

Modern Latvian Paganism: Some Introductory Remarks

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English-language scholarly publications such as *The Pomegranate* have increasingly shown interest in the various forms of modern-day Paganism developing in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. In regards to the Baltic sub-region of Eastern Europe, there has been a fair amount of discussion of the Romuva movement in Lithuania, but less attention paid to Pagan religious movements in the neighboring Baltic state of Latvia.¹ This is curious in that the two countries are of similar size with similar historical development and contemporary societal dynamics, both having suffered under Tsarist, Nazi, and Soviet domination over the last hundred years, and both having come out from the shadow of Soviet oppression in the early 1990s as newly independent European nations that would soon bind themselves more closely to Europe and more conclusively divorce themselves from the Soviet past by joining the European Union and the NATO military alliance.²

1. See Michael York, "Pan-Baltic Identity and Religio-Cultural Expression in Contemporary Lithuania," in *New Religions and the New Europe*, ed. Robert Towler (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995), 72–85.; Vytis Čiubrinskas, "Identity and the Revival of Tradition in Lithuania: An Insider's View," *FOLK: Journal of the Danish Ethnographic Society* 42 (2000): 19-40; Rudra Vilius Dundzila and Michael Strmiska, "Romuva: Lithuanian Paganism in Lithuania and America," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael Strmiska (Boulder: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 241–87; Rudra Vilius Dundzila, "Baltic Lithuanian Religion and Romuva," *Tyr: Myth-Culture-Tradition* 3, (2007-08): 279-360. See also Egidija Ramanauskaitė and Rimas Vaišnys, "Darna: A Lithuanian Pagan Approach to Life," *The Pomegranate* 13, no. 2 (2011): 130-145, which discusses a non-Romuva Lithuanian Pagan movement.

2. An overview of the archaeology, history, and culture of the Baltic peoples is given in Marija Gimbutas, *The Balts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963). The inter-war period of independence for the three Baltic states is detailed in Georg von Rauch, *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 1917-1940* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974). For the Soviet period, see Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence, 1940-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). The movement to independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with a concise summary of earlier Baltic history is presented in Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven: Yale, 1994). For Latvia in particular the best historical overview is Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1995).

The forms of modern Paganism that now exist in both countries derive from similar roots and have followed similar trajectories over time. The Lithuanian and Latvian languages are the two remaining members of the Baltic branch of the Indo-European language family. Estonian, the language of the third modern Baltic state, Estonia, has different origins in the Finno-Ugric-Uralic language family. Another Baltic language of Indo-European origins, Old Prussian, became extinct in the late medieval period due to Germanic colonization of much of the Baltic region.³ Owing to the introduction of other languages—Polish in Lithuania, German in Latvia—which soon became the preferred tongues of the ruling elites in the two countries, the two major Baltic languages mainly survived among the peasantry, the poor, and the illiterate. This social and cultural isolation helped Latvian and Lithuanian preserve many archaic linguistic features, making the two, especially Lithuanian, the modern European languages closest to ancient Indo-European languages like Sanskrit.

Comparative Indo-European studies and folklore collection activities in the nineteenth century shined a light not only on linguistic linkages but other cultural connections as well.⁴ The folksongs, folktales, myths, folk customs and other traditional lore of Lithuania and Latvia were found to contain many echoes of ancient Indo-European culture, from classical Greece to Hindu India, giving a new status and pedigree to the pre-Christian myth and religion of the Baltic peoples, and sparking a

3. For discussion of the Christianization of the Baltic region, particularly Latvia and Estonia, by Germanic Crusaders in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

