškais laikais (mirusiųjų deginimą arba laidojimą su įkapėmis, aukojimus ir pan.). Problemos sprendimą sunkina tai, kad ikikrikščioniškosios apeigos taip pat buvo vadinamos „pagoniškais ritualais / prietarais“, todėl reiktų kiekvieną atvejį, kalbantį apie pagoniškus ritualus

krikščioniškuose senkapiuose, nagrinėti atskirai. Antai dalyje šaltinių (pavyzdžiui, Prahos vyskupo Hermano pamokslų rinkinyje, XII a. pirmoji pusė) teužsimenama apie neaiškias „pagoniškas dainas“ ar kitus veiksmus kapinėse arba pagerbiant mirusįjį, nedetalizuojant, koks turėtas pagoniškas turinys konkrečiai. Kituose šaltiniuose (pavyzdžiui, Sembos vyskupo Michaelio Junge įsakyme, XV a. pirmoji pusė) kalbama, kad prūsai statę netinkamus kryžius prie mirusiųjų kapų, ir reikalauta juos pašalinti. Ten pat užsimenama, kad prūsai puotavę ir kažin kokias apeigas atlikinėję ant kapų. Tačiau nieko neminėta apie mirusiųjų deginimą, laidojimą su įkapėmis, aukojimus ar kitus ritualus, priskirtinus pagonybei. Todėl pagrįstai manytina, kad tokio pobūdžio šaltiniuose pagoniškais ritualais vadinti visi vietos Bažnyčios dignitorių nesankcionuoti mirusiųjų pagerbimo / įamžinimo veiksmai ir daiktai (kryžiai, puotos kapinėse), o ne pagoniški ritualai, egzistavę iki christianizacijos pradžios. Kituose šaltiniuose, pavyzdžiui, XVI a. Bychov(e) co kronikoje arba „Palaiminto Konstantino Muroviečio gyvenime“, minimos dedamos įkapės (lūšies nagai, virvės) priskirtinos pagoniams, tačiau savo kilme jos laikytinos krikščioniškomis, padedančiomis sielai pasiekti Viešpaties kalną, žinomą iš Šventojo Rašto, arba kitaip padedančiomis sielai užsitikrinti „tinkamą“ pomirtinę būklę. Visa tai rodo, kad kiekvieną rašytinį šaltinį reikia nagrinėti atskirai, aiškintis kontekstą, vartojamus simbolius, pasakymus, o ne visus *in corpore* minimus ritualus automatiškai priskirti pagonybei ar jos papročiams, gyvavusiems jau krikščioniškoje visuomenėje, laidojusioje savo mirusiuosius krikščioniškuose senkapiuose, bet ne visuomet tiksliai ir griežtai pagal bažnyčios dignitorių nurodymus.