



# MORALITY TALE OR ATTEMPT AT REPORTAGE? YET ANOTHER LOOK AT PETER VON DUSBURG'S DESCRIPTION OF THE PRUSSIAN PAGAN RELIGION

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## ABSTRACT

The story by the Teutonic Order chronicler Peter von Dusburg about the Prussian pagan priest *Criwe* and his sanctuary *Romowe* has for centuries provoked historiographical arguments about the nature of the Baltic pagan religion and the interpretation of Medieval chronicle sources relating to the Balts. This article focuses on an interpretation of Dusburg's text, without attempting to decide on the reality of ancient pagan religious practice. Through a 'close reading' approach to actual words and the contexts of sentences that are often extracted and used out of context, the article argues against either dismissing the passage as an invented moral exemplum or accepting it literally. A speculative explanation for Dusburg's portrayal of the pagan priest *Criwe* as a pope is presented for consideration. Moreover, through a reminder of the often-neglected context of the *Criwe* passage in book III of the chronicle, this article suggests an overarching aim for Dusburg's portrayal of the Old Prussians, which is not as the 'avatar of evil' often proposed in historiography, but rather as simple peoples who should be left to the Teutonic Order and not to the Franciscans favoured at that time by Grand Duke Gediminas of Lithuania. To aid readers, the article contains the whole Latin passage (rather than the extracts often quoted), and an English translation by Rasa Mažeika.

KEYWORDS: Teutonic Order's domains in Prussia, Old Prussian religion, Teutonic Order sources, Medieval chronicles.

99

## ANOTACIJA

Vokiečių ordino kronikininko Petro Dusburgiečio pasakojimas apie prūsų pagonių šventiką krivį (*Criwe*) ir jo šventyklą Romovę (*Romowe*) išprovokavo ištisus šimtmečius besitęsiančius istoriografinius ginčus dėl baltų pagoniškosios religijos pobūdžio ir Viduramžių kronikų informacijos, susijusios su baltais, interpretacijos. Šiame straipsnyje daugiausia dėmesio skiriama Petro Dusburgiečio teksto interpretacijai, klausimą apie senovės pagonių religinės praktikos realumą atidedant į šalį. Pasitelkus „atidaus skaitymo“ priegą analizuoti tikruosius žodžius ir kontekstus sakinių, kurie dažnai ištraukiami iš konteksto, straipsnyje teigiama, kad negalima nei atmesti šio Petro fragmento kaip išgalvoto moralizuojančio pavyzdžio, nei priimti jo pažodžiui. Be to, pateikiamas galimas paaiškinimas, kodėl Petras pagonių šventiką krivį vaizdavo kaip popiežių. Primenant dažnai ignoruojamą fragmento apie krivį iš kronikos 3-iosios knygos kontekstą, straipsnyje apibūdinamas bendras tikslas, kurio siekė Petras, vaizduodamas senuosius prūsus – jam jie buvo ne „blogio avatarai“, kaip dažnai manoma istoriografijoje, o naivūs neišmaneliai, kuriuos būtina palikti Vokiečių ordinui, bet ne pranciškonams, kuriuos tuo metu buvo pamėgęs Lietuvos didysis kunigaikštis Gediminas. Skaitytojų patogumui straipsnyje pateikiamas visas lotyniškas fragmentas (o ne dažnai cituojamos ištraukos) ir Rasos Mažeikos vertimas į anglų kalbą.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: Vokiečių ordino valdos Prūsijoje, senųjų prūsų religija, Vokiečių ordino šaltiniai, Viduramžių kronikos.

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CHRISTIANISATION IN THE EAST BALTIC: (RE)INTERPRETATIONS OF ARTEFACTS, VIEWS AND ACCOUNTS

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## Introduction

The pagan religion of the peoples living south and east of the Baltic Sea has fascinated scholars for centuries. One locus of fierce arguments has been the few words pertaining to Baltic paganism in the chronicles of the Teutonic Order (*Ordo domus Sanctae Mariae Theutonicorum Hierosolymitanorum*). This military-monastic order, originally established to aid crusades in the Holy Land, had in the early 13th century invaded the shores of the Baltic Sea to fight and eventually subjugated the pagan Prussians, and in the 14th century fought less successfully the Lithuanians, whom it was never able to conquer.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as scholars have always noted, the Teutonic Order's chroniclers give information, or possibly disinformation (to use a modern term), about their enemies or about a religion which they sought to eradicate. Nevertheless, *faute de mieux*, historians and archaeologists have often accepted almost literally the descriptions and even mere mentions of religious rites and objects in the chronicles, although there have been serious challenges to this view.

In presuming to cast a fresh glance at one of the most famous of such sources, the description of the religion and customs of the pagan Prussians in Peter von Dusburg's *Cronica terre Prussie*, this paper will not attempt to reconstruct the actual rites and beliefs of the ancient Baltic religion. After oceans of ink over four centuries, this question is still unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable.<sup>2</sup> However, due to the temptation to mine sources for scarce nuggets of information, there have perhaps not been enough

<sup>1</sup> There is a vast literature on the general topic of the Teutonic Order in many languages which would take a whole article in itself to list. The classic is BOOCKMANN, Hartmut. *Der Deutsche Orden: zwölf Kapitel aus seiner Geschichte*. München, 1981. The most recent include: GOUGUENHEIM, Sylvain. *Les derniers païens. Les Baltes face aux chrétiens, XII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris, 2022; SARNOWSKY, Jürgen. *Der Deutsche Orden*. 3. Aufl. München, 2022; DELESTOWICZ, Norbert. *Bracia zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach (1310-1351): studium prozopograficzne*. Wyd. 1. Kraków, 2021; KUBON, Sebastian. *Der Deutsche Orden in den sozialen Medien – Hinführung zum living article www.derdeutscheordenimnetz.de*. In *Von Hamburg nach Java: Studien zur mittelalterlichen, neuen und digitalen Geschichte. Festschrift zu Ehren von Jürgen Sarnowsky* (Nova Mediaevalia, Bd. 18). Hrsg. von Jochen BURGTORF, Christian HOFFARTH, Sebastian KUBON. Göttingen, 2020, S. 459–462; *Ecologies of Crusading, Colonization, and Religious Conversion in the Medieval Baltic* (Terra Sacra, II). Ed. by Aleksander PLUSKOWSKI. Turnhout, 2019; *The Military Orders*. Volume VII: *Piety, Pugnacity and Property*. Ed. by Nicholas MORTON. London, 2019; *Globale und regionale Aspekte in der Entwicklung des deutschen Ordens: Vorträge der Tagung der Internationalen Historischen Kommission zur Erforschung des Deutschen Ordens in Würzburg 2016* (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens, Bd. 82). Hrsg. von Udo ARNOLD. Weimar, 2019; JEZERSKI, Wojtek. *Livonian hospitality: the 'Livonian Rhymed Chronicle' and the Formation of Identities on the Thirteenth-Century Baltic Frontier*. *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 2020, Bd. 54, pp. 395–427; *The Teutonic Order in Prussia and Livonia: The Political and Ecclesiastical Structures 13th–16th c.* Ed. by Roman CZAJA, Andrzej RADZIMIŃSKI. Toruń, Köln, 2015; MILITZER, Klaus. *Die Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens*. 2. Aufl. Stuttgart, 2012; GOUGUENHEIM, Sylvain. *Les Chevaliers teutoniques*. Paris, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Collections of sources on the pagan Balt religion are: *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai* (hereafter BRMŠ). T. 1–2. Red. Norbertas VĖLIUS. Vilnius, 1996–2001 (includes extracts from all the sources); MANNHARDT, Wilhelm. *Letto-Preußische Götterlehre*. Riga, 1936 [reprinted: Hannover-Döhren, 1971]. Neglected French sources thoroughly analysed: CHOLLET, Loïc. *Les Sarrasins du Nord. Une histoire de la croisade balte par la littérature (XIII<sup>e</sup>-XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle)*. Neuchâtel, 2019.

attempts to look at the context within the chronicle, and also, it seems, certain aspects of the actual text have been overlooked. This sort of 'close reading' approach to actual words, and to what has strangely been omitted, has been applied by other scholars to this chronicle as a whole in many studies.<sup>3</sup> I hope to simply narrow that sort of focus to the passages and sentences that are often extracted and used out of context, and to present a speculative explanation for Dusburg's *Criwe* priest.

