

THE MYTHOLOGICAL MOON HORSE AS REFLECTED IN BALTIC ARCHAEOLOGY, FOLKLORE AND LINGUISTICS

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Abstract

In this article we discuss the phenomenon of crescent-shaped pendants dating back to the Late Roman Iron Age and Early Migration Period (3rd – 6th centuries AD). Placed on horse's foreheads, these crescent-shaped pendants evidently embodied a mythological link between the moon and the horse. The same link is clearly reflected in linguistic data and folklore right up until the 20th century.

We draw special attention to a horse with a white mark on its forehead called *laukas* (adj.), *laukis* (noun) in Lithuanian, which derives from the I-E root **louk-* 'shining, bright', as also does the Latin *luna* (< **louksnā*). Considering the data as a whole, we propose an unexpected link between the Baltic and Roman traditions.

Keywords: the Moon, horse, crescent-shaped pendants, Roman Iron Age.

The moon has been a prolific symbol around the Baltic since prehistoric times. Crescent-shaped Neolithic amber figurines, bronze pendants dating to the Roman Iron Age, and silver jewelry with impressed ornamentation represent some of the wide variety of visual symbols of the moon found in prehistoric times. Christian iconography in a rich variety of forms (drawings, frescos, figurines, etc.) certainly follows the same tradition. In the late 19th and 20th centuries the moon symbol was still popular in decorations on various handmade objects in everyday use – especially in the countryside.

The role of the moon and its relation to the sun in Baltic mythology and religion has been discussed by several authors (cf. Tsivian 1988; Greimas 1990, pp. 171ff; Vaiškūnas 1992; Klimka 1999; Vaitkevičienė 2001, pp. 130ff; Vaiškūnas 2006). The great importance of the moon in the past as well as in modern culture is also indicated by the large number of prayers to the New Moon recorded during the 20th century (see Balys 1951, pp. 17ff).

This article presents some detailed and complex evidence relating to the mythological Moon Horse among the Balts. Some archaeological, folkloric and linguistic data are selected and discussed.

Crescent-shaped pendants and other horse harness fittings

Well known in Baltic prehistory, symbols of the moon became especially abundant in the Roman Iron Age (1st to 4th centuries AD). During this period, cres-

cent-shaped pendants of different forms and patterns of manufacture were often attached to fibulas, neck-rings, pins, headbands, temple ornaments, and horse harnesses. Necklaces consisting of sets of crescent-shaped pendants as well as spirals, glass, and metal beads, were also prevalent.

It was only recently that a number of crescent-shaped pendants with small knobs were examined (Simniškytė 2002). Over 400 pendants of this type were recorded in 70 find spots covering an area from the lower Nemunas in the south to the southwestern coasts of Finland in the north. In the late 2nd century, crescent-shaped pendants with knobs spread into the Curonian Spit. In the 3rd and 4th centuries, communities living further to the east and north took over their manufacture. Such pendants were widely used as ornaments by women but rarely by children or men (according to the data obtained from burials).

On this occasion we will focus mainly on crescent-shaped pendants (originally *lunulae*) that were attached to horse harnesses. This custom was prevalent among Roman cavalrymen as well as in *Barbaricum* in north and north-east Europe. However, the use of crescent-shaped pendants as harness pendants might have been restricted in the cavalry, used perhaps as a kind of *dona militaria* or award for courage. Roman crescent-shaped pendants of different sizes (usually from 2 to 8 cm in width) were attached to different places on the harness. In this way pendants were used to decorate different parts of the horse's body, such as its head (smaller items) or sides (larger ones). From the late 2nd century onwards, particular harness plates

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Fig. 1. Base of the column of Antoninus Pius set up in commemoration of the emperor (died in 161 AD) (Vatican Museums). Scene depicting ritual cavalry parade which encircled the pyre three times in the course of the funeral. Crescent-shaped pendants and pendants of other forms are attached to horse harness (Claridge 1998, p.193). Photograph by V. Vaitkevičius.

mainly replaced harness pendants, although *lunulae* were still in use (Lawson 1982, p. 151ff; cf. Szirmai 1994) (Fig. 1).

