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Sources and Reconstructions of Pre-Christian Baltic Religion

Evidence, Interpretation, and the Limits of Reconstruction

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Abstract

The pre-Christian religions of the Baltic region are often described as if they formed a coherent system that can be reconstructed from surviving names, chronicles, archaeology, folklore, and later ethnographic records. The evidence is less complete and more uneven. BAFES-R-001 examined what the surviving material actually supports, where interpretation is reasonable, and where modern reconstruction begins.

The first research cycle compared medieval and early modern written sources with archaeology and modern source-critical scholarship. Particular attention was given to the Treaty of Christburg of 1249, the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, Peter of Dusburg, the Galician-Volhynian Chronicle, the Chronograph of 1262, the early modern catalogue of Jan Łasicki, and archaeological work on burial, horses, weapons, and sacred landscapes. A corrective review subsequently checked the critical manuscript reconstruction of the Chronograph of 1262 and the published facsimile evidence for the relevant passage of the Treaty of Christburg.

The evidence strongly supports regionally varied polytheistic traditions, named divine or cult figures, divination by lot, specialised ritual performers, sacred natural places, complex funerary practices, and ritual uses of horses. Medieval chronicles also contain several reports of executed ritual killings of captives, although their frequency and normative status cannot be established. Perkūnas has strong early cross-source attestation. Curche is securely placed in an annual post-harvest cultic context, but the familiar label “harvest god” remains an interpretation rather than the wording of the treaty. Teliavelis is securely present in the thirteenth-century textual tradition, while the historical origin of the smith-solar description attached to him remains open to literary and philological questions.

The evidence does not directly provide a single fixed pan-Baltic pantheon, a unified state religion, a centralised priestly hierarchy, or a standard ritual system shared by all Baltic peoples. The influential Romow and Criwe account cannot be used as straightforward proof of a “Baltic Vatican”. Later folklore and modern reconstruction remain valuable evidence for later traditions and reception, but they cannot be projected automatically into the thirteenth century.

The main conclusion is therefore neither that Baltic religion can be fully reconstructed nor that almost nothing can be known. The surviving evidence supports a substantial historical core, but that core is regional, uneven, and dependent on careful distinctions between source report, historical inference, and later reconstruction.

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1. Introduction

Pre-Christian Baltic religion survives through fragments. There is no indigenous medieval handbook of Lithuanian, Prussian, Curonian, Semigallian, or Samogitian religion. No surviving Baltic priest wrote a systematic account of doctrine, ritual, divine hierarchy, sacred law, or cosmology before Christianisation. Most early written testimony comes from people who stood outside the traditions they described: missionaries, crusading institutions, Christian chroniclers, political observers, or later authors writing in societies already transformed by Christianity.

This creates a predictable temptation. Sparse material encourages later readers to join fragments into a complete system. A divine name found in one text acquires a function from another. A late folk belief is used to fill a gap in a medieval chronicle. A list becomes a pantheon. A ritual specialist becomes a member of a priestly caste. A sacred place becomes evidence for a central sanctuary. Several similar texts are counted as several independent confirmations even when their literary relationship is uncertain.

The opposite temptation is equally misleading. Because the sources are Christian, polemical, incomplete, and sometimes dependent on one another, it is possible to conclude that they tell us almost nothing reliable about pre-Christian Baltic religion. That conclusion also goes too far. Medieval texts repeatedly preserve specific names, actions, ritual contexts, and descriptions. Archaeology independently confirms parts of the material world described by written sources. Modern philology and source criticism can distinguish textual fact from later interpretation more precisely than older synthetic accounts often did.

BAFES-R-001 was designed around this middle ground. Its purpose was not to produce another complete reconstruction of “the Baltic religion”. It asked a narrower question: what can the surviving evidence establish with reasonable confidence, and where does historical reconstruction begin?

This distinction matters beyond Baltic studies. Religions known mainly through hostile, external, late, or fragmentary sources are especially vulnerable to false certainty. The problem is methodological before it is mythological. A responsible reconstruction has to preserve the difference between what a source says, what several sources together make probable, what modern scholarship infers, and what remains unknown.

The first research cycle therefore treated evidence claim by claim. Written sources were compared chronologically and contextually. Where possible, the project checked critical editions rather than relying on popular summaries. Similar reports were examined for possible textual dependence. Archaeological evidence was used as an independent material control but not as a shortcut to religious meaning. Later folklore was treated as evidence of later tradition unless continuity could be argued rather than assumed.

The resulting picture is coherent in one sense and resistant to simplification in another. There is strong evidence for multiple divine or cult figures, divination, ritual specialists, sacred places, sacrificial activity, funerary practices with religious significance, and regionally recurring ritual patterns. There is much weaker evidence for a single uniform system extending across the whole Baltic world.

This publication presents that result in full. It is not a catalogue of every name ever associated with Baltic mythology. It is an evidential map of the strongest themes, the major uncertainties, and the points where later reconstruction has often become more confident than the surviving sources allow.

2. Research question and approach

The central research question was:

What can be established, reasonably inferred, considered uncertain, or only reconstructed about pre-Christian Baltic religious traditions from the surviving evidence?

The project used four practical distinctions.

First, a statement in a historical source is not identical to the historical reality described by that source. If Peter of Dusburg writes that a religious authority exercised influence over a wide pagan world, the existence of that sentence is certain. The institutional system behind it is a separate historical question.

Second, multiple texts are not necessarily multiple witnesses. Medieval compilers borrowed, translated, adapted, and inherited material. A claim repeated in three texts can still derive from one earlier information channel. The number of documents is therefore not a reliable count of independent observations.