### The context of Peter von Dusburg's *Cronica Terrae Prussiae*

The main part of the *Cronica* was written in or shortly before 1326,<sup>4</sup> by which time the Teutonic Knights had conquered and were ruling Prussia (modern-day northern Poland, and part of Kaliningrad Oblast) and Livonia (modern-day Latvia, and part of Estonia). Deadly war continued with still-pagan Lithuania, whose ruler Gediminas had, just a few years previously (1322 and 1323), written letters to Pope John XXII, Franciscan and Dominican missionary friars, and German Hansa towns, seemingly promising to convert to Christianity in exchange for peace.<sup>5</sup> The Teutonic Order escaped the collapse of its justification for wars in the Baltic only because, in the end, Gediminas refused baptism, although he did obtain a truce, enforced by papal legates, and still in effect when Dusburg was writing, which roused the chronicler to a spluttering fury. To further complicate the Order's position, it was a period when military orders in general were in disrepute, exemplified at its height by the prosecution and execution of the Templars. That is the political context of Peter von Dusburg's chronicle. The Grand Master needed to prepare for the worst, by justifying

<sup>3</sup> POLLAKÓWNA, Marzena. *Kronika Piotra z Dusburga*. Warszawa, 1968; PIOTR z Dusburga. *Kronika ziemi pruskiej*. Przetłumaczył Sławomir WYSZOMIRSKI, wstępem i komentarzem historycznym opatrzył Jarosław WENTA. Toruń, 2004; PIETRO di Dusburg. *Cronaca della terra di Prussia. L'ordine teutonico dalla fondazione al 1326*. Testo latino con versione italiana a fronte, introduzione e commento a cura di Piero BUGIANI. Spoleto, 2012; TRUPINDA, Janusz. *Ideologia krucjatowa w kronice Piotra z Dusburga*. Gdansk, 1999; and many others.

<sup>4</sup> TOEPPEN, Max. *Chronicon terrae Prussiae von Peter von Dusburg*. Einleitung. In *Scriptores rerum Prusicarum. Die Geschichtsquellen der preussischen Vorzeit bis zum Ordensherrschaft*. Hrsg. von Theodor HIRSCH, Max TÖPPEN, Ernst STREHLKE (hereafter *SRP*). Bd. 1. Leipzig, 1861, S. 2. Jarosław Wenta discusses authorship of the chronicle's continuation after 1326 – WENTA, Jarosław. Wstęp. In PIOTR z Dusburga. *Kronika ziemi Pruskiej* (2004)..., s. xxvi–xxvii. For the latest editions of Dusburg, see note 11 below. All references to the chronicle in this paper are by book and section number. The passage under discussion is III (5).

<sup>5</sup> Documents: *Chartularium Lithuaniae res gestas magni ducis Gedemine illustrans. Gedimino laiškai*. Tekstus, vertimus bei komentarus parengė S. C. ROWELL. Vilnius, 2003. Less accurate but more easily obtainable is *Gedimino laiškai*. Parengė Vladimir PAŠUTA, Irina ŠTAL. Vilnius, 1966; discussion: ROWELL, S. C. *Lithuania Ascending: A Pagan Empire within East-Central Europe, 1295–1345*. Cambridge, 1994; articles by many authors: *Metraščiai ir kunigaikščių laiškai* (Senoji Lietuvos literatūra, kn. 4). Ats. red. Mikas VAICEKAUSKAS. Vilnius, 1996.

the Order's policies even if the last pagans of the Baltic area converted, or if Pope John XXII (who in any case was quite hostile to the Teutonic Order and was willing to help the Lithuanians, even before conversion, with the treaty of 1323)<sup>6</sup> gave full support to the Order's enemy, the Archbishop of Riga. Therefore, I have argued in other publications that certain parts of Dusburg's chronicle present not only religious but specifically legal arguments for the Order's Baltic wars,<sup>7</sup> to be used by the Grand Master and by the legal counsel the Order regularly engaged at the Curia.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Dusburg's chronicle contains detailed military descriptions, and even purely entertaining anecdotes, which have little to do with war;<sup>9</sup> so another aim has been to make the work readable, and perhaps even suitable for a later vernacular translation (which was in fact written 30 years later by Nicholas Jeroschin).<sup>10</sup>

102

That is the context of Dusburg's treatment of pagan Balt religious beliefs. Only in one passage does he give a detailed description: section 5, book III. While this is very familiar to specialists in Baltic history (and has been discussed for 200 years), bits and pieces of it are often discussed separately from the rest of what the chronicler wrote. Therefore, here is my fairly literal English translation and the original Latin in full, reproduced from the new edition by Jarosław Wenta.<sup>11</sup>

Peter von Dusburg, book III (5):

*Prutheni notitiam Dei non habuerunt. Et quia simplices fuerunt, ratione comprehendere eum potuerunt, [et quia literas non habuerunt], immo nec in scripturis ipsum speculari non poterant. Mirabantur ultra modum in primitivo, quod quis absenti intentionem suam potuit per literas explicare. Et quod sic Deum non cognoverunt, ideo contigit, quod errando omnem creaturam pro deo coluerunt, scilicet solem, lunam et stellas, tonitrua, volatilia, quadrupedia etiam usque ad bufonem. Habuerunt etiam lucos, campos et*

<sup>6</sup> As pointed out long ago by POLLAKÓWNA, M. Op. cit., s. 195–198.

<sup>7</sup> MAŽEIKA, Rasa. Violent Victims? Surprising Aspects of the Just War Theory in the Chronicle of Peter von Dusburg. In *The Clash of Cultures on the Medieval Baltic Frontier*. Ed. by Alan V. MURRAY. Aldershot, 2009, pp. 123–137.

<sup>8</sup> BRUNDAGE, James. The Lawyers of the Military Orders. In *The Military Orders*. Vol. I: *Fighting for the Faith and Caring for the Sick*. Ed. by Malcolm BARBER. Aldershot, 1994, p. 356.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the story of two widows contending over a handsome servant: PIOTR z Dusburga. *Kronika ziemi Pruskiej* (2004) ..., lib. III (42).

<sup>10</sup> NICOLAUS von Jeroschin. *Kronike von Pruzinlant*. In *SRP*. Bd. 1, S. 291–624. New commentary and English translation: *The Chronicle of Prussia by Nicolaus von Jeroschin: A History of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, 1190–1331* (Crusade Texts in Translation, 20). Transl. by Mary FISCHER. Farnham, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> PETRUS de Dusburgk. *Chronica Terrae Prussiae* (Monumenta Poloniae Historica, nova series, t. XIII). Wydali, wstępem i przypisami opatrzyli Jarosław WENTA, Sławomir WYSZOMIRSKI. Kraków, 2007. This edition, which is difficult to obtain, contains very important comments, but only slight changes in this passage from the older and easier to obtain PETER von Dusburg. *Chronicon terrae Prussiae*. In *SRP*. Bd. 1, S. 3–269. Other editions: PETER von Dusburg. *Chronik des Preussenlandes*. Übersetzt und erläutert von Klaus SCHOLZ, Dieter WOJTECKI. Darmstadt, 1984 (text based on Töppen), and PIETRO di Dusburg. *Cronaca della terra di Prussia...* (text based on Wenta's).

*aquas sacros, sic quod secare aut agros colere vel piscari ausi non fuerunt in eisdem. Fuit autem in medio nationis huius perversae scilicet in Nadrouia locus quidam dictus Romow trahens nomen suum a Roma, in quo habitabat quidam, dictus Criwe, quem colebant pro papa, quia, sicut dominus papa regit universalem ecclesiam fidelium, ita ad istius nutum seu mandatum non solum gentes predictae, sed et Lethowini et aliae nationes Liuoniae terrae regebantur. Tantae enim fuit auctoritatis, quod non solum ipse vel aliquis de sanguine suo, verum et nuntius cum baculo suo vel alio signo transiens terminos infidelium predictorum a regibus et nobilibus et communi populo in magna reverentia haberetur. Fovebat etiam prout in lege veteri iugem ignem.*

