

THE BIRTH OF THE LITHUANIAN MYTH IN POLISH CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the studies of the birth of the Lithuanian myth in Polish Culture. Author points the importance of Lithuania in Polish intellectual life increased since the beginning of the 19th century. The role of Vilnius as one of the most influential research and artistic centers particularly improved. Vilnius University (Uniwersytet Wileński 1803-1832), which influence and achievements spread beyond Lithuanian border for a long time after it had been closed down, played an especially significant role. A lot of interest in Lithuanian history and culture, its languages and folklore developed among Vilnius intellectuals. The tendency was steady: in next decades numerous musical works, scientific research and literary works were created. They were inspired by widely understood Lithuanian culture. Vilnius started living its own life of a legendary capital of romanticism and a town of glorious but tragic history. Owing to a romantic tradition Lithuanian issues became one of the typical features of Polish culture.

KEY WORDS: Lithuanian myth, Lithuanian culture, Polish culture, intellectual life, Vilnius University (1803-1832), Vilnius history, Lithuanian history, language and folklore.

ANOTACIJA

Straipsnyje aptariama istorinio Lietuvos mito problematika Lenkijos kultūros sanklodoje. Autorius pabrėžia pamažu stiprėjančią lietuviškos kultūros svarbą Lenkijos intelektualų veikloje nuo pat XIX a. pradžios. Svarbią vietą čia užima Vilnius – bene svarbiausias to amžiaus mokslo ir meno centras. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas Vilniaus universitetui (Uniwersytet Wileński, 1803–1832), kuriame dirbo gausus būrys lenkų intelektualų, garsinusių ir Lietuvos vardą visoje šalyje bei už jos ribų iki pat šio universiteto uždarymo. Būtent čia kilo Lenkijos intelektualų susidomėjimas Lietuvos istorija, jos kultūra, lietuvių kalba ir tautosaka. Šių kelių Vilniaus universiteto gyvavimo dešimtmečių laikotarpiu buvo išspausdinta pluoštas veikalų, kuriuose paskelbti iškilūs lietuvių muzikos, literatūros, poezijos bei kitų kultūros sričių tyrinėjimai. Visa tai liudijo šių darbų autorių išsamų lietuviškos kultūros pažinimą bei supratimą. Romantinės pakraipos Vilniaus lenkų literatūriniai ir kitų kultūros apraiškų kūriniai šio Lietuvos mito propagavimu tapo neatsiejama abiejų tautų kultūros ir mokslo istorijos dalimi.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: Lietuvos mitas, Lietuvos kultūra, Lenkijos kultūra, intelektualinis gyvenimas, Vilniaus universitetas (1803–1832), Vilniaus istorija, Lietuvos istorija, kalba ir folkloras.

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Since the beginning of the 19th century the importance of Lithuania in Polish intellectual life increased. Particularly improved the role of Vilnius as one of the most influential research and artistic centres. Vilnius University (Uniwersytet Wileński 1803-1832), which influence and achievements spread beyond Lithuanian border for a long time after it had been closed down, played an especially significant role¹. A lot of interest in Lithuanian history and culture, its languages and folklore developed among Vilnius intellectuals. The tendency was steady: in next decades numerous musical works, scientific research and literary works were created. They were inspired by widely understood Lithuanian culture. Along with the romantic époque spirit the artists were captivated by partially mythical history of pagan Lithuania and its folk rituals. Many artists, who are part of Polish cultural heritage, should be enumerated: next to Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, also

¹ See more in: Beauvois 1991; Prašmantaitė 1992. About the university tradition and its students see: Stolzman 1987:31-58.

Ludwik Kondratowicz (Syrokomla), Ignacy Chodźko, Antoni Odyniec, Stanisław Moniuszko, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski and others. Additionally, Vilnius started living its own life of a legendary capital of romanticism and a town of glorious but tragic history. Owing to a romantic tradition Lithuanian issues became one of the typical features of Polish culture (Bumblauskas 1999:15; Stoberski 1981:129-133, 202-203; Kosman 1997:106).

Among various sciences and arts, it was undoubtedly literature that played the most considerable role in the creation of the Lithuanian myth. The vision from Adam Mickiewicz's works, especially from the national poem *Pan Tadeusz* (published in 1834) had a large impact too. It was widely regarded as canonical. For further decades many Polish authors directly derived their own images of Lithuania from the image (Kolbuszewski 1994:35-55; Hadaczek 1993:9-10; Czapplejewicz 1996:13).