Third, material evidence and religious meaning have to be separated. Archaeology can establish that a horse was buried in a particular context or that weapons accompanied human remains. It cannot, without additional evidence, establish the exact belief that motivated the act.

Fourth, later tradition is not automatically earlier tradition. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century folklore may preserve old motifs, but centuries of Christianisation, social change, literary circulation, and reinterpretation stand between a medieval practice and its late record. Continuity must be demonstrated where possible, not assumed.

Internally, BAFES-R-001 classified major claims according to whether they were documented, interpretive, hypothetical, traditional, or unresolved. The public argument does not reproduce the internal coding system, because the codes are research-management tools rather than a substitute for explanation. The underlying principle, however, remains visible throughout this publication: confidence should follow the evidence rather than the attractiveness of a reconstruction.

The research corpus covered several types of material.

The earliest written layer included the Treaty of Christburg of 1249, Henry of Livonia, the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, the Galician-Volhynian Chronicle, the Chronograph of 1262, and Peter of Dusburg's *Chronica terrae Prussiae*. These texts differ sharply in genre. A legal treaty is not a military poem. A chronographic compilation is not an eyewitness report. A crusading chronicle is not a neutral ethnography. Their differences are part of the evidence.

A second layer included early modern authors such as Jan Łasicki, whose catalogue of Samogitian divine and supernatural names is exceptionally rich but also difficult to interpret. Such sources may preserve genuine local material while simultaneously reflecting linguistic misunderstanding, literary ordering, Christian classification, or learned interpretation.

Archaeological scholarship was used to test material claims involving cremation, horse burial, weapons, harnesses, and ritual settings. The work of Roman Shiroukhov, Mindaugas Bertasius, Gediminas Petrauskas, and others demonstrates how much can be established materially while also illustrating the danger of moving too quickly from an object to a theology.

Modern historical, philological, and historiographic scholarship was used not as a single authority but as a field of competing models. The project drew particularly on Norbertas Vėlius, Ilja Lemeškin, Rolandas Kregždys, Nijolė Laurinkienė, Stephen C. Rowell, Darius Baronas, Vykintas Vaitkevičius, Gintaras Beresnevičius, Rasa Mažeika, Seweryn Szczepański, and Francis Young.

The result is intentionally conservative in one respect: the project prefers a narrower conclusion that survives source criticism to a more impressive conclusion that depends on several unproven identifications.

3. The source landscape

3.1 The Treaty of Christburg

The Treaty of Christburg, concluded in 1249, is among the most important early documentary sources for Old Prussian religious practice. Unlike a later narrative chronicle, it is a legal instrument produced in the context of conflict, conversion, and negotiated obligations. Its religious clauses were not written to preserve Prussian tradition for future historians. They identify practices and figures that Christian authorities expected converts to abandon.

The text names Curche in a recurring annual context after the gathering of crops and uses language indicating treatment “as a god”, together with libations. It also refers to Tullisones and Ligaschones in funerary practice and contains the word *nisum* in a description associated with the dead. These details are unusually valuable because they are embedded in a dated legal document rather than in a later mythographic synthesis.

The original treaty has not survived. BAFES therefore does not claim to have inspected an original medieval charter. The project used the published documentary tradition and, during a corrective review, compared the

relevant passage in the published facsimile of Latin copy A with the revised transcription analysed by Rolandas Kregždys. The forms *Curche*, *Tulissones*, *Ligaschones*, and *nisum* were confirmed at the level necessary for the claims made here (Kregždys 2012).

The treaty is strong evidence for the existence of particular terms and practices. It is weaker evidence for complete definitions of their functions. A prohibition can show that a practice mattered enough to regulate. It does not necessarily explain the practice in the categories that its participants would have used.

3.2 The Livonian narrative tradition

Henry of Livonia and the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle preserve repeated descriptions of divination, warfare, ritual decisions, and encounters with Baltic groups. Their value lies partly in recurrence across situations. Lots appear in decisions involving future action and divine assistance. The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle names Perkune in a Lithuanian context and contains a striking ritual specialist usually transmitted as *blūtekirl*, who casts lots, acts ritually in relation to an animal, predicts an outcome, and formulates a promise to the gods.

These sources are not ethnographic manuals. Their scenes are shaped by narrative, genre, audience, and Christian perspective. A ritual speech in a verse chronicle cannot be treated as a stenographic transcript. Yet literary form does not make every concrete detail fictional. The appropriate response is neither literalism nor dismissal, but comparison.

3.3 The Galician-Volhynian Chronicle and the Chronograph of 1262

The thirteenth-century Rus' textual world preserves some of the most important early Lithuanian divine names. The Galician-Volhynian Chronicle contains Lithuanian religious names in political and military contexts. The Chronograph of 1262 preserves a separate sequence of Andaj, Perkūnas, Žvorūna, and Teliavelis, accompanied by explanatory material for several figures.

Direct control of Ilja Lemeškin's critical reconstruction was a major corrective step in BAFES-R-001. The project checked the relevant readings across the surviving manuscript tradition represented by the Archival, Warsaw, Vilnius, and Zabelin witnesses. The sequence of names and the associated glosses are part of the critical tradition, not a modern invention (Lemeškin 2009; Vėlius 1996).

At the same time, four manuscript witnesses do not equal four independent historical observations. The manuscript tradition has genealogical relationships and editorial branches. The evidential unit is the textual tradition, not the raw number of surviving copies.

The relationship between the Galician-Volhynian Chronicle and the Chronograph is also more complicated than either complete dependence or complete independence. Direct borrowing of one Lithuanian religious list from the other has not been established, but both belong to a connected literary environment. Repeated names therefore matter, but they should not be counted mechanically as if two unrelated observers independently recorded the same event.

