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ANCIENT LITHUANIAN CALENDAR FESTIVALS

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Contemporary linguistic studies are barely imaginable without the studies of the Lithuanian language and culture. Linguistics reveals the grammatical history of the language. However, without wider studies of Lithuania’s cultural history it is almost impossible to perceive why the oldest living Indo-European language remained almost unchanged for millenniums.

We may get acquainted with regional cultures by employing different means, as for instance, studying their political history or economic development, or being interested in their achievements in science, music or sports. Nevertheless, regional culture is best of all represented by its festive calendar, the festivals that are celebrated, as well as festive customs and traditions. Why? Collective memory is a necessary condition for the survival of any social group, and the festive ritual has performed the duty of collecting and transmitting this collective memory throughout the millenniums. This included everything from the flow of knowledge society used to single out vitally important experiences useful both for practical purposes and the symbolic meaning, belonging to the sphere of the imaginable reality. By giving it the shape of festive beliefs and rituals, society would place it among other festive events. Peasant customs and traditions preserved this purpose until the very end of the 19th century, i.e., until the model of communal village life remained alive. Therefore, festive rituals always reflect not only particular kinds of cultural worldviews, but also the peculiarities of the social and economic structure of society or its dominant ideological powers.

For this reason, the studies of festive rituals can provide a lot of information on the peculiarities of the regional culture. However, here we face another problem – texts on national cultures are usually written in national languages or are very specialized and thus interesting only to a narrow circle of specialists, whereas texts conforming to the expectations of a wider circle of readers come to the light of the day quite rarely. For instance, in English, the dominant language of the global world, only two books on Lithuanian calendar festivals have been released: a bilingual book “Lithuanian customs and
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traditions / Lietuvų papročiai ir tradicijos išeivijoje” by Danutė Brazytė-Bindokienė published in 1989 in Chicago and the translation of “The World Outlook of the Ancient Balts” by Norbertas Vėlius (1989). The first, based on data collected in inter-war ethnographic periodicals, has become antiquated both methodologically and morally, whereas the second discusses calendar festivals in terms of a narrowly specialized conception by matching certain single festivals to the peculiarities of the geographically extrapolated ternary world outlook of the Balts.

This aim of this book is to present ancient Lithuanian calendar festivals that were celebrated by peasants living in the rural areas of Lithuania. The author’s main interest is focused on the in-depth meaning of customs and rituals. Chronologically the book considers the period from the 14th to the first half of the 20th century (even though the main focus is on the 19th to the first half of the 20th centuries), therefore, it does not provide information on New Year’s celebrations, St Valentine’s Day or other festivals that are popular now but were not known to Lithuanian peasants until the beginning of the 20th century.

The target readership of this book is manifold. While writing it, the author, first of all, thought about Lithuanians in diaspora, spread right around the world. Representatives of the third generation, regardless of their affection towards their native culture, rarely speak Lithuanian. This is predetermined by the surroundings of where they live – the natural aim to integrate into the surrounding social environment, which always becomes a stimulus in the processes of acculturation. However, language is not the main factor that determines the individual’s national-cultural identity, and the relationship between generations sooner or later stimulates interest in the sources of the culture of one’s ancestors.

Professors and students of the centres of Lithuanian studies were not overlooked, nor were foreign colleagues who continue to ask for different kinds of information or one or another element of Lithuanian culture that they had heard about at a conference or had read in an English summary of an article in the Lithuanian language. Paradoxically, a rather wide group of the target readership is determined by the contemporary European integration processes. Expansion of the European Union, its expansion to incorporate new countries, new tourist environments and economic zones prompt curious people to learn more about the features of regional cultures.

As the book is dedicated to a wide circle of readers, the author consciously avoids being overly academic
and foregoes analysis of narrow scientific problems. However, nor does the author aim to simply present factographical material. The group of Lithuanian calendar festivals here is described with reference to the theoretical approaches of contemporary anthropologists and ethnologists, focusing on the sources and continuity of the agrarian-ritual tradition as well as innovative changes that might be observed by taking into consideration both global and local economical-social-cultural alterations. A list of the most important books and articles that the author refers to is presented at the end of the book.

In the 19th–20th centuries, the festive calendar of Lithuanians had around twenty festive days of major significance. The most distinguished among them were Christmas, Shrovetide, St George’s Day, Easter, Pentecost, Midsummer Day, Assumption Day, and All Souls’ Day. In spoken language these festivals were called great (Lith. didžiosios) or annual (Lith. metinės) festivals. Most calendar festivals are celebrated on fixed dates, whereas dates of the movable Easter cycle festivals change every year. Therefore, dates of the feasts of Ascension, Pentecost, and Corpus Christi also change, because they are celebrated after a certain number of days after Easter. The date of Shrovetide also changes yearly and depends on the Easter date.

The book limits itself to presentation of the main festivals of the ritual year cycle, even though peasant
society used to perform rituals and referred to customs during all the moments of life that it considered existentially important. For instance, the right beginning and end of a task for a peasant who had preserved the fundamentals of magical thinking was no less relevant than the main calendar festivals, which were supposed to guarantee the existence to the whole community. Therefore, the beginning and the end of every specific task, such as driving animals out of the cowshed for the first time in spring, ploughing of the first furrow, sowing, haymaking, harvesting, flax-breaking, etc., was accompanied by various rituals, magic actions, superstitions, and beliefs, which were supposed to protect one’s present and future property from possible misfortunes or, on the contrary, guarantee fortune in advance, whereas after the successful completion of a task, peasants used to hold a festive banquet.

The author of this book, who remains indebted to his readers, has been carrying out research on the Lithuanian festive calendar and its historical transformations for more than two decades. Arūnas Vaicekauskas has published both scientific studies and science books for the general public. The idea of writing a book about Lithuanian calendar festivals for English-speaking readers had been stirring in the author’s head for some time. Contact with Lithuanians in diaspora and participation in the activities of the international scientists’ community also confirmed the idea that such a publication was necessary. Thus, the project aimed at strengthening contacts with centres of Lithuanian studies implemented by Vytautas Magnus University and other Lithuanian universities provided an excellent opportunity to turn this idea into reality.
The contemporary calendar is based on the astronomical rhythms of the sun. However, it also contains certain traces of the much more ancient lunar calendar. For instance, Baltic languages have preserved the old word for calling a period of time – for example, month (Lith. moon, month – *mėnuo*), whereas a week most probably signified the full length of one phase of the moon. The oldest traces of the lunar calendar are found in Siberian Palaeolithic cultures. The lunar calendar must have been very convenient for the primordial hunter. The change of the phases of this largest nocturnal heavenly body are seen very clearly, whereas short periods make it possible to count time perceiving relatively few numerals.

Traces of the solar calendar in Europe are comparatively late and are known from around the second millennium B.C. The solar calendar found its way to Greece from the Near East. Since the 19th century, Ancient Egypt was considered the homeland of the solar cult and the solar calendar. However, more recent research has shown that Egyptians were not the first. Inhabitants of the Stone Age cultures of the Sahara (Sudan) were familiar with a solar calendar already in the tenth millennium B.C.

Counting time based on the movement of heavenly bodies made it possible to create a calendar where time was marked both by longer periods (years, months,
weeks) and separate days. At first, this kind of calendar had to reveal seasonality, i.e., only the time of certain periods had to be counted in days. The full calendar, when every day of the year is counted, is a product of developed civilization and the human needs that it conditioned. Even in the early chronicles of the world’s first civilizations, we can notice that a mythical understanding of time predominated, and only the periods of time that related to significant events were recorded.

Christian Europe used the so-called Julian calendar, which recalled the times of the Roman emperor Gaius Julius Caesar. At the very end of the 14th century, it reached Lithuania together with Christianity. During the rule of the pope Gregory the Great, the Julian calendar was reformed and it spread throughout Europe in less than a century. In 1795 when Lithuania became part of tsarist Russia, time started being counted according to the Julian calendar that had already been forgotten long ago in Western Europe. Lithuania returned to the Gregorian calendar only in 1915. Moreover, as far back as the first half of the 20th century, along with the official one, the so-called folk calendar also functioned. Most often it is defined as a generalization of the generations long peasant experience combined with the cycle of the most important agricultural jobs. This standpoint is virtually correct; however, it is one-sided and does not reflect the genetic aspects of the folk calendar. The folk calendar, reflecting the peasant experience accumulated throughout generations, combined diverse ways of counting time that were used in different époques. In the late tradition of the first half of the 20th century,
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some of them are seen quite clearly, whereas others are merely noticeable in the general flow of symbolic information.

The oldest chronological concept is that of the season. The primordial hunter already perceived the change of seasons and noticed certain patterns, as different climatic realities conditioned man’s different activities. Primordial consciousness used to organize the surrounding environment with the help of binary oppositions. This is why in the beginning, years used to be divided only into two seasons. In the northern latitudes these were the warm and the cold seasons, whereas in the warm climatic zone – the dry and the rainy periods. According to the mythological model of the world, opposite poles of binary oppositions acquire opposite qualitative characteristics. Thus, in the northern latitudes, the warm period of the year was associated with the light and the warmth of the sun, whereas the cold half of the year was automatically associated with the powers of the dark and the underworld. In the mythical sense, only the warm (light) season of the year was favourable for man’s being out
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in the open. In peasant cultures, this kind of juxtaposition of the warm (light) and the cold (dark) seasons of the year remained in place until the very beginning of modern times.

Nowadays it is accepted that the year is divided into four seasons. On the 1st of March, the media announces that spring has arrived, summer is considered to start from the 1st of July, autumn starts on the 1st of September, and December is known as the first month of winter. However, even in the late Lithuanian folk calendar of the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th centuries, the subdivision of the year into seasons does not coincide with the present subdivision of the year into four periods of time of equal length. In the folk calendar, the first traces of spring are noticed only on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin (25th March). In the Lithuanian folk language this festival is called *Blovieščiai* (the word derives from the Slavic *Blagaja Vestj* – good news) or *Gandrinės* (Lith. *gandras* – stork). However, only the 23rd of April or St George’s Day was considered to be the real beginning of spring, i.e., a whole month later. Summer in our geographical latitude used to be very short; it is the time of growing to maturity in nature – and lasted from the final days of July until the middle of August. St Roch (16th August) was considered to be the first autumnal festival, whereas St Andrew’s Day (30th November) signified the beginning of the winter season.

Observation of changes in nature eventually led primitive man to the so-called phenological calendar, traces of which can still be found in the traditional Lithuanian peasant calendar. The phenological calendar is based on a more detailed observation of the growth of plants and animal behaviour. For instance, the winter season was outlined by the behaviour of the bear. It was believed that the bear would go into hibernation on St Andrew’s Day. In midwinter – on Candlemas (Lith. *Grabnyčios*, 2nd February) or on St Paul’s Conversion Day (26th January) the bear was believed to turn over onto its other side, whereas on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin – to wake up from its winter sleep. On the phenological level, many spring cycle festivals were linked with the birds returning from the south. St Casimir (4th March) is the day of the skylark. The Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, as it was already mentioned, is also called the day of the stork. St Joseph (29th March) is the day of the lapwing. On St George’s Day people waited for the return of the cuckoo, etc. Observing when different types of trees would go into bloom, or when and how sap would flow from trees indicated the right time for certain tasks in the fields.

A connection between the folk calendar and the movement of the sun over the vault of the sky could still be noted back in the 19th century. Representatives of the mythological school claimed that the cult of the deified Sun formed the foundation of the folk calendar. Right at that time, statements claiming that summer and winter solstice rituals reflected ancient people’s images of the eternal struggle between the powers of light and darkness were formulated. Despite the naivety of such reasoning, the dates of many important festivals of the folk calendar were actually coordinated with the astronomical rhythms of heavenly bodies. It is not surprising because, as was mentioned above, back in the beginning of the 19th century
peasants used to observe the night sky to find answers to their questions, and had a much deeper knowledge of folk astronomy than an ordinary urban man of today.

In the folk calendar that has reached our days, time is counted according to the saints’ names days as in the church calendar. Therefore, the time of its formation should be considered the beginning of the 19th or the end of the 18th century, because at the beginning of the 18th century, Lithuanian peasants still celebrated old festivals from the pre-Christian faith. Some ancient festivals, without any doubt, were incorporated into the folk calendar representing the late tradition. After all, Lithuanian peasants viewed Christian saints in their own way. Saints of the folk calendar were rarely related to Christian legends. Quite the reverse, most often their functions were reinterpreted on a domestic level. For instance, St Roch was first of all viewed as the patron saint of travellers. In Lithuania, St Isidore was represented as a ploughman, and St Agatha was supposed to offer protection from fire, whereas the warrior, patron saint of knights and states, St George, became the ruler of predators and the protector of domestic animals (especially horses). It is also noteworthy that the folk variants of the names of saints often differ greatly from the original versions.
The relationship between festivals of the folk calendar and the Christian calendar is well reflected by the fact that the folk festivals were rarely restricted to one calendar day (the day of the saint patron in the official church calendar). The most important rituals quite often used to be shifted to the eve of the church holiday (Midsummer Day, Christmas) or, on the contrary, elongated by adding 2–3 additional days or, in olden times, even more. Finally, the folk calendar also contains festivals that do not figure in the Christian calendar, as for instance, the middle of winter (Lith. Krikštai, 25th January) or Shrovetide.
Advent

The peasants’ ritual year starts with the cycle of Christmas or winter festivals. It is a relatively calm period because the crop has already been harvested and is safe in the granary, and there is still a great deal of time until the beginning of spring tasks out in the field. Therefore, this period offers time to rest and think about things greater than fortune in one’s personal life. People would start waiting for the great winter festivals on the 30th of November, i.e., from St Andrew’s Day. As Advent was supposed to be a period of concentration and reflection, raucous enjoyment had to be avoided. However, restrictions at this time were not as strict as those during Lent. Until World War I during the Advent season, Lithuanian villagers used to gather and spend evenings together; adults would talk or play cards, old people would tell children about the ghosts and devils they had met, whereas young people would entertain themselves by playing various games. Girls used to perform divinations in order to learn about their future marriage; they would place a cherry twig into a container of water – girls believed they would be fortunate if the twig blossomed before Christmas. Another method involved saying certain prayers to St Andrew while “sowing” poppy or hemp seeds around the well. In the interwar period, the tradition of Advent gatherings in villages started to disappear quite rapidly, firstly in western and northern Lithuania. This tradition remained alive longest in the eastern and especially in the southeastern part of Lithuania. Dzūkians (the inhabitants of south-east Lithuania) were accustomed not only to play games but also did not avoid singing particular Advent songs that they called hymns (Lith. giesmės).
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Christmas Eve

Food and drink served during all the greater, the so-called “annual”, festivals has certain ritualistic traits. Particular distinction due to its rich ritual tradition is given to Christmas Eve supper. On the one hand, it is determined by the status of Christmas Eve as one of the most important folk festivals. On the other hand, there is the role of the festive Christmas cycle in the context of the Christian cult (Christmas as the birthday of Christ). Lithuanian peasants, influenced by a syncretic worldview that had preserved pre-Christian images, transposed the accents of the festive ritual by placing most importance on the eating and drinking ritual and the agrarian-magic rituals of Christmas Eve.

COMMUNAL ASPECTS OF CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER. In the 19th–beginning of the 20th centuries, eating with the family was the prevailing form of the festive food tradition, even though communal eating traditions were also known. Regardless of all the possible ways of how the Christmas Eve supper ritual formed, the ritualistic structure of this supper has many features common to festive meals eaten at the conclusion of agricultural jobs in the 16th–17th centuries. It is also noteworthy that the cycle of Christmas Eve–Christmas festivals is related to the end of the agricultural year both in the consciousness of villagers and the work of researchers.

Ethnographic sources of the 16th–18th centuries provide descriptions of communal festive eating traditions. According to the chronicler Maciej Stryjkowski, during the festivals in honour of the god Puškaitis, villagers used to leave food and drink on the table during the night, inviting Barstukai – mythological beings of the chthonic origin – to feast. In the morning villagers would check which dish had been eaten away the most and believed they would not lack that dish that had been eaten by the Barstukai. In his description of the harvest festival, Stryjkowski mentions straw laid on the table, meat and bread dishes, and throwing food under the table (Vėlius N., 2001. P. 548). All the mentioned rituals make up the Christmas Eve supper ritual.
UNITY OF THE LIVING WORLD. Villagers emphasize that all family members used to sit together at the Christmas Eve table. The ritualistic community of the family is also expressed by the custom to share and eat the Christmas wafer (Lith. kalèdaitis), which sometimes is also called “The Boy’s Pie” (Lith. Bernelio pyragas). If a family member could not join the family in certain objective circumstances (because of military service or a long trip), the family’s unity was remembered by sending that person a peace of the wafer divided amongst the others at the Christmas Eve table. It is interesting to note that in spite of the accents of religious ideology, certain elements of the custom to share “The Boy’s Pie” fall out of the sphere of Christian mythology. For instance, Christmas wafer was quite often used in Christmas Eve divinations. Family members would look at the size of the piece of the wafer they received and would guess about their inheritance, fortune or the length of their life.

The communal nature of the festival can also be noted in the respect for the oldest family members who would be seated in the most honourable place – at the end of the table, also called “the good corner” (Lith. gerasis kampas or krikštasuolė – the most honourable place at a table, very often, at the end), close to the pictures of saints. Moreover, usually it was the oldest family member’s role to lead Christmas Eve rituals.

Cases when Christmas Eve supper was eaten by several families should also be mentioned. Most often
these were the families of relatives or good neighbours. Some people claim that such gatherings had been common only “in their parents’ times” (i.e., at the end of the 19th century) but not in their times. However, the question of the custom’s archaic origin remains unclear; a few families sitting together at the Christmas Eve table could have been a phenomenon of secondary origin.

Other Christmas customs reflect human beings’ connection with the whole living world. On Christmas morning, the master of the house would collect hay from the Christmas Eve table and divide it among all the animals in the shed. It was believed that feeding animals, most often the sheep and the cattle, with the Christmas Eve hay would make the latter reproduce successfully and remain healthy throughout the coming year. Villagers quite often claim that every single animal should receive some of this hay, even those who normally do not eat it. However, according to other variants, the horse or the pig would miss out. Sometimes this is explained rationally, for instance, by claiming that a pig would not eat it anyway. However, the latter explanation does not fit the horse. In the cases when the horse is mentioned, the arguments are of Christian origin; it is said that the horse did not kneel down and did not honour the Baby

Christmas tree. Kaunas. 2013
Jesus Christ upon his arrival in this world, therefore, it cannot receive this hay.

The community of the living world is also reflected in the provision that Christmas Eve is sacred to everyone, both humans and animals. It is often indicated as the reasoning to feed animals better during the festive days.

MAGIC FOR ABUNDANCE. The abundance of food on the festive table was supposed to carry a magic meaning. In specific cases it is expressed by underlining a particular number of dishes (on Christmas Eve) or by underlining the number of meals per day (on Shrovetide). Opposite statements, when the number of dishes is significant on Shrovetide and the number of meals per day on Christmas Eve, also exist. Saying that everyone has to taste every single dish served during Christmas Eve supper is another ritual action that lays emphasis on their abundance.

Villagers explain that they used to prepare 12 dishes for Christmas Eve supper in order to have 12 nourishing (rich) months the following year. In other cases, Christmas Eve supper is associated with the Christian Last Supper and, to be more precise, with the number of apostles present at the last supper. In certain rarer cases, people were accustomed to prepare 9 or 13 dishes. In the works of different researchers, explanations of the symbolic meaning and the origin of the latter numbers differ. However, almost always the “meanings” of the numbers tend to be associated with certain external phenomena and cosmic cycles, as for instance, the change of the lunar phases, months of the solar year, and likewise. In my opinion, there is much more to this issue than has been revealed thus far. Eating on numerous occasions during the day or underlining the large number of dishes signifies abundance and the fullness of everything. In this case, as well as in the examples above, a magic two-part formula is used: as everything is now at this moment, so too must it be in the future. In other words, the essence of every concrete number does not lay in the fact that it is a mathematical symbol of a certain phenomenon, but in the fact that it meant “a lot” in the consciousness of villagers.

SACRALIZATION OF FOOD. Magic and ritual meaning was attributed not only to the table with food and drink on it but also to separate dishes touched by the sacred festive time. In the festive Christmas Eve–Christmas cycle, magic meaning was attributed to the remains of the Christmas Eve supper, which were given to domestic animals and birds on Christmas morning; peasants believed that it would make their animals grow better and remain healthier throughout the year. Sometimes “The Boy’s Pie” was also given to
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DOMESTIC ANIMALS. In addition, feeding birds and animals was quite often supplemented by other actions of a magical character. For instance, birds were fed from the cart rim, so that they would not throw the eggs from their nests.

RITUAL TREATING OF “STRANGERS”. It is possible to identify a few forms of treating “strangers” to food and drinks during winter festivals. During the days of the Christmas Eve–Christmas cycle, poorer people or beggars used to be treated to food and drinks in all of Lithuania. In northern Lithuania, čigonautojai, i.e., groups of people wearing different masks and visiting homes, were given presents in the houses of landowners. The magical nature of giving food as a gift is expressed in beliefs. For instance, beekeepers used to bring honey to poor, elderly people because they believed that otherwise their bees “would not prosper.” On Christmas Day, food was also brought and divided among beggars by the church.