Literature and other arts created the basis for the Lithuanian legend, the country on the River Neman (Nemunas), the country of saint snakes and oak trees, bards, priestesses, "the country of graves and crosses", characterized by severe and diverse nature. The artistic visions depicted remote forests full of wildlife, mystical backwoods and wild moors. Magnificent nature was presented in Michał Elwiro Andriolli's illustrations for *Pan Tadeusz*, which were very popular and reproduced as individual copies. Juliusz Kossak's allegorical illustrations for Mickiewicz's works and Wincenty Pol's national poem *Pieśń o ziemi naszej* (*The Song of our Land*) were also very popular. The myth of temptingly mystical and simultaneously familiar land was being born from the artists' images (Kolbuszewski 1988:56-59).

In time the interest in Lithuania among Poles was increasing, sometimes turning into fascination. Daniel Beauvois called the phenomenon 'lithuanization of the Polish soul'. It lasted since the times of Mickiewicz till Czesław Miłosz and Tadeusz Konwicki (Beauvois 1994:97). Strong positive emotions comprised in literature and other arts stimulated the creation of other myths, e.g. the one about unique features of Lithuanian origins. It was often assumed that Lithuanian roots meant someone better, more talented, wittier, more moral and hard-working. Even at the end of the 20th century one of the authors wrote about an exceptional value of 'the addition of the Lithuanian blood' in Polish culture, convincing that 'beyond doubt Mickiewicz couldn't have come from Poznań and Piłsudski from Cracow' (Paźniewski 1989:109).

The mitologisation of Lithuania is clearly visible when compared with the perception of other eastern lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów). While the so called Ukrainian borderland, mainly owing to the 19th century literary vision, was becoming the synonym of bleeding and uneasy frontier, the nearby beloved Lithuania was associated with the oasis of peace, tolerance and familiarity. Lithuania seemed to be close to heart mainly thanks to the created picture of harmony of life there, modesty and goodness of the inhabitants – the world of permanent and sorted moral values. In literature and art the picture of everyday life in Samogitia (lit. Žemaitija, pol. Żmudź) was idealized. Under the influence of literature the Samogitian 'folk' (namely ethnic Lithuanians) appeared to Poles more familiar and more connected to Polishness than peasants from other parts of the so called Eastern Borderland. According to the rooted belief Catholic Samogitian country lived in perfect harmony with Polish gentry, presented as the archetype of a happy family household, true mythical Arcadia (Błoński 1987:51-52; Kolbuszewski 2000:19; Uliasz [B.d.]:18).

At the turn of the 19th and 20th century widely read novels by Maria Rodziewiczówna had a considerable influence on the creation of these images of gentry mansions. Her most well-known work,

Dewajtis (1888), which action took place in Samogitia, for many years was regarded as a masterpiece by public opinion (Martuszevska 1989:24, 235-236, 243; Szcześniak 1998:122-123). The readers of the novel were acquainted with 'typical' Samogitians: taciturn, stubborn, but devoted to tradition, proud and honest, but also patriots truly loving the Polish-Lithuanian homeland. The symbol of the Lithuanian fate and everlasting stay in the homeland was taken from the title oak tree – Dewajtis. Many other works copying the myth of Polish gentry in Lithuania were created under the impact of *Rodziewiczówna*. The literary works of the authoress had very strong impact on the emotional side of Polish patriotism and emerging nationalism (Domańska-Kubiak 2004:188; Cywiński 1996:281-285). The literary output of Henryk Sienkiewicz gave the most important trigger for the Lithuanian mythology, but also for the development of Polish national myths. The crucial role was played by the series of novels from 1884-1888 entitled *Trylogia* (*Ogniem i mieczem*, *Potop*, *Pan Wołodyjowski*), taking place in the 17th century, but also the novel *Krzyżacy* (1900), being set in the 14th and 15th centuries. Widely read and very popular, they were considered (and still are) as the fine achievements of Polish prose. It must be stated that literary critics pointed out Sienkiewicz's unquestioning apology of gentry and numerous simplifications. However, the readers loved his books for fast action, strong emotions and recalling the glory and power of Poland. These works were shaping the patriotic spirit of the young people from the end of the 19th century and further decades of the 20th century. The history of the old Lithuania is seen by Poles through Sienkiewicz's eyes even nowadays. The vision proposed by the author was commonly acquired and accepted, similarly to the characteristics of Lithuanians (but also Ukrainians), since then perceived mainly through the characters from his books (Kosman 2001:18-20; Strzelecki 2000:51; Kolbuszewski 2000:45, 66-69, 87-89).

