

# THE "DIVINE TRIAL" IN 12TH CENTURY TURAIDA IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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## Abstract

In The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia there is a description of "divine trial" in Turaida (Latvia), where the "horse of destiny" was used to decide the fate of Christian preacher in the Turaida brother Theodoric. The overall depiction of the trial bears strong likeness to Germanic traditions account of which comes from as early as the writings of Tacitus, in 98. However, the historical context shows similar patterns of mythological thought both with the Livs, the Balts and Germanic tribes. Also similar is the role of the horse in the mythology of these peoples.

Key words: Livs, Balts, Livonia, Turaida, horse of destiny, divine trial, mythology, the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia.

"Divine trial" is an ancient method by which it was tried to ritually ascertain the judicial truth. Which were used by every nation, including Baltic nations from the beginnings till the 16th century. It was used as the final argument, lest all other were used. Latvian historian and historian of the Law Arveds Švābe writes that all peoples of Livonia in twelfth and thirteenth century used this practice to consult deity in following matters:

- Whether or not to wage war;
- Whether or not to sign a truce;
- Whether or not to accept a new religion;
- Whether or not and how to punish offenders of gods;
- Whether or not to offer a sacrifice to the deity and what that would be.

Overall, several types of tests are known:

- Trial by fire;
- Trial by water;
- Trial by battle;
- Trial by casting lots

(Švābe 1932, p.32).

Divination was usually in form of ordeals, although we cannot fully exclude those methods popular in Western Europe; namely, judicial duelling and trial by heated iron or water (Blūzma, Lazdiņš 1998, p.24). In the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia, prominent description of such trial can be found. It contains description of trial of a Cistercian monk Theodoric, Christian preacher in the Turaida, later an abbot in Daugavgrīva (Dunemunde), at last - a bishop in Estonian lands (1211–1219) where he was killed in the year 1219 he was offended in the raising the disaster (Mugurēvičs 1993, p.342),

whom around 1190 the Livs of Turaida, wanted to sacrifice to their gods (Fig. 1).

"People were gathered and the will of gods regarding sacrifice was made known by casting lots; a spear was put on ground and a horse was led to step over it, by the will of God firstly putting down the leg of life. Brother prayed to the God with his mouth and gave blessing with his hand. The prophesier insisted that Christian god was sitting on horseback and guiding the horse's legs, so the horse's back had to be swept clean, to make the god fall off. So it was done, but as the horse, as previously, firstly put down the leg of life, Brother Theodoric's life was spared." (The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia I; 10) (Fig. 2).

Divine trial by using the "horse of destiny" could thus be likened to the practice of casting lots.

The report in the Chronicle of Henry is one of the most complete descriptions of the "divine trial" in medieval Europe, yet there are some peculiarities, namely, the reports of Roman historian Tacitus, where he assigns similar traditions to different Germanic tribes. Germans believed that the horse has the ability to forecast the future.

## Auguries and Method of Divination

Augury and divination by lot no people practice more diligently. The use of the lots is simple. A little bough is lopped off a fruit-bearing tree, and cut into small pieces; these are distinguished by certain marks, and thrown carelessly and at random over a white garment. In public questions the priest of the particular state, in private the father of the family, invokes the gods, and, with his eyes toward heaven, takes up each piece three times, and finds in them a meaning according to