Giving food in the context of the ritual of masked revellers, the mythological role of the beggar as a mediator between this and the other world, and also the universal mythologem of “strangers” show the connection between the custom and the cult of ancestors. Moreover, the custom of feeding “strangers” most often occurs in festivals where traces of honouring the dead are present, for instance, All Souls’ Day, the festive Christmas Eve and Christmas cycle, Easter, Pentecost, and Assumption Day. As different researchers claim, the ritual giving of food performed the function of a sacrifice to one’s dead ancestors, believing, that the latter would show their thanks by providing good fortune for the farm. Even a late interpretation of this
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Sharing the “Boy’s pie” during Christmas Eve supper
custom, influenced by Christianity, relates the distribution of food to the other world; food is given as payment to the beggar who would pray for the dead family members.

Similar functions were attributed to giving food to hired workers on Christmas before dismissing them, even though it might seem like a phenomenon having little to do with customs. However, the relationship between rewarding hired workers and fortune in farming is clearly reflected in beliefs, as for instance, in the belief claiming that if you do not give a sheep’s thigh to your hired workers on Christmas, you will not have fortune in rearing sheep.

Other forms of treating “strangers” were also related with the world of the dead. Landowners would often invite lonely or poor neighbours for Christmas Eve supper because of the belief that there had to be an even number of people seated at the Christmas Eve table otherwise, the dead may take the “spare” person with them. A similar belief was saying that a traveller or a beggar who enters the house on Christmas Eve has to be invited to stay for Christmas Eve supper. In this case, in the consciousness of the villager, the beggar is identified as the mythological “God-Grandfather”.

RITUAL EATING OF THE BREAD. The custom of ritual eating of bread also reflects the peasants’ aim of ensuring a consistent fullness for their homes by magical means. In southern Lithuania, in the Dzūkija region, bread would be carried around the house. The master of the house, holding some bread in his hands, would go around the house one, three or even more times (or even around the whole homestead), then go back to the door and knock. When someone from the
family asked, “Who’s there?”, the master would reply “God with the bread” (or Lith. kūče). After that he would be invited to enter the house. Going around an object is a magical custom that serves an apotropaic purpose and is similar to the custom of going around the crop in the fields holding the bread in your hands. A possible explanation is that this would guarantee that the bread which has come to the house does not have a way back. (The chain of semantic meanings was probably more complicated and is not reflected in ethnographic data; however, the final result that one wants to achieve is clear – guaranteeing abundance.)

Bringing the bread inside the house after performing a ritual in the name of God could have symbolized the arrival of abundance in the house, guaranteed by the forces of the other world.

“GUESTS” FROM THE OTHER WORLD. The living were imagined far from being the only participants of festive rituals. Even in the late tradition of the 20th century, villagers perceived their dead relatives as members of the unified community made up from both the living and the dead.

During Christmas Eve supper, attention to the dead ancestors may be noted already in the way the
table would be set. If a family member had passed away that year, his or her place at the Christmas Eve table was left empty, and the spoon for that person would be turned upside down. However, cases when a plate and a set of cutlery were left in the place assigned for the dead family member most probably should be considered as a phenomenon of secondary origin. This custom presumably has derived from funeral dinner customs that later became a part of Christmas Eve rituals.

Just before Christmas Eve supper everybody would remember their dead relatives. In the 20th century tradition, prayers prevailed, whereas mentioning the dead orally should be attributed to a more ancient tradition. In solitary instances, the first mouthfuls of dishes would be thrown to the souls of the dead ancestors. It is noteworthy that in the communal festivals of the 16th–17th centuries, this used to be a traditional way to start every ritualistic meal.

The cult of the dead is well noticed in the custom when, after Christmas Eve supper the table is not cleared but left overnight. It was believed that the souls of the dead would come and serve themselves at night. As inhabitants from southeast Lithuania figuratively put it, “all the [former] masters from that house would come to eat (Vaicekauskas, A. 2005. P. 166).” Food was usually left on the table or, sometimes, in semantically significant locations around the house, as for instance, on a windowsill, under the table, next to the stove or next to the chimney. Sometimes the table was not cleared but some food was also left on the windowsill. People explain this by saying that the souls of relatives would gather around the table, whereas the food on the windowsill would be for the wandering, homeless souls.

On Christmas morning, all the family members would gather and look at the table to see whether the souls of their dead relatives had come and eaten during the night. If some crumbs or other traces of “eating” were found, it was considered to be a good sign. Before leaving the table after Christmas Eve supper, the spoons of family members used to be left overturned. If in the morning someone’s spoon was found turned on its back side, it was understood as a message from the souls of the dead who were saying that the owner of that spoon would be dead before the next Christmas Eve.

The arrival of ancestors used to be theatricalized. The orations made by Father Christmas have much in common with those made by the mask-wearers when the latter would ask to be invited inside the house. In the very beginning of these orations Father Christmas presents himself as a representative of the world of
strangers (the other world). The world of these orations, despite the transformation of mythical images, is described as uncommon and containing things opposite of the earthly, whereas the abundance of everything is testimony of the association with mythical images of the other world. Father Christmas and mask-wearers are also dressed in a similar manner: fur worn on the wrong side, a bag, and a walking stick are common to both. Besides, both were supposed to bring abundance to the house.

Ethnographic information also shows that sometimes, instead of the souls of the dead, animals figuring in the semantic field of ancestors used to be invited into the house, namely, a sparrow or a wolf. They were called in a simple way by uttering, for instance, “Sparrow, sparrow – come to eat Christmas Eve supper.” The ritual role of the sparrow is especially noticeable in the Christmas cycle in the East Slavic region. In the government of Orienburg, still in the end of the past century, there was a tradition to fry a sparrow for Christmas, whereas in the surroundings of Brest, the same custom was practiced on New Year’s Eve. The sparrow also features in the Lithuanian Christmas Eve night-time divinations – girls used to go to the barn to catch sparrows in order to learn about their future marriage.

The wolf used to be invited by uttering a similar formula, “Wolf, wolf, come to eat peas. If you don’t come [now], don’t come at all.” These words were believed to have the power of a spell; peasants believed that the wolf would not kill any of their domestic animals in the summer if it was said. Similar formulas were also common to other calendar festivals. Another
belief was saying that the wolf had to be mentioned during Christmas Eve supper, because otherwise it might carry away dogs. According to the data collected by Lithuanian ethnographer Balys Buračas, people used to kill a sheep for the wolf in the surroundings of Pagiriai, in the Ukmergė district, whereas our neighbours the Latvians used to kill a goat on the crossroads at midnight. The latter ritual was also performed so that the wolf would not kill any domestic animals in the summer.

Both the sparrow and the wolf are also known in other nations’ festive rituals of the winter period. For instance, in Romania a lot of festive days of the winter cycle are called “wolf” days; Romanians were familiar with a lot of prohibitions which were supposed to be respected during the “wolf” days, hoping that the wolf would not kill any domestic animals in the summer.

The Wind and the Cold were other “guests” invited in for Christmas Eve supper. Researchers claim that this was another way to invite the souls of the dead ancestors.

Many vegetable dishes served for Christmas Eve supper belong to the semantic field of the cult of the ancestors. Kūčia is a mixture of boiled grain, most often wheat, cooked with honey (in later tradition, with
sugar or saccharin) or poppy seed (hemp) milk. A mixture of grains is one of the most important ritual dishes, known both in the rituals of calendar and family festivals. Kūčiukai are small, baked wheat or rye flour balls eaten with poppy seed or, rarer, hemp milk. Hemp or poppy seeds are often used in the divinations of calendar winter festivals. In order to learn about their future marriage, girls would “sow” hemp or poppy seeds around the well (or the way to the other world, from the mythological perspective). During Christmas or Shrovetide, girls baked hemp or poppy seed patties, put them on the doorstep of the house, and observed which of the patties was eaten first by the dog invited into the house. Links between hemp and the semantics of the other world are also reflected in the descriptions of Scythians’ funeral rituals by Herodotus. According to the famous historian, the living tried to fall into a trance by intoxicating themselves with the smoke of hemp in order to accompany the dead to the other world. Another Lithuanian Christmas Eve dish is oat kissel (Lith. avižinis kisielius) – a drink made of oat, water, and potato flour. A bowl of oat kissel put on the windowsill on the Christmas Eve without any doubt was left there in order to feed the souls of the dead. Eastern Slavs also used to “feed” the souls of the dead with oat kissel during calendar festivals. Honey, mushrooms, and fish, because of their non-cultural origin, unfamiliar environment or, in other words, non-human (Other) world, are other products to be related to the semantics of the cult of ancestors. Some researchers note a connection between the cult of ancestors and the pig served during Christmas (Vaicekauskas A., 2005. P. 169). The ritual importance of pork dishes in the cycle of Christmas festivals is revealed by the fact that sometimes pork dishes used be put on the Christmas Eve supper table, even though nobody would eat them on that day.

In the first half of the 20th century tradition, hay placed under the tablecloth of the Christmas Eve table was almost always associated with the Christian legend about the birth of the Baby Jesus Christ in a manger. Sometime villagers claim that hay is placed under the tablecloth because a lamb, the Baby Jesus, or God, will lie on it during Christmas Eve night. The latter images are also associated with the Christian cult. Moreover, it was believed that angels, Jesus or God himself would come to every single house and sleep on hay. This way of concrete thinking reflects the rudiments of the mythological consciousness.

It is not difficult to determine what was substituted by Christian saints in the rituals of calendar festivals. In the first half of the 20th century, the not-cleared Christmas Eve supper table left overnight was most often associated with feeding the souls of the dead, whereas in the explanations of respondents born in the third decade of the 20th century and later, Christian saints start to replace the souls of the dead. Respondents claim that Maria, St. Joseph, Christ, etc., come to the supper table during the night of Christmas Eve. Keeping this tendency in mind and remembering who was believed to visit homes “for real” during the night of Christmas Eve, we may guess that hay (or straw) on the ritual table could be devoted to the souls of the dead for them to squat on. Moreover, an analogous purpose of hay was present in funeral customs, when, while carrying the dead to the cemetery, straw was
spread in the fields for the souls of the dead, accompanying the corpse to rest. A sheaf of crops put near the Christmas Eve table was thought to have had a similar purpose.

YULE LOG. Two hundred years ago, Juozas Ambraziejus Pabrėža, an educated monk from Kretinga, wrote down his sermons in which he scolded his contemporaries for certain inappropriate habits. The monk did not approve of a number of things, however, among the traditional customs he mentioned was the pulling of a Yule or Christmas log (Lith. blukis, trinka):

On the first evening of Christmas, they renounce their Jesus Christ and choose Lucifer by going around in a group called Pullers-of-the-Yule-log [Lith. Blokwylkey]. They pull a Yule log all together, men and women, old and young, and even children. Pullers-of-the-Yule-log are of two kinds: public ones that call themselves Pullers-of-the-Yule-log and others who do not go by the name of Pullers-of-the-Yule-log, even though they do the same as the Pullers-of-the-Yule-log,...
The Pullers-of-the-Yule-log sing because they want to get a glass of vodka or because they want to show their voice, … [T]he ones who do not sing beat tabalai [Lith. a wooden percussion instrument made of hung wooden boards], and all make jokes… Pullers-of-the-Yule-log run, dance, and jump. They sing horrible songs and speak in a bad way… Pullers-of-the-Yule-log cause damage to people, throw things around, and break them…. (Skrodenis S., 1972. P. 22–23).

Simonas Daukantas, a famous Lithuanian historian, also wrote about this custom:
Then they pulled a Yule log along the village, beating tabalai and singing a particular song beginning with the words: Tabalai, tai, tai, tai, Old man, move your bones, up, up, up. Clap your hands etc. etc. Then they burned that Yule log – a difficult year had passed, and they hoped that the coming year would be much easier and it wouldn’t be necessary to work as hard as the last year. After having burned the old year, women immediately showed a doll carved from wood that the men would want to take; the women had to hide it, so that the men would not see it and look for it any more. (Daukantas S., 1988. P. 127–128).

Daukantas might have borrowed this last episode from his contemporary Teodor Narbutt, with whom he had a close relationship and, for some time, exchanged information. Narbutt wrote not only about the customs of Lithuanians but also those of Latvians from the surroundings of Bauska, therefore, the episode should be viewed with caution.

The last author to mention singing pullers-of-the-log was the bishop of Samogitia and famous writer Motiejus Valančius, in his “Palangos Juzė” (“Juzė from Palanga”, 1869). After that no one else mentioned the
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custom again. However, it should be noted that at the beginning of the 20th century, variants of the song sung while pulling the Yule log mentioned by Daukantas were written down in Šiaulėnai and Zapyškis by famous Lithuanian ethnographer Balys Buračas. However, Lithuanian folklorist Stasys Skrodenis doubts the authenticity of data collected by Buračas (Skrodenis S., 1972. P. 73).

Different researchers guess that the custom must have been more popular in Latvia, because Latvians called Christmas Eve the evening of the dance or the evening of the Yule log in the 17th century. In the first half of the 19th century, Narbutt, basing his knowledge on Stender’s “Latvian Grammar” and his own observations, wrote:

Latvians still remember the Evening of the Yule Log [Latv. Blukku], i.e., the evening of the block, celebrated on Christmas. During that day villagers hold banquets, eat a lot, drink, and jump over a Yule log, as a symbol of parasitism, and pull it around the village; when celebrating the end of their yearly rest (it used to be at the end of the year according to the old tradition, i.e., in the end of March), they burn this Yule log, as a symbol of parasitism, accompanied by the rituals of sneering and songs. According to other observations [My own fieldwork in the Bauskè locality], after having burned the old Yule log, villagers show a new doll carved from wood and decorated with ribbons. Afterwards women, making noise, seize it [and] make it disappear. It seems to be a visualization of the god of rebirth, Ukapirmas or Time [Lith. Laikas]. (Narbutas, 1992. P. 271).
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It seems that Narbutt, by moving the moment of burning the Yule log to the beginning of March, united the customs of pulling Christmas and Shrovetide logs. In conclusion, it may be noted that even though the chronological frames of data concerning the Latvian tradition are much wider, there is much less information on the Latvian variant than the analogous Lithuanian tradition. With regard to the facts that Daukantas and Narbutt quite often used the same sources and that the latter in his writings united the Christmas and Shrovetide customs, Narbutt wrote about Latvians and Daukantas attributed some of the same facts to Samogitians, the data provided by both authors should be evaluated with caution. Therefore, the most authentic information we have comes from the sermons of Pabrėža, who tells us that the custom of pulling the Yule log was vanishing and only some villagers had the courage to publicly perform it already at the beginning of the 19th century.

The ritual functions of the custom of pulling the Yule log are similar to those of other winter customs of a communal character – pulling the Shrovetide effigy and masked revellers going around visiting houses. People in costumes and pullers-of-the-log both visit homesteads, make noise, play pranks, and demonstrate aggressive behaviour towards the people they meet. Besides, both are treated to food and drinks.

Traditional sweets at the Christmas market
CHRISTMAS “GYPSIES”. During the Christmas period there are a few variations on the disguise custom that we know of – ranging from single masks performing at Christmas youth gatherings, to walking around in groups dressed as the Three Kings. In the villages of northern Lithuania, on the second day of the Christmas festival, so called Gypsies or čigonautojai would start to walk around and visit homes until the Epiphany.

In the first half of the 20th century, the custom of disguising underwent major changes. In northern Lithuania and, later, in Samogitia, masks representing animals started to vanish. In the second quarter of the 20th century, villagers started to make masks from thick paper. In the surroundings of Papilys (Biržai district), paper masks appeared around World War I. In the 1920s–1930s, mass production masks were already available in shops. However, in northern Aukštaitija masks were not very popular, because people preferred to cover their faces with soot or even dyes.

In northern Lithuania the Gypsy was the most important character in the group of mask wearers from the Christmas period. In the traditions of the first half of the 20th century, this character tried to imitate the dress and behaviour of the Romani, whereas in the Christmas period tradition of the 19th and even the first decade of the 20th centuries, the Gypsy mask’s appearance basically did not differ from the mask of a Jew or a beggar worn on Shrovetide. Disguised Gypsies usually wore sheepskin coats inside out and hid their faces under masks made of bark or fur. Their outdoor clothes were bound together with a rope or a straw belt. It is also noteworthy that Gypsies were represented as humped and walking with the help of a walking stick, i.e., old people. The character of the Christmas Gypsy shared some features with that of the Shrovetide Jew; both characters not only stole hens, but also splashed water, teased girls, etc. Very often their actions were directed against unmarried men and girls, which suggests that good luck in the marriage of single people was believed to be associated with the existential fortune of the whole community. The stealing of food, more rarely hens, could indicate a ritual origin as well.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the appearance and actions of disguised Gypsies usually corresponded to those of the Romani. People usually define Gypsies’ clothes as very poor, and often limit
themselves to only one statement, that Gypsies would dress “as Gypsies”. Female Gypsy characters usually wore long patched or pleated skirts, covered their shoulders with shawls, and wore beads on their necks or certain other “jewellery” made from shining paper. Another common attribute of a female Gypsy was a doll wrapped up in a shawl. Men representing Gypsies wore high boots, loose shirts, and hats. They also carried whips and, in order to be more similar to the real Romani, curled their hair.

Most of the actions that Gypsy characters performed were for entertainment. Gypsies used to dance and sing. They also were very “friendly”; they hugged and kissed after having covered their faces with soot. Female Gypsies almost always enjoyed telling people’s fortunes from cards or reading people’s palms, whereas the men offered to exchange something for a horse (or offered to buy it). Women carrying the imaginary baby asked people to give him some food or (more rarely) medicine. Stealing was another traditional trait of the masker-wearers’ behaviour.

Masked revellers used to make a lot of trouble: they would mess up the floor with mud, pour water, soot, prick
people with nails fixed onto the nose of the mask, and frighten children. However, the masters of the house rarely opposed such behaviour. On the contrary, usually they eagerly expected these masked guests and waited for them with cakes and biscuits. At the end of the “tour”, if it was not a weekend the “Gypsies” of the north-eastern Lithuania used to go back to their homes, whereas on holidays they would go to dances or hold parties themselves.

FATHER CHRISTMAS AND OTHER MASK-WEARERS. In Central Samogitia, there was a custom where twelve boys would visit homes in the period between Christmas and the Epiphany. This custom is essentially similar to that of masked revellers visiting homes. The inhabitants of the left bank of the Nemunas had a peculiar variant of the custom called dancing with Šyvis; the central character of the group of mask-wearers was a šyvis, i.e., a horse or a rider on a horse.
In eastern and especially south-eastern Lithuania, where the custom of visiting houses by masked revelers was not known, similar ritual functions were performed by the character of Father Christmas (Lith. Senis Kalėda). In Aukštaitija Father Christmas was associated with the so-called “bleating as lambs” (Lith. “bliovimu avinėliais”), when children imitated the bleating of lambs under the windows of their neighbours’ houses believing that it would guarantee a better flock of sheep in that house. Children usually performed these actions alone, but sometimes it was Father Christmas who would lead them from one house to another. Children would usually walk in a row one behind another with an arm on the other child’s shoulder in front. In other places Father Christmas used to bring such a row of children, called (Tar-) Varmasa, to a party.

In the Dzūkija region, Father Christmas (sometimes with children, but more often alone) visited homesteads and uttered certain verbal formulas that were supposed to bring fortune in farming and personal life. Sometimes the same role would be performed
by a member of the family who would present himself as “Master God with the bread” (Lith. ponas Dievas su Kūčele (duonele)). According to the latest tradition, around the 1920s–1930s, a neighbour dressed up as Father Christmas would already bring children some presents. The latter form of the custom was known not only in Aukštaitija but also in the Lazdijai district. Father Christmas visiting homes, both from the functional (wishing good fortune, being treated with food) and from the semantic perspectives (wearing a sheepskin coat inside out, the “other land” mentioned in his oration, etc.) is identical to a group of masked revelers visiting homes. In other words, Father Christmas is a character with an anthropomorphic appearance that performs alone and does not differ a lot from the Christmas Gypsies of Aukštaitija or the Shrovetide Jews of Samogitia. Moreover, the character of Father Christmas is more common in the localities where the complete form of the ritual (a group of young people wearing masks, visiting every house of the village, performing certain actions, and receiving certain reactions from people that are visited) was not known.

Christmas decoration. Druskininkai. 2012
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Epiphany scene. Kaunas. 2013
Epiphany

Everyone interested in the ethnic history is familiar with the fact that in the first half of the 20th century Lithuanian peasant culture was still syncretic and combined the Christian worldview with elements of the pagan worldview. As usual, older, less known, and more mysterious things attract more attention. Therefore, a major part of ethnographic works analyze the influence of the pre-Christian period on the late tradition. However, no less interesting are the attempts of the Christian Church to take control over certain forms of peasant culture of pre-Christian origin. Receiving a visit from the “Three Kings” in your home is one of the latter.