Crescent-shaped harness pendants were also prevalent among Baltic tribes. It is very likely that their manufacture and use as harness pendants were influenced by examples of Roman origin (cf. Nowakowski 1998, p. 82; Simniškytė 2002, p. 114). However, it is important to note that harness sets (with or without crescent-shaped pendants) dating from the Late Roman Iron Age (ca. 250–350 AD) to the Early Migration Period (ca. 450–550 AD) were found in elite graves without horses. A magnificent harness set was found in an inhumation grave in Szwajcaria barrow 2 (the so-called “chieftain grave”) (Suwałki district, Poland – Antoniewicz *et al.* 1958, p.23 ff). In inhumation grave 2 in Żywa Woda barrow 14 (a “warrior’s grave”) a horse harness was found that had been placed directly on the body of the deceased (Suwałki district, Poland – Ziemlińska-Odojowa 1961, p. 196 ff). In richly furnished cremation grave 79 in Netta (a collective family grave) an unburned harness was found among other grave goods (Augustów district, Poland – Bitner-Wróblewska 2007, pp. 220ff). Some horse harness fittings, including a crescent-shaped pendant and dozens of bronze

rivets, were collected in inhumation grave Mo a barrow 1 (another “warrior’s grave”) (Trakai district, Lithuania – Abaravičius 1996). Magnificent harness fittings (openwork pendants and strap dividers) were found in Maudžiorai (Kelmė district, Lithuania; inhumation grave 1; partly destroyed warrior’s grave – Valatka 1984, p. 12ff) and in Althof-Insterburg (Cherniakhovsk, Kaliningrad region) in grave 135 (Nowakowski 1998, Plate 104; excavations took place before the World War II and are not sufficiently documented). A harness set (or perhaps two of them) was found

in inhumation grave 47 in Žviliai (Šilalė district, Lithuania) (an impressive funerary deposit in warrior’s grave – Vaitkunsienė 1999, pp. 187ff) (Fig. 2).

Finally we must mention a harness set of special interest for the present purpose. It was found in horse grave 6/1992 in the Lazdininkai cemetery (Kretinga district, Lithuania) and includes a crescent-shaped pendant, strap dividers, and some other fittings (Bliujienė and Butkus 2007, Fig. 8:2).

In this way elaborate harness sets in each of above mentioned grave-good assemblages represent prestigious items and should be regarded as reflecting the high social status of the deceased. The exact position of the crescent-shaped pendants in harness sets found in burials – whether inhumations and cremations – tends to be unclear because the leather straps are not usually preserved (or at best only partly preserved thanks to bronze rivets). Nevertheless, we do know that crescent-shaped pendants were particular fittings of the harnesses.

The form of harness strap dividers also deserves consideration. The most prevalent one was cruciform. Four bronze, silver-plated or tin dividers were