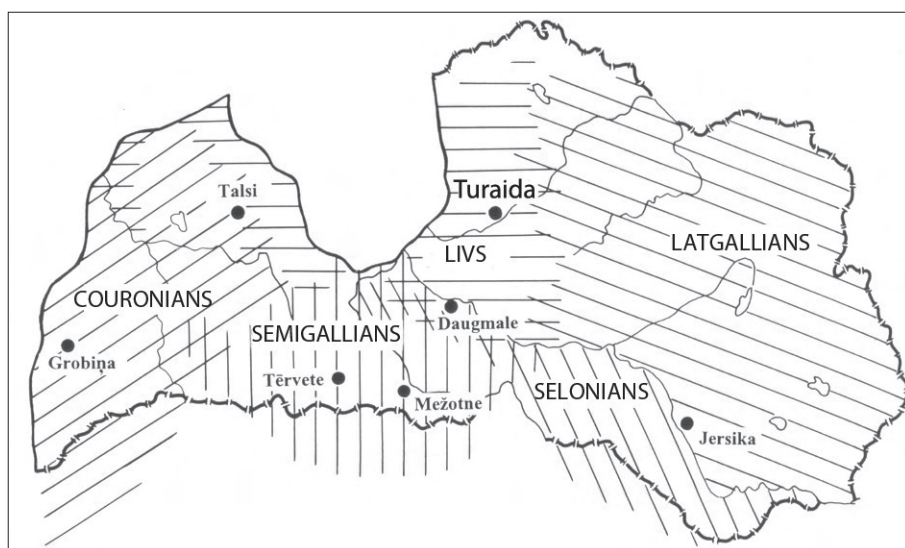


Fig. 1. Latvia in the nine-twelfth century

the mark previously impressed on them. If they prove unfavourable, there is no further consultation that day about the matter; if they sanction it, the confirmation of augury is still required. For they are also familiar with the practice of consulting the notes and flight of birds. It is peculiar to this people to seek omens and monitions from horses. Kept at the public expense, in these same woods and groves, are white horses, pure from the taint of earthly labour; these are yoked to a sacred car, and accompanied by the priest and the king, or chief of the tribe, who note their neighing and snorting.” (Tacitus, *Germania*, §10)

Similar divine trial by divination with spears is also described by Saxo Grammaticus (Hansen 1857, p.54). Certainly, even in thirteenth century German crusaders continued the practice of sacrificing horses in special occasions, e.g., after a successful battle. Evidence of such a practice could be found in the “Chronicle of Rhymes”:

<p><i>“Dô nam man der heiden pfert, Helme, schilde unde swert Und telten daz, geliche.</i></p> <p><i>Gote von himelriche War bescheiden ouch sin teil, Der in gegeben hette heil.”</i></p>	<p><i>“When horses, spears and swords And helmets, and also shields Left after by the Pagans The brothers gathered together, They orderly divided the loot, Without forgetting to give a share As a sacrifice to the Father, Who did give His help to them.</i></p>
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(Chronicle of Rhymes 1998, 11 991. 11 999)

Also several findings of horse skull sacrifices in buildings of Riga can be attributed to these German traditions. Thus, horse as divine medium is known also to Germanic peoples. It is possible that story of Theodoric’s trial by “horse of destiny” is plaited in the Chronicle to further underline the tenseness of the situation, the cruelty of pagan Livs and capability of God to protect His children, and it is done in a way well-understood by Germans.

It should not be forgotten that Livs are Finno-Ugric people living in Baltic, and that their language and mythological perception could be significantly different from Indo-European tribes like Germans and Balts. On the other hand, during the long period of coexistence, Baltic peoples could have developed similar judicial and religious traditions. In Latvian traditions, horse has similar role and place than that of Germanic. By beliefs of Latvian people, horse’s wisdom allows to perceive glimpses of future, to see what remains unseen for human beings (e.g., when starting a trip, if the horse lifts in first place the right leg, the trip was believed to be successful). Evidently, the “leg of life” mentioned in the Chronicle refers to horse’s right leg (Straubergs 1944, p.173).

In the burial ground of Salaspils’ Laukskola (Fig. 3.1) and in the Daugmale hillfort (Fig. 3.2) there were found two bronze figurines, both depicting an armed horseman. In both of them, horse’s left leg was raised. It is thought that, in this case, the horse in the figurines signifies belonging to certain social stratum, and does not contain references to cult of Sun or to divination practices. (Zemītis 2004, p.64ff).