Ethnographic works usually claim that the festival of the Three Kings is a new phenomenon, which has come to Lithuania from Poland. At the same time, a distinction is made between the masked revellers of Shrovetide in Samogitia by calling it a phenomenon of the ancient Lithuanian ethnic culture and claiming that the custom of the Three Kings visiting homes is Christian, new, and, therefore extraneous to us. However, we must keep in mind that almost all the agrarian rituals of the Lithuanian peasantry of the 18th–first half of the 20th centuries existed in the system of axes of the Christian Gregorian calendar. It is also noteworthy that many calendar festivals, which are now considered to be related to the Christian cult, a century or more ago, were condemned as godless.

A collection of Lithuanian sermons, the so called “Wolfenbütteler Postille”, compiled in the end of the 16th century, mentions the tradition of drawing a cross with a piece of charcoal above the embrasure of the door on the feast of the Epiphany (Vėlius N., 2001. P. 445). This action, much like the divinations, according to the authors of the Postille, was supposed to protect peasants from “devils and thunder.” Putting a cross on the door was considered to be not less heretical than the divinations with kūčia (a traditional Christmas Eve dish, mixture of boiled grain, most often wheat, sweetened cooked with honey), which are also mentioned in the same Postille.
Even though church authorities did not approve of certain elements of the traditional peasant culture, they could not ignore them in order to remain attractive in the eyes of society.

The visiting of homes by people dressed as the “Three Kings” is a relatively recent phenomenon.

In the second half of the 20th century, in some parts of Lithuania the oldest inhabitants still remembered that in their childhood the “Three Kings” did not visit homes. The inhabitants of south-eastern Lithuania sometimes indicate that the festivals of the Three Kings appeared only under Polish rule, i.e., when the
troops of General Zeligowski occupied Vilnius and thus separated it from the rest of Lithuania. At the beginning of the 20th century there were many places in Lithuania where the tradition of visiting homes by the “Three Kings” was not known. On the feast of the Epiphany, people used to put crosses on the doors of their houses (sometimes on those of the sheds as well), sometimes also on windows or even plant trees.

In north-eastern Lithuania, house-visiting by groups of revellers, called Gypsies, lasted from the second day of Christmas until the Epiphany. In the Kupiškis, Molėtai, Panevėžys, and Rokiškis districts, as some records show, the house-visiting of masked revellers would simply join the house-to-house visiting by the “Three Kings”. In the latter cases, the house-visiting, except the name and the time, had nothing in common with the characters representing the biblical Three Kings. Moreover, sometimes people simply claim that, “the Three Kings are the same Gypsies. It is so from ancient times. People said that people dressed as Gypsies would walk around. Before that they used to say that these were the Three Kings” (Kupreliškis, Biržai district).

In the localities where the characters called by the name of the Three Kings visited houses already in the very beginning of the 20th century, in the folk consciousness, the biblical legend of the Three Kings underwent major changes. The appearance and actions performed by the group of “The Three Kings” recalled the Church’s legend telling about the Star of Bethlehem that appeared in the sky after the birth of the Baby Jesus, and its light, which attracted shepherds, wise men, and rulers to come and greet the Messiah. According to the Christian tradition, there were three kings and one of them was dark-skinned. Thus, the group of mask-wearers usually comprised of three men wearing colourful “royal” clothes. One of them would paint his face with dark colours. As people remember, “Balthazar had painted his face with white paint, Caspar – with black paint, and Melchior’s face was normal” (Žiuopeliai, Akmenė district).

Quite often, the group of “three kings” would be led
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by a fourth person (for instance, “an angel”) carrying a beautiful lantern – “The Star of Bethlehem”.

We usually come across these kinds of groups in those localities where community life was influenced by the parish priest. In the canonical data, the clothes of the “three kings” were sewn from colourful fabrics and decorated with shining spangles. People often describe them as “similar to royal.” As one person from Turžėnai village in the Jonava district recalls, “They wear very beautiful clothes. When they come to visit a person and begin to sing hymns, old people even cry. They are dressed in a very beautiful manner and wear royal clothes, as Vytautas the Great [Grand duke of Lithuania], and one of them wears a hat just like Vytautas, only with a cross on it. The others wear red hats and all of them also have robes.” Other people mention red, blue or green robes. Such a group, with the permission of the church, would proceed from house to house in the whole parish, singing hymns, receiving some gifts, and collecting donations for the church. Sometimes the three kings would also give presents to children.

Even though the tradition of house-visiting by the “three kings” was closely related to the Christian ideology and, therefore, its content differed from the house-visiting of mask-wearers, the first tradition had borrowed some elements from the second one. For instance, the “three kings” did not only sing hymns in honour of the Baby Jesus, but also wished fortune in farming and family life in return for some treats or gifts.

In the view of the peasantry, house-visiting by the “three kings” was associated with the house-visiting of mask-wearers during other calendar festivals. In areas more remote from the administrational centre or the parish centre, people sometimes ignored the content of the Christian legend and the group of “three kings” was joined by new characters: an angel, Death, a devil, St Joseph, St Mary, etc. Sometimes these groups constituted of 7–10 or even more people. As it was mentioned above, in northern Lithuania the group of “three kings” was sometimes joined by the group of “Gypsies”. In the latter cases the “kings” did not perform any functional roles but only behaved “in a respectful manner”, while the “Gypsies” would make as much fun and havoc as they could. It is curious to note that sometimes people did not recognize the “three kings” and called them by different names, for instance, “a king and a queen” or “three kings and kinglets”. Sometimes even every mask-wearer was considered to be a “king”. Such processions of “The Three Kings” were inspired by villagers and not by the church.
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Shrovetide. Kaunas Botanic garden. 2012
Shrovetide

Shrovetide (Lith. Užgavėnės) is one of the most unique festivals in Lithuania. From the perspective of the Catholic ritual tradition, Shrovetide is an ordinary Tuesday before the fasting of Lent. However, in the peasant tradition Shrovetide was one of the most joyful and the most eagerly awaited festivals. Complex ritual structures of the festival were equal to or even more complex than those of the most important festivals of the calendar cycle. According to the fundamental features of the festive ritual, Shrovetide is placed not among the spring (as it is common to claim) but the winter festivals. The similarity between Christmas and Shrovetide rituals may be demonstrated by a simple comparison. Both festivals comprise of the rituals of house-visiting by mask-wearers, the pulling of a log, ritual sharing of food, a symbolic emphasis on abundance, and other factors.

It is noteworthy that Shrovetide is the only annual Lithuanian festival that did not enter the festive structures of the Gregorian calendar. In other words, Shrovetide rituals reached the beginning of the 20th century without any significant influence of Christianity. In consequence, the festival has preserved not only the archaic features of its rituals but also very clear regional peculiarities.

Eastern and Central European peasant cultures share many common features, comprising of the most important rituals in calendar festivals. For instance, the most important Shrovetide rituals in all the cultures of the region were those of home-visiting by young villagers in masks, riding in a horse-drawn sleigh, pulling a log or a woman’s effigy with huge breasts, eating together, and swinging on the swing. However, despite the regular structure of the Shrovetide festival, some local features may be noticed even in a relatively small area like present day ethnographic Lithuania. The archaic origin of the peasants’ customary tradition suggests that the local features of the Shrovetide festival reflect the differences between the ethno genetic and cultural developments of different regions of Lithuania.
SHROVETIDE MASK-WEARERS. The popularity of various Shrovetide customs in different ethnographic regions of Lithuania differed. For instance, in eastern, south-eastern, and southern Lithuania the most important moment of the festival, from the ritual perspective, was that of riding in a horse-drawn sleigh, whereas in Samogitia (and partially in central Lithuania) the walking around of masked revellers dominated.

Every mask performed certain actions. After having entered a house, Jew masks sold and bought goods, asked for food, invited girls to dance, blackened family members with soot, and, with a nail or a needle in the nose of the mask, pricked their subject whilst kissing or hugging them. The Gypsy women used to tell people’s fortunes and asked for food and drinks. Beggar masks used to pray and ask for alms.
“The Hungarians” or doctors would offer medicine. As it was already mentioned above, while performing their roles or just making fun, the mask-wearers would also cause some damage by spilling water or sprinkling ash in the house. However, the peasants rarely ever became seriously angry. More often, the mask-wearers were well received and given some treats or gifts. After having visited all the homesteads of the village, the participants of the group usually organized a party where all the village youth would gather.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Shrovetide maskers were known in all Lithuania, even though only the house-visiting tradition of the Samogitians had preserved the shape of an agrarian ritual. Its ritual character is revealed not only by the mask-wearers’ clothes and actions, but also the reaction towards them expressed by the masters of the house. The ritual importance of the house-visiting custom is also revealed by the fact that mask-wearers used to visit all the homesteads of the village without making any exception. Moreover, before entering the house, the maskers interchanged certain verbal formulas with the master of the house. Even though a major part of the roles performed by the maskers did not have any particular purposes and served to amuse, some of them still contained certain elements of a ritual character. For instance, mask-wearers’ actions directed against unmarried girls would lay emphasis on the fact that, according to the opinion of the community, only a married (and ready to become a mother) woman could be considered a full-fledged member of the community. The ritual origin of the house-visiting
custom is also reflected in the tradition of exchanging gifts and wishes. The mask-wearers, having received good gifts in abundance, expressed their wishes, which were supposed to guarantee fortune in farming and personal life.

In other regions of Lithuania, mask-wearers usually took part in youth parties and performed their roles in a spontaneous manner. Someone wearing a bear, a crane, Death or another mask would join a youth gathering and create frivolity there. Such performances did not contain any ritual meaning and the peasantry viewed them as young people’s jokes. It is noteworthy that in the northern part of Aukštaitija, ritual house-visiting as a custom was indeed known, however the custom used to be performed during the Christmas period and on Shrovetide. Moreover, in Western Lithuania masked revellers were called “Shrovetide Jews”, and in Aukštaitija the group was traditionally called by the name of “Gypsies”.

In Lithuania the main zoomorphic and anthropomorphic mask images feature in all the variants of the custom of disguising and have a surprisingly similar appearance. In the first half of the 20th century, the mask of a bear, a crane, monkey (Lith. *malpa*), a horse or a rider on a horse and some other masks could be encountered on the Samogitian Shrovetide, among the Aukštaitian “Gypsies”, in youth gatherings, and, eventually, among the wedding maskers. However, some masks were common only to western Lithuania. For instance, in the eastern part of Aukštaitija, the Jew character was more of an exception, much like the goat mask.
SHROVETIDE EFFIGY. In the European tradition, the culmination of many calendar festivals was marked by the ritual of dressing up and destructing an effigy or a jackstraw. Lithuanian Shrovetide is not an exception, even though pulling a female effigy was more common than destructing it. Unfortunately, ethnographic sources of the first half of the 20th century do not provide much information about the custom. Having finished pulling the effigy, villagers would keep it for the next year’s festival or take it apart. If the female effigy was destroyed, most often it was done by burning it or, quite rarely, by drowning. A male effigy Gavėnas (Lith. Gavėnia – Lent) used to be carried away from the village and thrown on snow or in a ditch. In some rare cases, Gavėnas could also be hanged.

An effigy of a woman fixed on a cart wheel, which had very few variants and the biggest number of semantically significant features, was most widespread in Samogitia. It was usually made by fixing the axle of a wheel on a sleigh, which permitted the wheel to turn. Afterwards a wooden frame was dressed in women’s clothes (a long skirt and a shirt), with accentuated huge breasts and then fixed to the wheel. The head, made from rags, was covered with a kerchief. A
stick would be pushed through the sleeves of the shirt, with a whip, flail or broom fixed to one end. When the sleigh was pulled, the construction made the effigy rotate. It would brandish a whip or a broom and thus beat every incautious spectator or someone who would come too close.

In different parts of Samogitia the name of a female or a male effigy varied, whereas its construction and the actions performed with it were very similar. Near the Baltic Sea it was called Morė, in Central Samogitia the name of Kotrė was more common, in the northern part – Šiuorė (Sorkė), and in Central Lithuania the figure’s name corresponded to its appearance, as for instance, Boba (an old woman), Diedelis (an old man), Pelėnų diedas (an ash man), etc.

Differences between Samogitia and Aukštaitija were more significant. In Samogitia villagers usually made a female effigy, whereas Aukštaitians used to make a male effigy called Gavėnas. In eastern Lithuania the name of Gavėnas was more widespread than the effigy itself. Gavėnas was associated with the prohibition to eat meat during Lent. “Gavėnas is sharpening its knife” people used to say to young children while indicating the shadow of tree branches moving in the sun. Researchers tend to consider the name of Gavėnas an authentic name of an archaic mythical being. However, the name of Lent (Lith. Gavėnia) and its relation to fasting time in the Christian tradition make us doubt about the validity of the idea about the archaic origin of the name (though not the mythical being). The effigy was considered to have certain negative features, and potentially dangerous powers only rarely were called by their real names.
Shrovetide revelers in disguise. Kurtuvėnai. 2013
The female effigy was distinguished by its erotic appearance, whereas the male effigy was attributed with threatening and frightening characteristics. The mask of Gavėnas was usually carved from wood. It used to have a long hooked nose, a beard, and was coloured with red and black paint. Thus, its appearance had many features common to the Jew mask, which was the most important anthropomorphic character in the group of Samogitian mask-wearers. It is noteworthy that both characters sometimes carried a dead piglet or a hen fixed on their waists. In some cases the effigy of a complex construction was substituted by a simple jackstraw carried in a cart or a sleigh.

In the late phase of its existence, both in western and eastern Lithuania, the name of an effigy was sometimes attributed to one of the characters of the group of masked revellers. Most often it was a man dressed in women’s clothes with a whip or a broom in his hand.

THE CUSTOM OF PULLING A LOG. In the Baltic tradition pulling a log is more associated with the Christmas period that Shrovetide. However, this is not necessarily correct. As it was already mentioned, the last time when ethnographic sources made reference to the Yule log was in the middle of the 19th century, whereas the Shrovetide log was still pulled in the first half of the 20th century. As written sources indicate, a Yule log used to be pulled from one homestead to another, whereas during Shrovetide a log was usually pulled inside the house or tied to the legs of unmarried girls of marriageable age. In other words, certain ritual functionality of the Shrovetide log could still be
observed in the first half of the 20th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, pulling of a Shrovetide log was widespread in a relatively small area, comprising of the present districts of Joniškis, Šiauliai, Radviliškis, Pakruojis, probably, Pasvalys, Kėdainiai, and even the northern part of Rokiškis district. The custom of pulling a Shrovetide log was also known in Ukraine, Belarus, and in the Western and Eastern Slavic countries (Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia) The nature and meaning of the custom of pulling a Shrovetide log should be close or even identical to that of carrying an effigy round the village. In both cases destruction of the object or a negative attitude towards it might be observed. When a Shrovetide log was pulled inside the house, the master of the house had to pay a ransom in order to have it removed from the house. An effigy, just like a log, in earlier tradition used to be pulled on Ash Wednesday (Lith. Pelėnų diena) and
the custom was moved to Shrove Tuesday only in the 1920s–1930s. When the areas where the log and the effigy were widespread are compared, we can see that the Shrovetide log appears to cover the “empty” territory between the Samogitian female effigy and the Aukštaitian Gavėnas.

SHROVETIDE SLEIGH RIDING: In Samogitia Shrovetide could not be imagined without mask-wearers’ spree, whereas in the rest of Lithuania the main accent of Shrovetide was riding in a horse-drawn sleigh. All the village youth would take part. Just like other rituals of the calendar cycle, the sleighing custom had several different forms. A variant when an older person would drive village children was quite common. In many cases, though, only children of relatives or close neighbours were driven. From the ritual
From the perspective, the version that applied in the Dzūkija region is of great interest; the custom was performed only by women, for instance, a daughter-in-law would drive her mother-in-law or a daughter-in-law would go sitting on a distaff. Going down the hill on distaffs by girls was also of an agrarian-magic character. However, different forms of the custom had similar meaning. In all of Lithuania, the peasantry associated riding with the future flax (in rarer cases – the whole crop) harvest according to the following principle: the longer you ride – the higher your flax will grow. Local characteristics of the custom might be distinguished in central Lithuania, where the custom of riding in a sleigh was combined with the custom of sprinkling water. The ritual distinctiveness of the region is also revealed by the fact that the area where the latter custom was known partially coincides with the area where the custom of pulling a Shrovetide log was performed.

The custom of riding in a horse-drawn sleigh and pouring water had several variants of different content. Usually it was not called in any specific way. Young people would ride about in a sleigh, carrying a barrel full of water or snow, and would be armed with long whips. In some places the custom was known as “carrying bees” (Lith. vežti bites), more rarely – “going godparents” (Lith. važiuoti kūmais). In the case of “carrying bees”, usually there was only one young man (more rarely, several), with a whip in his hands, carrying several young children, who would perform the role of “bees”. The children, put in an empty barrel or a big basket used for carrying hay, were supposed to imitate the buzzing of bees. In the case of “going godparents”, a boy and a girl dressed as “godparents”,

Shrovetide revelers in disguise. Kaunas. 2012
made a doll – a baby, and took the baby “to be baptized”. The specific circumstances of performing the custom required speed, therefore, only good horses used to be harnessed. Thus, when everything was ready, the sleigh would be driven as fast as possible down the main street of the village. Young children would imitate the buzzing of bees, and the adults in the sleigh would ask for “water, water”. People in the sleigh would try to cross the village as fast as they could and, in such a way, avoid being splashed with water. The rest of the village community, both young people and adults, most often hiding behind fences and waiting for the sleigh with buckets full of water, would try to wet them. The latter, in order to protect themselves, would use whips and water that they had in their barrels. The “godparents” would also try to

Shrovetide revelers in disguise. Kaunas. 2012
cross the village unnoticed, while the villagers would attempt to “baptize the baby”. It is noteworthy that the custom of youth driving in a horse-drawn sleigh on Shrovetide was practiced in all the region of Aukštaitija, whereas water was poured only in the above-discussed cases common to central Lithuania.

In Samogitia the custom of riding in a horse-drawn sleigh was practically unknown. Unfortunately, due to the lack of early sources, it is not possible to decisively claim that the absence of this custom should be considered a typical feature of the ritual structure of the Samogitian Shrovetide festival. Most Shrovetide customs were recorded in the relatively late tradition of the first half of the 20th century and, therefore, theoretically could have a connection with economic and socio-cultural processes that in Lithuania took place at the beginning of the 20th century. In western and south-eastern Lithuania free market relationships started to enter peasants’ life more rapidly than in the other regions of Lithuania. Farming methods, based on the value of economic profit, also modified the forms of ritual activities, which corresponded to the model of the community’s way of living. The real situation of that period is well revealed by personal reactions towards the questions of a researcher asking about the custom of riding in a sleigh in Samogitia: “No one would ride around in a horse-drawn sleigh. No one would let them do it. Horses were needed for work.”

Still in the middle of the 19th century, Liudvikas Adomas Jucevičius in his “Memories of the Samogitian land” (“Wspomnienia Zmudzi”, 1842) mentioned the custom of riding in a horse-drawn sleigh by noblemen and compared it with the Shrovetide sleigh rides in Poland (Jucevičius L. A., 1959. P. 246–247). However, Jucevičius related the sleigh rides of the Samogitian noblemen to the Christmas period, not to Shrovetide. Besides, other authors of the same period do not mention anything similar.
SWINGING ON THE SWING. On Shrove Tuesday people used to swing on swings in all the regions of Lithuania. However, villagers born at the beginning of the 20th century remember that the custom was especially popular in Dzūkija, Samogitia, and several northern districts of Aukštaitija, whereas only a few records are available about swinging in central, eastern, and north-eastern Aukštaitija. The inhabitants of eastern Lithuania most often claim that people would start swinging on swings on Easter.

In the surroundings of Dieveniškės (Šalčininkai district) a different variant of the custom was known, namely, “jumping on a board” (Lith. šokimas lenton). There was a particular way of performing the custom, not to mention who were its participants. A board was put on a log, and two girls stood on its ends. Afterwards, one of the girls, with the help of her body weight, raised and made the other one jump. As in the case of swinging on the swing, it was believed that the higher the girls “jump”, the higher the flax would grow.

PECULIARITIES OF THE SHROVETIDE FOOD TRADITION. Ritual eating is common to every important peasant ritual and has a lot of different forms, as for instance, eating together as a family during calendar and life cycle festivals, eating together as a community by bringing food and eating all in one place, the ritual treatment of strangers, ritual eating before starting or finishing works in the fields, etc. The meaning of ritual eating is based on the capacity to transfer the stable (eternal) state of being, which has not changed from the moment of world creation until present, to the everyday (human) world. In other words, the reasoning is based on the principle of magic – if there is much food during the festival, it will always be so. The same symbolical meaning was attributed to the number of dishes or the number of meals during the day.
Shrovetide “doctor” and “crane”. Kaunas Botanic garden. 2012
On Ash Wednesday (Lith. Pelenų trečiadienis), Lent and, thus the period of fasting starts. For this reason, on Shrovetide villagers strived to eat as much meat and other fatty food as they could. Pancakes are considered to be a traditional Shrovetide dish in all Lithuania. However, in Samogitia the main ritual dish of Shrovetide and other important calendar festivals was šiupinys – a mixture of fatty meat, groats, potatoes, and some other ingredients. As Lithuanian ethnographic historiography explains, šiupinys could have also been known in Aukštaitija and only later, under the cultural influence of Slavs, it was substituted by pancakes. However, it has to be kept in mind that in Aukštaitija (at least in the first half of the 20th century) pancakes only very rarely would be indicated as a traditional Shrovetide dish, whereas pancakes quite often appear in the ritual context of Shrovetide in Samogitia. For instance, mask-wearers used to be treated pancakes. Therefore, it is more logical to claim that šiupinys is a ritual dish of an archaic origin, which is characteristic exclusively to western Lithuania. Pancakes, most probably, should indeed be associated with the Slavic culture, because in eastern European countries the ritual symbolism of pancakes is closely related to the cult of dead ancestors. Thus it is absolutely natural that this dish became ritually important not in Aukštaitija (even though pancakes were more popular in this region) but in Samogitia – in the symbolic context of the house-visiting custom, where the symbolism of the cult of the dead relatives prevailed.