The common images of typical Lithuanians, gentry and folk alike, had literary origins. The character that evoked most sincere positive feelings in Polish readers was a comical and moustached Lithuanian nobleman from Myszkiškis (in English it means – Mice's guts), mister Longinus Podbipięta, the hero of *Ogniem i mieczem*. The tall nobleman spoke with a strange accent and had hardly any sense of humour. He was an ardent patriot of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a dangerous and courageous knight, but in reality the character 'as good-natured, as sincere as a child'. Very pious and shy – blushed and sighed when in the presence of women, became the butt of many jokes which he ignored with the shrug of his shoulders. The character of Podbipięta became in Poland the archetypical historical Lithuanian, and even the archetype of a Lithuanian in general. Poles from ethnically Polish areas were very sentimental about Lithuanians, among others, owing to the traits of Podbipięta. The power of the image and almost its allegorical character were clearly recognized and popular even at the beginning of the 21st century (Ostrowski 2002; Prašmantaitė 1995:102-103).

Sienkiewicz gave birth to many other Lithuanian characters, e.g. common portraits of brave gentry from Lauda in *Potop*. In *Krzyżacy* he described a secretive but sensible and courageous Samogitian commander named Skirwoiło. In contrast, 'Samogitian folk' is stereotypically presented by Sienkiewicz as taciturn, dressed in animals' skins warriors, who in their 'viciousness exceed even Lithuanians' (*Krzyżacy*) or 'a hairy Samogitian' (*Potop*). Thanks to Sienkiewicz the historic Samogitia was perceived as the reservoir of old-fashioned values and loyalty to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Artistic achievements in other areas had similar influence, e.g. evoking a lot of emotions pictures by Artur Grottger from the series *Lithuania*, historical paintings by Jan Matejko, or – to some

extent – also musical works, e.g. a symphonic poem by Mieczysław Karłowicz entitled *Rapsodia litewska*, published in 1909. However, the image depicted in art was far away from showing the Lithuanian reality. It rather offered a prepared image that most readers accepted as authentic and objective (Witkowska 1991:49, 56-57; Bujnicki 2000:65; Uliasz [B.d.]:18). At the beginning of the 20th century the majority of the inhabitants of the ethnically Polish areas knew hardly anything about real national relationships in the eastern parts of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The ‘nationalizing’ Polish society derived most information about Lithuania, Ukraine and Byelorussia almost entirely from literature and other artistic visions. Even the intelligentsia was very poorly oriented in the subtleties of the complicated subject matter. In 1907 a highly-esteemed writer Bolesław Prus, probably unintentionally, subscribed to the perception absolutely seriously declaring that

... each, even slightly enlightened Pole does not need to leave for Lithuania in order to get to know it. He has known it since childhood, or even earlier, from ancient times (Prus 1907; Sadowski 1988:261-265).

Along with the mitologisation of the image of Lithuania the myth of eastern borderlands was developing. In the scientific literature it is assumed that the term *eastern borderlands* was used one of the first times by Wincenty Pol in his rhapsod *Mohort* published in 1854. The term underwent an interesting evolution. Initially it meant a Polish Arcadia, far away from the centre. The term, firstly understood as only southern-eastern areas of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Ukraine), was later broadened to all areas directly incorporated into Russia, lying to the east of the Kingdom of Poland (Królestwo Kongresowe, so called Kongresówka, created by Russians in 1815). Gradually the borderlands were associated with the eastern frontier of Polish homeland, where there were deadly serious threats to Polish identity and Catholicism. In the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries the need to fight to sustain national identity was easily associated with the romantic vision of the old 17th century wars to defend the country and the faith. The legend of the buffer zone was reborn and the main prompt for its rebirth was also owing to literature (Wapiński 1995:51).

According to Jacek Kolbuszewski the process of ascribing Lithuania to the borderlands was gradual. Lithuania was not regarded as borderland in the meaning of outback. In this meaning Vilnius was not the borderland-like city as it played a role of one of the centres of Polish culture, similarly to Lvov. According to Kolbuszewski, in Polish consciousness the final process of ascribing Lithuania to the borderlands (again similarly to Lvov) finished in 1918-1922, when the reborn Poland was supposed to fight for the inclusion of Vilnius area. The rest of the Lithuanian Arcadia was then ‘lost’ to the Lithuanian Republic, which was in conflict with Poland².

In the 19th and 20th centuries the mental heritage of gentry in terms of culture and mitologisation of the vision of Polish-Lithuanian relationships influenced significantly the historical awareness of Poles. At the time when Poland was under the partitions the works of historians and literary authors usually rather emphasized everything that united the inhabitants of the former Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth than what divided them. The past was strongly idealized, common victories, the years of glory and magnitude were recalled.

