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Lithuania: let's celebrate the anniversary of greatness

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LITHUANIA: LET'S CELEBRATE THE ANNIVERSARY OF GREATNESS

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Such an academic discipline as “medieval studies” does not exist in Lithuania; however, the Middle Ages are present on the academic, cultural, and political scene and lately this presence has increased somewhat. St. Bruno of Querfurt is at fault here. According to the “Annals of Quedlinburg”, the bishop parted with his life *in confinio Rusciae at Lituae* in the year 1009. The decapitation of St. Bruno not only earned him the martyr’s glory, but also entered Lithuania into the world of the written word; in 2009 the country celebrates a millennium of its name. I do not know whether it was someone from academia who passed the millennium idea to politicians, but academics have received their share of the funding granted by the so-called Millennium Directorate¹ for research, conferences, and publications. Thus, regardless of nonexistent “medieval studies”, some of the millenarian research has been concerned with the Middle Ages and most of it is associated with yet another political initiative: the (re?) building of the grand ducal palace in Vilnius. Since the parliament passed the special rebuilding law in 1994, additional energy has been dedicated to archaeological and scholarly effort. I shall not dwell here on the controversial sides of this (re?)construction,² but will discuss its contribution to historical research. Archaeological excavations have not only provided new objects ranging from fragments of wall paintings executed in the Byzantine style and objects decorated with images on courtly subjects, but also offered data rectifying earlier interpretations of the urban development of Vilnius and the building of grand ducal residences there.³ In addition to excavations, scholars have been summoned to search for sources related to the palace under construction

¹ “Directorate for the Commemoration of the Millennium of Lithuania under the Auspices of the Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania,” <http://www.lietuvai1000.lt/index.en.htm>

² For a critical analysis of the (re?)construction see *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės Valdovų rūmų atkūrimo byla: vieno požiūrio likimas* [The Case of the Reconstruction of the Palace of the Lithuanian Grand Dukes: The Fate of One Viewpoint], ed. Alfredas Bumblauskas (Vilnius: V U leidykla, 2006); the official position is given in Napalys Kitkauskas, *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės valdovų rūmai* [The Palace of the Lithuanian Grand Dukes] (Vilnius: Kultūra, 2009).

³ *Vilniaus Žemutinės pilies rūmai* [The Palace in the Lower Castle of Vilnius], 5 vols. (Vilnius: L II and “Lietuvos pilys, 1989–2003).

and thus materials not yet used for the study of Lithuanian history have been brought to light.⁴

These millenarian ambitions, in fact, had a kind of rehearsal in 2003, when the 750th anniversary of the coronation of Lithuania's first and only king, Mindaugas (r. 1253–1263), was celebrated. In addition to a statue of the king, studies and collection of sources pertaining to his reign have been published.⁵ The king's jubilee pushed the popular understanding of Lithuania's history back to the thirteenth century and was used to propagate the idea that since the Catholic baptism of Mindaugas in 1251 the country has preferred Western civilization. By the same token, the pagan past, well popularized in the Soviet period, has lost favor for the sake of the civilizing role of Latin Christianity. Luckily, the long tradition of research into pre-Christian beliefs was crowned with the four volumes of *Sources on Baltic Religion and Mythology*.⁶

Lithuania, like many other EU countries of the former Soviet block, aspires to mediate between Europe's East and West; however, in contrast to its rivals, Lithuania claims to have historical experience, the "multiethnic and multi-religious" Grand Duchy, which makes her fit for the mediator's role. For this popular understanding of the country's more remote, but not necessarily medieval, past credit must be given to professor Alfredas Bumblauskas, who in addition to teaching history at Vilnius University, authors and presents shows on history on national TV. Today the Grand Duchy is part of national pride, in contrast to the interwar period, which regarded the polonised Grand Duchy as somewhat inferior for not being a nation state.

⁴ *Vilniaus Žemutinė pilis XIV a. – XIX a. pradžioje: 2002–2004 m. istorinių šaltinių paieškos* [The Lower Castle of Vilnius from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century: The Search for Historical Sources, 2002–2004], ed. Raimonda Ragauskienė (Vilnius: Pilių tyrimo centras, 2006); *Vilniaus Žemutinė pilis XIV a. – XIX a. pradžioje: 2005–2006 m. tyrimai* [The Lower Castle of Vilnius from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century: Research from 2005–2006], ed. Liudas Glemža (Vilnius: Pilių tyrimo centras, 2007).