4. For an excellent study of Baltic folk religious symbolism, see Vytautas Straisys and Libertas Klimka, "The Cosmology of the Ancient Balts," *Archaeo-Astronomy, supplement to Journal for the History of Astronomy* 22 (1997): S57-S81. For the Indo-European background of Latvian and Lithuanian Pagan mythology, see Jaan Puhvel, "Baltic and Slavic Myth," in Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 222–40; and "Indo-European Structure of the Baltic Pantheon," in *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, ed. Gerald Larson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 75–85. The posthumous collection of Marija Gimbutas's essays edited by Miriam Robbins Dexter, *The Living Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 197–213, also contains a fine summary article, "The Baltic Religion." The premier scholar of Latvian mythology was Haralds Biezais, whose article "Baltic Religion" in the 1987 *Encyclopedia of Religion* was seen as sufficiently masterful to update and supplement for the 2005 Second Edition of the encyclopedia. Latvian folklore and mythology has also been written on by no less a personage than the president of Latvia from 1999–2007, Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga [Vīķis-Freibergs], in a series of publications from the 1970s to the 2000s, such as "The Major Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Latvian Mythology," in *Linguistics and Poetics of Latvian Folk Songs*, edited by Vaira Vīķis-Freibergs (Montreal: McGill-Queensland, 1989), 91–112.

renewed appreciation of Baltic Paganism.⁵ This new pride in previously devalued ethnic identity tied in very well with the rising tide of ethnic nationalism across Europe, which in the Baltic region posed a direct challenge to the Russification policies of the Russian Empire. So it was that originally Pagan customs such as midsummer celebrations that had received a Christianizing gloss over the centuries received new attention and became part and parcel of anti-Russian, national independence movements.

It is this revival of interest in pre-Christian Baltic myth and religion in the nineteenth century that led to the formation of actual Pagan revival religious movements in the twentieth.⁶ The most prominent such Lithuanian religious association is *Romuva*, founded in its current form in the late 1980s by Jonas Trinkūnas (b. 1939) and his wife Inija Trinkūnienė (b. 1951), drawing on folkloric traditions and earlier Pagan revival efforts. *Romuva*'s history and contemporary activities have been analyzed by this author and others. Jonas and Inija, both skilled folk singers, also lead a Pagan-oriented folk music ensemble, *Kūlgrinda*, which has won high acclaim in performances across Europe and beyond.

Romuva's Latvian counterpart, *Dievturība*, more commonly known as *Dievturi*, has received far less attention, even though it might be said to be older than present-day *Romuva*, in that its current organizational form was first developed in the 1920s by Ernests Brastiņš (1892–1942). *Dievturi* was suppressed in the Soviet period and revived in the late 1980s, with Latvian *Dievturi* Pagans of that time in close and friendly contact with Jonas Trinkūnas and *Romuva*. This mutually respectful and supportive relationship between the main Lithuanian and Latvian Pagan associations has continued to the present, with both groups regularly participating in the annual meetings of the World Congress of Ethnic Religions, recently renamed the European Congress of Ethnic Religions,

5. The continuing importance of the Indo-European link to India for contemporary Lithuanian Paganism is explored in Michael Strmiska, "Romuva Looks East: Indian Inspiration in Lithuanian Paganism," in *Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Society: Ethnographies of Catholic Hegemony and the New Pluralism in Lithuania*, ed. Milda Ališauskienė and Ingo W. Schröder (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 125–50.

6. Overviews of both the Latvian and Lithuanian Pagan movements are given in Michael Strmiska, "The Music of the Past in Modern Baltic Paganism," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, no. 3 (2005): 39–58 and Valdis Muktupāvels, "Baltic Religion: New Religious Movements," in *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition, Volume 2*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 762–67. Muktupāvels has also authored a study of Latvian folk music that is highly relevant to the study of the folk traditions undergirding *Dievturi* and other Pagan movements in Latvia. See Valdis Muktupāvels, "Latvia," in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Vol. 8: Europe*, ed. Timothy Rice, James Porter, and Chris Goertzen, (New York: Garland, 2000), 499–508.

which was established under Trinkūnas's leadership in 1998.