² The author is also persuading that „the modern understanding of borderland derives from the Between Wars period” (Kolbuszewski 2000:56, 91-92, 97).

Simultaneously, the belief in the weakness and the underdevelopment of the civilisation of the pre-Christian Lithuania was deeply rooted in the Polish historical tradition. The main occupation of Lithuanians in the period before the union were supposed to be hunting and looting their neighbours. According to the common Polish image, propagated in literature, articles on social, political and cultural subjects, and historiography, the pagan Lithuania was deadly threatened by the Teutonic Knights. Faced with the power of the aggressors, notwithstanding their heroic and admirable defence, Lithuanians were doomed. The only rescue and historical necessity was converting the country to Christianity, agreement and joining forces with Poland (Tazbir 1991:9). Medieval Lithuanians jealously observed Polish freedoms and wanted to implement them in their country. All the factors lead Lithuania to making a wise and far-reaching decision about the union with Poland and subjecting to Latin civilisation. The union brought Lithuania mainly advantages, it meant the salvation and benefit. Even at the turn of the 20th century one of the Polish journalists was persuading that “a great and cultural people, which the Polish people was in the 14th century” united with “another people, underdeveloped, small and in addition pagan” and at the same time “did not impose its language, laws, army or monarch” (Kwestya litewska... 1905:106). Lithuania was incorporated into the western civilisation range. Poland gave Lithuania Christianity. Lithuanians learnt from Poles how to write and read, acquired more developed culture, law, traditions and language. Thanks to the union the Lithuanian country survived and the inhabitants could develop “inspired by Polish culture” (Warszawa, Archiwum... 1922; compare: Gloger 1905). The union and christening in the Latin ceremony protected Lithuania against the expansion of Bizantynian Russian culture. The cooperation against the Teutonic Order and Moscow resulted in magnificent military victories and permanent safety to the border.

In compliance with the Polish vision, the history of the union of Poland and Lithuania, especially since 1569, is a golden age of prosperity, power and undisturbed brotherhood of nations. Lithuanians were then “the best sons of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth” and played an important role in the creation of Polish culture and history (Obst 1912:28; see more in: Dylągowa 2000:146; Bumblauskas 1999:749-753). Lithuania always backed up Poland, even when the times were most difficult, even during the times of partitions and national uprisings. It is how a historian Henryk Mościcki in 1907 described the heroic experiences of the former century enumerating examples of Lithuanians, Kościuszko and Traugutt: “With courageous perseverance and determination characteristic of the descendants of Giedymin the sons of the flag of Pursuit and a White Eagle” (Mościcki 1907).

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries there appeared many studies concerning the history of Lithuania in Polish scientific literature, but they usually did not go beyond the traditional interpretation. The culmination of the interest in the Lithuanian issues took place in 1910-1914 during the magnificent 500th anniversary celebrations of the battle of Grunwald and the Horodło Union. Thus, under the flag of former glory of Jagiellonian times, the unity of Poles from all the areas under partitions was manifested. The belief in the stability of the heritage of the union was actually treated as a dogma and that is why the attempts at questioning it by the Lithuanian national movement faced with authentic and common indignation of the Polish society.

At the same time of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries young Lithuanian nationalism considered Polish-speaking inhabitants of Lithuania to be polonised Lithuanians and demanded their return to the language of their ancestors and their Lithuanian identity. According to the Polish society the mentioned thesis seemed impossible to be accepted, among others, because it questioned com-

mon roots of the whole modern nation in the area regarded as Polish heritage. To respond to the thesis, some nationally-minded researchers were trying to look for something different from gradual polonisation, easier to understand and accept, explanation of the genesis of the creation of Polish-inhabited areas on the Vilia (Neris) and Neman. The theory of massive kidnapping of the peasants from around Warsaw area by Lithuanians in the 12th-14th centuries and settling them down in the depths of Lithuania was commonly recognized. Unclear mentions from Medieval annals were regarded as the basis for the belief, especially the ones passed on by Jan Długosz, and then uncritically repeated and exaggerated by romantic historical writers, e.g. Teodor Narbutt. According to the information during each of the many such invasions, Lithuanians kidnapped 10,000-40,000 people. So it was concluded, thus even before the Krevo union in 1385, Lithuania was inhabited by many thousands of Poles,

[...] who settled down there and created their households. As people of higher culture they influenced the wild indigenous people and frequently acted as an example to follow and leaders (Obst 1921:7-10; Radliński 1919:145-146).

It was assumed that the modern descendants of the historic prisoners-settlers simply retained the Polish language, identity and religion.