SHROVETIDE EVENING GATHERINGS. Shrovetide evening gatherings were known across all of Lithuania, however, only in western Lithuania
did they have close connections with the ritual structures of the Shrovetide festival. In Samogitia, as a rule, mask-wearers organized such evenings after having visited all the houses in a village. They sold part of the food they gathered during the house-visiting, and, with the money they had made, bought drinks and paid the musicians. The rest of the food was eaten during the gathering. Young people, who had not participated in the house-visiting, would also join the party. Such Shrovetide gatherings traditionally were called “The Jews’ Ball” (Lith. Žydų balius) or “The Jews’ Wedding” (Lith. Žydų vestuvės).
ANCIENT LITHUANIAN CALENDAR FESTIVALS
St George’s Day

The sun and the coming spring made peasants focus on daily issues and the coming works in their homesteads and fields. Manuscripts of the 16th century provide a lot of information about a festival dedicated to the god Pergrubis celebrated before starting to work in the fields. As Maciej Stryjkowski indicates, the inhabitants of Semba, Įsrutis, Ragainė, and Kuršas (who are Samogitians and speak Samogitian as far as Karaliaučius (Germ. Königsberg)) have their own festival that they call Pergrubrinės. According to the chronicler:

In spring, as soon as the snow has melted away and the grass has started to green up, some homesteads start to make beer. They gather in one big house, where their Viršaitis, i.e. the one who makes sacrifices, or rather, a sorcerer, takes a pot of beer, raises it and says a prayer to the god Pergrubis, who brings grass and summer, “Oh our Lord our Pergrubios!... You drive out the winter which has bothered us and make every shoot grow, and every flower, and grass. We are now begging you to make grow well our grain, which we have already sown or will be sowing now, and let us be rich in grain, and would you be so kind as to destroy every weed. (Vėlius N., 2001. P. 549).

Stryjkowski further describes the ritual drinking of beer and mentions the things that other gods would be asked for. For instance, the god Perkūnas would be asked to “tame thunders, lightning, hail, rain, storms, and harmful clouds”; Svaikstikas – “to be so kind as to send light to their crops, meadows, flowers, and animals”; Pilvitis – “to kindly allow to harvest all the grain and bring it into the granaries”.

Almost in the same period, Jan Łasicki in his work “Concerning the gods of Samogitians, and other Sarmatians and false Christians” (“De diis Samagitarum caeterorumque Sarmatarum et falsorum Christianorum”, written in ca. 1582 and published in 1615) wrote that “[o]n St George’s day they make sacrifices to Pergrubrijus that is considered to be the god of flowers, plants, and various herbs.”
(Lasickis J., 1968. P. 28). Afterwards, in a manner similar to Stryjkowski, Łasicki describes the ritual drinking of beer and provides a short prayer to the god Pergrubris, “You drive out the winter; you make the spring more beautiful, and thanks to you valleys and forests turn green.”

The prayers provided by Stryjkowski and Łasicki might not exactly correspond to real ritual formulas, however, their content, without any doubt, is authentic. It partially coincides with the content of songs sung on St George’s day where St George is asked to unlock the ground, release the dew and the earth’s fertility (Greimas A.J., 1990. P. 456).

In the second half of the 17th century, Matthäus Prätorius called Pergrubris a Prussian god “they would call when they wanted to work in the fields, and after having finished the work they would also thank him” (Pretorijus, M., 2006. P. 287). The name Pergrubris, according to Prätorius, derives from the words “to wish to cultivate or process something” (Lith. norėti ką nors įdirbti, perdirbti). It is noteworthy that etymologies of present day researchers have confirmed the validity of
the ideas offered by this 17\textsuperscript{th} century ecclesiastic. For instance, Algirdas Julius Greimas reconstructed the authentic form of the god’s name form, which should be Pergrubis, by demonstrating that other variants of the name, which are mentioned in various sources, can easily be explained by phonetic changes. The etymology of the word Pergrubis, as Greimas states, derives from the Lithuanian word Grubas (Greimas A. J., 1990. P. 454). In the “Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language” grubas is defined as roughly frozen earth. According to the researcher, the god Pergrubis was a vernal fecundator.

In the late tradition of the end of 19\textsuperscript{th}–beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, St George’s day (Lith. \textit{Jurginės}, 23\textsuperscript{rd} of April) was most often associated with driving animals out of the cowshed for the first time in spring. However, in more ancient times St George’s day could have also been the feast of the first ploughing or the feast of the coming spring and the first spring works in the fields in general. Both data provided by the first chroniclers in the 16\textsuperscript{th}–17\textsuperscript{th} centuries and the ethnographic tradition of the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century support this idea. Of course, the beginning of ploughing depended on certain factors, as for instance, climate, the type of the soil, and other things that could not be controlled by man, however, in the surroundings of Dieveniškės, Gervėčiai, and Žeimelis people tried to perform the ritual of ploughing of the first furrow namely on St George’s day. A magic significance would also be attributed to people born on that day. Around Raseiniai, in the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, villagers used to congratulate a child born on St George’s day, adding further that at night time, they be taken to the garden of fruit-trees and would be asked to walk there naked.

On St George’s day, the ritual of visiting the crop would start to be performed. As Liudvikas Adomas Jucevičius wrote at the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, after having visited the crop, peasants would hold a banquet and would roll in a field of rye shouting “god, make it grow, god, make it grow” (Jucevičius L. A., 1959. P. 199). The belief that people and the soil may interchange their vital powers has archaic origins. In the tradition of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the end of the harvest was marked by similar rituals. The ritual of visiting the crop involved going around the fields and holding a banquet right on the field. In Dieveniškės people
used to take the ritual bread with them and go to listen to “what the rye is saying.” If they heard “move further, I will sit here”, they believed that they would have a good harvest, whereas silence was supposed to signify crop failure. In latter cases, the bread was carried around the fields and then taken to the church and placed on the altar of St George.

St George had inherited the role of the messenger of the spring season, and St George’s Day was considered to be the first day of spring. At the beginning of the 19th century, Teodor Narbutt wrote that on St George’s Day young girls used to run towards the rising sun singing that they were going to meet spring. Further, a table with food and drinks was prepared in one of the houses of the village, and young people made merry for long hours there (Narbutas T., 1992. P. 258–259). According to Pranė Dundu-lienė, still at the beginning of the 20th century, in the

St. George’s day feast. Palanga. 2012
surroundings of Mediniai Strėvininkai one of the older villagers would climb up on a hill and announce loudly that spring had come (Dundulienė P., 1991. P. 125). In addition, a connection between St George’s Day and the beginning of spring is also expressed in a text imitating the song of the lark, “Čyru vyru, spring, George, throw your fur coat away” (Lith. Čyru vyru, pavasaris, Jurai mėsk skrandą į pašalį). As it was already mentioned before, prayers to the god Pergrubris, written down by chroniclers in the 16th century, are similar to the “hymns” sung on St George’s Day, as for instance, “George, good evening, George, take the keys, George, unlock the soil, George, release the grass, Silky grass, Dew dripping with honey…” (Lith. Jurja, geras vakaras, Jurja, paimk raktus, Jurja, atrakink žemę, Jurja, išleisk žolelę, Žolelę šilkinę, Raselę meduotą...). (Greimas A. J., 1990. P. 456).

The time and space dimensions of St George’s Day festive rituals also show that it is to be considered the first real spring festival. It is the festival of open space and the light period of the day; all the most significant rituals used to be performed outside and in the daytime and, if possible, on a higher place. For instance, in south-eastern Lithuania women and girls, while singing the songs dedicated to St George, climbed on fences in order to “let their voices be heard higher.”

As the Christian legend goes, St George was a soldier of the Roman emperor Diocletian killed for his Christian beliefs on the 23rd of April. In Eastern Orthodoxy the cult of St George has been known since the 4th century. Later, in the 6th century, it spread to the West. The legends, which offer a narration of St
George’s encounter with a dragon, became popular in the 12th century during the Crusades. It was then that St George became the patron saint of knights. In the Lithuanian peasant tradition, certain elements of the cult of St George can be traced back to the 17th century. In the descriptions of rituals related to driving animals out to pasture for the first time, provided by Prätorius, the main character is already St George.

After being associated with agricultural rituals, St George inherited the functions of several characters of the pre-Christian mythology. As Greimas claims, St George might be viewed as a Christian substitute of the god Pergrubis, who was considered to be the harbinger of spring and the animator of spring’s viridity. St George also inherited the functions of springtime Perkūnas – the revitalizer of the soil and the liberator from the grasp of evil powers (Greimas A. J., 1990. P. 457). The fact that St George, the hero and the patron saint of knights, became the patron saint of animals and the ruler of predators – bears, wolves, and foxes, is also of great interest. As people say, wolves are the greyhounds of St George; they take what he indicates. St George Day’s prohibitions are connected to the latter beliefs, “St George is the patron saint of animals. Animals pray to him on that day. You cannot work with them [animals], otherwise, you won’t be lucky or
they will die. If [on St George’s Day] you work the soil – wolfs will kill colts. It is prohibited to weave or to warp on St George’s Day – wolfs will kill animals. One cannot lend anything because, otherwise, wolfs will kill animals”.

As it was already mentioned, the rituals related to driving animals to pasture were also associated with St George’s Day. It was believed that if the cattle were driven out earlier, they would become possessed by devils. The mythical consciousness viewed the first driving out of animals to pasture as an exceptionally important event related not only to the change of the saint protector (in winter it is St Nicholas who is supposed to protect animals in the sheds) but also to driving the cattle out of the (close) space inhabited by humans, back into the hands of nature, i.e., an open and dangerous (both to people and their property) space out of the control of humans.
The rituals that accompanied the driving of the animals out of the cowshed, described by Prätorius in the second half of the 17th century, survived until the beginning of the 20th century with hardly any alterations. According to the chronicler, Nadruvians or Skalvians, while driving their cattle out for pasture for the first time, used to hold the following celebration: the master of the house guided the cattle to an enclosure in front of the cowshed, fed the animals, and, afterwards, went around them three times while saying a prayer and asking God to protect his cattle. Eventually, St George was addressed by asking him to be kind to the cattle and not to let his greyhounds, i.e. bears, wolfs, and foxes, harm it. Afterwards the shepherd guided the cattle to the meadows and, while the cattle were pastured, everyone fasted and did not eat anything. In the evening, when the cattle were taken back home, a banquet was held. During the celebration, the master of the house, while holding a bowl with a ritual drink, addressed God again by asking for good weather, rain, leaves, grass, and health for his animals, and repeated the request to St George by asking him not to harm the animals once again. Then, after having poured a part of the drink on the floor, he drank the remainder and, afterwards, everyone ate and had a good time (Pretorijus M., 2006. P. 463–464; 506–507). Going around animals,
thanking God for healthy animals, and asking to take care of them in the future, fasting while waiting for animals to be taken home, and ritual eating and drinking – all these elements may also be encountered in the rituals performed during St George’s Day at the beginning of the 20th century. It is interesting to compare the above mentioned 17th century narrative with St George Day’s rituals of Dzūkians, performed at the beginning of the 20th century:

The master of the house cuts a big piece of bread, puts it into a bag, and takes four eggs and a juniper twig. He puts the eggs under the threshold of the cowshed in order to protect eggs from being broken by animals. He takes the lock and puts it into his bag. The master goes around his animals and says seven prayers to St George asking him to let the cattle be out to pasture in peace so that no animal would fall prey to wolves. Then he touches the cattle with the sanctified juniper twig and puts eggs under the threshold again.
ANCIENT LITHUANIAN CALENDAR FESTIVALS

St. George’s day feast. Palanga. 2012
After having returned to the house, the master signs the eggs in order to recognize them. During the Church festival dedicated to St George, the mistress puts those eggs on the altar and gives the bread to beggars. And the master locks the lock and hides it for the whole year – thus he locks the jaws of wolves; the wolf will not kill the cattle of this master even at night. But if an animal goes out onto the road, a wolf will kill it. The wolf’s jaw stays open when he is on a road. But he does not kill in the forest. (Zalanskas P. 285, 1983)

As the two narratives indicate, the rituals performed while driving animals out to pasture basically did not change over three centuries. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was still possible to observe the same ritual moments. It is also worth noting that the belief concerning the wolf’s jaw, which stays open on the road, has a close connection with archaic images of the mythical worldview. The peasant attributed the meaning of the underworld’s space (the road leading to the other world) to a tiny village street. In the Indo-European tradition, the wolf is considered to be the animal most closely related to the underworld. The space of the road is the space of the other (non-human) world; therefore, human magic is worthless there.

Magic rituals performed while driving animals out to pasture were rich in symbolism. Going around the cattle was combined with spreading the scent of herbs that had been blessed in church, sprinkling them with holy water, and tapping them with a juniper twig. Along with a candle, the ritual bread and eggs, other universal symbols of abundance and vital powers were also used. Putting a scythe, an axe or scissors under the threshold was related to an especially archaic belief where it was said that representatives of the other world were afraid of metal. In other cases the principle of magic identity between an action and the reaction towards it was employed, as for instance, in the case when a lock used to be carried around the cattle and then locked (as if the jaws of wolves were locked). Smaller domestic animals and birds would be sprinkled with holy water, scented with blessed herbs, and driven through the hub of a wheel.

St George’s festival preserved the reflections of the ancient sacrifice rituals. In the 16th century, before starting their work in the fields, Lithuanians used to sacrifice a pig to the goddess of the earth (deia telluri) (Vėlius N., 2001. P. 626). At the end of the 19th century, the custom of killing a black cock, a hen or a calf on the eve of St George’s Day and sprinkling its blood on animals, sheds, and feeding-troughs was still practiced in the surroundings of Antalieptė. In the first half of the 19th century, Jucevičius mentioned various wax figures of animals put on the altar of St George in the district of Zarasai (Jucevičius L.A., 1959. P. 198). At the end of the 19th century, a calf, covered with a shawl, would be taken to a church in the surroundings of Liškiava; the person would kneel down with that calf in his hands and then bring it to the priest “as a sacrifice”. In the tradition of the first half of the 20th century, it was various animal products that were sacrificed on the altar of St George. Bread baked “for the domestic animals” would also be taken to the church; it was usually given out to beggars.

Ritual eating and drinking is an obligatory part of any festival’s ritual structure. On St George’s Day
ritual eating and drinking was present during all the most important moments of the festival, as for instance, ploughing of the first furrow and visiting the crops. A shepherd, after having successfully driven the cattle back home, was treated to milk products and eggs. In the surroundings of Tauragė, horse herders used to visit houses, collect some eggs, and then cook scrambled eggs.

On the eve of St George’s Day, village lads visited houses in a manner similar to that of the mask-wearers of winter festivals or Easter lalautojai (people visiting houses and singing certain Easter songs). After having knocked at the door, they first uttered a ritual formula, “George has arrived on his white horse” (or “George is arriving on an ash-grey horse”, if some snow had fallen on the ground. People believed that the harvest would be especially good in that case). After that they wished their hosts luck in farming and were given presents. Village youth would then hold a banquet and eat the meals that had been collected. These kinds of youth parties were called jurginėjimas, i.e. walking around on St George’s Day. During the party young people honoured all the people named George, cooked scrambled eggs, and played with boiled eggs. There was also a tradition to decorate eggs called Georgies (Lith. jurgučiai) on St George’s Day.
ANCIENT LITHUANIAN CALENDAR FESTIVALS
Easter

Just after the sun, while moving through the vault of heaven, passes the astronomical point of the spring equinox, the Christian world celebrates its most significant festival commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The origin of Easter is linked to the ancient Jewish culture. During the first month of the ancient Jewish calendar, when the full moon rises (on the fourteenth day of the month of Nissan), Jews celebrate Pesach, the festival commemorating the story of liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt. Later this festival was adopted by the early Christian communities. However, the moon calendar used by ancient Jews does not correspond to the sun calendar, which was established in the Western world. The date of the Easter festival, counted according to the moon calendar, falls out on different days of the week in the sun calendar, whereas Christ, according to the Christian belief, resurrected on Sunday. Early Christian communities of Asia Minor treated this discrepancy with tolerance. Eventually, the problem was addressed when Christianity spread in the western part of the Roman Empire.

In A.D. 325 the First Council of Nicaea established the date of Easter as the first Sunday after the spring equinox. However, it did not completely solve the problem, because in the West the spring equinox was reckoned to be on the 18th of March, whereas due to more precise astronomical observations, in the Eastern part of the Empire the spring equinox was considered to be on the 21st of March. Disputes concerning the date of the equinox lasted until the 8th century A.D., when, finally, the 21st of March was recognized as the right date. This date is taken into consideration until now; therefore, Easter always falls on a Sunday between the 22nd of March and the 25th of April. The dates of Ascension Day, Pentecost, and Corpus Christi change in the same manner, because these festivals are celebrated after certain period of time after Easter. In Medieval Europe, despite the decision that was mentioned before, there were attempts to associate the date of Easter with
fixed dates of the sun calendar. For instance, in the 10th–13th centuries the 25th of March was considered to be the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin (or Lady Day) in the Western world. In the peasant calendar this festival, called Blovieščiai or Gandrinės, also marked the date of the spring equinox. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, accordingly, was linked to the 27th of March. It is interesting to note that in the Christian tradition the 25th of March was also considered to be the day when the world had been created or, in some countries, New Year’s Day.

The meaning of Easter in the context of the Christian culture defines the role of this festival in the peasant tradition. In the eastern part of Central Lithuania, Easter was considered to be the main festival of the year. This festival has the longest cycle of festive rituals. After having started on Palm Sunday, Easter rituals continue until the next Sunday after the festival. At the same time it is the festival that has probably had the most influence from Christianity. No other Lithuanian festival has peasant rituals that are so interrelated with the rituals performed in the Church.
ANCIENT LITHUANIAN CALENDAR FESTIVALS

PALM SUNDAY. Palm Sunday (Lith. *Verbų sekmadienis*) is celebrated on the Sunday before Easter. In the Christian tradition, palms blessed on Palm Sunday represent the palm branches the crowd scattered in front of Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. In Samogitia the palm was substituted with a *verba* – a branch of juniper, and in Aukštaitija – with a willow branch. Very often the verba would be made of both juniper and willow branches. Less commonly, branches from other trees (for instance, an oak) would be added, or the palm would be decorated with paper flowers. The inhabitants of the surroundings of Vilnius made very fancy palms from dried flowers and bent lengths of straw, collected during summer.

The Lithuanian peasant, first of all, viewed verba as a manifestation of vital powers, expressed by the juniper’s ability to remain green in winter and the vitality of the willow. These powers were of great importance in the context of the new agricultural season. Moreover, it was believed that the vital powers of plants could be transmitted to people, animals or a field of crops. In addition, a palm, after having been blessed in the church, was supposed to gain protective powers; for this reason, villagers use them for the protection of the house against lightning, the protection of crops against storms, the protection of animals against diseases, and in other similar cases.

HOLY WEEK. Lithuanians have many customs and beliefs linked to Holy Week (Lith. *Didžioji savaitė*). During Holy Week, everyday domestic activities, as for instance, weaving, milling, washing, sowing, etc. were prohibited. It was believed that the wind would lift off the roofs, lightning would strike the house or
hail storms would destroy the crops if a prohibition was violated. In the surroundings of Tverečius (Ignalina district) people would not use any lighting during Holy Week, because Jesus Christ was imprisoned in the dark during that period. The outcomes of actions performed during this sacred time were believed to be felt during the whole year. For instance, it was believed that if a person had a bath on Holy Thursday (Lith. Didysis ketvirtadienis), he or she would be clean all year long. In all of Lithuania nobody would lend anything on that day in order not to lend away their fortune (fortune in farming).

HOLY THURSDAY. In folk tradition, Holy Thursday was called Clean Thursday, because on that day the house used to be tidied up and aired, chimneys would be cleaned, animals were castrated, and people bathed. It was believed that combing hair on that day could help to get rid of head lice; whereas sweeping the house and throwing the sweepings over the fence into the neighbour’s yard could help to get rid of fleas, lice, and other parasites for ever. The same devices for the extermination of parasites were also used on Holy Saturday. On Holy Thursday, before sunrise, people used to bathe in cold water (snow) believing that it might help to cure itches and ulcers. Before sunrise, Aukštaitians would ride on a poker or steal fire-wood (chips) from their neighbours in order to find a lot of birds’ nests with eggs during summer.

