

Slovanské Pohanství ve středověkých latinských pramenech, vybral, přeložil, úvodem a poznámkami opatřil Jiří Dynda, Praha: Scriptorium, 2017, 365 p. ISBN 978-80-88013-52-5

Ever since the institutionalisation of history as a discipline, pre-Christian European culture, the Christianisation process, and the transformation in the value systems it provoked in society, have fascinated researchers of Medieval culture. There is no doubt that issues of the relationship between paganism and Christianity, and paganism as an object of religious and mythological research, depend on the sources to hand, and on the existing historiographical material. As a result, paying attention to primary sources is a determining factor when constructing an image of paganism in historiography and in society. In the 18th and 19th centuries, for various reasons, the approach towards paganism depended more on the idea of how sources should be read, rather than their straightforward reading.

This approach was due to the *a priori* belief that Medieval sources which described paganism, the Christianisation process, and the transformation of the value system in society, were not 'lying' *per se*, since the authors of these sources presented the known information 'correctly'. There is another side to this approach: European salon culture looked on paganism first of all as an ancient religion, presenting it as a part of Greek-Roman literature. Sixteenth to 18th-century 'closet' historiographers claimed that they could see paganism thriving, albeit in a different form, having been reincarnated as common piety, although in its content it was still quite close to the paganism of earlier times which flourished before the beginning of Christianisation. Nineteenth-century Romantics saw paganism as a primal religion 'unspoiled' by civilisation, which ended up being covered over by a thick layer of Christian culture. They imagined that, after brushing off the accumulated baggage, the 'primeval beauty' and the 'primeval truth' of paganism could be appreciated. This optimistic attitude towards the source determined optimistic attitudes towards paganism itself. Even though later sources that described paganism had the same critical criteria applied to them, the belief remained that these kinds of sources contained a pagan 'rationality'.

Just how this 'rationality' was perceived by various people is a separate topic. In any case, it was understood that being familiar with sources was an inseparable part of analysing paganism. In fact, modern ethnographers (at least in Lithuania), claiming to analyse the 'spiritual' layers of the nation, and therefore the pre-Christian religion as well, have

so far avoided applying critical criteria to sources of oral history, but this is a separate problem. Something else is of greater interest to us here: whether it is a Slavic or Baltic pagan religion, we come across several important issues. Apart from the ‘correct’ reading (and thus interpretation) of sources, which has been briefly mentioned, there is also the problem of analysing the concept of paganism itself, and the pagan rudiments already existing in Christian society. In order to discern these rudiments, we should turn our attention back to primary sources. So the emergence of source anthologies about paganism at the very least arouse our curiosity and are open to debate in historiography.

The source anthology presented here, *Slovanské Pohanství ve středověkých latinských pramenech* (Slavic Paganism in Medieval Latin Sources), compiled by the Czech medievalist Jiří Dynda, a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University in Prague, is no exception. The author is not new to research into Slavic paganism. His monograph about the Slavic god Svjatogor¹ came out not long ago, and he has published papers on other Slavic gods as well.² In addition, and what is of greater interest to us, this author has also analysed issues of the relationship between paganism and Christianity.³ There is no doubt that the source anthology presented here is the logical outcome of all his studies, especially since, as the author himself admits in the introduction to the book, he was the first to translate a large portion of Medieval sources about Slavic paganism from Latin into Czech. This should inspire further research into Slavic paganism, not just in the Czech Republic, but in other countries too, as the sources in the anthology are presented in the original Latin as well.

The source anthology consists of an introduction, six chapters, a bibliography and a list of abbreviations, a summary in English, and indexes of historical names, locations, ethonyms and mythologemes. In the introduction, the author briefly presents the sources themselves and their type, highlighting certain trends in their assessment, ranging from romantic to hyper-critical approaches. The latter approach eliminated the possibility of gaining something more from Medieval sources describing pagan gods, practices and rituals than the source related. According to the author, even though current researchers admit that, depending on the author of the source, a certain degree of ‘rationality’ does exist in documents,⁴ the reliability of

¹ J. Dynda, *Svjatogor. Smrt a iniciace staroruského bohatýra* (Praha, 2017).