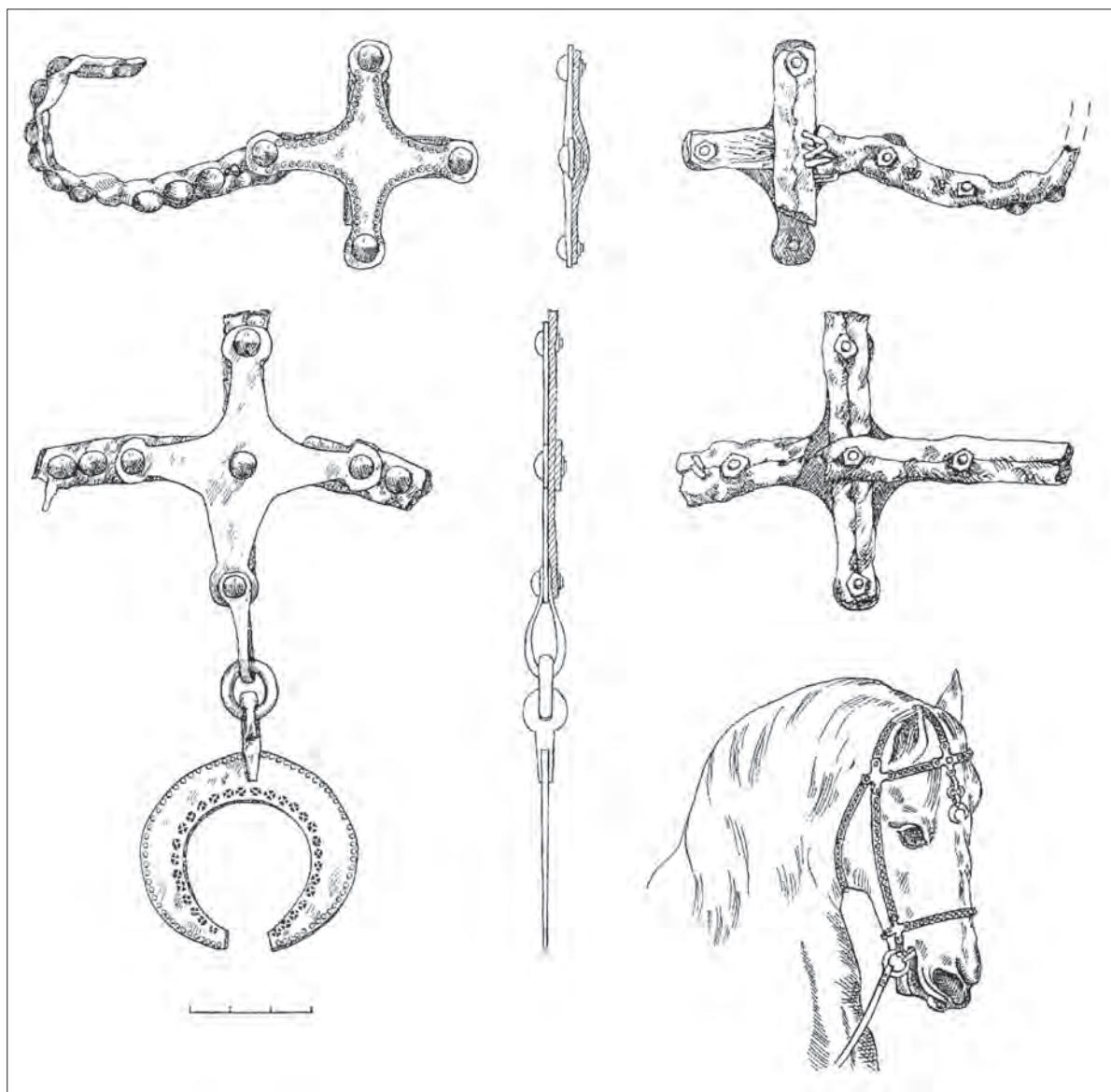


Fig. 2. A crescent-shaped pendant and four cruciform dividers found in the Žviliai cemetery. Reconstruction of the horse harness used by riders from Žviliai in ca. 450–550 AD (according to Vaitkunskienė 1999, p.188 (Fig. 214)).

usually found in harness sets, suggesting that the moon was actually accompanied by stars. The next form of strap dividers, which is of particular interest, is circular. Two pairs of openwork circular dividers have been found so far, in Maudžiorai (Kelmė district, Lithuania). As an additional decoration for the harness, dozens of bronze rivets with semi-spherical heads were used for studding the leather straps.

Summarizing the archaeological evidence, we should stress that the Roman custom of decorating a horse's harness with crescent-shaped pendants was also prevalent among Baltic tribes. The Baltic evidence (perhaps imitations of Roman items of the same kind) is dated to the Late Roman Iron Age – Early Migration Period (3rd to 6th centuries). These show a great variety of form and pattern of manufacture but share one thing in common – the elite of that time used to decorate their horses with an elaborate and impressive harness. Up

until then, horses' heads had been decorated with symbols of the moon (crescent-shaped pendants) primarily, though probably also with symbols of other heavenly bodies (in the form of cruciform and circular strap dividers as well as ranges of bronze rivets). This fact certainly allows us to turn to Baltic folklore and linguistic data in order to explore this further.

The Mythological Moon Horse according to Folklore

The personified Moon in Lithuanian folklore overtly takes the form of a horse. For example, the hero of a Lithuanian fairy tale recorded in 1887 is looking for a girl who must be somewhere “over the river of milk, over the wood of honey”. He asks the Moon, whom he has incidentally met with, the way to her. The Moon, as it were, agrees to show the way, gives our hero a

bridle and says: “Go behind my hut and tinkle the bridle, and when my horse arrives, follow him”. After a while it transpires that the Moon’s horse is the Moon himself turned into a horse (*tas mėnuo, į arkli paverstas*) (Davainis-Silvestraitis 1973, pp. 52ff).