*Prutheni resurrectionem carnis credebant, non tamen, ut debebant. Credebant enim, si nobilis vel ignobilis, dives vel pauper, potens vel impotens esset in hac vita, ita post resurrectionem in vita futura. Unde contingebat quod cum nobilibus mortuis arma, equi, servi, ancillae, vestes, canes venatici, aves rapaces et alia quae spectant ad militiam urerentur Cum ignobilibus comburebatur id, quod ad officium suum spectabat. Credebant, quod res exustae cum eis resurgerent, et servirent sicut prius. Circa ipsos mortuos talis fuit illusio diaboli, quod cum parentes defuncti ad dictum Criwe venirent, querentes, utrum tali die vel nocte vidisset aliquem domum suam transire, ille Criwe et dispositionem mortui in vestibus, armis, equis et familia sine hesitatione aliqua ostendebat, et ad majorem certitudinem ait, quod in superliminari domus suae talem fixuram cum lancea vel instrumento alio dereliquit. Post victoriam diis suis victimam obtulerunt et omnium eorum que ratione victoriae consecuti erant, tertiam partem dicto Criwe praesentaverunt, qui combussit talia. Nunc autem Lethowini et alii illarum partium infideles dictam victimam in aliquo loco sacro secundum eorum ritum comburrunt, sed antequam equi comburerentur, cursu fatigantur in tantum, quod vix possunt stare supra pedes suos. Prutheni raro aliquid factum notabile inchoabant, nisi prius missa sorte secundum ritum ipsorum a diis suis, utrum bene vel male debeat eis succedere sciscitarentur.*

*Vestes superfluas aut pretiosas non curabant nec adhuc currant; sicut hodie ipsas exiit ita cras induit, non attendens, si sint transversae. Molli stratu et cibo delicato non utuntur. Pro potu habent simplicem aquam et mellicratum sive medonem, et lac equarum, quod lac quondam non biberunt, nisi prius sanctificarentur. Alium potum antiquis temporibus non noverunt. Hospitibus suis omnem humanitatem, quam possunt, ostendunt, nec sunt in domo sua esculenta vel potulenta, que non communicent eis illa vice. Non videtur ipsis, quod hospites bene procuraverint, si non usque ad ebrietatem sumpserunt potum suum. Habent in consuetudine, quod in potationibus suis ad aequales et immoderatos haustus se obligant, unde contingit, quod singuli domestici hospiti suo certam mensuram potus offerunt sub his pactis, quod, postquam ipsi ebiberint, et ipse hospes tantundem evacuet ebibendo, et talis oblatio potus totiens reiteratur, quousque hospes cum domesticis, uxor cum marito, filius cum filia omnes inebriantur. Secundam antiquam consuetudinem hoc habent Prutheni adhuc in usu quod uxores suas emunt pro certa pecuniae summa. Unde vir servat uxorem sicut ancillam nec cum eo comedit in mensa et singulis diebus domesticorum et hospitem lavat pedes. Nullus inter eos permittitur mendicare, libere vagatur egenus inter eos de domo ad domum, et sine verecundia comedit quando placet. Si homicidium committitur inter eos nulla potest compositio intervenire, nisi prius ille homicida vel propinquus eius ab occisi parentibus occidatur.*

*Quando ex inopinato rerum eventu aliquam immoderatam incurrerunt turbationem, se ipsos occidere consueverunt.*

*Distinctionem dierum non habuerunt aut discretionem. Unde contingit, quando inter se vel ipsi cum alienis aliquod placitum vel parlamentum volunt servare, datur certus numerus dierum, quo facto quilibet eorum prima die facit unum signum in aliquo ligno vel nodum in corrigia aut zona. Secundo die addit iterum secundum signum et sic de singulis, quousque perveniat ad illum diem, quo tractatus huiusmodi est habendus. Aliqui omni de balneis utebantur ob reverentiam deorum suorum, aliqui balnea penitus detestabantur. Mulieres et viri solebant nere, aliqui linea, aliqui lanea, prout credebant diis suis complacere. Aliqui equos nigros, quidam albos vel alterius coloris propter deos suos non audebant aliquo modo equitare.*

The Prussians did not have knowledge of God. Because they were simple people, they were unable to comprehend Him through reason, and because they were unlettered, they were unable to perceive Him even in the Scriptures (they marvelled very much that anyone, being absent, could explain his wishes through writing). Because they thus did not know God, therefore it followed that in error they worshipped all creatures in place of God, namely the sun, moon and stars, thunder, lightning, four-footed beasts, even toads. For they had sacred groves, fields and waters, so that none dared to cut or cultivate or fish in them.

There was moreover in the midst of this perverse nation, that is in Nadrowia, a place called *Romow*, taking its name from Rome, in which there lived a certain person called *Criwe*, whom they revered for a pope, because just as the Lord Pope reigns over the universal Church of the faithful, just so at his [Criwe's] order or mandate not only the aforesaid [Prussian] peoples but also the Lithuanians and all the nations of Livonia were ruled. Such was his authority, that not only he himself or any of his relatives, but even his envoy with his staff or other sign, when travelling to the full extent of the aforesaid pagan (lands) were held in great honour by kings and nobles and the common people. He even tended a perpetual flame, just as in the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup>

The Prussians believed in the resurrection of the body, not, however, as they ought. For they believed that if one was noble or commoner, rich or poor, powerful or powerless in this life, thus [it would be] after resurrection in the future life. Whence it followed that with the noble dead would be burnt arms, horses, slaves and slave girls, garments, hunting dogs, falcons and other things which pertain to warriors. With commoners they cremated that which pertained to their station in life. They believed that the things burned with them would rise with them and would serve them as before. About the dead themselves such was the illusion sent by the Devil that when the parents of the dead came to the said Criwe, asking if on such and such a day or night he had seen anyone passing their home, Criwe without any hesitation would describe the deceased's clothing, weapons, horses and servants, and for greater credibility say that [the deceased] had left his mark made with a lance or some other instrument over the door of the house.

After a victory they offer a victim to their gods and of all those things which are a result of victory they present a third to the said Criwe, who burned such things. Even

<sup>12</sup> For example, Leviticus 6:13. My thanks to S. C. Rowell for telling me long ago that the 'old law' means Old Testament, not 'ancient times', as this phrase is sometimes translated.

now, the Lithuanians and other infidels of those parts burn the said victim in some sacred place according to their rite, but before they burn a horse, they tire it out by running so that it can scarce stand on its feet. Prussians rarely began any important task unless first by casting sticks according to their rite inquiry has been made from their gods whether it ought to succeed for them badly or well.

They [the Prussians] did not and still do not care for superfluous and rich clothing. What they take off today, they put on in the morning, not noticing if it is inside-out.<sup>13</sup> They do not use soft beds or delicate foods. For drink they have ordinary water or mead and mare's milk,<sup>14</sup> which milk they do not drink unless they are first blessed. Other drinks in former times they did not know. They extend all the generosity that they can to guests, nor is there food or drink in their house which they do not share with one another. It does not seem to them that guests will have been well supplied if they have not drunk to the point of inebriation. They have the custom, that in their drinking bouts they pledge themselves to equal and immoderate draughts, whence it follows, that each of the hosts offers to his guest a certain measure of drink with the pact, that after he has drunk, the guest will drink up the same amount, and such offerings of drink are repeated until guests and hosts, wife and husband, son and daughter, all are drunk.

According to their ancient custom the Prussians still have this usage, that they buy their wives for a certain sum of money.<sup>15</sup> Whence a man keeps his wife as a servant, nor does she eat at table with him and on particular days washes the feet of the hosts and guests.<sup>16</sup> No one among them is permitted to beg; the poor freely wander among them from house to house, and without shame eat when they want. If a murder is committed among them, no reconciliation can intervene, unless first that murderer

<sup>13</sup> Could this be about sheepskin or fur garments, which might be worn with fleece next to the body and a rough skin on the outside?

<sup>14</sup> Mare's milk can be fermented into *kumis* (*ääryg*), an alcoholic drink. In the ninth century, the tale of the traveller Wulfstan, which is generally supposed to refer to Balt tribes, says that they drank mare's milk, text in: Wulfstans Reisebericht. In *SRP*. Bd. 1, S. 733, and *BRMS*, t. 1, p. 166–167; also Adam of Bremen, in his *Gesta Hamburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (see liber 4, cap. 18), excerpt in *Aus niederdeutschen Chroniken*. In *SRP*. Bd. 1, S. 239, and *BRMS*, t. 1, p. 190. Cf. ROMANIUK, Karolina; MAJSZYK-ŚWIĄTEK, Marta; KRYSZAK, Katarzyna, et al. Alternative Use of Mare Milk. *Folia Pomeranae Universitatis Technologiae Stetinensis*, 2019, No. 348(49)1, pp. 121–130.