² Idem, ‘The Three-Headed One at the Crossroad: a Comparative Study of the Slavic God Triglav, in: *Studia mythologica Slavica*, vol. XVII (2014)’, pp. 57–82.

³ Cf. idem, ‘Mezi ,pohanstvím‘ a křesťanstvím: Homiliář opatovický jako pramen pro studium archaického slovanského náboženství?’ in: *Křižovatky Slovanů*, eds. M. Giger, H. Kosáková, M. Příhoda (Červený Kostelec-Praha, 2015), pp. 185–206.

⁴ Cf. S. Rosik, *Interpretacja chrześcijańska religii pogańskich Słowian w świetle kronik niemieckich XI–XII wieku (Thietmar, Adam z Bremy, Helmold)* (Wrocław, 2000), pp. 180–188, 224–232.

a source remains the main problem. We should bear in mind that Medieval sources describing paganism applied the *interpretatio romana/christiana* models.⁵ Based on these, an image of pagans as wrong and evil was constructed, which is why it comes as no surprise that some of the sources were written specifically according to the Medieval understanding of a pagan, and the image of what hid behind this perception. For this reason, as the author states, the debate over how sources referring to paganism should be read developed into the absolute denial of information, reaching a level of trust in non-Christian information in the 19th and 20th centuries. We could go on: hyper-critics considered all information about paganism to be an outcome of the *interpretatio romana/christiana* way of thinking, and at the time non-Christian researchers referring to sources accepted basically any information as the truth. Harnessing their unbridled imaginations, these researchers claimed to see relationships between source information and other conceivable artefacts that only they could envisage, in this way presenting hypothetical guesses as evidence. Confronted by the problem of how to read sources, these researchers, as the author himself admits, made the effort of conjuring up all sorts of gods and related artefacts. It goes without saying that this kind of ‘evidence’ is void. That is why returning to primary sources is the most important task for researchers.

In the Introduction, the author also discusses principles according to which sources are compiled. The source anthology published by the German researcher Karl H. Meyer in 1931, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae*, became the basis for the compilation of sources, where besides a strong focus on pre-Christian accounts of paganism, attention was also paid to paganism during the period of Christianisation, and later on. The source base is considerably wider in the source anthology review here: not only do we find sources that did not appear in Meyer’s anthology, but also sources that retained relics of paganism thanks to common piety. And this fact expands the possibilities for cultural anthropologists, ethnologists and historians of religion to research already regressed paganism, or the rudiments of paganism that, when intertwined with common Christian piety, allowed the formation of a unique Christian culture.

In the introduction, the author speaks about the possibility of searching for a religious syncretism of paganism and Christianity in the folklore of already-Christianised societies. There is no doubt that the concept of syncretism itself is controversial; often concepts of inculturation or acculturation are used instead, which would mean the adoption of certain previously dominant cultural elements and their adaptation under new

⁵ Ibid., pp. 26–42, 226–235, 281–303.

conditions.⁶ Syncretism, of course, does not imply a henotheistic state, as it might appear at first glance, where converts initially perceived the Christian God as the ‘strongest’ among all the other gods.⁷ If such a state did exist, it could have affected the part of the society that had not yet converted, whereby pagans, and not those who had already accepted Christianity, could have viewed Christ as the ‘strongest’ deity, surpassing all the others. Sources concerning the Baltic region just happen to mention a henotheistic stance among pagans rather than Christians.⁸ In any case, the concept of syncretism suggests that Christianity adopted certain elements of the pagan religion, even though this might actually refer more to certain superstitions (*superstitio* or *ritus paganorum*), which were consciously given a pagan meaning.