Among historians, a researcher from Lvov – Władysław Abraham, was an advocate of similar views on the issue of Polish settlement³. Zygmunt Gloger (1845-1910) was an exceptional propagator and creator of the myth. He was a highly respected ethnographer, archaeologist and historian. He was convincing that Poles settled down in Lithuania on their free will under Mieszko II, then were massively kidnapped as prisoners. As a proof, he referred to, among others, the ballad *Trzech Budrysow* by Adam Mickiewicz, according to which pagan Lithuanians brought wives from their invasions of Poland. According to Gloger, the literary work truly reflected medieval reality comprised in folk tales (Gloger 1904:15-16; see: Talko-Hryniewicz 1911:5; Wierciński 1920:11). The author of *Encyklopedia staropolska* firmly believed that the settlers taught Lithuanians how to grow fruits and vegetables, rear animals and how to make pottery. He was looking for Polish traces in Lithuanian folklore, ceremonies, language, pointed out the modern anthropological similarities of the inhabitants of Lithuania and Poles, e.g. the same build of the skull, the colour of eyes, the colour of hair, etc. (Gloger 1904:30). He made his findings public quite frequently at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. His work *Album Etnograficzne* published in 1904 gained special popularity.

During the further decades, despite the pulverizing criticism from many researchers (e.g. historians – Jan Feliks Jakubowski, Henryk Łowmianski, or filologists – Kazimierz Nitsch and Halina Turska) indicating that Gloger's and Abraham's theses are based on very unreliable premises, the moderately new myth was accepted by widely understood public opinion and highly influenced the common perception of the genesis of Polish settlement in Lithuania. The legend was repeated as truth especially during the Between Wars Period, but it was also deeply rooted in the consciousness of Poles in the second half of the 20th century (Jurkiewicz 1994:22).

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³ See more in: Abraham 1914:12-45.

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Balstogės universitetas, Lenkija

Santrauka

Nuo XIX a. pradžios augo Lietuvos reikšmė lenkų intelektualiniame gyvenime. Ypač išaugo Vilniaus, kaip vieno iš svarbiausių mokslo ir meno aktyvumo centrų, vaidmuo. Lenkų intelektualų aplinkoje kilo susidomėjimas Lietuvos istorija ir kultūra, jos kalba ir tautosaka. Tendencijos buvo nuolatinės: atsirado daug muzikos kūrinių, mokslinių darbų, literatūros kūrinių, įkvėptų plačiai suprantamos lietuviybės. Lenkų kultūroje gimė Lietuvos įvaizdis – mitas. Romantizmo epochos dvasia kūrėjai žavėjosi pagoniškos Lietuvos legendomis ir liaudies papročiais. Reikia paminėti autorius, kurie užėmė svarbią vietą lenkų kultūrinio paveldo istorijoje: Juliuszą Słowackį, Ludwiką Kondratowiczų (Syrokomlę), Ignacą Chodźką, Antonį Odyńcą, Stanisławą Moniuszką, Józefą Ignacą Kraszewski, Arturą Grottgerą ir kitus.

Labai didelę reikšmę turėjo Adomo Mickevičiaus sukurta Lietuvos vizija. Ypač tai pastebima poemoje *Ponas Tadas* (1834). Ši poema buvo visuotinai pripažinta klasikiniu kūriniu. Daug vėlesnių autorių tiesiogiai rėmėsi šiuo literatūriniu įvaizdžiu. XIX a. antrojoje pusėje Lietuvos legendai sustiprėti padėjo Henryko Sienkiewicziaus ir Marijos Rodziewiczównos literatūrinė kūryba. Laikui bėgant lenkų susidomėjimas Lietuva augo toliau ir net tapdavo jų susižavėjimo objektu. Prancūzų istorikas Daniel Beauvois šį reiškinį pavadino „lenkų dvasios lituanizavimu“, trunkančiu mažiau siai nuo Mickevičiaus iki Czesława Miłoszo ir Tadeuszo Konwickio laikų. Stiprus teigiamas emocinis krūvis, ženklus to meto lenkų meno kūriniuose, skatino ir vėlesnių Lietuvos įvaizdžio mitų atsiradimą.

Teigiamas Lietuvos įvaizdis lenkų kultūroje aiškiai matomas lyginant jį su kitomis buvusios Abiejų Tautų Respublikos žemėmis rytuose. Ukrainos žemės, ypač dėl literatūrinės vizijos poveikio, vis dažniau buvo suvokiamos kaip kruvino ir neramaus paribio sinonimas, o broliška, mylimoji Lietuva lenkams asocijavosi su ramybe, tolerancija ir susitapatinimu.

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