3.4 Peter of Dusburg

Peter of Dusburg's *Chronica terrae Prussiae*, completed in the early fourteenth century, is indispensable and dangerous in equal measure. It contains some of the most influential descriptions of Prussian religion, including sacred groves and waters, funerary belief, sacrifice, Romow, and Criwe.

The danger lies in the later history of reception. Dusburg's passages have often been extracted from their narrative setting and used as if they were transparent institutional descriptions. Rasa Mažeika's close reading of the Romow and Criwe passage is useful precisely because it resists the two easiest extremes: treating the account as simple reportage or dismissing it as pure moral fiction (Mažeika 2023).

Dusburg also wrote within the documentary and literary world of the Teutonic Order. His use of earlier written material is demonstrable in some contexts. Similarities between his religious descriptions and earlier texts therefore require dependency analysis before they are counted as independent confirmation.

3.5 Early modern catalogues

By the sixteenth century, the source situation changes. The written record becomes richer, but the historical distance from the thirteenth-century religious world also grows. Jan Łasicki's *De diis Samagitarum* is a

prominent example. It preserves a large catalogue of names linked to Samogitian beliefs and practices. Some entries may reflect genuine local divine names, spirits, ritual terms, household beings, natural phenomena, or misunderstood common nouns.

The catalogue is valuable precisely because it is heterogeneous. Its weakness appears when every capitalised or unfamiliar term is promoted into an ancient god. A long list does not prove a large, systematic pantheon. Each item has to be evaluated separately through linguistic, contextual, comparative, and historiographic evidence.

4. Source criticism and the problem of independence

Historical reconstruction becomes unreliable when the same information is counted repeatedly without asking how it travelled.

This problem appears at several levels in BAFES-R-001.

The first is manuscript dependence. The surviving copies of the Chronograph of 1262 preserve a textual tradition with branching relationships. They strengthen confidence that a reading belongs to the tradition, but they are not four ethnographic field reports.

The second is literary dependence between works. Peter of Dusburg is known to have used earlier materials in parts of his chronicle. Nicolaus von Jeroschin later translated and adapted Dusburg. Jeroschin therefore cannot be cited as an independent medieval witness for Romow or Criwe merely because his wording appears in a separate book.

The third is informational dependence without direct copying. Two texts can be textually distinct yet draw on overlapping intellectual or oral environments. This is one reason the Galician-Volhynian Chronicle and the Chronograph of 1262 should be treated with caution. Their Lithuanian passages are not demonstrably copied one from the other, but complete informational independence has not been established.

A useful principle follows: evidence should be weighted by channels, not merely counted by documents.

This principle affects several major themes. Three written accounts of funerary practices are less persuasive if they may share institutional traditions. Archaeological evidence becomes especially important because it provides a genuinely different channel. A repeated one-third motif in military sacrifice is less impressive if later authors may have inherited earlier narrative material or if the fraction itself belongs to wider medieval conventions. A divine name occurring in separate linguistic and literary contexts is more significant when the contexts are genuinely independent.

Source criticism does not automatically weaken every conclusion. In some cases it strengthens them by showing which claims survive after duplicate evidence is discounted. Perkūnas is a good example. His early attestation does not depend on one manuscript family alone. The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle provides a separate textual environment, while the Chronograph gives a distinct early record with a thunder gloss. Once source dependence is taken seriously, this cross-source pattern becomes more meaningful, not less.

5. Polytheism and the pantheon problem

5.1 What the evidence supports

Several early sources refer to gods in the plural and preserve named divine or cult figures. The Galician-Volhynian Chronicle, the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, and the Chronograph of 1262 all contribute to this picture. The Treaty of Christburg adds a specifically Prussian cultic figure in Curche.

For a minimal analytical definition of polytheism, this is sufficient. Several Baltic groups of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries can reasonably be described as participating in religious traditions that recognised multiple divine or cult powers.

This conclusion does not require a complete theology. Polytheism is a narrower claim than the existence of a fixed pantheon. It says that multiple divine powers were recognised. It does not say that all Baltic groups shared the same list, ranks, myths, institutions, or ritual calendar.

5.2 How a fixed pantheon is constructed

The strongest reconstructed pantheons usually depend on several interpretive operations.

One operation identifies names from different sources. Diviriks may be equated with Perkūnas. Nunadievis may be equated with Andaj. Medeina may be equated with Žvorūna. These proposals can have linguistic, structural, or functional arguments behind them, but the medieval texts do not themselves state these equations.

A second operation interprets order as rank. A sequence of names becomes a hierarchy, even though lists can be ordered for literary, mnemonic, syntactic, or contextual reasons.

A third operation treats regional or textual variation as a single religious system. Lithuanian, Prussian, Samogitian, and other material is placed into one table.

A fourth operation interprets political context as evidence for state religion. A god invoked in connection with a ruler or political event becomes part of an official state pantheon.

Any one of these steps may be defensible in a particular case. The problem arises when several uncertain steps are combined and the final system is presented as direct medieval evidence.

BAFES-R-001 therefore rejects the claim that the surviving thirteenth-century lists themselves provide a unified ranked state pantheon. This is not a claim that structured pantheons did not exist. It is a claim about the limits of the surviving evidence.

5.3 Regional religious worlds

The broader pattern fits a model of related but regionally varied religious traditions. Baltic languages and cultural connections justify comparison. Similar ritual forms may also have circulated across political boundaries. Yet linguistic relationship does not erase local history.

Prussian material develops in a different documentary setting from Lithuanian material. Samogitian evidence may not map cleanly onto either. Curonian and Semigallian episodes appear through yet other political and narrative contexts. Christianisation also occurred unevenly across time and region.