There have been a number of English language or English-translated works about Dievturi published from the 1960s onward. A book by Jānis Dārdedzis, *Latvian Religion: An Outline*, was published in 1967 and provided an insider account of Latvian mythology and Dievturi beliefs and rituals along with numerous quotations from Latvian *dainas*, the archaic folksongs that serve as quasi-sacred texts in Dievturi, parallel to the *dainos* of Lithuania. An article titled "The Ancient Latvian Religion—Dievturība," penned by the Latvian scholar and Dievturi member Jānis Tupešu, was published in 1987 in the journal *Lituanus* and later included in the Trinkūnas-edited volume *Of Gods and Holidays: The Baltic Heritage*, published in 1999. The Latvian scholars Agita Misāne and Aldis Pūtelis published English-language studies of Dievturi in the late 1990s.⁷ Solveiga Krūmiņa-Koņkova discussed Dievturi in an article on new religious movements in Latvia published in 1999.⁸ The composer, *kokles* player, and ethnomusicologist Valdis Muktupāvels provided a fine portrait of Dievturi in a broader discussion of New Religious Movements in the Baltic region in a 2005 encyclopedia article (see note 4). There have been few further studies published in English since that time.

As editor of the anthology *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (2005), I intended to include a section on Latvian Paganism, but the appointed author was unable to complete the chapter. As a result, there is only some limited discussion of Dievturi in the introductory chapter of the book, including mention of the unique, quasi-monotheistic, arguably trinitarian interpretation of the Latvian Pagan pantheon in Dievturi, with the great god Dievs seen as the primary and ultimate deity and the mother goddess Mara and the fate goddess Laima as his two deputies and/or lesser manifestations, with other Latvian gods and goddesses representing other forces and functions outside of this privileged first tier of divinity. I engaged in additional discussion of Dievturi in my 2005 article "The Music of the Past in Baltic Paganism" on the importance of folk music in the modern Pagan movements in Latvia and Lithuania, with a further study published in 2012.⁹

7. Agita Misāne, "The Traditional Latvian Religion of Dievturība in the Discourse of Latvian Nationalism," *Religious Minorities in Latvia* 4, no. 2 (2000): 32–52 and "Inter-War Right Wing Movements in the Baltic States and their Religious Affiliations," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 46, no. 1 (2001): 75–87; Aldis Pūtelis, "Folklore and Identity: The Situation of Latvia," *Folklore: An Electronical Journal of Folklore* 4 (1997), <http://www.hajdas.folklore.ee/folklore/vol4/index.html>.

8. Solveiga Krūmiņa-Koņkova, "New Religions in Latvia," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Emergent and Alternative Religions* 3, no. 1 (1999): 119–34.

9. Michael Strmiska, "Paganism-Inspired Folk Music, Folk Music-Inspired Paganism, and New Cultural Fusions in Lithuania and Latvia," in *Brill Handbook of New Reli-*

The general underrepresentation of modern Latvian Paganism in English-language academic publications, in comparison to the much higher level of attention paid to Romuva, is likely the result of some very simple and prosaic factors, above all, language, leadership, and public relations. Jonas Trinkūnas and Inija Trinkūnienė, having a fine command of English, charismatic personalities, and an eagerness to promote understanding of Romuva to a global audience, have made unceasing efforts to reach out to academics, journalists, and religious organizations inside and outside Lithuania to raise the profile of Romuva as a legitimate religious movement.¹⁰ Kūlgrinda performances and music CDs have served a similar purpose. Dievturi has not had leadership with the same qualities and inclinations, with the lack of English-language ability hampering communication with non-Latvians interested in the movement. It is also the case that some of the most charismatic, communicative, and English-speaking Dievturi members, such as the folklorist and Pagan priestess Inese Krūmiņa, have left Dievturi over the years in order to develop their own variant forms of Latvian Paganism.

For all of these reasons, modern Latvian Paganism has tended to lag behind modern Lithuanian Paganism in terms of international recognition, including scholarly discussion, even though Dievturi is a kindred religious movement no less deserving of attention than Romuva. It is therefore with very great pleasure that the editors of *The Pomegranate* present this special section devoted to Latvian Paganism, with two articles which directly concern Dievturi, and a third which illuminates the broader horizon of new religious movements (NRMs) in Latvia.