In another Lithuanian fairy tale recorded in 1920 the hero-fool, while watching over the oat crop for the third night, beholds “the little horse coming, bright as the moon, and proceeding to eat the oats”; afterwards he “mounts the moon-horse (*mėnesio arkliuką*) and rides away” (TŽ, 1923, pp. 124ff).

At least one type of Lithuanian riddle also deserves serious consideration, an example being: *Pėnyčiom, subatom gimė kumeliukas aukso patkavom* “On the Friday, on the Saturday the foal was born wearing golden horseshoes”. This is the moon (LT, 1968, p. 455, No 5420). Another version is: *Seredoj, subatoj gimė Dievo kumeliukas auksinėm kamanom, sidabrinėm padkavom* “On the Wednesday, on the Saturday God’s foal was born with a golden bridle and silver horseshoes”. Again, this is the moon (LKŽ, 1962, p. 870).

Some scholars, such as Algirdas Julius Greimas and Pranė Dundulienė, have already studied Lithuanian fairy tales and riddles such as these and connected them with a winter festival known as *Kumeliuko krikštynos* (“The Christening of the foal”), celebrated at the first New Moon after the New Year. It was the new crescent moon, they maintain, that was regarded as the “foal” of this festival (Greimas 1990, pp. 320ff; Dundulienė 1988, p. 28; 1990, p. 49). Consequently, the moon was commonly identified with a horse in Lithuanian folklore, and this association was confirmed ritually.

In some Latvian folk songs “God’s horse” or “God’s foal” (*Dieva kumeliņš*) makes an appearance, sometimes covered with a “starry saddlecloth” or “saddlecloth made of stars” (*zvaigžņu deķis*). This “God’s foal” is also identified with the Moon (Kursīte 1996, pp. 14ff; Šmits 1926, p. 15). Compare the following Latvian riddle: *No jūriņas izpeldēja divi sirmi kumeliņi: vienam bija zvaigžņu sega, otram zelta iemauktiņi* “Two grey horses (foals) have swum out of the sea: one with a starry saddlecloth, the other with the golden bridle (halter)”. These are the moon and the sun (LTM, 1954, p. 241, No 2712).

Other particularly interesting riddles concerning the moon exist in several versions in both Baltic and Slavic folklore. The Lithuanian variants include *Laukas arklys pro (per) vartus žiūri* “The horse with a white forehead is looking through the gate” (LT, 1968, p. 454, No 5418; on the popularity of this riddle in Lithuania see Kensminienė 2001, p. 194, No 89) and *Laukas kumelis per vartus daboja* “The stallion with a white

forehead is watching through the gate”. Both refer to the moon (TŽ, 1928, p. 585, No 136).

These have an exact Belarussian equivalent: *Lysy kon’ tseraz varoty gliadzić* “The horse with a white forehead is looking through the gate” – This, again, is the moon (Zagadki, 2004, p. 25, No 53). Compare also the Russian equivalents: *Sivyi zherebets pod vorotnei uviaz* “The grey stallion hangs up under the gates” and *Lysyi zherebets s belymi glazami, kruglyi, kak venec, svoimi ochami na vse on gliadit* “The stallion with a white forehead, round as a wreath, is watching everything with his white eyes” (Zagadki, 1968, p. 20, Nos 82 and 86). Then again, a description of a miraculous horse in a Russian fairy-tale indicates the moon on its forehead: *...po bokam chasty zvezdy, vo lbu iasnyi mesiats* “the frequent stars on the sides, the bright moon on the forehead” (Propp 1998, p. 266). Here it is essential to recognise that in Russian words having the same root as that used in this epithet for the moon-horse *lysyi* denote the appropriate parts of the horse harness, for instance: *lysina* “the white mark on the forehead (of an animal)” and also “the bright forehead-flap” and *lyska* “the middle girdle of harness on the horse’s forehead” (Dal’ 1981, pp. 276, 277).