After having cleaned the houses, villagers decorated them with openwork straw figures, so-called
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spiders or gardens. Bird figures made from hollow egg-shells by fixing paper or straw wings were especially popular; they would be hung from the ceiling.

GOOD FRIDAY. In folk belief, Good Friday (Lith. *Didysis penktadienis*) was linked to the suffering of Jesus Christ. People used to keep quiet during that day; they spoke quietly and avoided any unnecessary noises in order “not to wake up” the dead God. Nobody cleaned dust in order not to make it go into Jesus Christ’s eyes. It was also believed that only sorcerers would go to confession on Good Friday.

HOLY SATURDAY. On Holy Saturday (Lith. *Didysis šeštadienis*) fire and water were blessed in the church. Blessed fire was taken home and was used to relight the fire in the house. Easter dishes had to be cooked on the blessed flames and it was believed to have strong protective powers. Therefore, it was also used to make a fire in the fields in order to get rid of pests. On Easter morning the blessed fire would be carried around the house in order to protect it from fire. In the surroundings of Dūkštas, people believed that the master’s horses would “burn like fire”, i.e., be fat and fast, if the fire was taken home safely. On Holy Saturday the blessed water was sprinkled on buildings in order to protect them from the god Perkūnas that might set them on fire by lightning, on the soil – in order to protect it from weeds, and on the grain ready to be sowed – in order to keep away plant lice. Blessed water was also used as a medicine to cure fright and other diseases. A dying family member was sprinkled with blessed water in order to drive away evil spirits. People in all of Lithuania believed that the person who was the first to take the blessed water would also be the first to finish his work.

RITUAL ACCENTUATION OF THE END OF LENT. When Lent was coming to an end, in many places of Lithuania children used to take a board, draw a herring with chalk or coal, then tie the board to a cord and pull it around the churchyard. According to Motiejus Valančius and Balys Buračas, on Holy Wednesday children pulled the board around the churchyard just once, on Holy Thursday – twice, and on Good Friday – three times (Kudirka J., 1990. P. 33). Even though the custom of “pulling a herring” is clearly linked to the context of Lent, it also echoes the custom of pulling a log, which is common to the most important winter festivals.

Aukštaitians used to drive out (shoot) the symbol of Lent Gavėnas in a similar manner. The sacristan of the church or someone else would disguise himself as a scarecrow (Lith. *baidyklė*), put on an act in the churchyard, and then be driven away by soldiers guarding the coffin of Jesus Christ or by the shots from the “Mauser cannon (Buračas B., 1993. P. 223).”

HOLY NIGHT. In all of Lithuania, even though no liturgical services were held, people used to stay in the church during the whole night before Easter; the believers sang hymns and moved around the Stations of the Cross. In many churches young people used to put on the clothes of the “Roman soldiers” guarding the coffin of Jesus Christ, whereas others dressed as “Jews”; the latter were viewed in a negative way. The appearance and behaviour of “Jews” was similar to that of the Samogitian Shrovetide characters. Young men wearing the masks of Jews bothered the soldiers,
tried to “steal” the body of Jesus Christ, and, during the morning procession, went in the direction opposite to that of the worshippers. During the night mask-wearers also helped people in the church stay awake by putting a bottle with ammonia under their noses, hobbling their legs, pricking them with a needle fixed in the nose of the mask, etc.

The earliest information about Easter mask-wearers in Lithuania reaches us from the beginning of the 19th century. The bishop of Samogitia Juozapas Arnulfas Giedraitis in his pastoral letter written in March 1812 was indignant that on Easter in some churches people disguised as soldiers had put “ugly masks” on their faces (Kudirka J., 1990. P. 28). Later, this information was repeated by Motiejus Valančius in his “Žemaičių vyskupystė” (“The Diocese of Samogitia”, 1848). However, regardless of the negative opinions expressed by church authorities, at the beginning of the 20th century Easter plays were still performed in some churches of Samogitia and Aukštaitija. Later the
custom rapidly disappeared. The tradition (with short breaks) has survived until today only in the village of Pievėnai (Mažeikių district).

In the late 19th century, in some churches of Aukštaitija people used to shoot from small “Mauser cannons” during Easter night and during the morning procession. Guards of the coffin of Jesus Christ shot in the churchyard in the same manner. This custom was also adapted by people in the villages who used to fire rifles in their homesteads “in order to scare away evil spirits”.

On Easter morning everyone went to church. Early in the morning, before sunrise, the Resurrection and holy Mass were celebrated. In all of Lithuania until World War I after the Easter service the priest used to bless food, such as decorated Easter eggs or natural eggs, bread, salt, Easter pie, ham, bacon, sausages, butter, cheese, etc. This custom survived longest in south-eastern Lithuania. The food would be placed beside a lateral or even the central altar, along the church (beside the benches) or in the churchyard. After the service villagers would hurry home in order to break their fast.

THE FESTIVAL’S AGRICULTURAL CONTENT. Lithuanians started to celebrate Easter after having been Christianized. However, in the flow of time, this festival acquired archaic ritual structures common to agricultural rituals and, thus, reflects the worldview of ancient Lithuanians just like the festivals with “pagan roots” do. When the connections between the 19th–20th centuries peasant culture and the pre-Christian experience of Lithuanians are discussed, it is especially important to take into consideration the
fact that, in the late tradition, the archaic-ness of an agricultural ritual is not linked to the period when it originated or the nature of its origin but rather to the internal characteristics of the peasant consciousness. In the peasant perception, the importance of any festival directly depends on the stereotypes of the ritual behaviour preserved by the tradition. Festive rituals of the peasant calendar were rarely limited to the date or dates indicated in the Gregorian church calendar. Still not long ago Easter was celebrated for 3-4 days. Traditionally, the first day was reckoned to be the day of calm. On the second day villagers started engaging in various forms of entertainment and could visit others. The third or the fourth day of the festival was called Ice Day or the Day of Hail (Lith. Ledų diena). On that day people did not do any agricultural jobs because it was believed that hail would damage the corn of those who dared to work in the fields.

The content of ritual structures of Easter is similar to that of other important calendar festivals. On Easter much importance is given to the festive time, which induces certain kinds of human behaviour and prohibits others. A properly performed ritual action was supposed to guarantee fortune in the future, whereas improper behaviour could bring misfortune. A lot of Lithuanian Easter customs were also common to other calendar festivals, as for instance, pouring water on one another, swinging on the swing, eating a lot, and performing divinations related to fortune in farming and personal life. In addition, as it was already mentioned above, Easter rituals involved the blessing of palms, fire, water, and food in a church. The essence of the latter rituals was also associated with fortune in farming and personal life.

SACRALIZATION OF THE FESTIVE TIME. The significance of Easter night and morning was emphasized by various beliefs. For instance, in the surroundings of Liškiava people believed that at midnight the water in streams turns into wine. In all of Lithuania it was also believed that on Easter morning the rising sun changes its colours and dances (swings) in the vault of the sky. Special attention was paid to the time of the Easter procession, which was considered to be very favourable for magic rituals performed in order to get personal profit, protect oneself or one’s property or, on the contrary, harm somebody. The magic of doing something faster than others was based on the special characteristics attributed to sacred time too. Everybody strove to be the first to take the blessed water or get the “new fire”. It was also believed that the first who got up or was the first to make up the fire on Easter morning would also be the first to finish all his agricultural jobs. The same result could be achieved by turning back home first from church. Therefore, after the morning service villagers would start a peculiar race in order to see who would be the first to come home. If the homestead was on the other side of the church, farmers would leave their gates opened already before leaving for church in order to be the first to reach their land.

BELIEFS AND PROHIBITIONS. Some beliefs of the first day of Easter corresponded to those of Holy Week. In all the country people believed that the one who had a bath on Easter morning before sunrise would cure themselves of ulcers and other skin
diseases. After having returned home from church, villagers used to ask other members of the family, “Where are the fleas?” Someone would answer that the fleas had gone away to one or another neighbour, and it was believed to become true. Other home parasites were “driven away” in a similar manner.

EASTER BREAKFAST. Ritual eating was an essential part of the ritual structure of all the important peasant festivals. People sought to have a great supply of food and drinks on their tables during the main annual festivals because it was believed to guarantee a rich coming year and enough bread for the family throughout the whole year.

Easter breakfast dishes were first of all taken to the church and blessed there. Decorated Easter eggs (Lith. velykaičiai, margučiai) were the most important dish of Easter breakfast. They were put in a bowl decorated with branches of lycopodium, leaves of cowberries,
The so called Easter “fir-tree” made from a wooden stove with branches and nests to hold Easter eggs.

The breaking of the Lent fast started with eating the decorated Easter eggs. Most often each family member would take one egg, hit their neighbour’s egg with it, and then eat it. Sometimes one egg was divided amongst all the family members, just like the Christmas wafer on Christmas Eve.

Roasted piglet is another traditional Easter dish. Many women of the house also used to bake special Easter pies. Other festive dishes were meat jelly and cheese. Soups (Easter beetroot soup) and stewed cabbage were eaten only in Central Lithuania.

On the occasion of the festival, villagers shared their food with beggars and poor neighbours, whereas the remains were used in agrarian magic. For instance, the bones that remained after having eaten a ham used to be buried in the fields; they were supposed to protect the crop from calamities or vermin.

AGRICULTURAL RITUALS. The custom of pouring water on one another is present in most calendar festivals. This ritual was believed to guarantee enough humidity for the crop. Sometimes the ritual had other specific aims, namely, it had to guarantee that cows would give plenty of milk and that bees would swarm successfully. On Easter people traditionally used to pour water on one another for two days; on the first day young men poured water on the girls and on the second day, vice versa.

In a major part of Lithuania, the season of swinging on the swing started on the second day of Easter; in the first half of the 20th century Shrovetide swings were not very widespread. Traditionally a village
would make only one swing where all the village youth and even older people would gather in order to swing. Depending on the construction type, one, two or even four people could swing together. Everyone would strive to swing as high as he or she could, because it was believed to make the crop grow higher.

EASTER EGGS. Even now any Lithuanian could hardly imagine Easter without Easter eggs. Many people dye eggs on Easter, however, it is not known where and when the custom originated. The oldest dyed eggs date to the 4th century A.D. and were found in the surroundings of Worms in Germany, and in Opole, Poland, eggshells decorated with wax dating to the 10th century were discovered. In Lithuania the oldest egg-form handicraft articles made of stone, bones, and clay were found in the cultural layers of from the 8th century. In Lithuanian written sources the Easter egg was mentioned for the first time in the dedication of Martynas Mažvydas’ „Giesmė šv. Ambrazejaus“ ("A Hymn of St Ambrose", 1549), where the author ordered his text be given away as a present

Jonas Balys, basing his statement on the fact that Easter eggs are widely spread in Slavic countries, whereas our neighbours in Latvia do not know this tradition, guessed that the tradition of decorating Easter eggs had arrived in Lithuania from the Byzantine Empire via the Slavic peoples. In Lithuania eggs used to be dyed not only on Easter but also on St George’s Day and Pentecost. This suggests that the dyeing of eggs, which is linked with archaic semantics, could have come from St George’s Day. The latter festival has close connections with the Lithuanian pre-Christian religious tradition. Besides, both Easter and St George’s Day are celebrated in the same period and, sometimes, even on the same day.

RITUAL SYMBOLISM OF THE EGG. In the ritual context, the egg performs similar functions to those of grain. The symbolic meaning of both is based on their ability to give life. Other specific properties of the egg – its thin shell and oval form – context can also be attributed certain symbolic meanings in the context of a specific ritual. For instance, in the rituals of driving out the cattle to pasture (on St George’s Day) the unbroken / cracked egg was associated with animals’ health / diseases, and its oval form used to be linked to the thickness of an animal, whereas thickness, in turn, was associated with health.

An egg is an animal product. For this reason, eggs as ritual food were often used in the festivals that focus on farming. However, the symbolic meaning of

Chapel made from the trunk of the tree. Bijotai. Tauragė district
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the egg is not limited to the sphere of farming. As a universal symbolical expression of vital powers (health, growth), the egg, from the viewpoint of archetypal consciousness, could have been a primary source of the universe and, which might be quite hard to imagine at present, a symbol of funeral rituals. Lithuanians and other peoples in the whole world narrate etiological legends about an egg laid by a duck (or another waterbird) from which the world originated. According to Buračas, peasants living in Kupiškis had a tradition to put an egg into the coffin with a dead person. Similar symbolical associations shared by the first Christians could have influenced the ritual role of the Easter egg in Christianity.

The colours of the 19th–20th-century Lithuanian Easter eggs also convey symbolic meanings. Traditionally, black and brown were the dominant colours, whereas patterns used to be white (yellowish). According to Victor Turner, an outstanding researcher of rituals, black, red, and white colours made up the basis of the oldest symbolic system. It shows that the traditional colours of Easter eggs could have had connections with the more archaic layers of the ethnic culture.
DYES AND DYEING TECHNIQUES. Aniline dyes for dyeing eggs started to be used between the 19th and the 20th centuries, even though some people prefer traditional natural vegetable dyes up to now. In the 1970s and 1980s, special bright coloured lacquers were quite widespread. Today the most popular are four or six colour aniline dyes, even though many inhabitants of cities have started to decorate Easter eggs with special stickers and do not use the traditional techniques any more.

The inhabitants of traditional Lithuanian villages dyed eggs with natural vegetable dyes, namely, onion skins, black alder bark, rust, tree lichen, rye sprouts, cornflower and camomile flowers, and even boiled beetroot liquid. Dyers of eggs, by using different dyeing materials, could obtain different shades of brown, black, green, yellow, violet, and blue. Black Easter eggs were especially popular. It is not a surprise, because in the peasant culture the colour black was first of all associated with the soil where the crop grew. Red (villagers most often attributed this word to different shades of brown) was the second most popular colour, which was associated with the red colour of blood. In southern Lithuania and in the southern part of central Lithuania (around Kaunas) violet colour was also common.

DECORATING TECHNIQUES. Polychrome eggs dyed in several colours and decorated with various patterns were popular in all the territory of Lithuania, whereas monochrome Easter eggs were liked in northern and central Lithuania. Both the colour of an egg and its decorative patterns were supposed to enhance (or to emphasize) the symbolic meaning of its vital powers. However, it should be noted that researchers’ attempts to explain the symbolic information encoded in the patterns of Easter eggs, in very many cases, are based on speculations rather than valid facts.

Easter eggs may be patterned or scratched. In order to obtain patterns, beeswax (today also candle tallow) is used. Melted beeswax is applied to a warm raw egg; thus wax does not become solid rapidly and permits the decorator to finish the work. Today, in order to draw a smooth line or dots of the same size, drawing pin heads are used, whereas in the traditional village better results were obtained by applying wax with a vetches’ seed fixed on the end of a wooden stick. After having boiled such an egg in the vegetal dyes, spots covered with beeswax remain white. Patterns may be also drawn on a coloured egg and if the procedure is repeated for several times, several patterns of different colours may be obtained. However, only experienced decorators have the courage to use the latter technique.

Scratching is considered to be a less complicated and more rapid technique than that of drawing patterns with beeswax. For scratching one needs hard-boiled monochrome eggs and certain tools – a simple knife or a special scratching tool. Different tools help to obtain lines of different thickness, allow drawing a bigger or a smaller picture, and influence the precision. For instance, the most beautiful openwork patterns may be obtained by scratching with a needle.

There were several other techniques for the decoration of Easter eggs; however, they were not as popular as decorating with beeswax or by scratching. For instance, Dzūkians used to decorate monochrome...
Easter eggs from Punskas region

Eggs by drawing a pattern with a dilute solution of salt or some other acids. Acids would eat away dyes and thus make white patterns become visible. A similar method was used by Prussian Lithuanians in the 19th century; they would draw patterns with beeswax and make the acid eat away the colour. By employing this method, it was possible to obtain colourful patterns on a white background.

Nowadays the so-called technique of a “negative print” is popular. A “negative” print of a leaf might be obtained by putting leaves of a plant on an egg, wrapping the egg up in a cloth, and boiling in dyes. The so-called “marble” technique is similar to that of “negative print”. In this case an egg is covered with pieces of paper, onion skins, leaves, and other materials and then wrapped up in a cloth. When the egg is taken out of dyes, it becomes patterned in chaotic colourful spots.

PATTERNS. In the end of the 19th century, archaeologist, painter and the first researcher of Lithuanian Easter eggs Tadas Daugirdas wrote that, “[t]he infinite richness of patterns makes you think that every person decorating an Easter egg is led by his or her fantasy. However, after having looked at the patterns more carefully, we may clearly see that it is not fantasy but tradition that plays a more important role here (Ramonienė F, 1977. P. 94).”

Easter eggs most often used to be decorated with geometrical or vegetal patterns. Other ornaments, as for instance, images of people, animals, birds, plants or inscriptions (years, names, short greetings, slogans) were quite rare.

Compositional patterns of Lithuanian Easter eggs are usually composed of identical components: dots, crosses, stars, suns, and other elements. At first glance, many of these patterns might seem very similar. However, it would be a very difficult or even impossible task to find two completely identical eggs, because re-grouping of one or another element results in creating a new pattern.

Art critics distinguish four basic schemes of ornament composition. When the first one is applied, the egg is vertically divided into two equal sections. Thus the ornament is further composed in the middle of each section. The second scheme is similar to the first one only that both ends of the egg are decorated as well. The third scheme comprises “belt” ornaments. If a wide “belt” pattern is composed in the middle of the egg, the ends of the egg usually are not decorated; but if the pattern is narrower, suns or other similar ornaments are drawn in the ends of the egg. In rarer cases, a “belt” is composed cornerwise around the egg. When the fourth scheme is applied, the pattern is composed beginning from the end (both ends) of the egg.
However, some Easter eggs do not fall under any category, as for instance, eggs with realistic flowers, leaves, birds or those representing certain subject themes.

ENTERTAINMENT WITH EASTER EGGS. Just after having left the church, villagers started testing the hardness of their Easter egg shells. Formerly every villager, both young children and elderly people, used to take part in games with Easter eggs. Egg rolling was one of the most popular games throughout all of Lithuania; the winner, i.e., the one who had broken or hit another player’s egg, took possession of both eggs. It is interesting to note that the breaking of Easter eggs was even called “taking away” (Lith. atimtinės).

On Easter there was a tradition to give eggs to children. At night Easter eggs used to be left in a child’s shoe by the imaginary Easter Woman (Lith. Velykė, Velykų bobutė) or, in rare cases, Easter Man (Lith. Velykis). Children also went to collect Easter eggs from their neighbours (especially godparents); after having come to the neighbour’s yard, the child would say a rhymed oration and get a few Easter eggs in return. The youngest children asked for eggs by putting one or a few fingers into their mouth. The number of fingers inserted into the mouth was supposed to indicate the number of Easter eggs that the child wanted to receive.

In southern Lithuania Easter eggs were also given to young people visiting houses and singing Easter songs (Lith. lalauninkai). This custom’s ritual structure was similar to that of house-visiting during winter festivals. Dzūkian lalauninkai would first of all ask for permission to sing a religious song and then sing it. Afterwards, they would sing certain laudation songs or say orations and, in the end, receive Easter eggs. Young people who were not allowed to enter the house or were not given presents, just like the mask-wearers of the winter festivals, used to utter “negative” wishes, which were supposed to have the power of a spell. The latter wishes could have sounded something like, for instance, “I wish your hens lay stones instead of eggs” or similar.

Formerly the custom of house-visiting and collecting eggs by young people was known throughout all of Lithuania, whereas in the surroundings of Batakiai and Skaudvilė (Tauragė district) in southern Samogitia, the custom was performed by a group of mask-wearers.

SUNDAY AFTER EASTER. The Sunday after Easter (Lith. Atvelykis) was considered to mark the end of Easter. Samogitians also called this day “Little Easter” (Lith. Velykėlės or Mažosios Velykėlės), the inhabitants of Central and northern Lithuania – “Children’s Easter” (Lith. Vaikų Velykos), and Dzūkians – “Accompanying” (Lith. Pravadai, the word derives from the Slavic languages). On that day people dyed eggs again (or kept several dyed eggs for the occasion), children visited their godmothers, and young people tested the hardness of their eggs.
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Easter eggs decorated by Dalė Augustaitienė, Sigita Grėbliauskaitė, Laura Lukianskienė, Daiva Morkūnienė, Irena Saltonienė, Herminija Vokietaitienė

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Easter eggs decorated by Dalė Augustaitienė, Sigita Grėbliauskaitė, Laura Lukianskienė, Daiva Morkūnienė, Irena Saltonienė, Herminija Vokietaitienė
Pentecost

The traditional Lithuanian calendar has several festivals celebrated after a certain period of time after Easter. One of the most important among them is Pentecost (Lith. Sekminės), celebrated seven weeks after the Resurrection of Jesus. For ancient Jews it was a harvest festival. As the Old Testament states, on that day the Law on Sinai was given to Moses, whereas according to the New Testament it is a feast commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ. In some parts of Lithuania Pentecost was considered to be nearly the most important festival of the year, even more significant than Easter or Christmas. For instance, in eastern Lithuania, where the tradition of communal herding was preserved longest, Pentecost used to be celebrated for three or even four days.