A historically plausible reconstruction should therefore expect both shared patterns and local variation. The evidence strongly favours neither total fragmentation nor a single uniform religious system.

6. Named divine and cult figures

6.1 Perkūnas

Perkūnas has one of the strongest early cases in the corpus.

The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle names *Perkune* in a Lithuanian context. The Chronograph of 1262 contains Perkūnas in the sequence Andaj, Perkūnas, Žvorūna, Teliavelis and attaches a thunder-related gloss. These are separate textual environments, and the Chronograph reading was directly checked against the critical manuscript reconstruction (Meyer 1876; Lemeškin 2009).

This allows a strong conclusion: Perkūnas was an early attested Lithuanian divine or cult figure associated, at least in one early textual tradition, with thunder.

It does not allow a complete reconstruction of Perkūnas. His exact rank is not established. The sources do not prove that he was the sole supreme deity of a state system. They do not establish that every motif found in later folklore was already present in the thirteenth century. They do not automatically prove the identity of Perkūnas with every similarly interpreted name in other lists.

Nijolė Laurinkienė's extensive study demonstrates the richness of linguistic, folkloric, and historical material surrounding Perkūnas (Laurinkienė 1996). For the purposes of early reconstruction, however, later richness should not blur the distinction between early attestation and later tradition. The strongest result is precisely that Perkūnas does not need late folklore in order to be historically visible.

6.2 Diviriks and the problem of equivalence

The proposed equation *Diviriks* = *Perkūnas* is a useful example of a plausible but unproven identification. The proposal has structural and philological arguments, and it may ultimately be correct. No surviving medieval text states the identity directly.

The responsible formulation is therefore comparative: *Diviriks* may represent a figure related or identical to *Perkūnas*, but the equation remains a hypothesis. It should not be used as an invisible bridge that allows two lists to be merged before the identification itself is argued.

6.3 Teliavelis

Teliavelis is both well attested and difficult to interpret.

The name appears in two distinct thirteenth-century textual corpora. The *Chronograph* of 1262 presents *Teliavelis* as a smith associated with forging the Sun and placing or casting it into the sky. Direct examination of Lemeškin's critical reconstruction confirms that the smith-solar description belongs to the manuscript tradition (Lemeškin 2009; Vēlius 1996).

That textual fact should be separated from the historical origin of the description.

Lemeškin has drawn attention to a possible literary relationship with the Biblical Tubal-Cain, who appears in the chronographic literary environment as a figure associated with metalworking. Similarity of name, craft, and literary context raises a legitimate question: did the compiler shape an indigenous name through a familiar bookish model?

The possibility does not prove that *Teliavelis* was invented. The name's appearance in the Galician-Volhynian Chronicle, without the same smith-solar narrative, argues against a simple invention theory. The strongest present formulation has three levels:

1. *Teliavelis* is an early attested name.
2. The *Chronograph* documents a smith-solar description attached to that name.
3. The origin and historical authenticity of that exact description remain debated.

Later equations such as *Teliavelis* = *Kalvelis* or *Teliavelis* = *Velnias* may be productive scholarly hypotheses. They are not direct statements of the thirteenth-century texts.

6.4 Curche

Curche appears in one of the earliest and strongest documentary contexts in the corpus: the Treaty of Christburg of 1249.

The treaty places *Curche* in an annual context after crops have been gathered, uses the phrase *pro deo*, and refers to libations. The agricultural association is therefore not arbitrary. Yet the common summary “*Curche* was the Prussian god of harvest” goes beyond the literal text.

This difference may seem minor, but it illustrates how reconstruction hardens into fact. Once a modern functional label is repeated across handbooks, websites, and diagrams, readers can easily assume that the medieval source itself supplied the label.

Rolandas Kregždys has challenged simple inherited readings and proposed a more complicated etymological and functional history, including possible connections with cattle and secondary agricultural interpretation (Kregždys 2012). Seweryn Szczepański places the treaty within the broader religious and political circumstances of Prussian Christianisation (Szczepański 2017).

BAFES-R-001 does not choose a new certainty merely because an older certainty is weak. The secure historical core is smaller: *Curche* was named in an annual post-harvest cultic context and treated as divine. His exact function and etymology remain open.

6.5 Andaj, Nunadievis, Žvorūna, and Medeina

The early Lithuanian lists preserve additional names whose relationships remain difficult.

Andaj is securely present in the critical Chronograph tradition. Nunadievis occurs in another early corpus. Their proposed identity is possible but not established. The texts do not provide enough shared functional information to make the equation secure.

Žvorūna is also securely present in the Chronograph tradition, where the surrounding gloss has a zoological character. Medeina or Medeinas appears in another early Lithuanian context. Their association through forest, animals, or hunting has a long historiographic tradition and is often treated as obvious. Yet the early sources do not state that the two names refer to the same figure.

These cases demonstrate why an attractive reconstructed pantheon can be more stable on paper than in the sources. A diagram can remove uncertainty by design. Historical evidence cannot.

7. Divination and ritual specialists

7.1 Divination by lot

Divination by lot is one of the stronger cross-regional patterns identified in the research.

Henry of Livonia describes the use of lots in decisions involving divine assistance and future action. The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle contains further scenes involving lots. Peter of Dusburg also reports Prussian consultation of divine powers through lot before significant actions.

These accounts differ in setting and wording. They should not be reduced to one standard technique. Even so, recurrence across more than one group and source context supports a broader historical inference: divinatory use of lots was practised among several Baltic communities in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

This conclusion is stronger than a claim based on a single dramatic episode but narrower than a claim about a pan-Baltic divinatory institution. We do not know that the same objects, specialists, prayers, rules, or interpretations were used everywhere.