The Mythological Moon Horse according to Linguistics

The description of the horse with a white forehead (with a white mark or even a blaze on the forehead) (Fig. 3) as *laukas* in Lithuanian and **lysъ(jb)* in Slavic deserves special attention. These adjectives derive from the Indo-European root **leuk(’)- / *louk(’)-* ‘shining, bright’ from which – to be precise, from the I.-E. noun **louksnā* ‘luminary’ – also derive the Slavic **luna*, Middle Irish *luan*, *lōn*, and the Latin *lūna* ‘the moon’, as is well known (for further comments see: Fraenkel 1962, pp. 344ff; Smoczyński 2007, p. 339; ESSIA 1990, pp. 45ff; Walde, Hofmann 1938, pp. 833ff; Pokorny 1959, pp. 687ff; Klein 2003, p. 433; Smoczyński 2007, p. 339)¹.

It should be mentioned here that the Old Prussian word **lauksnā* (pl. *lauxnos*), also deriving from the I.-E. **louksnā* ‘luminary’, does not mean ‘the moon’ but the ‘star’ (Toporov 1990, pp. 179ff; Mažiulis 1996, pp. 53ff). Likewise, a white mark on the forehead of an animal, especially a horse, which in Lithuanian is called *laukas*, can also be called a “star”: examples include

¹ We thank Stanisław Iwaniszewski for pointing out, when this paper was presented in Klaipėda in July 2007, that the Polish *lysy* ‘with the white forehead’ (or ‘bald’ when referring to a man) could be applied directly to the moon. In other words, the moon itself in Polish acquires the appellation *lysy*.



Fig. 3. *Laukas* – a horse with the white forehead. Photograph by V. Vaitkevičius.

Arkliukas su žvaigžde kaktoj “A horse with a star on its forehead”; *Mūs arklys su balta žvaigžde kakton* “Our horse has a white star on its forehead”; and *Par tą arklių žvaigždukė kaktoj buvo* “That horse had a little star on its forehead”. The adjective *žvaigždėtas* ‘starry’ also has the meaning ‘with the white mark on its forehead’; compare *žvaigždėtas arklys* “The horse with the white spot on its forehead” (namely “The starry horse”) and *žvaigždgalvis*, meaning the same thing (namely “starry-head”) (LKŽ, 2002, pp. 1022ff).

As V. Toporov has pointed out, West Baltic (> Slavic) together with Italic speakers in the late 1st millennium BC actually occupied a relatively compact territory which was also connected to the area where people spoke Celtic and Illyrian. Consequently the fact that here and only here the I.-E. **louk-snā* has been applied to nocturnal luminaries “terminologically” could not have occurred by chance (Toporov 1990, p. 183). In other I.-E. languages where it has survived it usually means light and brightness in general, as in Avestic *raoxšnā*, etc.

As we have shown, significant evidence exists that the mythological moon-horse survives in contemporary traditions, both Baltic and Slavic. The results of the present examination permit us to establish an unexpected link between the Baltic (and perhaps the Balto-Slavic?) and Roman traditions. Moreover, a careful consideration of the Baltic materials may help us offer a satisfactory explanation of the Roman evidence.

Conclusions

In terms of mythology, the horse (and especially the one with a white forehead called *laukas*) represents the moon. The adjectives *laukas* in Lithuanian and **lysъ(jb)* in Slavic are cognate with the Slavic **luna* and the Latin *lūna* ‘the moon’ (< I.-E. **louk-snā*), and the words of the same root in Russian denote the appropriate parts of the harness. The white mark on the forehead of the horse can also be described as “star”, and the Old Prussian word for the stars *lauxnos* (sg. **lauksnā*) derives from the same I.-E. noun.

The placing of crescent-shaped and star-shaped glittering pendants on a horse’s forehead, which is clear from the Baltic and Roman archaeological evidence, fits clearly into the mythological and linguistic context that we have presented.