⁵ Edvardas Gudavičius, *Mindaugas* (Vilnius: Žara, 1998); *Mindaugo knyga: istorijos šaltiniai apie Lietuvos karalių* [The Book of Mindaugas: Historical Sources about the King of Lithuania], ed. Artūras Dubonis et al. (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos instituto leidykla, 2005); *Mindaugas karalius* [King Mindaugas], ed. Vytautas Ališauskas (Vilnius: Aidai, 2008).

⁶ *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai/Sources of Baltic Religion and Mythology/Quellen der baltischen Religion und Mythologie*, ed. Norbertas Vėlius, 4 vols. (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidykla, 1996–2005).

As to why the Middle Ages has not constituted a separate field in studying national history,⁷ my answer is twofold: on the one hand because of the scarcity of medieval sources; on the other because the Middle Ages is a chronological part of the history of the Grand Duchy. To my mind, the latter assumption should be given more credibility, as Lithuania's troubled statehood has placed the state atop the historical hierarchy. Therefore, the periodization of the past follows the existence of the state. Hence, the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries are known as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; the long nineteenth century is a time under the tsarist yoke, which was swept away by the establishment of the republic in 1918, which was broken by three consecutive occupations, and today's Republic of Lithuania continues what was terminated in 1940. The period before the thirteenth century is termed prehistory and largely relies on archaeological research.

Luckily, the above populist picture has quite a number of exceptions that make quality contributions to medieval studies. Critical editions of the *Lithuanian Metrica* and its research are augmenting and providing not only written sources, but also giving insights into how the grand ducal chancellery operated and on the growing authority of a written document.⁸ Grand Duke Gediminas' (r. 1316–1341) letters addressed to merchants and artisans along the Baltic coast as well as those to the papacy have received a new critical edition meticulously prepared by Stephen C. Rowell.⁹ Narrative sources also enjoy scholarly attention resulting in critical translations and novel interpretations on their compilations and changing functions.¹⁰ Pieces of Neo-Latin literature

⁷ In Lithuania, non-national history is hardly thinkable for several reasons, among which I would specify: (1) a general lack of resources; (2) the historical research of Lithuanian authors on non-Lithuanian subjects cannot compete with translations on the same topics; and (3) Lithuanian academics have lobbied successfully to have Lithuanian studies (termed *Lituanistica*) listed as a priority research area which is funded under separate programmes by the Lithuanian State Science and Studies Foundation and some EU frameworks and given more points in annual ratings compiled by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education.

⁸ The *Metrica* served as a primary source for the work of Jurgita Kunsmanaitė, "Provisions for Widowhood in the Legal Sources of Sixteenth-Century Lithuania," Ph.D. dissertation (Budapest: Central European University, 2009).

⁹ *Chartularium Lithuaniae res gestas magni ducis Gedeminne illustrans/Gedimino laiškai*, tr. and ed. S. C. Rowell (Vilnius: Vaga, 2003).

¹⁰ E.g., Vygandas Marburgietis [Wigand von Marburg], *Naujoji Prūsijos kronika* [New Prussian Chronicle], tr. and ed. Rimantas Jasas, *Lituanistinė biblioteka* 30 (Vilnius: Vaga, 1999); Petras Dusburgietis [Petrus de Dusburg], *Prūsijos žemės kronika* [Chronicle of the Prussian Land], tr. Leonas Valkūnas, ed. Romas Batūra (Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2005).

have appeared in bilingual editions¹¹ and translations of a number of early modern texts have been published. In fact, the field of literature has thus far been the most international, supplying the Lithuanian audience with a series of medieval classics in translation.¹² The third field that has not only opened but is also gaining strength is the translation of Christian sources ranging from the early Church Fathers to monastic rules and publications on the religious heritage in Lithuania.

Considering research, a few monographs based on doctoral dissertations must be listed as pioneering in interdisciplinary medieval studies rather than presenting historical research in the narrow sense. Darius Baronas' study on the three martyrs of Vilnius¹³ opened a long-neglected inquiry into the Orthodox tradition. Baronas examines the biographies and the cult of the martyrs (killed ca. 1347) in the contexts of grand ducal policy, noble kinship, and confessions. The study traces the spread of devotion to the martyrs and reveals mechanisms that sustained their popularity. The useful appendixes offer a selection of martyrs' lives from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Muscovy, Byzantium, and the Balkans. The examination of Lithuanian nobility by Rimvydas Petrauskas¹⁴ combines prosopographic inquiry with research

¹¹ Jonas Vislicietis [Johannes Vislicensis], *Bellum Prutenum/Prūsų karas*, tr. and ed. Eugenija Ulčinė, Bibliotheca Baltica. Lithuania (Vilnius: Mintis, 1997); Jonas Radvanas [Johannes Radvanus], *Radvilias/Radviliada*, tr., ed. and intro. Sigita Narbutas, Bibliotheca Baltica. Lithuania (Vilnius: Vaga, 1997); Mikalojus Husovianas [Nicolaus Hussovianus], *Opera/Raštai*, ed. Sigita Narbutas, tr. Benediktas Kazlauskas, Sigita Narbutas, Eugenija Ulčinė, and Tomas Veteikis (Vilnius: LLTI, 2007).