The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle also contains a scene that may reflect scapulimancy, or divination involving a shoulder blade. The episode is important but isolated. It supports the possibility of this practice without establishing its distribution or institutional form.

7.2 Tulissones and Ligaschones

The Treaty of Christburg associates Tulissones and Ligaschones with funerary practice and compares them to pagan priests through a Christian explanatory phrase.

Their exact roles remain uncertain. It is not clear whether the two words name separate offices, variant terms, related performers, or categories misunderstood by the Latin writer. Etymological arguments have produced different reconstructions.

What the treaty does support is ritual specialisation. Certain people had recognisable roles in funerary performance, speech, interpretation, or mediation. Calling them a fully organised priesthood adds more institutional structure than the source provides.

7.3 The blūtekirl episode

The *blūtekirl* episode in the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle gives a vivid picture of specialised ritual performance. The figure casts lots, performs an action involving an animal, predicts the outcome of a military undertaking, and formulates a religious promise.

Even if the transmitted word is a descriptive term used by the chronicler rather than an indigenous office title, the scene is difficult to explain without some concept of specialised ritual authority.

Together with the Treaty of Christburg, this supports a strong but limited conclusion: at least some Baltic societies recognised people who performed specialised ritual functions.

The evidence does not establish a hereditary caste, a unified clerical hierarchy, common ordination, or a pan-Baltic priesthood. The existence of ritual experts should not be inflated into an ecclesiastical institution.

8. Sacred landscapes

Sacred natural places form another theme supported by both written sources and later interdisciplinary study.

Peter of Dusburg refers to sacred groves, fields, waters, and particular places treated as sacred. These statements fit a broader pattern in Baltic and northern European religious history in which ritual significance was attached to landscape features rather than only to built temples.

Vykintas Vaitkevičius has shown the potential of combining historical sources, place-names, archaeology, geography, and folklore in the study of Baltic sacred places (Vaitkevičius 2003). His work also demonstrates why site identification must be case-specific.

The general conclusion is strong: sacred natural places existed and mattered.

The specific conclusion “this hill, stone, grove, spring, or field was a pre-Christian sanctuary in the thirteenth century” requires more evidence. A suggestive place-name can survive for many reasons. A late legend may preserve an older memory, but it may also arise after Christianisation. An archaeological find may show activity without identifying its ritual meaning.

The term *alka* or *alkas* is particularly vulnerable to automatic use as proof. Linguistic and folkloric evidence can make a location interesting, but the label does not itself date a sacred function or prove continuity.

A responsible sacred-landscape history therefore works site by site. Strong cases emerge when several independent lines converge: early textual reference, place-name evidence, archaeological context, spatial pattern, and durable local tradition. Weak cases should remain possibilities rather than dots on a map presented as established sanctuaries.

9. Death, burial, and the afterlife

9.1 Material evidence

Funerary evidence is one of the most productive areas for comparing written and archaeological sources.

Roman Shiroukhov’s work on Prussian graves in the Sambian Peninsula documents tenth- to thirteenth-century burials with weapons and horse equipment, together with patterns of social differentiation and warrior display (Shiroukhov 2012). Archaeology in Lithuania likewise documents complex cremation practices and changing medieval burial landscapes (Petrauskas 2017).

These findings independently establish important material facts: horses, weapons, harnesses, cremated human remains, and other objects were combined in patterned funerary contexts.

This matters because written chroniclers also describe the dead with equipment, horses, weapons, clothing, or other possessions. Archaeology therefore confirms that at least part of the material world in those narratives corresponds to real burial practice rather than literary invention.

9.2 The semantic problem

The difficult question is what those objects meant.

A chronicler may explain that the dead required equipment for continued activity after death. Archaeology can show that equipment was placed or burned with the dead, but it cannot independently prove the same explanation.

This distinction is crucial. The presence of a horse does not itself tell us whether the animal was a mount for the afterlife, a status marker, a sacrifice, a companion, a public display, an offering, or a combination of meanings. The presence of weapons does not automatically mean belief in post-mortem warfare.

Written sources do provide grounds for a more cautious semantic inference. The Treaty of Christburg includes imagery of the dead moving into another age or world. The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle and Peter of Dusburg connect possessions and social identity with continued existence in ways that are difficult to reduce to purely material custom.

The best present conclusion is therefore layered. The material funerary pattern is highly secure. The interpretation that possessions and social status retained significance after death is well supported but less secure than the archaeological pattern itself.

9.3 Cremation and the danger of simple religious markers

Cremation is often treated as an obvious marker of pagan identity. Medieval Baltic evidence does not support such a simple equation in every context.

Cremation practices varied over time and region, and cultural change did not necessarily coincide immediately with formal conversion. Christianisation was a process rather than a single switch. Archaeological practice, political identity, and religious affiliation can move at different speeds.

Gediminas Petrauskas's work on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century cremation cemeteries demonstrates the value of treating burial as a complex regional and social phenomenon rather than a binary religious label (Petrauskas 2017).

For BAFES-R-001, this means that cremation can contribute to an argument about religious practice but should not be used alone as proof that an individual burial is "pagan".

10. Horses, sacrifice, and ritual performance

The horse occupies a prominent place in the material and written evidence.

Archaeological research documents horse graves and special horse-burial areas in the Baltic region. Mindaugas Bertasius has emphasised the performative and public dimensions of horse burial, including the relationship between burial space, landscape, memory, and ritual action (Bertasius 2009). Prussian and Sambian material likewise shows horses and horse equipment integrated into elite and funerary contexts (Shiroukhov 2012).

Written sources describe sacrificial or ritual uses of horses in several settings. These reports are consistent with the independent archaeological evidence at the level of general phenomenon: horses had religious and ritual significance beyond ordinary economic use.

