Medeina/Medeinė as a relic of Neolithic beliefs

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Abstract

Medeina originally was a deity of forests in Lithuanian mythology, later in the 13th – 14th centuries she became also a deity of war. The fact that a deity of forests became one of the central deities in the mythology of medieval society is rather unique. Also a fact pointing to the archaism of Medeina is her connection with the bear cult. The character of Medeina seems to be a relic of beliefs of a substrate ethnic group. The name of Medeina/Medeinė is derived from Lithuanian words medis "tree" or medė "forest"; which have no reliable Indo-European etymology. The root mede “tree” / “forest” can originate from a language of the Neolithic people of the East European plain, these people spoke a language related to Yeniseian, Caucasian, and Hattic. The root mede “tree” / “forest” correlates with Proto-Northwest Caucasian form *mažV “pine-tree”. The name Medeina/Medeinė originally could sound like Mæde/Mæda.

Keywords: Medeina; Lithuanian mythology; bear cult

1. Introduction

Medeina or Medeinė is one of the main deities in Lithuanian mythology. Originally Medeinė was a deity of trees and animals, and a patroness of hunting. Later, in the 13th – 14th centuries AD, Medeinė became a patroness of hunting and war, i.e.: activities of the military elite, and therefore she was considered as state sovereign’s goddess (Vaitkevičius 2003: 31).

According to A. J. Greimas this goddess is a single, unwilling to get married, but libidinous/voluptuous, a beautiful huntress, girl, or she-wolf (cf. vilkmergė – “wanton”) accompanied by an escort of wolves (Vaitkevičius 2003: 30, Greimas 1993).

We suppose that the figure of Medeina/Medeinė is a relic of the beliefs of people of the Neolithic period in Lithuanian religion, and in this paper we are going to show arguments/reasons for this.

2. Peculiarities of the figure of Medeina

The fact that a deity of forests and animals is considered as one of the central deities in the mythology that existed in the Lithuanian State before Christianization is rather unique. For instance, in pagan Slavic mythology there are no deities that could be aligned with Medeina; beings/spirits which can perform functions of patrons/patronesses of forests and animals are not deities, but characters of lower level mythology: Leshy and Baba Yaga. Also it is notorious
that the figure of Medeina is a rather vivid and well-elaborated character in mythology and in folklore.

It is rather unnatural to suppose that pagan Rus’ differed significantly from pagan Lithuania in their everyday life and basic economic activities: basic activity in both societies was agriculture and hunting and forest gathering were auxiliary activities. It would be unnatural to suppose that Lithuanian people of the pagan period were more connected with forests/hunting than people of the pagan Rus’. However, one of the central characters of pagan Lithuanian mythology is a deity of forests/animals, and in pagan Slavic mythology equivalent characters are absent.

It is possible to state that any mythology reflects somehow the structure and main activities of the corresponding society.

We suppose that the presence of such a character as Medeina in Lithuanian mythology can be explained by an influence of a substrate ethnic group, i.e.: by some people whose main activity among others was hunting.

Also an important fact pointing to the archaism of Medeina is her connection with the bear ritual.

Bear rituals and bear myths were important parts of Baltic paganism. We can read about the bear cult that existed in Lithuania in the works of chronicler Jan Długosz (15th century), historian Jan Łasicki (16th century), and The Bychowiec Chronicle (13th century).

In a Lithuanian folk tale it is said that Medeina and Lazdona both fell in love with the same guy named Kaukarius. Lazdona sang very beautifully and she became jealous since not only Medeina loved Kaukarius, but also Kaukarius loved Medeina, and that’s why Lazdona drowned Medeina in a river. Two shepherds found remains of Medeina corpse and made a harp of her bones and strings of her hairs. The harp started to play by itself and told the story of two sisters. The shepherds came to the village and told about this. Lazdona realized that reprisal awaited her and jumped off a cliff trying to make suicide, but a guy named Lauksargas saved her and she became his wife.

One day an intertribal war began and Kaukarius was mortally wounded, Lazdona bandaged his wounds and calls the witch Lauma for help. Lauma said that the skin of a freshly killed bear with blood is needed, which should be put on dying Kaukarius in order for him to survive. Lauksargas killed a bear and brought the skin. Lauma put the skin on Kaukarius and he turned into a huge and strong bear. The bear thanked Lazdona for saving him, but he said that he heard the song of the harp and would never forgive Lazdona for the death of his beloved Medeina. And he said that he was going to kill them all. Lazdona asked for mercy and asked Lauma to help her. Lauma was a witch, but she was also afraid of the bear. Lauma ordered Lazdona to give the harp to the bear, and also said that along with the harp Lazdona would lose her voice and would not be able to speak. Also Lauma said that she is going to pray to Upinis – the deity of the river for he would return Medeina back.