These three articles were first presented as conference papers at the inaugural gathering of the Latvian Society for the Study of Religions (LSSR), held in October 2011 in Riga.¹¹ The conference also featured excellent papers on Lithuanian and Estonian Paganism and Eastern European and Russian new religious movements, which I hope will be published soon either in this journal or elsewhere.

Our first article's author is Anita Stašulāne, who teaches religious studies at the University of Daugavpils in Latvia and has pursued

gions and Cultural Productions, ed. Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 349–98.

10. Several papers on Lithuanian Pagan traditions presented by the Trinkūnases at a 2003 conference were published in a volume also edited by Jonas Trinkūnas entitled *Syncretism: An Indo-Romuva Strategy of Integration: A collection of papers presented at the Indo-Romuva cultures conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey, USA* (Bensalem PA: International Center for Cultural Studies, 2005).

11. The conference was entitled "Between East and West: Cultural and Religious Dialogue Before, After and During the Totalitarian Rule" and took place October 6-7, 2011 at the University of Latvia in Riga.

research into Western esotericism and its Eastern European offshoots for many years. She was also one of the organizers of the Riga conference and one of the founders of the LSSR. Her article explores the early years of the modern Dievturi movement from a unique angle, that of police and government surveillance of Dievturi operations during the latter half of the interwar period. This was a time when the newly independent nation's democratic institutions and intentions were increasingly undermined by a rising tide of right-wing nationalism and autocracy. Dievturi, as an organization promoting a particular version of Latvian ethnic culture and identity, became embroiled in the power struggles, ideological disputes, and identity politics of this time. In the final section of the article, she touches on the relationship of Dievturi to the post-Soviet political situation in Latvia, revealing the continuing political implications and entanglements of Paganism in Latvia.

Our second article's creator is Kristīne Ogle, a doctoral candidate, research associate, and lecturer in Art History at the Latvian Academy of Art in Riga. Her essay also concerns the interwar period in Latvia, focusing on the struggles of artists associated with the Dievturi movement to develop a self-consciously "native Latvian" visual and stylistic vocabulary for representing Latvian Pagan deities. This goes to the heart of a recurring dilemma for Pagans and Pagan movements everywhere, the question of authenticity for religious movements that claim to represent a continuation of ancient religious traditions while obviously needing to adapt and alter past heritage to fit the needs and norms of the present day. Without having perfect knowledge of all aspects of the past traditions which the current practitioners desire to revive and continue, there is an inevitable necessity of inventing new elements to replace undesirable features of old traditions or to substitute for missing pieces of religious heritage. In relation to Pagan religious art, the attempt to slavishly imitate the ways and forms of old can result in religious art that in the worst case scenario, may amount to little more than antiquarian kitsch, but fully embracing the freedom to create new forms, styles, and images runs the opposite risk of alienating those believers seeking a completely "authentic" continuation or recreation of past tradition and heritage.

The third essay in our special Latvian section is by Rūta Muktupāvela, an associate professor at the Latvian Academy of Culture in Riga, a skilled folk singer, and also the wife of the aforementioned Valdis Muktupāvels. Her article takes us beyond the realm of Dievturi to examine contemporary religious movements in Latvia which center on particular geographical locations ascribed with spectacular, spiritual qualities, such as magical healing powers, which are in turn associated with the vestigial influence of past Latvian Pagan habitation or worship

at these sites of sacred power that may be either ancient and rediscovered, as the devout would have it, or newly crafted to suit modern needs and desires, as the more skeptical might see it. If Stašulāne's essay introduces us to the political aspects of Latvian Paganism and Ogle's piece to the artistic ramifications, Muktupāvela's excursus confronts us with the potential of Paganism and New Age spirituality for commercialization and commodification in the fast-changing and stressful conditions of post-Soviet Latvia.

All three articles, however different their particular foci and historical periods, engage with the common theme of the importance of national and/or ethnic identity in Latvian Paganism and new religious movements. This is indeed a key issue, perhaps *the* key issue, in much contemporary Eastern European Paganism, and the different ways in which these articles expose this issue provide us with much food for thought and further inquiry, for which the authors are to be applauded.

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