¹² The following bilingual publications in the series of the Viduramžių biblioteka [Medieval Library] have come out in print: *Carmina Burana: vagantų poezija*, tr., ed. Sigita Narbutas, intro. Genovaitė Dručkutė (Vilnius: LLTI, 2003); *Marija Pranciūzė Lė* [Marie de France, Les], tr., and intro. Genovaitė Dručkutė, ed. Sigita Narbutas (Vilnius: LLTI, 2004); *Novellino, arba šimtas senųjų novelių* [Il Novellino], tr. Dainius Būre, ed. Živilė Nedzinskaitė (Vilnius: LLTI, 2004); Adomas Alietis [Adam de la Halle], *Dramos* [Plays], tr. and intro. Rita Černiauskienė, ed. Ona Daukšienė (Vilnius: LLTI, 2004); Andrius Kapelionas [Andreas Capellanus], *Meilės žiedas, arba trys knygos apie meilę* [De Amore], tr. Sigita Narbutas, intro. Genovaitė Dručkutė, ed. Asta Vaškelienė (Vilnius: LLTI, 2006); Jokūbas Voraginetis [Jacopo da Varazze], *Aukso legenda arba šventųjų skaitiniai* [Legenda aurea], book 1, tr. and ed. Veronika Gerbutavičienė, Sigita Narbutas, Vaidilė Stalioraitytė, and Tomas Veteikis (Vilnius: LLTI, 2008).

¹³ Darius Baronas, *Trys Vilniaus kankiniai: gyvenimas ir istorija/Tres martyres Vilnenses: vita et historia*, Fontes ecclesiastici historiae Lithuaniae (Vilnius: Aidai, 2000). Darius Baronas is a senior research officer at the Institute of Lithuanian History and a chair of the Vilnius Division of the Lithuanian Catholic Academy of Sciences; he specializes in the fields of medieval hagiography and military history (email address: dbaronas@gmail.com).

¹⁴ Rimvydas Petrauskas, *Lietuvos diduomenė XIV a. pabaigoje – XV a.: sudėtis, struktūra, valdžia* (Lithuanian Nobility at the End of the Fourteenth and the Fifteenth Century: Composition, Structure, Power) (Vilnius: Aidai, 2003). Rimvydas Petrauskas is chair of the Department of Ancient and Medieval History at the Faculty of History of the Vilnius University, specializing in courtly culture and the nobility of Lithuania (email address: rimvydas.petrauskas@if.vu.lt).

into social structures, collective identity, and the exercise of group authority. Petrauskas' conclusions have reshaped prevailing theory on the development of Lithuanian nobility from officers at the grand ducal court and demonstrated a much greater variety of paths that led to the rank of magnate. In addition to a fresh and well-argued picture of fifteenth-century nobles and their careers, the list of noblemen appended to the book has become a much-used reference. My study on the image of Grand Duke Vytautas (r. 1392–1430), based on my CEU dissertation, was published in Lithuanian in 2008¹⁵ and sales records show that it has been quite popular.

A sad observation is that student interest in the Middle Ages seems to be decreasing. In addition to “all these languages” and limited career opportunities, a shortage of inspiring and dedicated teachers is a major obstacle to pursuing medieval studies. It is my impression that only archaeologists maintain a constant interest in the remnants from the Middle Ages; however, most of the dissertations in archaeology do not rely on written sources in their original languages and do not focus on specifically medieval remains, but rather consider entire sites or a certain type of find. My optimistic estimation is that in the fields other than archaeology one dissertation concerned with the Middle Ages is defended once in five years. Such a situation is quite adequate given the resources Lithuania can offer; however, a general internationalization of scholarship would enhance the popularity of medieval studies and it is my hope that our CEU department will continue to play its role here.