Lasdona gave the harp to bear, he broke it, and living Medeina appeared. Lazdona was never able to speak or sing again. And Medeina climbed on the back of the bear without fear, and they went into the forest.

This legend is pretty famous and a sculpture depicting Medeina on the bear can be seen in the center of Vilnius (fig. 1).
Fig. 1. The statue of Medeina on bear in Vilnius (photo by Rita Daukšaitė)
This legend somehow reminds some Ainu folk tales narrating about saving a human girl/woman by a bear. Ainu had a well-elaborated bear cult and thus such legends can be considered as relics of the bear cult.

And also there are some other relics of the bear cult in Lithuania. For instance, people from Panevėžys (fig. 2), when building a new house, first let in a bear, if the bear entered the house without resistance, it meant there were no evil spirits in the house, and then they brought a black hen, to which the bear cut off its head. Also during the winter solstice, ancestors of the Balts disguised themselves as bears.

To clarify the origin of Medeina we turn to the etymology of her name.
3. A possible etymology of name Medeina/Medeinė

The variant of Medeina is an earlier form while the variant of Medeina is a more late form. The name of Medeina/Medeinė is derived from Lithuanian words medis – "tree" or medė – “forest” (Gimbutas 2001: 210). Also it is interesting that in the dialects of Western Aukštaitija mėdė means “forest” and “hunting” (Nepokupnii 1967: 80).

![Fig. 3. Location of Aukštaitija within Lithuania (image source – Aukštaitija)](image)

In both variants of the name can be singled out root mede “tree”/”forest”/”hunting” and suffix -ina/-inė that expresses the meaning of abstractness and also is a marker of the female gender of nouns.

At first sight, the etymology of the name Medeina/Medeinė is rather clear, but the problem is that the words medis “tree” and medė – “forest” have no reliable Baltic and Indo-European etymology.

Lithuanian medis “tree” and medė – “forest” are generally supposed to have originated from Proto-Indo-European *médʰyos “middle”, “in-between” (see Medis), however, semantic transformation from “middle”, “in-between” to “tree”/ “forest” is very unnatural, complicated, and improbable.

The root mede can’t come from Proto-Finnic *mecca [mettsa] since the approximate time of decay of Proto-Finnic is 9th century AD (see Прибалтийско-финские языки), in that epoch
Baltic languages already existed for more than 1000 years (Girdenis, Mažiulis 1994), and it is generally supposed that Proto-Finnic *mecca was borrowed from a Baltic language (see Reconstruction: Proto-Finnic/meccä).

Also can be said that the transformation of d/dʒ/dz/ʒ into ts is much more natural than the transformation of ts into d/dʒ/dz/ʒ.

Thus, the name Medeina/Medeinė has no Indo-European or Uralic etymology.

It seems that name Medeina/Medeinė as well as the root mede “tree” / “forest” can originate from the language (or languages) of the Neolithic people who lived upon the East European plain and created the Pit-Comb Ware. It is possible to state that these Neolithic people spoke a language (or languages) that was a juncture/bridge between Yeniseian on the one hand and Caucasian and Hattic on the other (for more details see: Akulov 2020, 2021).

In the Sami language there are some words that have no Uralic etymology, but can be explained through Yeniseian, Caucasian, and Hattic, and one word of this list is the word murr/muorra “tree” that correlates with Proto-Nakh *murqa “alder-tree” (Akulov 2021: 18) and with Proto-Northwest Caucasian *mažV “pine-tree,” “prickle”, “thorn”; “forest” (Akulov 2020: 3).

It looks fairly logical to suppose that the Baltic root mede “tree” / “forest” can be traced to this Proto-Northwest Caucasian form *mažV. And thus, it is possible to reconstruct the original form of name Medeina/Medeinė, this form most probably had the following view: Mæde/Mæda.

Before the current case we had no information about the names of Neolithic deities. Now, having reconstructed at least one name of a Neolithic deity, we can really pop into the beliefs of the Neolithic people.

Ancient Balts could have contacts with the Neolithic people and in Baltic mythology can be found certain myths traced back to the Neolithic people. Here also should be taken into account the fact that Balts remained pagan till 15th century AD so they could better maintain ancient myths, including those which were borrowed from Neolithic people.

Ancient Balts were among the first Indo-Europeans who appeared upon the East European plain, they can be traced directly to the tribes that created Corded Ware (3200 – 2300 BCE). The people who created the Corded Ware obviously could have direct contacts with the people who created the Pit-Comb Ware that is dated about 6th – 2nd millennia BCE. It should also be taken into account that historical periods don’t change each other like divisions on the clock face, some features of the early Metal age appeared in the late Neolithic period, and some Neolithic features were maintained in the early Metal age; epochs interpenetrate each other, and people of one epoch don’t disappear when another epoch is coming.

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