The evidence does not establish one standard Baltic horse-sacrifice ceremony.

The recipient may differ. The purpose may differ. Some contexts are funerary, others military, divinatory, commemorative, or sacrificial. The animal may be killed, buried, burned, displayed, or represented through equipment. Regional practices could share symbolic themes without constituting a single ritual system.

This distinction matters because the horse is one of the easiest themes to over-unify. Its high value, military importance, mobility, and social symbolism made it suitable for many kinds of ritual expression. A common animal does not automatically imply a common liturgy.

The strongest conclusion is therefore broad but historically meaningful: ritual uses of horses were well established in parts of the medieval Baltic world, and archaeology provides an independent material basis for this conclusion.

11. Human sacrifice and the problem of war booty

11.1 Human sacrifice

Human sacrifice is one of the most difficult themes because the sources were often written by Christian opponents in contexts of warfare.

A naive reading can turn every accusation into fact. An equally naive reaction can dismiss all such reports as propaganda. BAFES-R-001 attempted to avoid both.

The first step was to separate different narrative categories: threats, vows, intended sacrifices, prevented actions, executions, and episodes in which the chronicler explicitly describes a killing as an offering to gods.

After this separation, several reports remain in which captives are said to have been killed in ritual contexts. Some passages use explicit sacrificial language.

This is enough to make the historical existence of ritual killing plausible in some Prussian, Lithuanian, and Samogitian contexts. It is not enough to establish frequency, normality, or a common procedure.

War chronicles disproportionately record extreme events. The survival of several accounts may reflect genuine practice, literary selection, institutional memory, or all three. Source dependence also matters. Similar episodes cannot automatically be counted as independent.

The most defensible conclusion is narrow: medieval sources repeatedly report executed ritual killings of captives among some Baltic groups, while the frequency and normative status of the practice remain unknown.

11.2 The one-third motif

The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle contains a ritual promise in which one third of booty is to be dedicated to the gods. Peter of Dusburg reports a related one-third division involving Criwe.

The numerical agreement has often been treated as evidence of a fixed religious rule. It may be evidence of such a rule, but the case is weaker than it first appears.

The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle does not provide a complete later account showing that the full promised programme was carried out. Dusburg wrote later within the Teutonic Order's literary world. A one-third share also has wider medieval legal, literary, and symbolic parallels.

The research therefore distinguishes between two propositions.

A custom of dedicating some part of military booty to divine powers is historically plausible.

A fixed, pan-regional rule requiring exactly one third, attached to a standard sacrificial procedure, is not established.

This difference is typical of the project as a whole. A probable religious pattern can survive even when an overly precise reconstruction does not.

12. Romow and Criwe

Few passages have shaped modern images of Baltic religion as strongly as Peter of Dusburg's account of Romow and Criwe.

Dusburg describes a sacred centre and a religious authority whose reach is compared with that of the pope. Later authors amplified the image. In modern retellings, Romow sometimes becomes a Baltic equivalent of Rome or the Vatican, and Criwe becomes the head of a centralised pagan church.

The source does not justify that level of certainty.

The comparison with Rome and the papacy is Christian institutional language. It may have been an explanatory analogy, a rhetorical device, a political claim, or a way of translating unfamiliar authority into categories a Christian reader could understand.

Nicolaus von Jeroschin's later version is dependent on Dusburg and therefore cannot serve as an independent witness. Early modern elaborations must also be checked for dependence before they are used as corroboration.

Modern scholarship has responded in different ways. Some researchers have treated the passage with deep suspicion. Others have sought a historical core. Mažeika's recent close reading is valuable because it shows that the choice is not simply between "literal truth" and "complete invention" (Mažeika 2023).

BAFES-R-001 adopts the same general caution. A narrower historical core remains possible. There may have been a significant sacred or assembly place and a religious authority with influence beyond a single household or village. The passage could preserve a real institution reframed through Christian language.

What is not demonstrated is a pan-Baltic church with central government, a hierarchy structurally analogous to Catholicism, or universal authority over all Baltic peoples.

The phrase “Baltic Vatican” is therefore useful as a description of a later historiographic image, not as a secure statement about the thirteenth or early fourteenth century.

13. Łasicki and the early modern expansion of the record

Jan Łasicki’s *De diis Samagitarum* has had enormous influence because it appears to offer what the medieval record lacks: a large list of named deities and supernatural beings.

That apparent abundance must be handled carefully.

The text was produced in the sixteenth century, after long processes of Christianisation and social change. It records material from a world in which older traditions, Christian practice, local custom, household ritual, linguistic misunderstanding, and learned classification could coexist.

The list itself is heterogeneous. Some names may represent deities. Others may be spirits, personified functions, ritual expressions, domestic beings, natural phenomena, occupational terms, misunderstood phrases, or editorial constructions.

This does not make Łasicki worthless. On the contrary, the source is exceptionally valuable for understanding the religious and vernacular world of its own period and for identifying possible continuities. Its value declines only when its internal diversity is flattened into a uniform pantheon.

Each item requires an individual case. Questions include:

- Is the word linguistically intelligible?
- Does it occur elsewhere?
- Is the context ritual, narrative, domestic, agricultural, or lexical?
- Is the name independently attested?
- Could a common noun or phrase have been reanalysed as a proper name?
- Does later folklore preserve a related figure, and if so, what is the chronological gap?

A source-critical approach therefore treats Łasicki as a collection of problems rather than a ready-made answer key.

