Lietuvos istorija, T. III: Darius Baronas, Artūras Dubonis, Rimvydas Petrauskas, XIII a. – 1385 m. *Valstybės iškilimas tarp Rytų ir Vakarų*, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2011. 615 p. ISBN 978-9955-23-566-8

This book is part of the Lithuanian Institute of History's programme 'Lithuanian History' (12 volumes planned). The goal of the programme is 'to reveal Lithuania as a distinctive socio-cultural phenomenon of identity development and evolution, rather than to narrow conceptions of the history of the Lithuanian state or the Lithuanian nation as had been done in previously published syntheses'.¹ A difficult goal has been set that requires a very deep knowledge of history and its rethinking.

The third volume is devoted to the early period of the history of Lithuanian statehood, during which the short-lived Kingdom of Lithuania and the mighty pagan Grand Duchy of Lithuania were created. Due to the lack of historical sources, and the cultivation of romantic historiography, a shroud of mystery, which arouses the imagination of society and encourages an interest in ancient times not only among Lithuanians but also the people of neighbouring nations, still surrounds this period of Lithuania's history. The polyethnic and multicultural nature of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania has determined that its history has received considerable attention in the historiography of different countries. In the book's introduction, the historiography traditions of Russia, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Germany and Lithuania, and the reasons for their different interpretations, are briefly presented. This will help the curious reader to look at history from a totally different angle, to understand more clearly the diversity of the neighbours' approaches and the circumstances of their formation. In this synthesis, we will not see searches for the role of Lithuania's glorious civilisation, and some readers may even remain dissatisfied with the new insights of historians, which disturb the settled waters and force us to rethink our perception of Lithuania's history.

The synthesis consists of an introduction, three main sections, a summary, a chronological table, lists of sources and literature, and indexes of names and places. Each section is divided into subsections, and these into still smaller parts, which greatly facilitate the search for information.

The first section is entitled 'The First Two Centuries. Geographic, Geopolitical, Geocultural Environment. Population'. This part of the book describes the change in the climate of the country, the territory populated by

¹ Access through: <<http://www.istorija.lt/html/ldk1.html>> [viewed on 09 05 2014].

the Balts, the population, its density, the economy, and more. The picture provided is rather gloomy: during the period under discussion, there was a cooling of the climate, cold winters, frequent crop failures, famines, poor local resources, poor nutrition of the population, short life expectancy, disease, permanent wars, a low economic level, etc. Taking this into account, the life of the Baltic tribes at that time is called 'survival' (p. 240). It is doubtful whether this characterisation is correct. Such an assessment, apparently, could appear by comparing the living conditions of the Balts in the 13th and 14th centuries to the life of 21st-century Lithuanians. However, comparing them to those of neighbouring countries, they could be viewed only as of a lower level. In one way or another, the image drawn should bring somewhat closer to the ground readers who still cherish the image of the romantic historiography of Lithuanians, about the pagan period as a golden age, and that is already a pretty good result. This section provides very detailed descriptions of the Baltic lands and the emergence of new ethno-geographic formations, which at the same time are very difficult and confusing, practically unattainable for the average reader. There is a lack of good maps that would help us to be better oriented. The reader learns about the population, clothing, housing, crafts, etc, but this is limited to the Baltic tribes, sometimes even only to the Lithuanians. The specifics of the Ruthenian lands that were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are barely touched on. For the reader, the question naturally arises, how many people lived there, what was their standard of living, how did they dress, how did their standard of living differ from that of Lithuanians, etc. Perhaps that would help us to know better '*Lithuania* as a distinctive socio-cultural phenomenon'.

Looking at the geopolitical situation, the question arises why were the Balts, the fragmented Ruthenians, the Finno-Ugrians and others not conquered for such a long time? According to the authors, this was determined by the limited goals of the grand dukes, the severity of the natural conditions, and scarce resources. A certain balance existed in the region. In this section, the reader is informed about the development of West European cities, population growth, and the problems of German knights settling in the Baltic region. In order to avoid a too subjective approach, it is proposed to see the Order not only from the bad side: it was not only a negative factor. In fact, in the book, we can see a certain 'rehabilitation' of the Christians and the Pope. The great efforts made by the Christians to preach the gospel peacefully in the Baltic region are shown, the losses they encountered, the risks, the aims of the pagans to take advantage of Christian credulity, and the persecution of converts, etc. The authors draw attention to the fact that the armed struggle was launched only as a last resort. The established stereotypes that the Popes were against Lithuania's independence, that the possibility for the pagans to accept baptism independently was not recognised, etc, are destroyed. A much more objective

view is presented, showing the diversity of views on the pagan issue that existed in the Middle Ages.