In the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century, Pentecost was closely related to the customs of herding. On that day shepherds made wreaths from the branches of birch trees and put them on the necks of their cows. While part of the shepherds herded the cattle, the rest of them visited the houses of the masters in order to collect some food. Having come to a house, shepherds expressed their requests by saying certain orations based on the principle of magic “a gift for a gift” (the gifts given to shepherds were supposed to guarantee fortune in farming). After having gathered some products (most often eggs), shepherds ate together in the fields sitting around a fire. In the evening they drove the wreathed cattle back home, where usually they would be invited to the table and treated with animal products, namely, cheese, milk, eggs, etc. The number of dishes very often was seven. The wreaths were usually dried and later used for healing. On the following morning, masters usually let their shepherds sleep in, while the cattle were driven to pasture by young girls. The girls were joined by young men and, eventually, the gathering traditionally became a celebration of youth with foods and drinks, songs, dances, and games. Among the latter the most prominent were
games imitating the wedding ceremony. Young people would choose a bride and a groom and perform all the main wedding rituals, comprising that of leading the newlyweds to bed. The exhilarated youth often forgot the cattle; however, the custom did not permit to seek compensation for the damage, even if someone’s crop suffered as a result of the wayward cattle. Thus farmers used to protect their crop from animals themselves on that day. On the second day of Pentecost, hired ploughmen (Lith. bundininkai) used to organize a celebration. They also visited the houses in the village and collected food from the mistresses and beer from the masters. Later young village girls joined them on the occasion and the celebration continued.

According to 16th–17th-century sources and ethnographic data from the beginning of the 20th century, Pentecost and the celebration of the end of the sowing period or the end of all the spring tasks on the whole share a connection. Still at the beginning of the 20th century, after having finished sowing, farmers from the surroundings of Joniškis used to gather in one house where they would hold a banquet for two days; men put together some crop in order to make beer together (Lith. sambarinis alus) and women prepared some food. Village celebrations, lasting for several days, were also known in Raseiniai. Authors from the 16th–17th centuries mention collective banquets (Lith. samborių puotos) held in sacred places near rivers and also beer made by the community. The same word samboris used to define the two customs suggests that the authors have in mind the same traditions. Another author, Jokūbas Lavinskis from the 16th century,
connected the drinking of sambarinis alus to the day of Pentecost too (Vélius N., 2001. P. 609).

The origins of many calendar festivals go back to times when the village community was supposed to be made up of both the living and the dead. The latter, as the living believed, existed nearby and were connected by a close relationship. For this reason, most of festive rituals were performed in order to ensure a good relationship between the living and the dead. Lithuanian Pentecost rituals reflect the semantics of the cult of the dead, even though it is not so clearly expressed as in the lands of Eastern Slavs, where people used to bring food to cemeteries on the second day of the Pentecost week. The custom to decorate houses with the branches of birch trees, one of the most significant moments of the festival, should also be linked to the cult of dead ancestors. In the flow of time this custom was adopted by Christian churches. In the Lithuanian tradition the cult of trees is associated with the cult of the dead. Still at the beginning of the 20th century, Lithuanians believed that the souls of the dead lived in trees. The relationship between chthonic mythology and the birch tree was especially strong. The importance given to water also reflects the chthonic context of Pentecost. According to folk beliefs, it was not good to bathe in the lake or river before Pentecost because laumės (female mythical beings) could catch the person doing that. On Pentecost priests would bless water for the second time (the first time this was done on Easter). After having returned home from the church, villagers sprinkled it in the fields in order to protect them against pests, and into water bodies, in order to protect people from drowning.
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St. John’s day torches
St John’s Day

In scientific and, especially, popular literature the role of Midsummer or St John’s Day (Lith. Joninės) in the festive peasant calendar is overrated. Such a viewpoint is shaped by the peculiarities of a contemporary person’s reasoning. From the astronomical viewpoint the changes of the sun’s position during the winter and summer solstices and spring and autumn equinox are equivalent. Thus, researchers, influenced by the scientific worldview, tended to give similar importance to the rituals which were performed on those days.

There is no doubt that the festival of the summer solstice was among the most important calendar festivals, however, the complex of St John’s Day rituals is relatively small. In some parts of Lithuania this festival was not even celebrated. Already at the beginning of the 19th century, Teodor Narbutt noticed that St John’s Day was lacking in ancient rituals. The historian even guessed that Midsummer “during the period of idolatry probably had its own rites; the data regarding it did not survive until our times; except the custom of lighting bonfires and jumping over them; they also carried certain torches and lanterns; dancing girls were afraid of Pinewood men [Lith. Pušiniai] or Lithuanian satyrs” (Narbutas T., 1992. P. 262). The scientist whose aim was to present a glorious image of ancient Lithuania would not have missed an opportunity to mention the rituals of an important peasant festival. Jonas Balys, a researcher of interwar period village customs, presumed that Lithuanians had taken the custom of lighting bonfires from Germans (Balys J., 1991. P. 212). In fact, more significant St John’s Day rituals were known only in the border area between Lithuania and Latvia, and in Lithuania Minor, i.e., regions under the influence of German culture. Whatever the influence of Germans could have been (we have doubts about it, because the cultural traditions of Germans, Balts, and Slavs are close because of their common origin), there are no grounds to claim that the rituals performed during this festival were as important as those
of the winter festivals or to consider this festival as “the most important festival of the Balts”

In the Lithuanian language Midsummer Day is called in different ways: the Festival of the summer solstice of the shortest night of the year, St John’s Day (Lith. Joninės), the Festival of Dews (Lith. Rasos) or the Festival of Kupolė (Lith. Kupolė is a bouquet of healing herbs or springtime vegetation and flowers). It might be presumed that the pre-Christian names of the festival were irreversibly forgotten and that the names of Rasos or Kupolės appeared when more significance was attributed to one or another exceptional moment of the festival, i.e., the ritual meaning of the St John’s morning dew or the collection of healing herbs. Prevalence might be given to the name of Kupolė because the pre-Christian name of the Prussian festival – Kreszes – etymologically is linked to vegetation and, therefore, to the meaning of Kupolė. It is also possible that the name Kupolė derives from the Slavic Kupala and is related to the verb kupatsia, meaning, “to have a bath”. Here we might remember the custom to take bath in the dew-wet grass on the morning of St John’s Day. Christian mythology links this festival to St John the Baptist, even though the real relationship between the festival and Christianity is expressed by the fact that almost all the festive rituals used to be performed on St John’s Eve.

In the Baltic lands St John’s Day rituals were mentioned for the first time in 1372 when the bishop of Warmia Henry II released the document, which forbid celebrating St John’s Day in the old way (Dundulienė P., 1991. P. 179). However, this ordinance as well as other ones issued by ecclesiastics did not have much influence on peasants. The bishop of Samogitia Motiejus Valančius in his writings mentions the year 1815 when some priests were angry that villagers in the parishes of
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St. John’s day altar
Kartena, Skuodas, Salantai and others were celebrating St John’s Day in the old way.

Maciej Stryjkowski was one of the first to connect St John’s Day with the worshipping of the goddess Leda (Lada) (Vélius N., 2001. P. 546). In the 19th century the worshipping of Leda (Lada) was analysed by many researchers of Lithuanian mythology, namely, Teodor Narbutt, Liudvikas Adomas Jucevičius, Adomas Honorijus Kirkoras, etc. Their romantic propositions have been approved by some of the other more recent researchers. Simonas Daukantas also interpreted ancient manuscripts in an uncritical way and thus linked the rituals of St John’s Day with the worshipping of the god Perkūnas – the creator of everything. Even if the interpretation of Daukantas seems naïve, the cult of Perkūnas as the ruler of the powers of heaven could
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have had its place in the ancient rituals of St John’s Day. The places where the festival traditionally takes place – fields and hills – are open spaces with vertical orientation to heaven and, therefore, related to the god Perkūnas. Perkūnas, alongside with the Highest God, was the most important deity representing the upper sphere of the universe in the ancient Lithuanian belief and even in the late peasant tradition of the beginning of the 20th century. The possible role of Perkūnas in the Midsummer Day’s rituals is reflected in an incantation against fever; during the longest day of the year one had to bake bread and eat it while uttering, “[i]n the name of the sun and the thunder of Perkūnas, I order you fever to go away from people (Lith. Saulės vardu, Perkūno griausmu, tau drugy insakau, tavį vara nuog žmonių). Another Lithuanian researcher Pranė Dundulienė claimed that the main focus during the Festival of St John was on the protection of the crop against natural disasters, as for instance, hail and droughts, as well as evil spirits and witches. Here we may remember that Perkūnas was considered to be the ruler of heavenly powers, i.e. storms, hails, and lightning.

However, the ritual space and supernatural powers performing in mythological context of St John’s Festival were related not only to the heavenly sphere. The presence of chthonic mythology and the supernatural powers representing it were also significant. Water bodies as places for performing St John’s Day rituals were no less important than the above-mentioned hills or the fields of crops. In the 16th century Martin Cromer who wrote about the rituals performed during Midsummer Day celebrations claimed that, “[t]hen, according to an ancient superstitious custom, they decorate all springs with flowers and branches of trees and collect various herbs, which are supposed to treat different diseases” (Jucevičius L. A., 1959. P. 234). In the first half of the 19th century, a similar description was provided by Jucevičius, “[t]he place where people like to perform the rituals of St John’s or Kupala Festival are hills and the banks of rivers; on the hills people burn bonfires and jump over them, and then take baths in the rivers in order to clean themselves from sins and to protect themselves from various diseases throughout the year” (Jucevičius L. A., 1959. P. 234). Taking a bath or bathing animals on the festive morning, usually during sunrise, in order to protect them from various diseases was also known in other peasant festivals, namely, St George’s Day, Easter, and Pentecost. There are a lot of beliefs related to the magic powers of the morning dew related to St John’s Festival. On the one hand, people believed to recover after having rolled in the morning dew and to have a better harvest after having shaken down the dew in their crop fields. On the other hand, water, with some rare exceptions, is symbolically related to the Other world in Indo European cultures. Thus, the same morning dew could also be associated with the festive night when witches are supposed to romp. Another belief was saying that people should go to the crop fields only after the morning dew had evaporated.

Midsummer night is the night when witches and other beings of the chthonic world romp. Until the beginning of the 20th century, people living in the Lithuanian villages believed that witches riding pigs gather on the crossroads and then fly to gatherings
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on the mountains of Šatrija or Rambynas, or even to Kiev during Midsummer night. While cooking porridge from rye dew witches were believed to cast evil spells on the crop fields or on people, turning them into werewolves, whereas devils and other monsters of the chthonic world would attack the person who had found a fern blossom.

On St John’s Day villagers practicing witchcraft were believed to attempt to steal milk from their neighbours’ cows by passing a milk filter, a towel or a bed sheet over a dewy meadow where their neighbour’s cows grazed. It was done by tearing up grass from other people’s plots, taking out straw from other people’s cowsheds, borrowing something, or in some other way. One of the most comprehensive and the most beautiful descriptions of the “technologies” of witch crafting was provided by a famous Lithuanian folk singer Petras Zalanskas:

Witches get up early before sunrise on St John’s Day and take a wide towel made from the last length of a roll [Lith. taračkinis]. That towel is usually quadrangular and with long fringes. Witches drag this towel in the dew of all the meadows until it gets all wet. They take the milk from the cow that belongs to the farmer whose meadows were visited by these witches. After having turned back home, the witch wrings that towel very well so that no more water is left in it. Then she gives that water to her cows. She hangs that towel on a wall, takes a bucket and squeezes the fringes as if they were cow’s dugs and utters the colours of the neighbours’ cows – motley, black, brown. People say that witches get a few buckets of milk that way. It’s not all about them. After some time those witches take that towel and try to hit the cows whose milk they will drink. (Zalanskas P. 287,1983)

Moreover, villagers believed that not only domestic animals but also textiles laid for bleaching needed protection on St John’s Day. If the textiles were left
outside overnight, witches were believed to sew them together with horsehair.

In order to protect their animals, villagers used to close the doors of the sheds for the night and put some sharp pricking items, prickly plants, stinging nettles or branches of the mountain ash on the windows, whereas the door was blocked with a harrow or closed by bolting it with a blessed candle. Besides, a cross made of beeswax or other material was placed next to the door. People also used to draw crosses on the cattle or to spread tar on cows’ horns for the same reason and the cattle were driven out to pasture only when the morning dew had dried.

If any cow did actually stop giving milk, villagers also made use of magic to remedy the situation. In the middle of the 19th century, Jucevičius wrote that common Lithuanian people “boil milk filters in the holy water taken from three churches, believing that it will make the sorceress suffer... and she will come in order to ask to lend her something; if she is not given anything, she cannot stand the pain, asks for forgiveness and gives back the milk [that she had stolen].” (Jucevičius L. A., 1959. P. 199).

Lithuanians also liked narratives about the fern blossom, which was supposed to have the power to give knowledge to the person who finds it on Midsummer Night. Usually the person would not expect such luck and find the blossom unexpectedly, whereas the one who desired to find it himself had to be very courageous, be aware of certain rules of ritual behaviour, and even prepare for the search, because various creatures of the Other world would try to scare the person in order to snatch the blossom themselves.

It is also noteworthy that searching for the fern blossom on St John’s Night is a relatively new custom.

The importance and distinction of the festive time of Midsummer Day used to be expressed through various narratives representing extraordinary events impossible in the common everyday (human) time and space. Such extraordinary events include: the fern going into bloom at midnight (in reality it does not bloom), “winding” of an “ant frankincense” (Lith. “skruzdeliu kodylas”), which is supposed to give imaginary supernatural knowledge, and the sun dancing or changing its colours on Midsummer Day’s morning. Still at the beginning of the 20th century, villagers believed that the sun rises with colourful wreaths, which
turn round it, on Midsummer Day’s morning. According to Jucevičius, Lithuanians used to say that on the Day of St John the Baptist the Sun rides out of its palace in a cart harnessed with three horses – golden, silver, and diamond, goes to her husband the Moon and on her way dances in the cart (Jucevičius L. A., 1959. P. 460). During the sacred time of St John’s Day, exceptional powers could be given to common objects too. For instance, healing plants or “sun’s dogs” (Lith. saulės šuneliai – yellow fluffy worms, glow-worm caterpillars) collected on Midsummer Day’s Eve were believed to gain special healing powers.

Both written sources of the 16th–19th centuries and the folk tradition of the 20th century often mention the collection of healing herbs (Lith. kupoliavimas). In Wolfenbütteler Postille, in 1573, herbs collected on Midsummer Day are called kupolos, whereas Stryjowski used this term for festive entertainment. In the 17th century Matthäus Prätorius also mentioned kupoliavimas. The term kupolės is present in the dictionaries of Christian Gottlieb Mielcke, Friedrich Kurschat and other publications too. Most often this word was used to refer to healing herbs collected on Midsummer Day’s Eve, even though some authors thought that the term referred to a concrete plant. Mielcke and Kurschat presumed that it was Saint-John’s-wort, whereas Aukusti Robert Niemi and Adolfas Sabaliauskas presumed that kupolės were plants blooming in yellow and blue.

In Prussian Lithuania the kupolė was a tall pole with a wooden wheel decorated with flowers and herbs collected on Midsummer Day’s Eve. Such decorated poles used by Nadruvians and Samogitians were mentioned by Prätorius in the 17th century (Balys J., 1993. P. 217). In 1832 Schultze, the precentor of Lazdėnai, described kupolis as a pole decorated with wild flowers and ribbons (Balys J., 1993. P. 216). According to Schultze, girls used to protect the pole from boys who were trying to steal it during the whole night. The inhabitants of south-eastern Lithuania did not
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In the peasant culture the addressee of future divinations is powers of the Other world. They were supposed to control not only the powers of growth but also wealth and prophesy of the future. Hence, divinations were always performed in the places of the house, homestead or the village associated with certain particular semantic meanings, as for instance, by the door-step, stove, windowsill, well or on the crossroads. For the same reason, in the symbolism of divinations the theme of water is common. Floating wreaths on Midsummer Day until today remains one of the most romanticized and popular elements of the
In the first half of the 19th century, Narbutt, in his description of Midsummer Day’s rituals, mentioned ritual fires as an important element of the festival—young people jumping over bonfires and torches being carried around (Narbutas T., 1992. P. 262). A big bonfire until present has been an important attribute of St John’s Day celebrations. However, bonfires burning throughout the night, tarred tubs fixed on tall poles or wheels rolled down the hill were not the main ritual features of the festival, even though they were influenced by the images related to the mythical understanding of the dark period of the day (year) as dangerous to a person. St John’s Day bonfires have nothing to do with the romantic interpretations of the 19th century authors or those popularized by today’s media, namely, the imaginary fight between the powers of the light and the dark or with the imaginary efforts of the man to help the sun. Bonfires burning during the festive night were supposed to substitute the sun and to protect people from evil powers by spreading the light that scared them away. It is also noteworthy that during the shortest night of the year, the powers of the chthonic world were as active as in the festivals of the dark period of the year.

The symbolic meaning of fire almost always was associated with its destructive (hence, also cleansing) power in the peasant tradition of the 19th–20th centuries. Such meaning was attributed to the bonfires of St John’s night too. During the festival young people jumped over them in order to protect themselves from potential diseases and burned weeds rooted up from the crop fields in order to protect the fields from weeds. People believed that the ashes of the St John’s
View from the top of the Rambynas hill to the Nemunas river valley
Ancient Lithuanian Calendar Festivals

Day bonfire poured under the foundation of the house could protect it from lighting and fires.

The festival of the shortest day of the year has many common features with Pentecost and Corpus Christi. The main rituals of St John’s festival, alongside with the collecting of healing herbs called kupoliavimas, are those of visiting the crops and swinging on the swing. Forms of youth entertainment around the fire are very similar to Pentecost gatherings. Moreover, on St John’s Day Prussian Lithuanians used to put wreaths on their cows, just like on Pentecost. Both festivals could even be joined into one festive cycle dedicated to worshipping the flourishing vegetation. As Stryjkowski indicated in the 16th century, peasants used to celebrate St John’s Day for around one month which, in turn, might have caused similarities between the two festivals (Vėlius N., 2001. P. 546). However, such a long period of celebration seemed highly unlikely even to the Romantic historian Narbutt (Narbutas T., 1992. P. 261).

Peasant rituals were slowly changing in the flow of time, and all calendar festivals experienced more or less important innovations. St John’s Day is not an exception. For instance, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union distributed an instruction indicating where and how St John’s Day should be celebrated, thus making the festival more popular.

In the first half of the 20th century, the tradition to congratulate people whose names are Jonas (John) by adorning their heads with flower wreaths or wreaths made of tree (most often, oak-tree) boughs or leaves became popular.
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Haymaking
Peasant festivals are usually divided into two main groups – calendar and work festivals. However, many researchers have noticed that such a division may have limitations. On the one hand, we will not find any calendar festival, which does not focus on the main element of the peasant’s existence – the future crop. On the other hand, even agriculture related tasks depending on specific seasonal conditions were linked with certain fixed dates of the festive calendar – St John’s Day, St Peter’s Day, St Anne’s Day, Assumption Day, etc. Festivals of the traditional folk calendar might be divided into two major groups. The first group comprises of festivals that depend on cosmic rhythms, namely, the cycles of winter and the shifting spring festivals. The other group comprises of festivals that commemorate the beginning and the end of spring and autumn jobs out in the fields.

According to mythical thinking, a proper end to the jobs was no less important than their successful beginning. In other words, the peasant was interested not only in growing a good crop but also in maintaining good results and moving their fortune to the following farming season. For this reason, at the end of every specific task – haymaking, harvesting, flax breaking, etc. various customs and rituals were performed, and after having finished their tasks, villagers would gather and perform sacrifice rituals.

In the 16th century Lithuanian peasants had still preserved some elements of the ancient belief and rituals performed by village communities differed significantly from those performed in later periods. Almost every festival culminated in an animal’s sacrifice. For instance, Maciej Stryjkowski describes sumptuous rituals during which a he-goat or an ox would be sacrificed:

*In the same place, in the lowlands of Prussians, which are called Süduva or Samland, Samogitian peasants of the Lithuanian nationality once a year celebrate the festival of an ox or a he-goat sacrifice in the following way: four or six villages gather together, collect some money, bread, other things, just like while house-visiting during Christmas, and then buy*
all that. If they get a lot of money, they buy an ox or a he-goat straight away and, after having gathered in one house, make up a big fire. Their wives bring wheat and buckwheat flour and make small buns. Then their chief [Lith. Viršaitis] or their priest, according to the pagan custom, having put a wreath on his head, puts his hand on the head of the goat or the ox and asks all the gods, every one separately, as I have already mentioned before, to be so kind and take the sacrifice on the occasion of the festival and, afterwards, having taken the ox or the goat by the horns, takes it to the barn. By the barn all the men lift it and the priest-chief, having put a towel around his waist, calls all the gods once again…. After that, uttering something he goes around the ox three times and then kills it. They do not let the blood go on the ground but collect it into a bowl from which the chief scoops up some blood with a scoop or a goblet and sprinkles it on people. Then everybody shares the rest of the blood and sprinkles it on their animals, just like we do with holy water…. Afterwards, singing and blowing long pipes, they eat and drink throughout the whole night. In the morning, carrying a wheat bun and the remains of the supper, they walk through the village and go onto the crossroads where they place everything in one spot … [H]aving done that, they leave everything to the gods and go home. (Vélius N., 2001. P. 549–550).