This point also illustrates a larger historiographic divide. Synthetic works such as Gintaras Beresnevičius’s systematic study attempt to reconstruct broader structures from the combined record (Beresnevičius 2004). More recent source-first approaches, including Francis Young’s English-language survey, place greater weight on historical sources and archaeology while expressing caution about using much later ethnography as a direct window into the pre-Christian period (Young 2025).

These approaches need not be treated as enemies. Reconstruction is unavoidable if historians wish to move beyond a list of quotations. The question is how visibly the reconstruction is separated from the evidence that supports it.

14. Later folklore, continuity, and reconstruction

Late folklore is indispensable to Baltic cultural history. It is also one of the most dangerous sources when the research question concerns the thirteenth century.

Folklore collected in the nineteenth or twentieth century may preserve very old motifs. Oral traditions can be conservative. Ritual habits can survive changes of formal religion. Place-names can preserve memories. Christian and pre-Christian patterns can coexist for long periods.

None of these possibilities establishes continuity automatically.

Between a medieval source and a late folklore record stand centuries of Christian teaching, local reinterpretation, print culture, antiquarian interest, nationalism, romantic reconstruction, administrative change, language shift, and contact with neighbouring traditions.

Continuity should therefore be argued through chains of evidence. A late motif becomes more useful for early reconstruction when one or more intermediate records exist, when linguistic continuity is strong, when the practice is structurally resistant to borrowing, or when archaeology provides an independent parallel.

Without such support, late folklore remains evidence for the period in which it was recorded and for the cultural memory available to that period.

This principle also applies to modern religious reconstruction. Contemporary Baltic pagan movements, heritage practices, and popular mythologies are important subjects in their own right. They document modern identity, reception, and creative continuity. Their present significance does not prove the antiquity of every element they use.

The distinction is not a judgement on authenticity in a religious sense. A modern tradition can be meaningful even when parts of its historical reconstruction are recent. Historical source criticism asks a different question: how early can a particular element actually be documented?

15. What can be reconstructed responsibly?

If the surviving sources do not provide a complete system, what kind of reconstruction remains possible?

A responsible reconstruction can begin with a set of relatively strong propositions.

First, multiple Baltic groups recognised more than one divine or cult power. Polytheistic religious worlds are strongly supported.

Second, some named figures are historically robust. Perkūnas is the clearest early Lithuanian example. Curche is securely named in a Prussian cultic context. Andaj, Žvorūna, and Teliavelis belong to an important thirteenth-century Lithuanian textual tradition, although the interpretation of each name varies in difficulty.

Third, divination by lot appears across more than one region and source context. It is reasonable to see it as a recurring Baltic ritual practice, while avoiding claims of a single standard technique.

Fourth, ritual specialisation existed. The evidence supports people with recognisable ritual roles, especially in funerary and divinatory contexts. It does not establish a centralised priestly system.

Fifth, sacred natural places formed part of the religious landscape. The general phenomenon is strong; individual site identification requires separate evidence.

Sixth, funerary practice linked the dead with horses, weapons, equipment, and other possessions in patterned ways. Archaeology strongly supports the material pattern. Written sources make continued post-mortem status or activity plausible, but exact beliefs remain harder to reconstruct.

Seventh, horses had ritual significance beyond ordinary use. The evidence supports multiple forms of horse-related ritual rather than one universal ceremony.

Eighth, some medieval reports of ritual killing are too specific and recurrent to dismiss automatically. The evidence supports historical plausibility in some contexts but not frequency or universality.

Ninth, regional diversity must be treated as a feature of the evidence rather than a defect to be eliminated. A “Baltic religion” can be a useful comparative category if it does not erase Prussian, Lithuanian, Samogitian, Curonian, Semigallian, and other differences.

From these propositions, a broader model becomes possible.

The pre-Christian Baltic religious world was probably composed of related local and regional traditions sharing linguistic inheritance, certain ritual patterns, and overlapping divine concepts, while remaining variable in names, institutions, social organisation, and local sacred geography.

This model is less visually satisfying than a table of gods with fixed functions. It is historically more plausible because it allows both cultural relationship and local variation.

The evidence does not require the assumption of a uniform theology. Religion in medieval societies need not have been systematised in the form expected by modern handbooks. Ritual practice, kinship, political authority, seasonal cycles, warfare, burial, and sacred landscape may have been integrated without a central institution defining an official doctrine.

16. Limitations and open questions

The first research cycle substantially improved the evidential map, but several limitations remain fundamental.

16.1 Fragmentary and external written evidence

The surviving texts were not written by insiders for the purpose of preserving their religions. Christian authors selected what interested them. Military and missionary contexts favour conflict, conversion, sacrifice, and striking customs. Ordinary domestic religion may be underrepresented. Silence in the sources is therefore not proof of absence.

16.2 Regional heterogeneity

The evidence comes from different peoples, periods, and political settings. Shared Baltic cultural background permits comparison but does not justify automatic transfer of a local institution or divine function from one region to another.

16.3 Source dependence

The dependency graph is incomplete. Some relationships are demonstrable, others only possible. The project has therefore avoided counting similar written statements as fully independent unless there are good grounds to do so.

16.4 Specialist linguistic questions

Several central problems are philological: the etymology of *Curche*, the relationship between *Diviriks* and *Perkūnas*, the identity of *Nunadiēvis* and *Andaj*, the relationship between *Medeina* and *Žvorūna*, and the historical origin of *Teliavelis*.

BAFES-R-001 compares specialist arguments but does not claim to replace historical Baltic linguistics, palaeography, or diplomatic scholarship. Where the linguistic evidence is contested, the historical conclusion remains correspondingly cautious.

16.5 Archaeological semantics

Material evidence can establish patterns with considerable precision. The meaning assigned to those patterns is usually less secure. The project therefore separates material conclusions from cosmological interpretation.