In the last section (F) of the statute of the Diocese of Krakow from 1408, it is written that over Pentecost the common folk continued to sing pagan songs (*Pentecosthen fiant cantus paganici*), and this was identified as *ritu paganico*. The statute does not mention just what songs these were, but they are given a negative connotation. Was this a form of opposition to the celebration of Pentecost among the people, hidden under the guise of paganism? Or did these songs, in terms of their content, actually reflect pagan customs? Or were they songs that were simply unsuitable for celebrating Pentecost? How much syncretism can we see in this kind of prohibition, if we do not know which songs are being referred to, their content, or ultimately the context in which they were sung. So, the fact that they were sung for Pentecost does not tell us anything, unfortunately, nor where they were sung (in church, in yards, in the fields, or visiting neighbours?), nor who sung them, and how much this had in common with pagan customs.

⁶ To read about acculturation and inculturation and various aspects of them in the Middle Ages, see: W. Haubrichs, ‘Identität und Name. Akkulturationsvorgänge in Namen und die Traditions-gesellschaften des frühen Mittelalters’, in: *Die Suche nach den Ursprüngen. Von der Bedeutung des frühen Mittelalters*, ed. W. Pohl (Wien, 2004), pp. 85–105; R. MacKitterick, ‘Akkulturation and the Writing of History in the Early Middle Ages’, in: *Akkulturation. Probleme einer germanisch-romanischen Kultursynthese in Spätantike und frühem Mittelalter*, eds. D. Hägermann, W. Haubrichs, J. Jarnut, C. Gieffers (Berlin-New York, 2004), pp. 381–395.

⁷ More about henotheism: L.M. West, Towards Monotheism, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, eds. P. Athanassiadi, M. Frede (Oxford, 1999), pp. 21–40. Cf. P. Nufflen, ‘Pagan monotheism as a religious phenomenon’, in: *One God. Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, eds. S. Mitchell, P. Nufflen (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 18–33.

⁸ Cf. this sample digest: Vita Ansgarii auctore Rimberto, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptorium rerum Germanicarum*, ed. G. Waitz (Hanoverae, 1884), cap. 30. For more examples from the Germanic Christianisation of the Early Middle Ages: J. Rusell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity. A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York-Oxford, 1994), pp. 23–24.

Similarly, a decree issued in Prussia by the Teutonic Order's Bishop of Sambia Michael Junge, dated to around 1426, also banned Prussians from singing (*omnino prohibeatur ne cantaciones*),⁹ although it is not specified which songs could not be sung, nor is there any indication that they were necessarily pagan. We learn only from the context that the Bishop of Sambia believed that these songs posed a threat to the Christian faith. Compilers of anthologies of 11th-century canon law wrote about such songs and other impermissible customs,¹⁰ which shows that information of this nature must be given careful consideration.

The 1408 statute of the Diocese of Krakow is a perfect example of why we should not be talking about syncretism, but the folklorisation of certain Christian customs that might have had a primal image even in pre-Christian culture.¹¹ The material from the source anthology discussed here shows how this kind of folklorisation occurred, and its extent, and this can only be done when comparing sources with each other, and analysing the information they contain. The same can be said about the comparison of sources of Baltic mythology with Slavic pagan sources.

As has been mentioned, the anthology consists of six chapters, identified by the first letters of the alphabet, according to the example of Meyer. The first chapter (A) contains the earliest written Latin sources from the sixth to the tenth centuries, where Slavic paganism is mentioned for the first time. Incidentally, the first (A1) and the third (A3) sources in this chapter are Greek. This is the only exception the author has made: the sixth-century extract from *De bello Gothico* by Procopius of Caesarea about Slavic religion is a perfect example of how an image of Slavic paganism started being created in the times of Late Antiquity, based on the *interpretatio romana* model. This model is seen later on in tenth-century sources, such as *Res gestae Saxonicae* by Widucind of Corvey (see the extract from source B2). So, in the very earliest sources about Slavic paganism, we can spot the desire of these source authors to explain paganism according to the accepted *interpretatio romana* model. This is unsurprising, as practically the whole Medieval image of pagans and non-Christians rested on the ancient concept of paganism, entwined with the image of paganism emerging from the Holy Scriptures.¹²

⁹ *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai (BRMŠ)*, t. I, ed. N. Vėlius (Vilnius, 1996), p. 482.