Answer to the questions whether the divine trial really existed, is to be found in mythology. After all, judges



Fig. 2. Painting by A. Baumanis (1867–1904) „The Horse of Destiny” Oil, canvas, 1887.

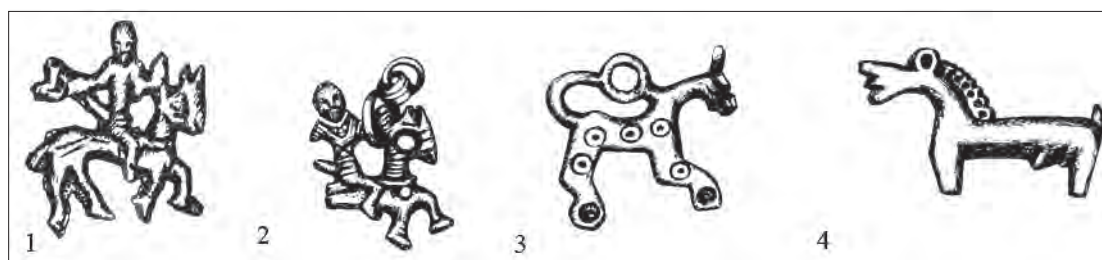


Fig. 3. The Livs bronze pedants: horsemen and horse figures: 1 Salaspils Laukskola, grave 480; 2, 3 Daugmale hillfort; 4 Daugmale settlement.

in the divine trial are priests with the power to contact the realm of gods.

In the mythology of Finno-Ugric peoples, horse does not occupy so prominent a place than in the Indo-European mythology, yet in the archæological findings, there could be found many references to the special role of horse in the Livic society. Written evidence also portrays possibility of human sacrifice during twelfth and thirteenth century. The Chronicle of Henry tells us about human sacrifice, describing the events of 1205: “Not a long time after that, the Livs, waiting in the woods, slayed seventeen of the crusaders who went out of Ikšķile to collect grain tribute; some of them they [the Livs] did slaughter with a dreadful torture as a sacrifice to their gods” (The Chronicle of Henry IX:12). There is also archæological evidence that confirms the possibility of human sacrifice. In the ancient town adjacent to the Daugmale hill fort, there were found under a gate tower fragments of one or two human skulls, lower jaw and a tooth (Urtāns 1968).

In the settlement of Riga which existed before the giving rights of the city from bishop Albert in 1201, a place of worship is found, with elements of horse cult. Near to the Dome cathedral and the graveyard adjacent to it, in excavations guided by A. Caune and S. Tilko it was stated that previously in that place there was a twelfth century burial ground. Next to the burial ground fireplaces, pits for ritual sacrifices and remains of dug-in poles were found. One of the sacrifice pits contained half of a horse lower jaw. Also was found a fragment of an oak pole approximately 30cm in diameter, and five stakes driven in the ground west of it. Using the radioactive carbon tests, it was ascertained that the poles were made around 1100 AD (± 40 years). As oak was never used in the buildings of Riga settlement, Caune assumes that the top of the pole probably was shaped in form of figure depicting some deity. Next to such idols were stakes on which different sacrifices could be put (Caune 1992, p.31ff). The fact that such wooden idols were widely known is confirmed by findings of five wooden sticks with depiction of a human



head, found in Riga. Such idols are commonly associated with West Slavonic deity Sviatovit (Caune 1981, p.56ff), but similar items are found also in Scandinavia – in Svenbork, Denmark such a figurine was found and dated to approximately 1100 AD, and is considered to be either of Slavonic origin, or to be created with Slavonic influence (Jansen 1992, p.380). These evidences shows that among natives of Riga settlement – predominantly Livs who integrate and accept of Indo-European, namely Slavonic and Baltic deities.