Jan Łasicki, a contemporary of Stryjkowski, after having repeated the same identical information almost word for word, links the ritual of goat sacrifice with the end of harvesting – “[a]fter having finished the harvesting, they perform a sumptuous sacrifice again” (Lasickis J., 1969. P. 28–29).

However, already at the beginning of the 17th century, Prătorius described Harvest Home (Lith. rugiapjūtės pabaigtvės) rituals, which reached the beginning of the 20th century almost unchanged. According to Prătorius, at the end of the harvest peasants would leave a small unreaped area of rye around which all the harvesters gather and the master would say prayers of gratitude and ask the gods to let them carry the crop home safely. Afterwards, they cut the rest of the crop in the direction of the sunrise. Having finished the harvest, the master sits in the place from where he had started to harvest, cuts the last sheaf of rye, and makes a wreath out of it (Lith. pabaigtviių vainikas). Then the master, the chief harvester or the best harvester puts it on his or her head and then they all go home singing. Other members of the family wait for the harvesters at home and drench them with water, wishing them full granaries. Then everybody celebrates (Preторijus M., 2006. P. 509). Identical
rituals were performed until the beginning of the 20th century.

In the tradition from the 19th to the first half of the 20th century, the Harvest Home festival had still preserved its festive character. Just like any festival, it started by performing rituals emphasizing the festive time and space: people cleaned the house, washed tables and benches, and decorated the interior of the house with boughs. The harvesters put on new clean clothes on the occasion so that their bread would be white.

In different parts of Lithuania, Harvest Home customs varied, though the main elements always included cutting of the last sheaf, making it into a wreath, giving the wreath to the master, and a banquet. Special attention was paid to the cutting of the last sheaf. Until the beginning of the 20th century this ritual had preserved mythical beliefs about the spirit
of the crops, which becomes smaller and smaller as the area of crops diminishes, and finally remains in the last sheaf. Prussian Lithuanians called it the Rye Woman (Lith. Rugių boba). People around Tilžė imagined her as a woman with severe look, iron and tar filled breasts; she was believed to put iron clogs on children’s feet. Elsewhere it was imagined as a woman riding on a horse or walking with a dog; if she caught a child, she was thought to press him or her to her iron heart. Semantically, this being is similar to the Shrovetide female effigy; they are both menacing and have big breasts. The horse or the dog of the Rye Woman represents her relation with the chthonic world. In Prussian Lithuania, still in the end of the 19th century, the last sheaf was made into a harvest doll and sumptuously brought home in the last cart of rye. At home the doll was drenched with water.

In Užnemunė (the area on the left bank of the river Nemunas) and central Lithuania harvesters avoided cutting the last sheaf because people used to mock
that person. In other cases men believed they would remain single or widowers, whereas women were believed to give birth to an illegitimate child if they cut the last sheaf. Pranė Dundulienė considered fear a late phenomenon that appeared when the cult of the crop-spirit had been forgotten (Dundulienė P., 1991. P. 207). However, it is more believable that the origin of this fear is especially ancient – the fear of coming into contact with the deity. In the ritual of the cutting of the last sheaf, semiotician Algirdas Julius Greimas also notices the traces of the cult of the mother goddess Žemyna – the goddess of the earth in Lithuanian mythology (Greimas A. J., 1990. P. 437).

In order to guarantee fortune in farming, various ritual actions were performed while cutting and bounding the last sheaf. The Lithuanians from Švenčionys and Gervėčiai used to bury or simply put on the ground some bread in the place where the last sheaf had been cut. In addition, this ritual action was enhanced by uttering certain verbal formulas, such as “earth, you have given me [bread], therefore, we’re also giving [it] to you” (Lith. davei man žemele, duodam ir tau). People in all of Lithuania strived to make the last sheaf as large as possible in order to have good crop and their granaries full throughout the following year. In northern Lithuania peasants threw the sheaf up believing that the higher the sheaf went into the sky, the taller the crop would grow during the following year. As it was already mentioned, after having cut and bound the last sheaf harvesters most often made a wreath from its ears of rye. Afterwards the wreath was brought home and given to the master of the house saying some magic verbal formulas.

At times, harvesters would limit themselves to short two-part formulas, as for instance, “[a]s many ears in the wreath – thus many carts in the fields” (Lith. Kiek vainike varpų – tiek lauke vežimų), while in other cases longer praising orations were said, for instance, “[w]e bow down in the name of God and wish you long years of life and good health. We wish you were as strong as the oak tree and as healthy as a radish. We wish you to have your granaries full of rye, wheat, barley, and other grains. We wish you the following things on your table: a ram, the leg of a cock, the head and the leg of a pig” In both cases the aim of verbal formulas was the same – to ensure fortune in farming and abundance of everything in the house.
The Harvest Home wreath was an obligatory attribute of the festival. If harvesters did not bring it home, they were not invited to a banquet, whereas the duty of the masters of the house was to receive the wreath and to express proper thanks. If the masters of the house did not want to take the wreath or did not hold a banquet, the wreath was given to hens and instead of it a wreath of weeds was brought. Moreover, in such a case formulas wishing fortune in farming were replaced by ones wishing the opposite.

On Assumption Day the Harvest Home wreath used to be brought to church and blessed. Afterwards, its grain was mixed with the seed grain prepared for the next sowing. In some places people used to put the wreath in the barn and then place the crop on it.

The custom of pouring water at one another was common in almost every important communal festival and was performed in order to evoke rain. Thus pouring water on the harvesters who had brought home the Harvest Home wreath was supposed to guarantee a sufficient quantity of humidity throughout the next year. As enough water is one of the main conditions for a good harvest, eventually the custom started to be considered as a guarantee for a good harvest. Therefore, beliefs claiming that the crop would grow better after drenching the harvesters with water were even more popular than those saying that the harvesters were drenched because thus the fields of rye would not dry up the next year.

Larger or smaller treats or certain dishes were an obligatory attribute of any communal festival. In the surroundings of the Gervėčiai Harvest Home festival, called Ažynkos, the inhabitants had preserved quite a complex ritual structure until the beginning of the 20th century. As on Christmas Eve, peasants ate in the evening and had twelve dishes on their tables. In Rimdžiūnai village, before starting to eat, the master of the house used to pour three spoons of every dish under the table for the souls of the dead. Both in Gervėčiai and Rimdžiūnai a candle was lit and carried around the table or around a bowl with food. This was supposed to close the abundant festive food into a magic circle and guarantee that everything would remain the same in the future. On the next morning the remains of food used to be brought to the poor asking them to say prayers for the dead.
ANCIENT LITHUANIAN CALENDAR FESTIVALS
Assumption Day

In the peasant calendar of the 19th–20th centuries, the new harvest was associated with the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven, or the Day of Grass (Lith. Žolinė) celebrated on the 15th of August. On that day peasants brought healing herbs, the Harvest Home wreath, and the first bread baked from the new crop to church in order for them to be blessed. As most Lithuanian festivals, the festival of the Assumption was also influenced by the cult of ancestors. Villagers used to bring food to the beggars gathered by the church. Samogitians, still at the beginning of the 19th century, gave beggars the first loaf of bread baked from the newly harvested crop. Dzūkians from the surroundings of Liškiava used to kill a ram or a piglet and prepare nine dishes from the products harvested that year. Moreover, they gave beggars not only food; a few farmers would contribute some money and buy drinks.

Assumption day wreath from the Punskas region
All Souls’ Day

In the Catholic liturgy, the 2nd of November is first of all known as the day for the commemoration of the dead and the day for praying for the dead. The rituals of the commemoration of the dead, just like other traditions of the Christian church, have an interesting history. The common prayer for all the departed was first of all mentioned in the writings of the church fathers in the 4th century A.D., whereas a specific day for the commemoration of the dead for the first time was mentioned in the 7th century’s Regula Monachorum or monastery regulations by St Isidore of Seville. This day was commemorated around Pentecost. After two centuries it was already celebrated in many monasteries but on different days. In the very end of the 10th century A.D., the community of the Benedictine monastery in Cluny, France, began to commemorate all the departed on 2nd November and established the liturgy for the commemoration of all the faithful departed.

Lithuanian ethnographer Juozas Kudirka guesses that the day for the commemoration of the dead in Lithuania has been known since when the country was Christianized (Kudirka J., 1991. P. 34). This presumption is quite reasonable because in 1400, the ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Vytautas invited the Benedictines to Lithuania and settled them in his native land – Old Trakai (Lith. Senieji Trakai). Besides, Maciej Stryjkowski and Jan Łasicki, the authors of the chronicles written in the 16th century, call the 2nd of November the day for the commemoration of all the dead.

It is noteworthy that Łasicki, making use of Jonas Laskovijus’ words, for the first time identified the Christian day for the commemoration of the dead with the pre-Christian festival, the so-called final harvest festival of the year (Lith. Galutinio derliaus sudorojimo šventė), celebrated when peasants had gathered up all there was to harvest that year (Lasickis J., 1969. P. 22–23). However, peasant society could not have had a separate festival dedicated only to the dead, because rituals honouring the dead and treating them to food and drinks were present not only in calendar
festivals but also in festivals related to agricultural jobs, and also funeral rituals. For instance, as the Jesuit chronicle of the year 1611 puts it, “[o]ther men and women would bring godless sacrifices for the souls of their dead ancestors and friends. They would do it every year quite often and during the major festivals of Easter, Christmas, and All Saints’ Day they would hold special banquets for them” (Vėlius N., 2001. P. 633). In the villages around Pavarėnis, still after World War I, people used to honour the dead on several festivals, namely, All Saints’ Day, Candlemas, and Assumption Day.

It seems even less probable that ancient rituals of the final harvest could have disappeared under the influence of Christianity and that only the rituals for honouring the dead survived in the festival of All Souls’ Day, which reflects a relatively late tradition. Indeed, any natural or cultural phenomenon may disappear under unfavourable conditions. However, it is impossible that part of the rituals of the final harvest festival would disappear without leaving any traces, whereas others would remain almost unchanged through centuries, especially if we keep in mind that the peasantry’s consciousness is especially stable. The claim that the Lithuanian peasants in the pre-Christian period did not have any festival at the beginning of November is far more convincing. However, the festival for the commemoration of the dead, which reached the country with Christianity, found very favourable conditions because the ancient folk calendar comprised of an entire cycle of pre-Christian agrarian festivals with rituals, where rituals commemorating dead ancestors prevailed. It is also noteworthy that the origins of the Christian festival for the commemoration of the dead lie in the rituals of feeding the souls of the dead that the Lithuanian clergy was indignant at in the 16th–19th centuries. In comparison, St Augustine in the 4th century A.D. was indignant that food and drinks were sacrificed to the souls of the dead by Christians.

On the one hand, common origins let the Christian day for the commemoration of the dead easily find its place among the pre-Christian agrarian festivals. On
the other hand, the folk understanding of the commemoration appeared to have taken back the Christian festival to its origins by supplementing its liturgy with rituals inherited from ancestors. This syncretism of the world-outlooks common to many Lithuanian peasant festivals was noticed by researchers of the 19th century. For instance, Liudvikas Adomas Jucevičius wrote that “[t]his festival is particular because here we may observe pagan rituals that are mixed with Christian images. Furthermore, the Christian day for commemoration of the dead is celebrated exactly in the same period... and folk, celebrating it that way, think that foods, drinks, and hymns will help the souls of the dead suffering in Purgatory” (Jucevičius L. A., 1959. P. 279).

Authors of the 16th–19th centuries call All Souls’ Day by the name of Ilgės, meaning pangs of love or longings. In the first half of the 18th century this name of the festival was also included into the dictionaries by Pilypas Ruigys and Jokūbas Brodovskis. It is interesting to note that the sources of the 16th–17th centuries use the same term – ilgi, ilgiai, ilgės – to indicate the tribute that the peasant had to pay to his landlord. According to Juozas Jurginis, “the collecting of longings” (Lith. ilges rinkti) had the same meaning as the collecting of alms on Christmas, only that on Christmas it was the priest who would collect alms, and in autumn the landlord collected ilgės. However, already in the 16th century only smaller landlords used to visit their peasants, whereas the ilgės of large landlords were changed by tributes in money. In the 18th century ilgės were counted as part of the land tax and were not mentioned separately any more. Names of the feudal...
service and the calendar festival most probably were identified as one when the custom of collecting ilgės was changed by paying tributes in money or products. Feudal society strived to match every important event to a festive date of the church calendar, and the tribute of ilgės had to be paid until the day for the commemoration of all the dead. When the duty was abolished, peasants changed the name of the festival to another more suitable one, namely, Vėlinės – the day of the souls of the dead.

All the rituals performed for the commemoration of the dead are based on the same belief that souls of the dead relatives continue to live among the living and are able to offer help or harm depending on people’s behaviour towards them. People living throughout all of Lithuania believed that on All Souls’ Day, the souls of the dead visit their former homes or go to churches in order to pray there. In late tradition, this motif quite often assumes a more Christian character. It is believed that the souls of the dead are released from purgatory and go to listen to prayers that were not said for them on time, “[o]n All Souls’ Day all the churches
are full of souls, just like herrings [in a barrel]; they do not burn in fire that day, therefore, they pray and are happy. Only the souls whose mothers cry a lot come wet... tears wet their clothes” (Tverečius).

People prepared to meet the souls of the dead in advance. For instance, before All Souls’ Day they didn’t dry anything in the dryer (Lith. jauja, used for frying flax or crops), which was left empty, because souls would come to warm themselves (Pušalotas). According to Balys Buračas, on the eve of All Saints’ Day the inhabitants of Kupiškis and Panevėžys waited for the souls of their relatives to come home and used to make the bed white and soft. They would light a Candlemas candle on the both sides of the pillow, kneel down and wait for the soul of the dead. If any sound in the ceiling or floor was heard, it was considered to be the sign that the dead had come. Wandering spirits could also be met accidentally. As a belief legend narrates, “[o]nce just before the festive days the mistress of the house ordered to sweep the house and to sand the floor. In the morning she saw that the whole house was full of small footprints... even though there was not a single child in the house. Only when she remembered that it was All Souls’ Day, she realized that these were her dead children who had come” (Kaltinėnai).

The souls of the dead could also be seen with the help of certain means or by hiding in a church at night. However, humans’ contacts with the powers of the other world were always considered to be dangerous. For instance, it was believed that the souls of the dead might be seen through a ring, but the person who tried this would become very frightened. It was
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All Souls’ Day candles
considered even more dangerous to go to a church at night time because the dead, even the closest relatives, were believed to attack and seek to tear to pieces their parents or children. The only way to stay alive was to get on the altar or substitute yourself with something, as for instance, to throw some kind of object to the souls so that they would tear it to pieces instead of the person they chase. The following belief legend from Vilkaviškis narrates about a man who desired to meet his dead children:

On All Souls’ night all the souls of the dead gather in their parish church. One man went to the church that night in order to see whether his son and daughter who had been dead for already one year would come. When he was going to the church somebody told him to take two rolls of cloth and throw them to the souls when they would attack him so that they do not tear him to pieces. So, having taken two rolls of cloth, he went to the church and that’s what he saw: from one side came his son with a knife in his hands and from the other side came his daughter with a rope, and all the church was full of the souls of the dead. His son and daughter suddenly rushed at him and then also the rest of the souls. He dashed through the door and started to run, but the souls were following him. Then he threw them one roll of cloth and the souls of the dead rushed on to it. They tore it to pieces and started to chase him again. Then he threw the second roll of cloth and the souls rushed on to it again. At that moment he managed to enter the house of someone living nearby. (Balys J., 1981.)

The time of the festival of All Souls’ Day used to be sacralized by defining certain norms of behaviour or prohibiting certain common jobs. Here are several examples: “On All Souls’ evening it is better not to go anywhere, because on that evening the souls of the dead gather in their parish churches in order to take back the prayers dedicated to them. If the road is wet, it is even possible to hear the splashing of steps in the mud” (Veliuona); “It is forbidden to visit girls on All Souls’ evening, because if someone does it, the souls
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Panemunė cemetery. Kaunas
will chase that young person throughout the whole year” (Tverečius); “If you play music on All Souls’ evening, the devil will ride on you” (Veliuona); “If someone patches up something on All Saints’ Day, that person’s lambs will be motley” (Pumpėnai). On All Souls’ Day it was also forbidden to pour out water or sweepings in order not to throw it on the souls of the dead wandering around the houses. The peculiarity of the time of All Souls’ Day was also expressed by the following folk beliefs: “If the child is born on All Souls’ Day, he sees evil spirits when he goes to a funeral” (Naumiestis); “It is always rainy on All Saints’ Day: the sky is crying and thus does want people walking around so that they do not disturb the souls of the dead who have come to this world” (Seirijai).

The most important rites of honouring the dead were those of feeding them. Holding a banquet in a cemetery and leaving part of the food for the dead should be considered as the oldest form of this ritual. As the chroniclers of the 16th century wrote, in Samogitia, near Kuršas, during the period of honouring the dead, Lithuanians used to visit the graves of their dead relatives; they brought milk, beer and mead into the cemetery and held a banquet and dance while playing trumpets and drums.

Regardless of the churches’ and manors’ fight against the manifestations of ancient beliefs in the village community, banquets held in cemeteries were known still in the 19th century. In the mid-19th century, as famous interwar ethnographer Antanas Mažiulis claimed, in the surroundings of Pasarčiai, every village used to celebrate All Souls’ Day in the cemetery: “As people used to say, at that night the souls of the dead
gather in the cemetery and usually stay on trees or on tops of the crosses. In cemeteries, after having given food to the poor..., they would say some prayers, and having invited the poor to join them, they would eat sitting on the family grave” (Kudirka J., 1991. P. 35).

In the surroundings of Salakas and Tauragnai there was a custom to prepare food for the souls of the dead and leave it throughout the night on the grave. People would eat it and share with the poor on All Souls’ Day.

The custom of leaving food for the dead in cemeteries is mentioned already in the earliest sources. In the 15th century Jan Długosz wrote:

[I]n the woods they had separate fireplaces for families and houses where, having put on white festive clothes, they would burn the corpses of their dead relatives and friends with their horses. By such fireplaces bowls made from oak bark would be placed and food similar to cheese would be poured in it, and mead would be poured on the fireplace, believing that the souls of the dead would come at night, refresh themselves with food and drink the mead from the fireplace…. (Vėlius N., 1996. P. 580–581).

In 1723 the diary of pastoral activities of Jesuits’ Academic College in Vilnius mentions that “others would bring food to the graves of the dead; some persons said that they were told to do that... by the shadows of the dead.” An interesting description of the traditions of eating and drinking on All Souls’ Day was published in the newspaper “Lietuvos aidas” (“Lithuanian Echo”) by a famous ethnographer Antanas Valantinas in 1938:

Old people tell us that still in the beginning of the last century, in some places people celebrated All Saints’ Day by performing certain peculiar rituals. They would eat and drink in cemeteries. All of the family led by its oldest member would go to the cemetery singing “Lord, in front of your fierce and anger...” They would bring various foods and drinks. In the cemetery, by the grave of some
dead relative, the most senior leader would wave with his finger to all the four directions inviting dead relatives up to the oldest ancestors by calling as many of their names as he could remember. Afterwards he would pour beer, vodka, mead, and milk in all directions. Then they would put bread, meat, cheese and other dishes on the grave. (Valantinas A., 1938.)

At the last quarter of the 19th century, in Lithuania there was a custom to place eggs, along with other dishes, on the grave on All Souls’ Day. On the following day the inhabitants of Kupiškis used to give those eggs to children, “so that they know where their relative’s graves are.” The egg is a universal symbol of life and fertility, therefore, boiled or scrambled eggs are especially often used in agrarian rituals.