Abbreviations

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MITINIS MĖNUO-ŽIRGAS BALTŲ ARCHEOLOGIJOS, FOLKLORO IR KALBOS DUOMENIMIS

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Santrauka

Mėnulis baltų priešistorėje – svarbus ir populiarus simbolis. Didelį susidomėjimą kelia dailūs pusbėnulio (= jauno mėnulio) formos kabučiai, datuojami vėlyvuoju romėniškuoju – ankstyvuoju migracijų laikotarpiu (III–VI a.). Plačiai paplitę pusbėnulio formos kabučiai tuo metu puošė moterų krūtinę ir kaklą, taip pat buvo žirgų kamanų elementas. Pastarieji ir yra šio straipsnio dėmesio centre.

Panašiai kaip Romos imperijos kavalėrija ir kai kurių kitų „barbarų“ kraštų raitėliai, žirgų kamanas baltai mėgo puošti pusbėnulio formos kabučiais. Iki šiol jų rasta aukščiausiam (kartu kariniam) to meto visuomenės sluoksniui atstovaujančių asmenų kapuose Lietuvoje, Lenkijoje, Kaliningrado srities teritorijoje (Lazdininkai, Maudžiorai, Moša, Neta, Šveicarija, Žviliai ir kiti laidojimo paminklai). Tiksliai kabučių padėtį kamanose dažnai sunku nustatyti dėl prastos pastarųjų būklės, tačiau pagal išlikusius pavyzdžius matyti, jog kabučiai puošė žirgo kaktą. Kryžiaus ir apskritimo for-

mos kamanų dirželių skirstikliai bei dirželius puošusios spurgelių formos kniedės minėtame jauno mėnulio kontekste gali būti siejami su kitais dangaus kūnais – saule ir žvaigždėmis.

Duomenys rodo, jog baltų naudotų pusmėnulio formos kabučių (žmonių ir žirgų papuošalų) prototipai veikiausiai buvo pavyzdžiai iš Romos imperijos ir kitų „barbarų“ kraštų. Taip pat neatmestina, jog kai kurie baltų kraštuose archeologų rasti kabučiai yra tiesiog importuoti. Tačiau didelis kabučių populiarumas Rytų Pabaltijyje (vien moterų papuošalų – per 400 radinių) ir savita idėjos raiška (elitas puošia savo žirgų kaktas) verčia manyti, jog tradicija atitiko baltų mitologijos vaizdinius (glaudus mėnulio-žirgo ryšys) ir taip papildomai realizavo būdingą jauno mėnulio simboliką.

Būdinga, jog baltų ir slavų tautosakoje mėnulis priyginamas arkliui ir kartais tiesiog pasirodo arklio pavidalu. Nagrinėjamai temai ypač svarbus mėnulio-arklio epitetas lie. laukas, la. lauks „su balta kakta“ ir jų slaviškasis atitikmuo **lʸsʲ(jb)* ta pačia reikšme, nes jie yra giminiški slavų bei lotynų mėnulio pavadinimams, atitinkamai **luna* ir *lūna* (< ide. **louk-snā*). Tas pats žodis prūsų kalboje **lauk-snā* reiškia žvaigždę, o lietuviai bei latviai savo ruožtu žvaigžde vadina baltą dėmę gyvūno kaktoje. Be to, rusų pasakose stebuklingas žirgas kartais vaizduojamas su mėnesiu kaktoje ir žvaigždėmis iš šonų, o tos pačios, kaip minėtieji, šaknies žodžiai *лысуна* ir *лыска* žymi atitinkamas žirgo kamanų dalis – žvilgantį kabutį, skirstiklį arba plokštelę ant kaktos bei vidurinę per kaktą einantį kamanų dirželį.

Visa tai liudija iki šiol baltų ir slavų tradicijose gyvą kalbinį-mitinį kontekstą, kuris galbūt davė pagrindą mėnulį bei žvaigždes simbolizuojantiems žirgo kamanų elementams atsirasti, ypač kai pusmėnulį vaizduojantis kabutis puošė žirgo kaktą. Savo ruožtu šis baltų ir slavų kalbinis-mitinis kontekstas kartu su jau minėtu lotyniškuoju mėnulio pavadinimu *lūna* suteikia daugiau duomenų apie atitinkamą romėnų raitelių tradiciją.

III

III. ASTRO-
NOMICAL AND
ETHNOCOSMO-
LOGICAL
INTERPRETA-
TION OF AR-
CHAEOLOGICAL
AND ETHNO-
LOGICAL
ARTEFACTS