In the Talsi hillfort, horse skulls were discovered in the foundation of buildings (Karnups 1937, p.109). Horse leg bones, skull and other bones were found under the fireplaces in Livic settlements in Doles Rau i (nore 1987, p.79), yet the most prominent example of a horse sacrifice is discovered in the excavations by my colleague Roberts Spirģis in Liv settlement and it's burial ground in the Ogresgala Čabas (Spirģis 2007, p.50ff; cf. R. Brūzis and R. Spirģis article in this volume). This particular sacrifice could be dated to the 12th century. In 1987 the burial of the horse also was found in the ancient burial place near the hillfort of Daugmale.

Figurines of animals, including horses, are characteristic feature of the entire Finno-Ugric culture area. Of Finno-Ugric origin evidently are also the plastic bronze horses which are common during eleventh to fourteenth century. In some of these figurines could be seen digressions from horse natural form, e.g., the snout is shaped according to then-common style of beasts, and nevertheless features characteristic to horses are accentuated, such as the mane (Fig. 3.3,4).

Divine trial with heated iron is mentioned in the most early of Baltic and Livic judicial codices. The codification can be attributed to second half of thirteenth century, it was done by Germans and it reflects legal regulations of both local and Western European origin.

Resemblance of the “divine trial” in Turaida to ancient Germanic tradition could signify strong linking between Livs and Northern Germanic tribes – especially peoples of Middle Sweden; the signs of that linking are especially prominent along the lower Daugava in 10th century and in the beginning of 11th century; also in the surroundings of Gauja in first half of 12th century (Tõnisson 1992, p.168). It is certainly possible that the judicial procedures were also similar and the divine trial in Turaida can be easily perceived in the historical context of that time.

Translated by Agrita Lujāne

## Abbreviations

AA – Archive of Archaeological Section of Latvian National Museum of History

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Received: 15 February 2009; Revised: 20 March 2009; Accepted: 12 June 2009

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## „DIEVIŠKAS IŠBANDYMAS“ XII A. TURAIDOS ISTORINIAME KONTEKSTE

**Guntis Zemītis**

### Santrauka

Pranašavimai paprastai būdavo siejami su įvairiais išbandymais. Henriko Latvio kronikoje galima aptikti vaizdų tokių išbandymų aprašymą. Tai išbandymas cisterių vienuolio Teodoriko, kurį Turaidos lyviai 1190 m. norėjo paaukoti savo dievams (2 pav.). „Žmonės susirinko ir, norėdami sužinoti dievų valią dėl aukojimo, metė burtus: paguldė ietį ant žemės ir vedė per ją žirgą; Dievo valia žirgas žengė per ietį dešine koja, laikoma skirta gyvybei. Brolis tuo metu meldėsi ir ištiesta ranka laimino žmones. Žynys sakė, kad krikščionių Dievas sėdi ant žirgo nugaros ir valdo jo kojas, todėl reikia nuplauti žirgo nugarą ir tokiu būdu pašalinti Dievą. Kada tai padarė, žirgas per ietį vėl žengė gyvybei skirta koja, brolis Teodorikas išliko gyvas“ (Henriko Latvio kronika, I, 10, vertė Juozas Jurginis).

Henriko Latvio kronikos pranešimas primena romėnų istoriko Tacito paminėtas įvairių germanų genčių panašias tradicijas I amžiuje. Tokį „dievišką išbandymą“ ietimi taip pat aprašė Saksas Gramatikas.

Reikėtų nepamiršti, kad lyviai – Pabaltijo finougrai, ir jų kalba bei mitologinė samprata galėjo gerokai skirtis nuo indoeuropiečių genčių, tokių kaip germanai ir baltai. Kita vertus, ilgalaikis koegzistavimas galėjo suformuoti panašias teisingas ir religines Pabaltijo žmonių tradicijas. Finougrų mitologijoje žirgas neužima ypač svarbios vietos (1; 3 pav.), tačiau archeologinė medžiaga byloja apie reikšmingą žirgo vaidmenį lyvių visuomenėje. Rašytiniai šaltiniai taip pat leidžia manyti, kad XII–XIII a. egzistavo žmonių aukojimas.

Vertė Jurgita Žukauskaitė