<sup>15</sup> This may well be a custom of dower, a male version of a dowry gift in many societies. However, Wilhelm Gaerte believed this means literal purchase. – GAERTE, Wilhelm. Die Frau bei den Altpreußen vor 700 Jahren. *Altpreußen: Vierteljahrschrift für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*, 1937, Jhg. 2, Hf. 2, S. 89. He cites the *Tresslerbuch* for a later example of the Teutonic Order buying a wife for a Prussian, but without a reference, and I cannot find this entry in the *Tresslerbuch*. He also over-credulously uses a standard list of pagan vices in a letter of Pope Honorius III (*Preußisches Urkundenbuch. Politische Abteilung*. Bd. I: *Die Bildung des Ordensstaates*, 1. Hälfte. Hrsg. von Rudolf PHILIPPI. Königsberg, 1882 [hereafter *PUB*], S. 20), as well as some travellers' tales from other countries to imagine 'gastliche Prostitution' among the Prussians: GAERTE, Wilhelm. Die gastliche Prostitution bei den alten Preußen. *Prussia. Zeitschrift für Heimatkunde und Heimatschutz*, 1926/27, Bd. 27, S. 252–255.

<sup>16</sup> The foot washing, since it was done on particular days, may be a religious rite. Romas Batūra has the interesting thought that in this passage Peter von Dusburg may have confused wives and servants up if his source was a Prussian, as *moteris* (woman) was a synonym for 'wife' in Lithuanian sources and up to modern times: PETRAS Dusburgietis. *Prūsijos žemės kronika*. Parengė, įvadą ir paaiškinimus parašė, žemėlapį sudarė Romas BATŪRA. Vilnius, 1985, p. 362. Of course, this is still true in German. I might add that in my Lithuanian immigrant community in the 20th century, Lithuanian wives always served everyone at table before (if ever) they sat down!

or his relative is killed by the relatives of the murdered person. When great troubles occur from unexpected events, they are accustomed to kill themselves.

They [the Prussians] cannot distinguish or differentiate days. Whence it happens, when among themselves or with foreigners they want to meet for a treaty or *parlamentum*, they are given a certain number of days. This done, any one of them on the first day makes a mark in some stick or a knot in a belt or string. On the second day he adds a second sign and thus each time until he comes to that day when the meeting is to be held. Some have baths every day in honour of their gods, while others greatly detest baths. Women and men are accustomed to spin, some linen and others wool, as they believe is pleasing to their gods. On account of their gods, some do not dare to ride black horses, others white or other coloured horses.

(Translated by Rasa Mažeika)

### Close reading of the text

As happens with many chronicle sources, and even more in the sources-starved field of Baltic history, historians have argued for a century over how much of this passage is fiction and how much is at least some adumbration of reality. Obvious, but often not sufficiently stressed, is that here Dusburg is writing about a specific area, Prussia, a conquered land in his day, and about a long-past time, when the Teutonic Order first came to Prussia. Note that the past tense is consistently used for the description of Prussian religion (*'simplices fuerunt', 'habuerunt lucos', 'fuit ... Criwe', 'credebant'*, etc), except in the sentence about human sacrifice, which may be influenced by the sentence immediately following 'even now the Lithuanians burn the victim', surely meant to contrast the present with the past. Then the description of Prussian social customs is in the present, the switch to Dusburg's own time stressed in the remark about marriage dower, *'habent Prutheni adhuc in usu'*, i.e. the Prussians still do this. Notably, the past tense is used for the lack of West European drinks 'in former times' (presumably beer had made an appearance with the German settlers in Dusburg's day), and for the tendency towards suicide, which would be much more suppressed than other customs in Christian Prussia. Of course, we do not have Dusburg's original manuscript, and a later copyist could have mistaken abbreviations of tense endings, but it is notable that Nicholas Jeroschin, translating this chronicle into German 30 years later, has some of that alteration of tenses, but by his time putting the lack of strong drink or the lack of a calendar in the past, which does imply that there was some deliberation about differentiating past customs from ones contemporary with the author.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Dusburg's choice of tenses reflects a switch from

<sup>17</sup> NICOLAUS von Jeroschin. *Kronike von Pruzinlant...*, lines 4015–4040, 4159–4218.



relating a story heard about the mythical past to telling what he is told or has seen in his own time.<sup>18</sup>

The sentences about *Criwe* and *Romowe* are still often interpreted and presented to the general public as a literal description of the Baltic pagan religion,<sup>19</sup> but this may be wishful thinking, because there are so few detailed written sources, and the high priest of an eternal flame has such lovely classical resonances. Others have long been sceptical,<sup>20</sup> most influentially S.C. Rowell, who argued in his early work that *Criwe* was invented by the chronicler to shame his fellow Teutonic Knights by the example of these noble ascetic pagans who eschew the luxuries *Dusburg* condemned in his fellow monks and who obey a Pope as the Order's monks should.<sup>21</sup> But how can false beliefs and even human sacrifice be an example? Especially because the section about spurning luxuries follows right after the description of human sacrifice to the dead and just before descriptions of extreme drunkenness. Presumably not what *Dusburg* wanted his fellow monks to do...

Another group of scholars interpret this passage as portraying the Prussians as avatars of evil, with beliefs that are a negative image of Christianity, and *Criwe* as an anti-pope,<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On the use of time concepts in past and modern ethnographies to create 'othering', see FABIAN, Jonathan. *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York, 2014, pp. 23–24.

<sup>19</sup> To cite only the more recent, PETRAS *Dusburgietis. Prūsijos žemės kronika...*, p. 359–360; LIBENSTEIN, Alexander. Peter of Dusburg's Report on the Nadruvian Priest *Kriwe*. In *Tales, Myths and Legends of Ancient Prussia*. Ed. by Paweł KAWIŃSKI, Seweryn SZCZEPAŃSKI. Olsztyn, 2015, p. 58; SZCZEPAŃSKI, Seweryn. Traktat dzierzgoński (1249 r.) a elementy religijności Prusów. *Tabularium Historiae*, 2017, t. 2, s. 91; BALSYS, Rimantas. Ilikrikščioniškoji lietuvių ir prūsų religija: vertybinis matmuo. In *Vakarykščio pasaulio atgarsiai*. Sud. Margarita MATULYTĖ, Romualdas JUZEFOVIČIUS, Rimantas BALSYS. Vilnius, 2018, p. 12–25; VAITKEVIČIUS, Vyktintas. *Alkai. Baltų šventviečių studija*. Vilnius, 2003, p. 201; VAITKEVIČIUS, Vyktintas. Prussian *Romuva Decoded*. *Cosmos*, 2003, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 93–127; SIKORSKI, Dariusz Adam. *Instytucje władzy u Prusów w Średniowieczu (na tle struktury społecznej i terytorialnej)*. Olsztyn, 2010. Cf. BERTULEIT, Hans [BERTULAITIS, Jonas]. Das Religionswesen der alten Preußen mit litauisch-lettischen Parallelen. *Sitzungsberichte der Altertumsgesellschaft Prussia*, 1924, Hf. 25, S. 9–113 (mostly depending on the later Simon Grunau).

<sup>20</sup> *Mythologiae Lituanae Monumenta = Źródła do mytologii litewskiej*. Część II: *Wiek XIV i XV*. Zebrał, ocenił i objaśnił Anton MIERZYŃSKI. Warszawa, 1896, s. 23–24; KOSMAN, Marcell. *Litwa pierwotna: mity, legendy, fakty*. Warszawa, 1989, s. 101–102; BAUER, Helmut. *Peter von Dusburg und die Geschichtsschreibung des Deutschen Ordens im 14. Jahrhundert in Preußen* (Historische Studien, Bd. 272). Berlin, 1935 (reprint: Vaduz, 1965), S. 66; PLUSKOWSKI, Aleksander. *The Archaeology of the Prussian Crusade. Holy War and Colonisation*. London, 2012, p. 68. ŠČAVINSKAS, Marius. Ankstyvieji socialiniai, politiniai, kultūriniai ir mentaliniai visuomenės pokyčiai Baltijos regiono rytinėje pakrantėje. In *Vertybių transformacijos: Baltijos regiono rytinė pakrantė XIII–XVIII amžiais*. Sud. S. C. ROWELL. Klaipėda, 2015, p. 43–46.

<sup>21</sup> ROWELL, S. C. Op. cit., pp. 126–127.