¹⁰ Cf. Burchardi Wormaciensis episcopi, Libri XIX: Corector, in: *Patrologiae cursus complectus, series Latina*, vol. 140, ed. J. Migne (Paris, 1853), cap. 91–92.

¹¹ Compare the understanding of common piety in the Late Middle Ages: S. Bylina, *Religijność późnego średniowiecza. Chrześcijaństwo a kultura tradycyjna w Europie środkowo-wschodniej w XIV–XV w.* (Warszawa, 2009), pp. 91–105, 113–126.

¹² H. Goetz, *Die Wahrnehmung anderer Religionen und christlich-abendländisches Selbstverständnis im frühen und hohen Mittelalter (5.– 12. Jahrhundert)* (Berlin, 2013), pp. 144–187.

The second chapter (B) reveals the paganism of the Polabian Slavs in tenth to 12th-century sources. Most of the chapter is devoted to the chronicle of Tietmar of Merseburg, *Thietmarus Merseburgensis Chronicon*, in which the destruction of Western Slavic artefacts (idols and shrines) by Christianisation and paganism received significant attention. We would not be wrong in saying that this is one of the most important sources from the early 11th century where the Bishop of Merseburg presents accounts of Western Slavic pagan artefacts. Later generations of chroniclers learned about the paganism of the Polabian Slavs from this chronicle in particular. Source B6, which the author identifies as a letter, is also quite telling. This text, known as the Magdeburg Charter, was probably written in 1107 or 1108, and presents the theonym of the Polabian Slavic deity Pripegal. It is not clear whether the author of this source was Archbishop Aldegot of Madgeburg, as the author claims (he also mentions another possible author, an anonymous writer from Flanders), as the source inscription where the letter's recipients are identified (who are also the charter's initiators) also makes a mention of the bishop himself, alongside many other bishops and senior secular members of society.¹³ Whatever the case might be, this charter should be assessed in the light of the contexts of the Second Crusade. These contexts are closely linked to the pagan Prussian assessment in terms of the Second Crusade.¹⁴ This demonstrates again that Slavic (and Baltic) paganism should be analysed in the general context of paganism.

A separate group of hagiographic sources is presented in the third, and longest, chapter (C). Here, the author presents descriptions of artefacts of Western Slavic pagans who lived in Pomerania and Pomerelia, mentioned in the hagiographies (*Apostolus Pomeranorum*) of Bishop Otto of Bamberg from the first half of the 12th century, as well as material relating to Christianisation. The hagiographers of St Otto of Bamberg described how shrines were demolished, idols of deities were destroyed, and what superstitions were alive amongst the Slavs. These superstitions are presented separately in the letter from St Otto of Bamberg to Pope Callixtus II (see C1, II, 21). In these accounts, the pagan deity Triglav is described as being 'opposite' to the Christian God, that is, he was the main Slavic god, *summus deus*. We learn what influence Christianity had on paganism from the hagiographies presented: a pagan idol was erected during a Slavic apostasy at a church built in honour of St Adalbert-Vojtěch in the city of Wolin. It is no wonder that the Polish Medievalist Henryk

¹³ To read more about this charter, its initiators and the Crusade rhetoric used, see: G. Constable, *Crusaders and Crusading in the Twelfth Century* (Farnham, 2008), pp. 197–214.

¹⁴ For more, see: D. Güttner-Sporzyński, *Poland, Holy War and the Piast Monarchy 1100–1230 (Europa Sacra, 14)* (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 115–133.

Łowmiański spoke about the ‘Christianisation’ of paganism,¹⁵ which is a possibility that we need to keep in mind when analysing pagan artefacts in written and archaeological sources.