Chroniclers of the 16th century, along with eating in the cemetery, also describe banquets held inside the house. For instance, Jan Łasicki claims that:

During these festivals they invite the dead to leave the cemetery and come to the bathhouse for a banquet; the number of chairs, towels, and shirts corresponds to the number of invited, and the table is full of food and drinks. Afterwards, having come back to their houses, they drink for three days, and all the food and clothes are later left in the cemetery. Then they wave goodbye to the souls of their dead relatives. (Lasickis J., 1969. P. 33).
Now it is difficult to assert, whether eating and drinking indoors on All Souls’ Day once existed as a part of a wider ritual, comprising both of honouring the dead in the cemetery and in the house or not. As clergymen and the nobility opposed the manifestations of old beliefs, it might be possible that villagers celebrated All Souls’ Day secretly, so that nobody sees them doing that. A description of All Souls’ Day provided by Liudvikas Adomas Jucevičius at the first half of the 19th century indirectly supports this idea:

**The present All Soul’s Day, as the very name indicates, is a celebration that is performed by common people in many districts of Lithuania, Prussia, and Curonia in order to commemorate their dead forefathers or all ancestors in general…. As enlightened clergymen and landlords strived to destroy the custom, related to superstitions and pranks that were condemned more than once, nowadays folk celebrate All Souls’ Day secretly in chapels or empty houses near cemeteries. There they hold a banquet with various dishes, drinks, fruits, and call the souls of the dead. (Jucevičius L. A., 1959. P. 279).**
A description of All Souls’ Day provided by Teodor Narbutt clearly shows that in the first half of the 19th century, rituals for commemorating the dead had still preserved a complex structure:

[On the occasion of All Souls’ Day] a fancy banquet is held with mainly dark-coloured dishes, as for instance, pig’s or goose’s blood soups [Lith. juka], vėdarai [sausages made of grated potatoes or groats and blood stuffed into entrails and baked in the oven], soups made of dried beetroot leaves, which make the soup dark green, various baked meat dishes, porridges, šiupinai [porridges made of pork or cracklings and peas, beans, potatoes, groats, and flour], and other local dishes, which need to be twelve. The house is swept and cleaned; the table is covered with a tablecloth, where jugs with drinks are placed. When the guests have gathered in compete silence, the mistress puts a bowl of every dish on the table. Everybody remains silent when the master of the house begins his discourse with the following words, “Dear souls of the dead, whose remembrance is so dear to this house, honourable ancestors of the family, men of eternal remembrance and the most honourable women and, first of all, my grandfather... I invite you to the annual festival, which we poor folk could hold; let it be as pleasant to you as your memory is dear to us. Enjoy the food in front of the gods of the underworld. …” The silence continues… [E] verybody looks at the table. The most devote ones, in the vapour rising from the dishes, seem to see souls of the dead eating…. If the dog barks at that moment, it is understood as a sign that some angry soul does not want to enter the house, which means that it will wander around the house, scare people, and harm them for the whole year. For this reason the dog would be closed in the porch…. After having stayed in silence for a quarter of an hour, the master looks around and says, “Forgive us, dear souls of the dead.” Then after a moment of silence he continues, “Good-bye, dear souls of the dead, bless us, the living, and leave this house in peace. Go where you need to go, but remember not to harm anything when you fly above our doorsteps, yards, gardens, and fields.” Then everybody bows, looks around, and says, “There’s no soul.” Then the mistress takes all the dishes away, pours the drinks into bottles and small barrels,
then puts everything into baskets, cleans the table, turns the tablecloth upside down, and then the banquet of the living starts. Sitting at the table they also say prayers, dedicate the first glass to the souls of the dead and put it behind the window.... After having finished eating and drinking, the house and the end the porch are swept, whereas foods and drinks are put into baskets and given to the beggars. These are alms for the dead. When the person who distributed the alms returns back home, everybody eats and drinks twice as much as before: men and women, sitting all together, drink in a circle to their health. (Narbutas T., 1991. P. 311).

At the beginning of the 19th century the banquet at a cemetery starts to be substituted by giving food, namely, bread, meat, beer, vodka, etc. to beggars. Traditional All Souls’ Day alms were bread and mutton. In the beginning of the 20th century the inhabitants of eastern Lithuania used to bake small bread rolls. When giving them to the beggars they would tell them the names of the dead the beggars had to pray for. Others used to utter the names before putting the rolls to the oven.

Candles burning in the cemetery, the symbol of contemporary All Souls’ Day, are among the latest customs of Lithuanian Vėlinės. In the last quarter of the 19th century, candles were lit on the graves in the churchyard of the church of Akmuo village, in the surroundings of Varėna. At the beginning of the 20th century, All Souls’ Day candles became popular in Užnemunė. In other parts of Lithuania the custom of lighting a candle on the grave on All Souls’ Day spread only after World War II.
A major part of calendar festivals celebrated by Lithuanian peasants in the 19th–20th centuries – Christmas, Midsummer Day, St George’s Day, Assumption Day, etc. – were, without doubt, of pre-Christian origin. However, festivals of Christian origin – Easter, Pentecost, All Souls’ Day, etc. – found their place among other celebrations too. For instance, Easter adapted archaic rituals, the research into which helps to reveal the pre-Christian worldview of ancient Lithuanians no worse than research into Christmas Eve or Christmas rituals, which are considered to have “pagan” roots. The archaic nature of many rituals performed in the 19th–20th centuries is not related to the time they appeared, but rather to the images of the mythical world that survived in the consciousness of people living in the rural areas of Lithuania. Therefore, the customs of calendar festivals of the 19th–20th centuries are one of the most important sources revealing the ancient Lithuanian worldview.

As far back as the end of the 18th century, the culture of Lithuanian peasants underwent important changes because the main moments of village community life were finally made to conform to the Gregorian calendar. Certain signs of this process can already be traced to the end of the 16th century, even though only at approximately the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries did the dates of commemoration of Christian saints enter the peasant calendar. Village festivals described in the sources of the 19th century, as a matter of fact, do not differ from the festive rituals of the first half of the 20th century. In the peasant calendar, the gods and goddesses of the old Lithuanian belief were replaced with Christian saints in the 19th–20th centuries. Agrarian magic was supplemented with Christian symbolism, namely, that of water, bread, the harvest, and the blessing of plants in the church. The sign of the cross gained popularity in protective magic. Thus, festive rituals became closely
related to Christianity, and even in the first half of the 20th century, a festival traditionally started with worship in a church and finished with a communal prayer at a table with food and drink.

At the same time, customs inherited from ancestors required that a good, self-respecting peasant would perform a number of actions even if he did not remember much about their origin or their meaning. He would only know that his parents and grandparents had acted that way in order to ensure personal fortune and success for their farms, and that if he wanted to live “as well as before”, he had to behave accordingly.

Festive banquets mentioned in sources from the 16th–17th centuries remained the key accent of peasant festivals until the beginning of the 20th century. The shift from the community environment to the private family sphere did not change the essence of the ritual. In both cases the same ritual action had to ensure well-being and prosperity (so that various things would last for a long time). Formulas, used to address forces of the supernatural world (in the more recent tradition – God or various Christian saints), remained stable as well. Usually they started with thanks for the results of the year that had passed and proceeded further with requests for the future. Magic divinations did not change either. Generally speaking, in the rural culture of the second half of the 19th century and even that of the 20th century, we can still find all kinds of magic rituals mentioned in sources from the 16th–17th centuries. Only the sacrifice of large animals did not survive until the beginning of the 20th century, even though an archaic funerary custom to kill a cow or a bull or at least a pig was preserved. Other customs such as
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the rooster sacrifice, feeding the dead, pouring water, baking of ritual bread, and even sprinkling of animals and buildings with the blood of a sacrificed animal featured as part of peasant festivals until the 19th–20th centuries. Descriptions of festivals by Maciej Stryjkowski and other authors of the 16th century remind us of the custom of putting hay under the tablecloth of the Christmas Eve table, which is still widely practiced, whereas the custom to bury food after a banquet, which is also mentioned in the sources of the 16th century, is similar to more recent divinations performed during calendar festivals when the house was swept and the rubbish was poured out on a crossroads.

In 16th–17th century-manuscripts and Church documents, the person leading rituals of the old Lithuanian belief is called “the chief” (Lith. viršaitis), an oracle (Lith. žinys), or a sorcerer (Lith. burtininkas). Both men and women could perform the role. Usually it was someone “older than others” and someone who “surpassed the others with their knowledge of divine issues.” That person would not only kill animals for sacrifice, thank the gods for protection, or pray for favours, but also predict the future from certain signs. Even in the first half of the 20th century, rituals of calendar festivals were still led by the oldest family member, i.e., someone who knew ritual traditions better than others.

Sources from the 16th–18th centuries mention various places related to the worship of deities. Descriptions of rituals performed in honour of domestic gods mention stones preserved in barns, millstones, the fireplace (sometimes the stove) or a corner of the house. Both the stove and “the good corner” of the house preserved their ritualistic role until the beginning of the 20th century.

In the traditional peasant environment, individual magic practices had never prevailed over communal rituals. Only in certain cases would a peasant seek personal wellness at other people’s expense, for instance, by “taking” milk from the neighbour’s cow,
by “transferring” the future crop from the neighbour’s fields to one’s own or, vice versa, by “turning out” the pest to the neighbour’s farm. In Lithuanian villages, individual farms owned by families prevailed, however, all the community took part in the most important (annual) festive rituals. Rituals performed by entire village communities included pulling a log or a straw woman, visiting the cornfields, walking masked in groups, riding in a horse-drawn sleigh, or swinging on the swing. Even when magic actions were performed in a separate farm, as for instance, while driving animals out of the cowshed for the first time in spring, the success of these actions was important to the whole village community.
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Myth in the Peasant Calendar

When ancient Lithuanian beliefs started to vanish, their mythological background remained alive in folklore, customs, beliefs and prohibitions, divinations and superstitions. In peasant festivals of the first half of the 20th century, it is still possible to identify traces of the mythical understanding of the world; customs emphasize various opposites such as left and right, high and low, east and west, north and south, the light period of the day (year) and the dark period of the day (year), and similar. Moreover, in the first half of the 20th century, it was still thought that festive time was exceptional and, therefore, opposed to the mundane time.

In the 19th–20th centuries peasant society did not understand the implication of a festive time and did not seek to create a “festive” time consciously. Villagers simply celebrated “like their parents and grandparents used to do.” However, the analysis of ethnographical texts reveals certain features of festive behaviour conditioned by mythical consciousness.

It was forbidden to do everyday jobs during the most important festivals. In winter female jobs dominated, namely, spinning and later, after Shrovetide, – weaving. Thus it was prohibited to spin on Christmas and Shrovetide. Later, when the spring approached, women and young girls usually started to weave. Therefore, on St George’s Day women were not allowed to weave or prepare the loom for weaving. In spring, when people were starting to work in the fields, various outdoor activities were prohibited on festivals, as for instance, peasants were not permitted to work with horses on St George’s Day. On St Mark’s Day (25th April) it was forbidden to move the soil in general. People would not do other ordinary jobs as well, such as darning or patching clothes, milling with millstones, and similar. The largest number of prohibitions was common to the first day of the festival. On the first
day of the biggest annual festivals – Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost – the stove usually remained unheated and nobody cleaned the house. There was a folk warning, “In summer sparrows would peck the crop [from the field] of the person who cleans windows, tables, benches, and other on Pentecost.”

The basis for various prohibitions varied a lot. Christmas and Shrovetide prohibitions contain images of certain beings of chthonic origin, which semantically are close to anthropomorphic (human shaped) characters from the groups of masked revellers. The latter may possibly exact punishment for work conducted during the sacred time (or, rarely, for a job that had not been finished before a festival), as for instance, “[if] you spin on Christmas or Shrovetide, Father Christmas or Father Shrovetide (Lith. Užgavėnių diedas) will come and foul the linen.” Other beliefs say that anyone who works during a festival may encounter souls of the dead hanging around the house. In the evening of Christmas Eve, it is forbidden to pour water and to litter so that these do not go into the eyes of the souls of the dead relatives. Another prohibition does not allow using sharp objects on those days, because the souls that have come to visit their homes may hurt themselves.

In the first half of the 20th century, prohibitions were often related to more realistic dangers that a person may face if he or she did not behave in a proper way: natural disasters may occur, wild animals may attack, a family member may die, or other phenomena, which are undesirable in a farmers’ life, may occur. If you do agricultural jobs on a festive day, hail will damage the corn. If you mill – the wind will tear...
down the roof from the house or animals will be dizzy (Lith. kvaituliu suksis). If you darn or patch – spotted lambs or lambs with “sewn up mouths” will be born. If you work with horses on St George’s Day, prepare the loom for weaving, carry a reed or a knife in order to sharpen it, wolves will attack your animals in pasture.

The importance of the festive time is often emphasized by telling narratives about the festive day, usually about something extraordinary that happens at midnight and would be impossible in ordinary time. For instance, as people used to say, at midnight on Christmas Eve animals begin to speak in human voices, and water turns into wine or becomes sweet. Midnight on Christmas Eve was considered especially favourable for divinations and foretelling the future. Similar narratives were also told on other festivals – St George’s Day, Easter, and Midsummer Day. For instance: “Where a stream flows, the water in it turns into wine on Easter”; “At night before the first day of Easter, one should go to a river, take off their clothes, and wash themselves in order to be ‘white’ all
the time. As it was already mentioned, on Midsummer Day the fern is believed to blossom, “ant frankincense” (Lith. “skruzdelius kodylas”) may give imaginary supernatural knowledge, and medicinal herbs collected on Midsummer’s Eve help to get rid of illnesses.

The most important rituals performed during winter festivals usually took place in the evening, when it was already dark. The dark time of the year and the day, which was the time of winter festivals in the peasant calendar, was considered to be especially dangerous for people. In all of Lithuania it was believed that during the winter festivals, at night evil spirits and representatives of the world of the dead would become more active. For instance, villagers believed that witches would come to cut the sheep’s wool on Christmas Eve night. As it was believed, during that time it was also possible to meet a devil or a ghost on the village crossroads or somewhere on the riverside.
under a bridge. The way masked revellers behaved with people they met on their way is also of great interest. During festivals, especially in the evening, there would rarely be any travellers. However, if the mask-wearers met a traveller, they surrounded him and tormented him until he “ransomed himself”. Such behaviour may be related to the danger that a person faces in the dark period of the day and the opposition between the person and mask-wearers, who are considered to be representatives of the Other world.

During the shortest summer night, forces of the chthonic world would also become more active. People believed that laumės, witches, and devils used to wander in fields and forests on St John’s Night. They enchanted people or destroyed the power of the healing herbs. As it was already mentioned, on St John’s Night, witches riding pigs were believed to gather on a crossroads or fly to the mountains of Šatrija or Rambynas, or even to Kiev in order to make merry there. At the same night, witches were believed to try to steal milk from their neighbours’ cows, place fields of rye under a spell, or turn people into werewolves. Devils and other creatures of the chthonic world, meanwhile, would attack the person who happened to find the fern blossom. In order to protect their animals, villagers used to put various sharp, prickly objects or nettles on the windows and doors of the cattle-shed. During St John’s Night, not only cattle but also textiles needed protection. Under no circumstances could cloth be left outdoors or near a pond, because witches were believed to damage it by threading a line through it (this belief was registered in Simnas, Alytus, Seirijai), embroidering it with a line (Liškiava), weaving or tangling horsehair into the cloth so that it became impossible to remove (Leipalingis), threading it with bristle (Alytus), and laumės were believed to damage the cloth by spitting on it (Alytus). Another belief says that on St John’s Night witches would take towels and collect dew from rye in order to be able to “send illnesses to people”.

Any action performed during the exceptional festive time, by all means, was believed to have
consequences in the future and, therefore, conditioned certain behavioural stereotypes. A popular belief says that if you have debts on Christmas Eve, you will remain indebted for the whole year. This is where the custom to pay back debts before Christmas Eve (or New Year) comes from. Tradition-based village ethics required people to make peace with everybody before Christmas Eve and not to quarrel during the festival – if you were angry with somebody, you would remain angry the whole year. Similarly, people wanted to make sure that the work would go swiftly the whole year – if you were the first to arise in the morning or the first to light the stove (during Shrovetide), or first to return from church (on Christmas, Pentecost, or Easter), you would be the first to come home after working in the fields. A gun that fired during Christmas Eve was believed to remain well-calibrated for the whole year. Therefore, there was a tradition to hunt on Christmas Eve.

Ritual reassurance of abundance was based on the principles of magic too; if something was present during a festival (ritual), it would be present the whole year. Consequently, a banquet was an attribute of every more significant festival. Bread, which was the main food of the peasant, symbolised abundance and had to be present on table with other dishes or on the table used for performing a ritual. Certain numbers symbolized abundance too. During Christmas Eve supper and on Shrovetide, most often the number twelve is emphasized; twelve obligatory dishes are served, or it is eaten twelve times a day. During Ascension Day (Lith. Šeštinės), people used to eat six
dumplings, pies, or other dishes, during Pentecost (Lith. Sekminės) – seven, and during Corpus Christi (Lith. Devintinės) – nine.

Magic meaning was attributed not only to the table with food and drink but also to separate dishes. For instance, during the sowing time, peasants of the Dzūkija region used to grease their hands with lard that was eaten on Shrovetide, because they believed that birds would not peck their grain if they did it. In the surroundings of Salakas, the plough was greased with lard in order not to have thistles in the fields. Food preserved since Shrovetide was believed to protect from snake bites, cure animal diseases, and help to recognize a person dealing with witchcraft. On the Christmas morning, the remains of Christmas Eve
supper were given to domestic animals and birds in order to make them grow better and be healthier.

Lithuanians believed that it was possible to borrow (find) other people’s fortune during festivals. Therefore, during the most important festivals, villagers used to go to their neighbours with an intention to borrow something, but the latter would refuse to lend them anything. Even a tiny chip of wood secretly taken from the neighbour and brought home could transfer the neighbour’s luck (fortune in farming) to the right farm. Thus villagers performed certain magic actions in order to protect themselves, for instance, if someone came to borrow something, the “evil intentions” could be neutralized by throwing something stealthily over that person’s head.

Meteorological conditions on a festive day were believed to indicate the weather of the coming year or the abundance of the crop. The weather of the first day of a festival showed what the weather would be like throughout the whole year. A starry sky on Christmas Eve was associated with the number of eggs laid by hens, the abundance
of mushrooms and berries in summer and in autumn (the more stars, the better). If there was a lot of snow, cows would give plenty of milk (this relation is probably based on the association between the white colour of milk and snow). Meanwhile, the belief that large snowflakes falling from the sky predict a good season for honey bees, most probably has originated from the comparison of the size of honey bee swarms with snowflakes flying in the wind.

Ritual purification is another important moment of a festival. Bathing on Christmas Eve is the best known custom of that kind. In the villages of Aukštaitija region, almost every homestead had a bathhouse, but in every village on the eve of a festive day only a few bathhouses used to be heated. Thus a few families gathered to bathe together in the same bathhouse. Men were always the first to bath in a hotter bathhouse, and women would bath after them. The ritual

Sculpture based on a mythological theme. Dūkštos Regional Park. Vilnius district.
Sculpture based on a mythological theme. Dūkštos Regional Park. Vilnius district
nature of this custom is expressed by the clearly expressed necessity to bathe. Ethnographic sources also contain descriptions of certain moments of ritual bathing. In the middle of the 19th century, Kolberg indicated that people used to bathe this way before other annual festivals as well.

Cleaning the house on the eve of a festival is another important preparatory moment. Pre-festive purification is also related to the periods of fasting. Fasting, when people stopped eating a certain food or restrained themselves from something in general, spread together with Christianity. The exclusiveness of the festive time was also emphasized by wearing new (white) clothes during the festival or covering the festive table with a new (white) tablecloth.

Peasants in a similar way mythologized other, non-festive, times as well. The beginning and the end of the spring plough, sowing, and other important works in the fields were also related to rituals. While starting their works in the fields, peasants used to
take into consideration the day of the week, the phase of the moon, and respected certain prohibitions and rules, which were often based on binary oppositions, for instance, “empty” and “full”. Nobody would start a job on Monday or during the waning moon. According to the mythical worldview, if a job was started at that time, its result would be “empty” or “vanishing” (waning), whereas the week “full of days” or the full (increcent) moon were supposed to guarantee good harvest or other kind of fortune to the farm. Similar respect was paid to the direction of the wind. The direction of north mythologically was related to darkness, cold, death, and the south was expected to bring warmth that gave life. Therefore, the choice of the peasant depended on the results that he wanted to achieve. When villagers waited for the southern wind, they hoped that it would bring the warmth needed for the crop. If peasants started their work when the northern wind was blowing, they believed that it would destroy the potential vermin. The direction of work (movement) was also very significant, and the peasant’s choice was determined by the binary opposition of “close” and “far”. If a peasant was walking towards home while working in the fields, he could expect a better end to the work. In order to have a “clean” crop, workers used to put on white (clean) clothes before going out to fields, etc. The beginning (end) of a task was led by ritual pouring of water on the ploughman (sower), which had to assure a sufficient amount of humidity in the summer, while the end of a task was always finished with a banquet.

Kernavė hill fortress
For Further Reading


Main Bibliography

Balys, Jonas. Lietuvių žemdirbystės papročiai ir tikėjimai [Lithuanian Agrarian Customs and Beliefs]. Silver Spring, Maryland: Lithuanian Folklore Publishers, 1986.


ANCIENT LITHUANIAN CALENDAR FESTIVALS


The book discusses traditional Lithuanian calendar festivals, their development, rituals, and customs. It also focuses on the ways rural communities celebrated Christmas, St John’s Day, and St George’s Day, paying special attention to ancient rituals that are still practiced today. The reader will also find answers to the following questions: What is the difference between Shrovetide and other calendar festivals? Why can Easter, which reached Lithuania with Christianity, reveal the customs of early Lithuanians no worse than other traditional rural festivals of pre-Christian origin? The book is dedicated to everyone interested in traditional Lithuanian culture and customs.