<sup>22</sup> FEISTNER, Edith. Vom Kampf gegen das 'Andere': Pruzzen, Litauer und Mongolen in lateinischen und deutschen Texten des Mittelalters. *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 2003, Bd. 132, Hf. 2, S. 281–294; NEECKE, Michael. *Literarische Strategien narrativer Identitätsbildung. Eine Untersuchung der frühen Chroniken des Deutschen Ordens*. Frankfurt am Main, 2008; MATUZOVA, Vera. Mental Frontiers: Prussians as Seen by Peter von Dusburg. In *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150–1500*. Ed. by Alan V. MURRAY. Aldershot, 2001, pp. 255–258. It is interesting that Helmut Bauer wrote that enemies of the Order are tools of the Devil for *Dusburg* (BAUER, H. Op. cit., S. 50), but one of the three examples he cites deals with Christian crusaders fighting each other (III, 71), and the other two are apostatising Semians and Prussians (III 110 and 189). It seems the Devil uses only Christians as his tools!

or perhaps a 'simile' to show how organised and so threatening the pagans are.<sup>23</sup> Yet if the purpose is to emphasise the devil worship of the pagans, why not concentrate more on human sacrifice (which in Dusburg's time the Lithuanians were still sometimes applying to captured Teutonic Knights)? Why is there no mention in this passage of idols, the epitome of paganism, and quite possibly really existing in Prussia, such as the 'idol *Curche*', which appears in a peace treaty of 1249?<sup>24</sup> Moreover, any theory of a wholly negative narrative about Prussian pagans is belied by the sentences on shunning fine garments and delicate foods which echo almost exactly Peter von Dusburg's words of praise in his chronicle for the more ascetic monks of his own order.<sup>25</sup> It is too much of a logical stretch to argue, as some have done,<sup>26</sup> that the rejection of fine garments is somehow an evil quality for Dusburg, because some Teutonic Knights were adopting more luxurious possessions. The rejection of material luxury and wealth was a feature of the reforms of Grand Master Werner von Orseln, to whom Dusburg was presenting this chronicle.<sup>27</sup> And why record Prussian charity to the poor, surely a virtue mandated by the Statutes of the Teutonic Order?<sup>28</sup> Dusburg's description of the religion and the good and bad customs of the Prussians in section III (5) must be read as a whole, its component parts cannot be separated from their context.

Christian rhetoric about worshipping creatures rather than the Creator is very old; as Piero Bugiani points out, it echoes St Paul [Rom. I 23] and St Augustine.<sup>29</sup> However, as is seldom remarked, Dusburg substitutes the worship of toads for the worship of serpents mentioned by St Paul, possibly to increase ridicule and disgust, or to link with witchcraft practices, an indication that he does not simply repeat Biblical passages.<sup>30</sup> There is also a Biblical echo in the 'perpetual flame' (not mentioned in other sources), as

<sup>23</sup> BOJTÁR, Endre. *Foreword to the Past. A Cultural History of the Baltic People*. Budapest, 1999, p. 320.

<sup>24</sup> Treaty of Christburg between Prus and the Teutonic Order: *PUB*, Nr. 218.

<sup>25</sup> PETER von Dusburg. *Chronicon terrae Prussiae...*, lib. II (10) and lib. III (30), about the hunger and hardships suffered by the founders of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, lib. III (131) about the self-mortification of Herman de Lichtenburg.

<sup>26</sup> FEISTNER, E. *Op. cit.*, S. 284–285; MATUZOVA, V. *Op. cit.*, pp. 255–258. Feistner and Matuzova even see the rejection of rich garments or help for beggars, which are also standard tropes of monastic virtue, as somehow wrong. This seems an extreme case of fitting all the aspects of a source into a preconceived mould of 'othering'.

<sup>27</sup> Decrees by Werner von Orseln: *Die Statuten des Deutschen Ordens nach den ältesten Handschriften*. Hrsg. von Max PERLBACH. Halle, 1890, S. 147; ARNOLD, Udo. *Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens: 1190–1994* (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens, Bd. 40). Marburg, 1998, S. 62, 64; MILITZER, K. *Op. cit.*, S. 100–101. Cf. POLLAKÓWNA, M. *Op. cit.*, s. 196.

<sup>28</sup> *Die Statuten des Deutschen Ordens...*, S. 42 (Regel 14 *De elemosina danda*), pointed out by Piero Bugiani in PIETRO di Dusburg. *Cronaca della terra di Prussia...*, p. 93, note 372.

<sup>29</sup> BUGIANI, Piero. Sul prussiano *Criwe* e la sua preistoria. *Res Balticae*, 2013, Nr. 12, p. 25–37, here p. 29; cf. Innocent IV in 1244, as pointed out by KALA, Tina. Incorporation of the Northern Baltic Lands into the Western Christian World. In *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier...*, pp. 3–10, here p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> The toad as a symbol of evil: ROBBINS, Mary E. The Truculent Toad in the Middle Ages. In *Animals in the Middle Ages*. Ed. by Nona C. FLORES. London, New York, 2016, pp. 26–47. For the frequency of toads as symbols of the Devil, see graphs in SALISBURY, Joyce E. *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*. New York, 1994, pp. 134–135.

in Leviticus 6:13 about sacrifices offered by sons of Aaron. It is true enough, as Marius Ščavinskas and Michael Brauer have argued, that this chronicle, like other Medieval sources, is informed and coloured by Classical and Christian rhetorical models (*interpretatio romana* and *interpretatio Christiana*).<sup>31</sup> But if we read Dusburg's description of Prussian customs as a whole, neither model completely fits. The supposed pope has much to do with funeral ceremonies, the Christian virtues are balanced by unclassical human sacrifice and bride price, and the passage ends with satirical descriptions of drunken wagers that fit neither model. What they do fit, I would argue, is Dusburg's general presentation of the Prussian pagans before the coming of the Teutonic Order as 'simplices' (see below), not wholly evil, but rather ignorant, and thus misled, with 'no knowledge of God', still waiting for salvation, like the Jews of the Hebrew Bible.

### A suggestion for the origin of the tale of *Criwe*

The main historiographical debate has been on the probably unsolvable question of how much Dusburg's description conforms with the actual practices and customs of the Prussians. Most researchers agree that there is other evidence for the Balt pagans having *Romowe*, or variants, as a place name,<sup>32</sup> for pagan sanctuaries,<sup>33</sup> sacred

<sup>31</sup> ŠČAVINSKAS, Marius. Apie prūsų genčių ikirikščionišką visuomenę [review article]. In *Krikščioniškosios tradicijos raiška viduramžių-naujųjų laikų kasdienybės kultūroje: europietiški ir lietuviški puslapiai* (Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis, t. 27). Sud. Vacys VAIVADA. Klaipėda, 2013, p. 200–202, and ŠČAVINSKAS, Marius. *Kristus prieš Belialą*. T. 1: *Lietuvių anapusinio pasaulio vaizdinių christianizacija Viduramžiais*. Klaipėda, 2021, p. 25–28; BRAUER, Michael. *Die Entdeckung des „Heidentums“ in Preußen. Die Prusen in den Reformdiskursen des Spätmittelalters und der Reformation* (Europa im Mittelalter, Bd. 17). Berlin, 2011, S. 200–206.

<sup>32</sup> Dusburg later in his chronicle mentions a place called *Romene* in the Lithuania of his day (III 259); Hermann de Wartberge has *Romagyn* in Lithuania – Hermanni de Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae. In *SRP*. Bd. 2. Leipzig, 1863, S. 92; cf. location suggested on map by MUGURĒVIČS, Ēvalds. Hermanni de Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae über Litauen im Zusammenhang mit den Daten der Archäologie. *Archaeologia Lituana*, 2006, Vol. 7, p. 245; Die Chronik Wigands von Marburg. In *SRP*. Bd. 2, S. 560, 584, 591, 611, 633. Cf. MIERZYŃSKI, Anton. *Romowe: rozprawa archeologiczna*. Poznań, 1900, s. 17; BŪGA, Kazimieras. *Rinkiniai raštai*. T. 1. Vilnius, 1958, p. 168. Rolandas Kregždys gives the fullest discussion of linguists' arguments about the origin of the word *Romow*, KREGŽDYS, Rolandas. Pr. 'Romow': tekstologinė, etimologinė, mitologinė analizė. In *Baltų onomastikos tyrimai*. T. 2. Sud. Grasilda BLAŽIENĖ, Alma RAGAUSKAITĖ. Vilnius, 2011, p. 162–180, 159–161. He also has the more tenuous theory that *Romowe* was a city because the 'stat' *Romowe* in Dusburg's contemporary translator Jeroschin means Stadt or town (KREGŽDYS, Rolandas. Pr. *Romow* pagal Petro Dusburgiečio 'Prūsijos žemės kroniką' ir kitos istorinės interpretacijos iki mūsų laikų (toponimo etimologinė analizė, lokalizacija). In *Tai, kas išlieka* (Senovės baltų kultūra, t. 8). Sud. Elvyra USAČIOVAITĖ, Vilnius, 2009, p. 120–184). It is true that Jeroschin mentions 'stat' Jerusalem, obviously a city, and the Jeroschin expert Mary Fischer does translate *stat* as 'city' for this passage (FISCHER, M. Op. cit., p. 70), but Meyer's glossary for Liv RhChron equates 'stat' to *Stätte*, or 'place'. A. Senn in his vocab has 'place or city'. In any case, any translator seeing Dusburg's comparison of *Romowe* to Rome, the city of cities, might automatically use the term for city. Dusburg does not, and there is no reason to assume Jeroschin had more information.