16.6 Frequency of rare or extreme practices

Human sacrifice is the clearest example. Several reports can establish plausibility without telling us whether the practice was common, exceptional, restricted to war, politically symbolic, or limited to certain periods and groups.

16.7 Romow and institutional religion

The historical core of the *Romow* and *Criwe* tradition remains unresolved. Future work would need to combine textual criticism, political context, geography, and the history of later reception without treating later elaborations as independent early evidence.

16.8 Teliavelis

Teliavelis remains one of the most promising areas for further study. The name is early and secure as a textual fact. The smith-solar narrative is also securely present in the *Chronograph*. What remains uncertain is how much of that description reflects an indigenous religious tradition and how much may have been shaped by the compiler's literary environment.

16.9 The boundary between continuity and reconstruction

Later folklore may preserve early material, but the strength of continuity varies from motif to motif. Future studies should focus on individual chains of transmission rather than using “folklore” as one undifferentiated body of ancient evidence.

17. Conclusion

The first research cycle of BAFES-R-001 began with a simple question that proved more useful than an attempt to reconstruct a complete religion: what do the surviving sources actually allow us to say?

They allow us to say quite a lot.

Several medieval Baltic religious traditions were polytheistic in a meaningful historical sense. Named divine and cult figures are genuinely present in early texts. Perkūnas has strong early cross-source attestation. Curche belongs securely to a thirteenth-century Prussian cultic context. Teliavelis, Andaj, and Žvorūna belong to an early Lithuanian textual tradition that can now be checked through critical manuscript scholarship.

Divination by lot appears repeatedly. Ritual specialists are historically probable. Sacred natural places are well supported as a general phenomenon. Archaeology confirms complex funerary patterns involving horses, weapons, and equipment. Ritual use of horses is well established. Medieval chronicles contain several accounts of executed ritual killings of captives that cannot responsibly be dismissed as a category, even though their frequency remains unknowable.

The sources also tell us what not to claim too easily.

They do not hand us a single fixed pan-Baltic pantheon. They do not demonstrate a common state religion with one hierarchy. They do not prove a centralised priesthood. They do not justify treating every later divine list as a survival from the thirteenth century. They do not turn Romow into a documented Baltic Vatican. They do not make every *alka* a proven ancient sanctuary. They do not make every horse burial evidence for the same belief.

The most important conclusion is methodological. Historical reconstruction is strongest when uncertainty remains visible.

The surviving evidence supports a family of related but regionally varied religious traditions. These traditions shared some concepts and practices and differed in others. Their history was transformed by warfare, state formation, Christianisation, literary transmission, and later cultural memory. A useful reconstruction must preserve those layers rather than collapse them into one timeless system.

This leaves a picture that is incomplete but not empty. It is less orderly than the pantheons of modern diagrams and more historically credible because of that disorder. The fragments do not permit the recovery of an authoritative ancient Baltic theology. They do permit a disciplined account of names, practices, places, ritual roles, funerary patterns, and recurring religious forms.

That is the level at which BAFES-R-001 considers the evidence strongest.

Appendix A. Evidence summary

Theme	Strongest evidence	Present assessment	Main caution
Polytheism	Multiple early references to gods in the plural and named figures	Strongly supported for several Baltic traditions	Does not equal one fixed pantheon
Perkūnas	Livonian Rhymed Chronicle and Chronograph of 1262	Strong early attestation	Exact rank and full later mythology not established
Teliavelis	Galician-Volhynian Chronicle and Chronograph tradition	Name strongly attested; smith-solar description textually secure	Literary influence on the description remains possible
Curche	Treaty of Christburg, 1249	Secure post-harvest cultic context	Exact function and etymology uncertain

Theme	Strongest evidence	Present assessment	Main caution
Divine-name equivalences	Comparison of early Lithuanian lists	Several plausible hypotheses	Direct identities not stated by medieval texts
Divination by lot	Henry of Livonia, Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, Peter of Dusburg	Strong cross-regional pattern	No single standard technique demonstrated
Ritual specialists	Tulissones/Ligaschones and blūtekirl episode	Specialised ritual functions strongly supported	No proven pan-Baltic priestly caste
Sacred places	Medieval written sources and interdisciplinary site research	Sacred natural landscapes strongly supported	Individual sites need independent case evidence
Funerary material	Written reports plus archaeology	Horses, weapons, equipment, cremation patterns strongly supported	Archaeology alone cannot establish exact beliefs
Ritual use of horses	Written and archaeological evidence	Strongly supported as a general phenomenon	No universal ceremony or meaning
Human sacrifice	Several medieval accounts of executed ritual killings	Historically plausible in some contexts	Frequency, regularity, and universality unknown
One-third war booty	Livonian Rhymed Chronicle and Peter of Dusburg	Possible historical custom of dedicating booty	Fixed one-third rule not established
Romow/Criwe	Peter of Dusburg	Important historical text; limited historical core possible	Centralised “Baltic Vatican” model unproven
Łasicki	Sixteenth-century Samogitian catalogue	Valuable heterogeneous source	Not every entry is necessarily an ancient deity
Later folklore	Nineteenth- and twentieth-century records	Essential for later tradition and possible continuity studies	Cannot be projected automatically into the medieval period

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About BAFES

The Baltic Association for Folklore and Esoteric Studies (BAFES) is a Lithuania-based research association focused on folklore, vernacular belief, pre-Christian religious traditions, the history of magic and esotericism, dreams, and related cultural phenomena in the Baltic region.

BAFES distinguishes between documented historical evidence, scholarly interpretation, hypothesis, later tradition, and modern reconstruction. Research materials may remain internal while completed public studies are released through bafes.org.

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