While the general picture of medieval studies in Lithuania may seem rather dull, I am pleased to say that there is more of the Middle Ages in the country. The exhibition “Christianity in the Art of Lithuania” organized by the Lithuanian Art Museum as a series of temporary shows in 1999–2003 was decisive for bringing long-neglected ecclesiastical and religious art into public awareness. Importantly, the treasury of Vilnius Cathedral, containing a number of top quality items from the Middle Ages, was exhibited there for the first time.¹⁶ Besides medieval objects in exhibition halls, new sites of medieval heritage have been identified or gained broader recognition. In addition to the well-known medieval towns of Trakai, Vilnius, and Kaunas, the settlement of Kernavė has been thoroughly excavated and today is open to public access as one of the world's heritage sites offering a panorama of a complex

¹⁵ Giedrė Mickūnaitė, *Vytautas Didysis. Valdovo įvaizdis* (Vytautas the Great. A Ruler's Image) (Vilnius: VDA leidykla, 2008).

¹⁶ *Vilniaus katedros lobynas/Vilnius Cathedral Treasury*, ed. Romualdas Budrys and Vydas Dolinskas (Vilnius: L D M, 2002).

of five hill-forts and presenting earthworks that formed an impressive landscape in the Middle Ages. Research on medieval monasteries has focused predominantly on the mendicant orders, but the Benedictine tradition was addressed on the occasion of the 600-year anniversary of the first Benedictine foundation in 1405.¹⁷ In autumn 2008, a fourteenth-century graveyard was identified in Verkiiai, a suburb of Vilnius. Its rich burials, containing items previously known only as single pieces, support the hypothesis of a formerly unknown town in the neighborhood of Vilnius. Lastly, I would like to share my joy that fragments of wall paintings executed in Byzantine style were uncovered in the parish church of Trakai. As these are the pieces that I am currently occupied with, I will use this opportunity to introduce the discovery in greater detail.

In 1645, Symon Mankiewicz, a priest, published the first history of the Trakai church where he mentions that once its walls were entirely painted with “Greek” images; however, after the porch was added to the western façade the paintings in the naves were whitewashed, although those in the presbytery survived. This information was briefly noted ten years later and these “Greek” murals were still “remembered” in the nineteenth century. Judging by the fragments that have been discovered as well as circumstantial evidence, the surviving paintings belong to three phases, two from the fifteenth century and one, in the presbytery, from the sixteenth. Paintings of the two lower registers have been found; the bottom features drapery and the upper one depicts full-size figures. In addition, the western and part of the northern wall showed the Last Judgement, of which the scene of Paradise survives in fragments. It is represented by the figure of the Patriarch Jacob, seated under the trees of Paradise, holding the souls of the elect in his bosom. An adjacent group of saints “looking” westwards are perhaps being let into the gates of Paradise by St. Peter. The identification of other figures requires more research. For the time being, it is noteworthy that their faces were mutilated deliberately before the murals were whitewashed. Thus, in addition to research on iconography and style, the paintings open the issue of Catholic iconoclasm from around 1600. The destruction of “Greek” images would not be surprising within the context of the Catholic Counter-Reformation; however, the paradox is that from then onwards the church of Trakai was renowned for the miraculous painting of the Mother of God, which is a Gothic Madonna transformed into

¹⁷ *Pirmieji pranciškonų žingsniai Lietuvoje XIII–XVIII a.* (The First Franciscan Steps in Lithuania, Thirteenth – Eighteenth Centuries), ed. Darius Baronas (Vilnius: Aidai, 2006); *Benediktiškoji tradicija Lietuvoje* (The Benedictine Tradition in Lithuania), ed. Liudas Jovaiša (Vilnius: Aidai, 2008).

a Byzantine-like Hodegetria, proclaimed as a gift from the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus (r. 1392–1425).

The Trakai case is sufficient to show the availability of sources and topics for a medievalist, regardless of jubilees and other ornaments of contemporary politics. It seems, however, that the next event to bring the heroic Middle Ages to a wider public will be the screening of “Grünwald – the Iron Day”¹⁸ an epic movie dedicated to the 600th anniversary of the battle of Grünwald (15 July 1410), to be completed in the summer of 2010. While film critics are quite sceptical of the movie's artistic qualities, its advocates, among which one finds the Ministry of Defence, see it as a means to give Lithuanian-Polish military cooperation a history.

Withal, medieval studies could yet claim its position and win independence from the realities of today. It is my assumption that what is needed from those teaching about various issues of the medieval past is to explain it more clearly by showing that the Middle Ages was not just a period of history, but also a distinct system of reasoning which was reformed by Martin Luther and the multitude of his followers and rivals.

¹⁸ “Žalgiris – Geležies diena” (Grunwald – the Iron Day), director Raimundas Banionis, script Juozas Marcinkevičius, Marius Daškus and Raimundas Banionis, scholarly consultant Rimvydas Petrauskas.