<sup>33</sup> Die Chronik Wigands von Marburg. In *SRP*. Bd. 2, S. 624: Lithuanians take refuge in '*edes sacras*' (*aedes*, temple or sanctuary). Cf. VAITKEVIČIUS, Vyktintas. Ancient Sacred Places in Lithuania: Crossroads of Geography, Archaeology and Folklore. *Archaeologia Baltica*, 2011, Vol. 15, pp. 45–55.

woods or waters,<sup>34</sup> cremation with goods and animals,<sup>35</sup> human sacrifice,<sup>36</sup> and even possibly pagan priests, at least in a later period.<sup>37</sup> The sticking point has been *Criwe*, a word which has caused much argument among linguists. Some derive it from *kri-vulė*, a crooked staff used to summon assemblies, and thus associated with the staff or *baculus* mentioned by Dusburg.<sup>38</sup> More recently, it has been argued that *Criwe* is from the Polonism *kreivas* or crooked, possibly relating to a sinister aspect of a pagan priest.<sup>39</sup> However, even if the name mentioned by Dusburg makes linguistic sense, perhaps indicating that his source was a Prussian interlocutor, that certainly does not prove the actual existence of a high priest by that name. Critics have rightly derided the possibility that there was an overarching ruler in the Baltic region,<sup>40</sup> since *Criwe* is *not* mentioned elsewhere and he is not in a treaty between the Teutonic Order and the Prussians in 1249.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Sacred waters: SZCZEPANIK, Paweł; WADYL, Sławomir. A Comparative Analysis of Early Medieval North-West Slavonic and West Baltic Sacred Landscapes. An Introduction to the Problems. *Networks and Neighbours*, 2014, Vol. 2.1, pp. 1–19. Sacred woods mentioned already in the 13th century by Thomas of Cantimpré (Thomas Cantimpratensis): *Thomæ Cantipratensis Bonum universale de apibus*. Ed. Georges COLVENEER. Duacum, 1627, lib. 2, cap. 57, p. 548. Cremation in chronicles (*Descriptiones Terrarum*, Oliver of Paderborn, Henry of Livonia, Dusburg, etc) and documents (papal, Danish) summarised in TAMM, Marek. A New World into Old Words: The Eastern Baltic Region and the Cultural Geography of Medieval Europe. In *The Clash of Cultures...*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>35</sup> SHIROUKHOV, Roman. Prussian Graves in the Sambian Peninsula, with Imports, Weapons and Horse Harnesses, from the Tenth to the 13th Century: The Question of the Warrior Elite. *Archeologia Baltica*, 2012, Vol. 18, pp. 224–255; WYCZÓŁKOWSKI, Mariusz; MAKOWIECKI, Daniel. Horse Sacrifices in Prussia in the Early Middle Age Period. Ritual Area Poganowo Site IV, Olsztyn Province. *Archaeologia Baltica*, 2009, Vol. 11, pp. 295–304. Latest: SHIROUKHOV, Roman; SKVORTSOV, Konstantin; IBSEN, Timo. The Early Medieval Graves of Groß Ottenhagen (Berezovka). On the Way from Sambia to the Middle Reaches of the Niemen. *Archaeologia Baltica*, 2021, Vol. 28, pp. 150–174. On evidence of the continuation of pagan funeral rites, citing Michael Junge, the 15th-century Bishop of Samland: RADZIMIŃSKI, Andrzej. Uwagi na temat pogaństwa Prusów w późniejszym średniowieczu. In *Memoria viva. Studia historyczne poświęcone pamięci Izabeli Skierskiej*. Red. Grażyna RUTKOWSKA, Antoni GAŚIOROWSKI. Warszawa, 2015, s. 372.

<sup>36</sup> Die Chronik Wigands von Marburg. In *SRP*. Bd. 2, S. 549, 583, 596, 620; Hermann von Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae. In *SRP*. Bd. 2, S. 85. Cf. PETER von Dusburg. Chronicon terrae Prussiae..., lib. III (86); CHOLLET, Loïc. Le Cheval et la mort. Rites funéraires, éthique chevaleresque et représentation de l'altérité culturelle lors de la Croisade Balte. *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae*, 2020, Vol. 25, p. 193–219.

<sup>37</sup> Die Chronik Wigands von Marburg. In *SRP*. Bd. 2, S. 542, mentions the capture of a '*sanctum virum*' in 1364 in Lithuania. Cf. BERESNEVIČIUS, Gintaras. *Lietuvių religija ir mitologija*. Vilnius, 2008, p. 34–37. Wilhelm Mannhardt accepts the possibility of a sacred place called *Romowe* and of a priest who served there, although he rejects the idea of the priest's central authority (MANNHARDT, W. Op. cit., S. 91–92).

<sup>38</sup> MAŽIULIS, Vytautas. *Prūsų kalbos etimologijos žodynas*. T. 2. Vilnius, 1996, p. 283; cf. WADYL, Sławomir. The sacred sphere of Prussian life in the early Middle Ages. In *Sacred Space in the State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia*. Vol. 2. Ed. by Jarosław WENTA, Magdalena KOPCZYŃSKA. Toruń, 2013, s. 50, and many older scholars: summary in ZAROFF, Roman. Some aspects of pre-Christian Baltic religion. In *New Researches on the Religion and Mythology of the Pagan Slavs*. Ed. by Patrice LAJOYE. Lisieux, 2019, pp. 183–219. On later evidence re the use of the *krivulė*, see SZCZEPANIK, Seweryn. *Eikim kruwom! Czyli „chodźmy na zebranie!”*. Uwagi o kolekcji kriwul ze zbiorów etnograficznych *Altertumsgesellschaft Insterburg* i trwałości staropruskiej tradycji. *Pruthenia: pismo poświęcone Prusom i ludom bałtyjskim*, 2013, t. 8, s. 184–190.

<sup>39</sup> KREGŽDYS, Rolandas. Charakterystyka słownika polonizmów w języku litewskim. *LingVaria*, 2012, Nr. 2, s. 138–139; KAWIŃSKI, Paweł. *Sacrum w wyobrażeniach pogańskich Prusów. Próba interpretacji na pograniczu historii i etnologii religii*. Olsztyn, 2018, s. 161.

<sup>40</sup> See note 19 above.

<sup>41</sup> *PUB*, Nr. 218.

## A possible explanation for 'pope' *Criwe*

My guess is that Peter von Dusburg is repeating a story or legend told by Prussians about a powerful priest in the past, referred to as '*paps*', which is the Old Prussian for 'priest'.<sup>42</sup> Dusburg was an educated cleric who liked to offer intellectual explanations (hence the use of the rather pompous formal logic phrase *ideo contingit*), and link what he saw in Prussia to his known models, i.e. the Bible, but also sometimes classical references.<sup>43</sup> Hence *Romowe* must take its name from Rome, and *paps* must equal the Christian *papa*. Note that the chronicle does *not* say that *Criwe* was a pope, only that he was respected as a pope (*colebant pro papa*) because of his wide influence.

## Dusburg III (5) as an argument against rival missionaries

111

I would suggest that the key for the image of the Prussians presented in this passage by Peter von Dusburg is the word *simplices*, with its stress on the ignorance and simplicity of the Prussians: 'Because they were simple folk, they could not comprehend Him [i.e. God] through reason' and could not even read and thus be instructed by Scriptures. This amounts to an excuse through ignorance for the Prussians *until* they attacked Christians.<sup>44</sup> Arguments that the Prussians are presented here as wholly evil or mirror opposites of Christianity<sup>45</sup> are belied by the virtuous Prussian qualities in the same passage. Nor can these human-sacrificing pagans possibly be presented as good models for Christians. Dusburg's emphasis is on the Prussians' ignorance, which gives them some of the virtues of noble savages, but basically leaves them unable to act sensibly or in a 'civilised' manner. Hence the story about telling days by making knots,<sup>46</sup> obviously meant to show that the Prussians were innumerate as well as illiterate, but which may

<sup>42</sup> MAŽIULIS, V. *Prūsų kalbos etimologijos žodynas...*, t. 3. Vilnius, 1996, p. 223; NESSELMANN, Georg. *Thesaurus linguae Prussicae: der preussische Vocabellvorrath*. Berlin, 1873, S. 119; VATER, Johann Severin. *Die Sprache der alten Preussen*. Braunschweig, 1821 [reprinted Wiesbaden, 1966], S. 130.