The second section is entitled 'Structure of Lithuanian Society, its Structures and Institutions'. It is important to note that in historiography, social structure was seen as quite static: the relatives of the sovereign, the nobility, the free and not free farmers. This synthesis shows the limitations of this model, because society was much more unwieldy (more complex), and the estates had not fully formed, and there was also an independent public domain of nobility that existed alongside the duke's domain. The policies of the eradication of the old nobility and the creation of a 'new' one, which Grand Duke Vytautas (1392–1430) supposedly took, are denied. The continuation of the old aristocracy and the changes in the nobility, the local aristocracy and nobility becoming the ruler's nobles, and the formation of agnaterelatives, are revealed. Attention is drawn to the fact that the old conception of the almost unlimited government, of the Grand Duke and his family is replaced. In the early history of Lithuania, there was no steady gradual growth of the power of the Grand Duke, but there were different periods when a particular ruler was able to consolidate the nobility (Mindaugas, Gediminas). The mutual dependence of the sovereign and the nobility is made more important. The investigations developed in unison in foreign historiography related to the influence of the societies of foreign countries on the development of Lithuania and the Lithuanian factors in the process are not taken into account. The synthesis shows that the influence of foreign societies was weak, and affected only a small number of people (essentially only the ruling elite), while 'Lithuanians created their own, creative, vibrant society, and not a copy of the life of any civilised neighbours' (p. 334). It also describes the ethno-confessional communities, GDL law, the army, and other points of interest.

The third section 'The Techniques, Forms, Results of Lithuania's Public Expression' is devoted to the formation, the emergence of the state and relations with neighbours. The authors draw attention to the existence of Lithuanians favourable to Christians in the pre-state period, when an inconsistent foreign policy was characteristic of Lithuania. Some Lithuanians backed maintaining friendly relations with the Germans, and assisted them; others were hostile to them; and yet others cared only about war booty. In addition, 'one has to assume that Mindaugas listened to the advice of the Lithuanian nobles favourable to Christianity, to make peace with Riga and be baptised' (p. 411). The path of the expansion of the GDL into the Ruthenian regions, which was far from easy and required enormous effort by the Lithuanians, is described. In addition, the Lithuanian contribution in historiography to the battles with the Tatars was too dramatised. Nevertheless, the relations between the Lithuanians and Tatars were rather pragmatic, they worked together often out of convenience, and rushing into the Russian lands the Lithuanians had no aim to liberate them from

the Tatars. 'In those other distant times one cannot apply the theory about the involvement of the Lithuanians in the fight against the Tatars. There was simply no such fight between these nations' (p. 476).

The book presents an image of the desperate struggles between the Lithuanians and the Germans as a story depicting much more complex mutual relations: 'the picture of a war without attention is mainly the fruit of works at that time and later historiography, only partially consistent with historical reality' (p. 511). Both the rulers and the nobility would begin friendly mutual relations, the Lithuanians would retreat to the Order, and the Germans to the GDL, friendly contacts were fostered, there was convergence, truces were frequently made, and so on. This is well reflected in the conflict between Grand Dukes Jogaila and Kęstutis: both sought the support of the Order.

It also discusses problems in the research of Lithuanian paganism, research which is particularly complicated by the lack of written sources and their questionable reliability. The authors demolish the approach about the uniqueness of Baltic paganism, and show its weakness, the approach of the population (the ruling elite): 'Lithuanians were characterised by a pragmatic approach to religion, defined by the Latin adage *do ut des*. If the pagan gods are useful, they will receive offerings; if they become useless they are simply forgotten' (p. 522). According to the authors, in the 14th century the faith of the pagans ran out of steam, and the pagans themselves had little fear of their gods; the pagans did not create any significant movement, there was no caste of priests, temples were a rarity. The duplicity, short-sightedness, and breaking of oaths by the pagan rulers and the like are mentioned. Here, the author of the synthesis criticises Grand Duke Kęstutis for his broken promises to be baptised: 'It is likely that Kęstutis, having neutralised the dangers raised by the Hungarian expedition and having freed his brother, felt satisfied with the virtuosity of his "diplomacy". Neither he nor his brothers, it seems, were at all lured by a broader perspective' (pp. 529–530). It is doubtful whether such assessments are correct.

The paucity of the illustrations, which do not always enrich the text, are very striking. The same can be said about the cartography: the maps provided are very poor and uninformative. In addition, there could have been more of them, both supplementing the story about Lithuania and also illustrating the European context. However, the informativeness of the context of late Medieval European history makes one happy, because we will find practically no Lithuanian books about European Medieval history. Apparently, it is sufficient for Lithuanians to know that at that time they became the greatest and the strongest in Europe.

In summary, one can say that this synthesis of Lithuanian history is the most comprehensive work, which we dare to call a new step in the science of history, covering the period of the 13th and 14th centuries. The

abundant work of historiography allows one not only to rewrite anew, but also to adjust somewhat and practically create a new view of the past. The most recent findings in historiography are presented, and some interpretations see the light of day for the first time. Not every reader will agree with everything he reads, but the insights based on firm arguments will not allow him to give up. Without doubt, this synthesis of the history of Lithuania should be translated in order to be available to foreign researchers.

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