The relatively long fourth chapter (D) presents Slavic paganism on the Baltic Sea island of Rügen, and the story of its elimination (most thoroughly in the chronicle *Saxo Grammaticus*, as the Danes were most active in the destruction of Rügen’s pagan artefacts). As in the case of the Magdeburg Charter, we should look at *Saxo Grammaticus* as a work promoting the ideology of the Crusades.

The shortest chapter is probably the fifth (E), dedicated to the requirements of Church synods and preachers to abide by the norms of Christian life, and deny any inappropriate pagan lapses. Geographically, the sources cover the area from Dalmatia to Bohemia, and date from the tenth to 14th centuries. The documents presented in this chapter (such as the statutes of the Synod of Prague from the 14th century, and the visitation protocol of the Archdiocese of Prague, dated to 1382) reveal how pagan superstitions were understood in a society that was already practically Christian.

The last chapter (F) is the biggest in terms of the number of sources. It is basically a continuation of E, only the sources are from a chronologically later period, most of them (except for the bull of Pope Innocent III of 1207 and the chronicle of Petersberg *Chronicon Montis Sereni*, written in the 13th century) from the 14th and 15th centuries (the last document is from the 16th century). The sources in this chapter (F) do not tell us about paganism itself, or its liquidation during the period of Christianisation, but about the real or alleged pagan superstitions (*ritus paganorum*) encountered in Christian society when discussing the issue of syncretism, which was mentioned earlier. This chapter does not contain some of the homilies or other documents that have already been translated into Czech and which have been published in numerous other anthologies. However, we should take note of two sermons (F4) from the anthology of sermons of Stanislaus of Skarbimierz (late 14th to early 15th centuries), which offer many examples of common Christian piety. We are not certain what is actually meant by the phrase ‘sacrifice to the demons’ (*daemonibus sacrificia*), whether these are Christian demons from the Holy Scriptures, or creatures from the rudiments of paganism. Interestingly, readers are reminded that Stanislaus of Skarbimierz was one of the theoreticians of Polish canon law who spoke in favour of the voluntary Christianisation of pagans, and actively defended the rights of Lithuanian pagans to accept

¹⁵ H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian i jej upadek (w VI–XII)* (Warszawa, 1979), pp. 146–154, 183–198, 239–263. Cf. L.P. Słupecki, ‘Pagan Temple – Christian Church. The problem of Old Norse Temples’, in: *Between Paganism and Christianity in the North*, ed. L.P. Słupecki, J. Morawiec (Rzeszów, 2009), pp. 29–40.

baptism on a voluntary basis.¹⁶ Source F14 is also significant, written by an anonymous Polish preacher from the late 15th century, consolidating the truths of the Christian faith, and juxtaposing them against inappropriate behavioural norms, various incantations and other beliefs. All of these sermons and other information given in the documents in chapter F, and the rhetoric in which they are presented, undoubtedly remind us of the Jesuit relationals from the early 17th century from various locations in Lithuania and Livonia.¹⁷

Thus, even though in the introduction the author admits that his anthology of sources is not a comprehensive critical scientific digest of sources, since its aim was to present original sources, we have to acknowledge that there is certainly no lack of critical commentary. Before each document, readers are presented with the context of the source's appearance, information about the author of the source, and a short summary, which makes it easier to understand the source and relate it to others in the anthology. The main advantage of the book are the original sources themselves, for until now they were mostly scattered in various anthologies and separate publications.

In terms of Lithuanian historiography, it is important to learn about neighbouring Slavic paganism, its images and contexts, in order to understand that the mechanism for depicting Lithuanian paganism and its image was based on old Christian traditions of depicting paganism which were once applied in the description of Slavic pre-Christian beliefs.

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¹⁶ W. Świeboda, *Innowiercy w opiniach prawnych uczonych polskich w XV wieku. Paganie, żydzi, muzułmanie*. Kraków, 2013, pp. 143–156.

¹⁷ Cf. *BRMŠ*, t. III, ed. N. Vėlius (Vilnius, 2003), pp. 549–558.