<sup>43</sup> Klaus Scholz and Dieter Wojtecki (PETER von Dusburg. *Chronik des Preussenlandes...*, S. 92, 57) point out echoes of Horace (PETER von Dusburg. *Chronicon terrae Prussiae...*, lib. II, 10) and Ovid (PETER von Dusburg. *Chronicon terrae Prussiae...*, lib. II, 2). Dusburg mentions Ulysses and Hector, though possibly from a *florilegium* rather than any knowledge of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* (lib. III, 36).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. proceedings of conference organised at Cambridge in 1998: MAŽEIKA, Rasa. Granting Power to Enemy Gods in the Chronicles of the Baltic Crusades. In *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*. Ed. by David ABULAFIA, Nora BEREND. Aldershot, 2002 [reprinted: Abingdon, Oxon, 2016], pp. 153–171, here p. 158; KWIATKOWSKI, Stefan. *Zakon niemiecki w Prusach a umysłowość średniowieczna: scholastyczne rozumienie prawa natury a etyczna I religijna świadomość Kryżaków do około 1420 roku*. Wyd. 2. Szczecin, 2005, s. 97–98, writing about the influence of philosophical ideas in the 14th century; GOUGUENHEIM, S. *Les derniers païens...*, p. 64–65.

<sup>45</sup> See footnote 25.

<sup>46</sup> Bugiani suggests that the telling of days by knots is to show ignorance of the Church calendar (PIETRO di Dusburg. *Cronaca della terra di Prussia...*, p. 94), but the passage is about counting the days left until meetings, so this seems a tenuous explanation.

be a true detail about a complicated system of communication which Dusburg did not understand but could be similar to South American *kipu* (*quipu*).<sup>47</sup> Hence also the anecdotes which immediately precede and follow the section we are discussing (Bk. III, 5). Book III (4) tells a story about a Galindian Prussian 'prophetess' who, at the instigation of local women, persuades their men to foolishly go into battle unarmed, when they are all killed by Christians and the women initiators are enslaved. Section III (6) is another anecdote: Theodoric, Vogt of Sambia for the Teutonic Order,<sup>48</sup> decides to cure a Prussian of a superstitious fear of white horses, which seems justified because the horses are strangled by the Devil. Somewhat incredibly, Theodoric keeps buying horses until the Devil gives up. In both stories, pagan beliefs are overcome not by theology or preaching but by Germanic practical action. Even more telling are anecdotes elsewhere in the chronicle about a Prussian killing himself with a crossbow through ignorance,<sup>49</sup> or a Prussian spy who saw Teutonic Order monks eating cabbage and so thought they could survive sieges by eating grass.<sup>50</sup> Clearly, these are meant to be amusing. The Prussians, a *former* enemy when Dusburg was writing, were once dangerous (there are certainly stories of atrocities by them in the chronicle),<sup>51</sup> but in Dusburg's time remain foolish and even laughable, unlike the *continuing* enemy, the Lithuanians, who are presented as still dangerous and devious, their former ruler Vytenis a blasphemer mocking God (III 310), and their current ruler, when Dusburg was writing, is the snake (*aspis surda*) and deceiver (*seductor*) Gediminas.<sup>52</sup>

There may indeed be an 'ethnographic turn' to Dusburg's stories about the Prussians, anecdotes to make the chronicle more interesting.<sup>53</sup> Obviously, as Janusz Trupinda

<sup>47</sup> The Incas and in modern times Andean cultures had systems of knots on strings which gave quantitative info about far-flung provinces, and even stories or poems: PANDE, Neeraj Anant. Numeral systems of great ancient human civilizations. *Journal of Science and Arts*, 2010, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 209; ASCHER, Marcia. The Logical-Numerical System of Inca Quipus. *Annals of the History of Computing*, 1983, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 268–278.

<sup>48</sup> Bugiani identifies him as Theodoric de Liedelau, citing Voigt and Wolpert (PIETRO di Dusburg. *Cronaca della terra di Prussia...*, p. 95).

<sup>49</sup> PETER von Dusburg. *Chronicon terrae Prussiae...*, lib. III (105) '... *quidam frater ... coactus fuit relinquere balistam tensam, et effugiens vix evasit. Quem ballistam quidam Sambita tollens suspendit ad collum suum. Alii circumstantes ammirati fuerunt ultra modum, quid esset, quia prius talia non viderunt ... tandem quidam per depressionem resoluta clave, corda baliste collum eius praescidit, ita quod post tempus modicum exiraret. De quo facto Prutheni balistas valde de cetero timuerunt.*'

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, lib. III (70): 'Sambite ... *curiosius exquirentes fratrum condicionem et statum ... miserunt unum de senioribus suis versus Balmg ... reversus ad Sambitas ait: scitote, quod fratres sunt homines sicut et nos ... in armis, cibus et aliis satis conveniunt nobiscum, sed in hoc differunt a nobis ... Ipsi singulis noctibus surgunt de stratu suo, et conveniunt in oratorio, et in die pluries, et exhibent reverenciam deo suo, quod nos non facimus. Unde in bello nos sine hesitatione aliqua superabunt. Et quia iste vidit fratres comedentes caules, quibus Prutheni non utebantur, credit, esse germina, unde addidit: et ipsi etiam comedunt gramina, sicut equus et mulus; quis posset talibus resistere, qui in solitudine sine labore inveniunt cibum suum?*'

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, lib. III (40) about the killing of a pregnant woman.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, lib. III (357) and III (358).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. RUBIÉS, Joan-Pau. The Emergence of a Naturalistic and Ethnographic Paradigm in Late Medieval Writing. In *Medieval Ethnographies. European Perceptions of the World Beyond*. Ed. by Joan-Pau RUBIÉS,

and many other scholars have elucidated, Dusburg has a political agenda which focuses on praising the Teutonic Order as a bulwark against wicked infidels, using the rhetoric of holy war to justify the Order at a time when the military-monastic orders were under attack.<sup>54</sup> However, I believe there is another theme. As is noted above, Dusburg is writing only two years after the Teutonic Knights almost lost the reason for their existence, as the Lithuanian ruler Gediminas flirted with the acceptance of baptism through letters written by Franciscans and Dominicans working at his court and addressed to the Pope (John XXII), who favoured the Teutonic Order's enemy, the Archbishop of Riga, himself a Franciscan.<sup>55</sup> The Order and its monopoly on bringing Christianity to the Baltic were under attack.

So the Teutonic Knights, when Dusburg was writing, must fend off rival peaceful missionary orders by emphasising the simple-minded and primitive quality of the, by then, conquered Prussians, to show they needed not only baptism but also 'civilising' and governing.<sup>56</sup> This is more than a *Kulturtrager* argument. Ancient Prussian culture is not presented as wholly evil or wholly other, since it has priests, asceticism, charity towards the poor and obedience of authority, like the Teutonic Knights. However, the chronicler's implication is that Franciscans bringing baptism will not be enough. German government and organisation are needed to educate and rule the Prussians, and free them from pagan priests who deceive them; that, for me, is Dusburg's practical message. No missionaries from other orders are wanted.

## Conclusions

On closer examination, I believe that Peter von Dusburg was not inventing, but rather filtering stories that he heard from dependable and undependable witnesses. The careful alternation of past and present tenses shows, I believe, that the chronicler is differentiating stories he has heard about the past from Prussian customs he or his Order's officials saw in his own day. In the story of the priest Criwe, Dusburg, who often includes amusing anecdotes to enliven his text, and/or to make a political

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London, 2016, pp. 35–40 on Medieval authors (Marco Polo, Rubruck, Mandeville) who combined a Christian outlook with detailed ethnographic description.

<sup>54</sup> TRUPINDA, J. Op. cit., especially s. 100–105 and 157; cf. SARNOWSKY, J. Op. cit., s. 86–87; GOUGUENHEIM, S. *Les Chevaliers...*, p. 403, 406–407.

<sup>55</sup> S. C. Rowell in: MAŽEIKA, R. J.; ROWELL, S. C. *Zelatores maximi: Pope John XXII, Archbishop Frederick of Riga and the Baltic Mission 1305–1340. Archivum Historiae Pontificiae*, 1993, Vol. 31, pp. 45–68.

<sup>56</sup> In fact, the Teutonic Order did not govern just by its own resources, but often used local Prussian elites: SIMSONS, Raitis. *The Inclusion of Indigenous Western Baltic People in the Teutonic Order's Prussian and Curonian Land Administration in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. In Legacies of the Crusades: Proceedings of the Ninth Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East, Odense, 27 June – 1 July 2016. Vol. 1. Ed. by Torben Kjersgaard NIELSEN, Kurt Villads JENSEN. Turnhout, 2021, pp. 261–284.*

point, is probably repeating a legend he heard about a time long past, possibly told by a native convert using the Prussian word *paps* for priest. Of course, such stories mix mythical and realistic elements, and we have no way of distinguishing these, although the name *Romowe*, sacred places, and grave goods cremated with the dead are confirmed by other sources. Dusburg then indulges in typical Medieval etymologising, so *Romowe* becomes Rome, and *paps* becomes *papa* (in a similar process, in other chronicles, the Baltic Sea becomes associated with the Virgin Mary, through the false etymology *Maria/mare*).

The chronicler goes on to give details of Old Prussian social customs of his own time (c. 1326), switching to the present tense to indicate that these are still extant. This passage is clearly not an invented morality tale, although a Medieval cleric's text will inevitably not avoid moralising, since the portrayal of the Baltic Prussians includes vices, such as drunkenness, as well as virtues. Thus, I would argue that the Prussians portrayed in this chronicle are neither examples for Teutonic monks nor wholly evil 'other'. The chronicler does not take opportunities to multiply atrocity aspects of the pagan religions (for example human sacrifice), and he noticeably includes some laudable customs of the Prussians, who in his day were already the Teutonic Order's subjects, but he has a more hostile attitude towards its contemporary Lithuanian enemies.

The Prussians, for Dusburg, have exotic, and in some cases amusing, customs, arising from their ignorance and simplicity. His description must be viewed in the light of the events of 1323–1325, a year before the chronicle was completed, when the Lithuanian ruler Gediminas secured truces with the help of Franciscans actually working at his court. For me, Dusburg's words seem to be carefully chosen, to reflect not only his general purpose of glorifying and justifying the Teutonic Order's wars with the heathen, but also the specific aim to discourage attempts to supplant the Teutonic Knights with more peaceful missionaries, because the Prussians are so laughably simple and primitive that they need government as well as Christianisation. There is no need to dismiss everything he tells us about the Prussians of his own time, but it is also too hopeful to believe all the details of the *Criwe* legend, which the chronicle clearly indicates is about the ancient past. This approach may perhaps not help reconstruct the actual pagan religion, but at least it may combat both over-scepticism and over-credulity about this source, and Medieval sources in general.

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## MORALIZAVIMAS AR ŽINIŲ PERDAVIMAS? GRĮŽTANT PRIE PETRO DUSBURGIEČIO PASAKOJIMO APIE PAGONIŲ PRŪSŲ RELIGIJĄ

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Santrauka

Analizuojant pagonių prūsų religijos ir papročių aprašymą Vokiečių ordino kunigo ir kronikininko Petro Dusburgiečio veikalo „Prūsijos žemės kronika“ (lot. *Cronica terre Prussie*) trečiosios knygos penktajame skyriuje (III, 5), pristatomame straipsnyje nėra siekiama atkurti tikrųjų senovės baltų religijos apeigų ir tikėjimų, kurie dėl šaltinių fragmentiškumo galimai lieka neaiškūs ir iki galo neišnagrinėtini. Pateikus visą penktojo skyriaus lotynišką tekstą (pagal naujausią (2007 m.) lenkų mokslininko Jarosława Wentos leidimą) ir jo vertimą į anglų kalbą, straipsnyje analizuojama ištraukos kalba ir kontekstas, kuriame minimas žynys *Criwe* ir šventovė, vadinama *Romowe*.

Straipsnyje atkreipiamas dėmesys, kad istoriografijoje iki šiol nepakankamai akcentuota, jog Petras Dusburgietis, viena vertus, rašė apie konkrečią vietovę – Prūsiją, t. y. jo laikais užkariautą žemę, kita vertus, rašė apie seniai praėjusius laikus, kai į Prūsiją pirmą kartą atėjo Vokiečių ordinas. Teksto analizė rodo, kad kronikininkas aprašė *Criwe* ir *Romowe* istoriją vartodamas būtąjį laiką. Tačiau savo laikų prūsų papročiams apibūdinti Petras Dusburgietis pereina prie esamojo laiko. Nors originalus lotyniškas kronikos rankraštis nėra išlikęs, po 30 metų atliktame Mikalojaus Jeroschino vertime į vokiečių kalbą vartojami tie patys būtasis ir esamasis laikai, pasakojant apie *Criwe* ir prūsų papročius. Kitaip tariant, Petro Dusburgiečio ir Mikalojaus Jeroschino pasakojimas apie žynį *Criwe* ir šventovę *Romowe* pristatomas kaip istorija ir / ar legenda, o prūsų papročių aprašymas pateikiamas kaip reportažas apie dabartinę Petro Dusburgiečio gyvenamąją aplinką.

Straipsnyje aptarti duomenys rodo, kad istorija apie *Criwe* ir *Romowe* negalėjo būti sugalvota kaip moralizuojantis pavyzdys Vokiečių ordino nariams, nes pateiktoje istorijoje ir tame pačiame skyriuje (III, 5) esama aspektų, kurie sukeltų siaubą ir pajuoką krikščionims – rašoma apie žmonių aukas, tikėjimą sukčiaujančiu pagonių kunigu ir kt. Aptariame prūsų pagonių papročių aprašyme Petras Dusburgietis, gyvenęs XIV a. pirmojoje pusėje, pasakoja apie pagonių prūsų dorybes (labdarą, prabangos stoką), kurias lydi ydos (girtuokliavimas, nuotakos pirkimas), todėl dalis ištraukos taip pat neteikiama pavyzdžiu Vokiečių ordino broliams. Straipsnio autorės manymu, labiau tikėtina, kad Petras Dusburgietis, dažnai į savo kroniką įterpdamas linksmy anekdotų ir nutikimų, trečiosios knygos penktajame skyriuje (III, 5) kartojo išgirstą legendą (kiek joje istorinės tikrovės,

nejmanoma nuspręsti) apie kadaise gyvenusį galingą pagonių dvasininką. Straipsnyje keliama versija, kad istoriją apie *Crive* kronikininkui galėjo papasakoti vietinis prūsas, galimai vartojęs senųjų prūsų žodį *paps* „kunigas“, tuo paskatindamas Petrą Dusburgietį pateikti tipišką Viduramžiams, bet klaidingą etimologiją, pagal kurią *Romowe* = Roma ir *paps* = popiežius.

Taip pat daugiau dėmesio nusipelno aptariamos kronikos ištraukos (III, 5) kontekstas ir 1326 m. situacijos (taikos su Lietuvos didžiuoju kunigaikščiu Gediminu) aprašymas, baigiantis kroniką ir išryškinantis kronikininko skirtingą požiūrį į prūsus ir lietuvius. Atsižvelgdamas į taiką, kurią Lietuvos valdovas Gediminas, susirašinėdamas su Apaštalu Sostu, padedant pranciškonams ir dominikonams, gavo 1323 m., kronikininkas su pykčiu ir panieka aprašo įsivyravusią ramybę tarp kariaujančių šalių, akcentuodamas prūsų naivumą ir primityvų mąstymą, priešpriešinamą lietuvių sukybei. Tai rodo ne tik Petro Dusburgiečio gerai žinomą siekį pateisinti Vokiečių ordino užkariavimą Prūsijoje, bet gal ir norą parodyti, kad Ordino konkurentų, Gedimino talkininkų pranciškonų bei dominikonų, taikių misijų Baltijos jūros rytinėje pakrantėje nepakaks. Petro Dusburgiečio manymu, primityviems prūsams ir apsuksiams (sukčiaujantiems) lietuviams reikėjo tvirto valdymo ir civilizacijos, t. y. Vokiečių ordino, galinčio visa tai suteikti. Tad pasakojimai apie senovėje apsuksaus kunigo viešpatavimą Prūsijoje ar apie keistus prūsų tų laikų papročius yra dalis Petro Dusburgiečio pasakojimo apie neraštingus ir paprastai mąstančius žmones, kuriuos nuo jų pačių išgelbėjo Vokiečių ordinas.