



Prussian Chronicle | Preussische Chronik

Text Information

Author | Simon Grunau

Language | Middle High German, Early New High German

Period | 16th Century

Genre | Chronicle, History

Source | *Simon Grunaus Preussische Chronik*, volume 1, eds Perlbach, M., Philippi, R., and Wagner, P., Duncker and Humblot, 1876, Leipzig.

Collection | Making History: Chronicles, Legends and Anecdotes; Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/grunau_prussian_chronicle/

Translation and introduction by Thomas Hewitt.

Introduction to the Text

This text is an excerpt from Simon Grunau's *Preussische Chronik*, or Prussian Chronicle. The text is written in the Early New High German language (*Frühneuhochdeutsch*), and scholars believe that it was completed by around 1530. It was composed in Prussia (which today spans northern Poland and Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast), most likely in the vicinity of Gdańsk.

Little is known about the author Simon Grunau. He was a Dominican friar, born in Tolkmitsk in Prussia (which is near today's Elbląg, Poland). He seems to have lived most of his life in Gdańsk, where he was particularly active preaching amongst the burghers. At the time when Grunau was writing, the position of the Dominican Order in Prussia was uncertain, not least due to the spread of Lutheranism across Prussia during the 1520s. The Lutheran Reformation had quickly reached and taken hold in Prussia, and this was a key concern for Grunau, not only due to Luther's rejection of papal authority and monasticism, but also the social and doctrinal changes emerging as a result of Luther's confrontation with the Catholic Church. In 1525, the Teutonic Order, the religious military order who had governed the majority of Prussia since the mid-thirteenth century, converted to Lutheranism and transformed their Catholic monastic state into a secular Lutheran duchy. The impacts of these events are reflected in Grunau's chronicle, highlighted by his open hostility to both Lutheranism and Duke Albert of Prussia (the first Duke of Prussia, and previous Grandmaster (leader) of the Teutonic Order).

Grunau's chronicle purports to give an account of the history of Prussia from the beginning of time until around 1530, and as such contains a wide variety of socioeconomic, religious and political narratives. In addition to exploring the pre-Christian lives of the Prussians and the religious changes mentioned above, Grunau interweaves passages concerning economic themes such as taxation and price and currency fluctuations, as well as political themes such as relations between Prussia, Poland, and the Holy Roman Empire.

The chronicle is a compilation of material from numerous sources, both narrative (other chronicles such as that of Peter von Dusburg) and documentary (such as the Treaty of Christburg, a legal and peace agreement between the Teutonic Order and Prussian tribes), as well as Grunau's own experiences and material likely invented or seriously embellished by Grunau himself. As a result, its reliability and veracity are in question, and Grunau's chronicle has often been wrongly dismissed as unworthy of study for this reason. There are numerous lines of enquiry still open with Grunau's work, not least with respect to why and how he embellished his material, and what new narratives and identities he created in doing so.

The excerpt included in the *Global Medieval Sourcebook* is an interesting account of the supposed pantheon of gods worshipped by the pre-Christian Prussians before the thirteenth century, combined with details of how they came to be deified and what exactly their worship entailed. Within this there are several elements: first, the obviously ritualistic elements of the 'pagan' worship of these gods, with gruesome sacrifice and quasi-ghostlike hauntings; second, the more worldly offerings Grunau suggests (such as various crops and animals), providing information about food and drink either found in Prussia or commonly known to his readers at the time. Finally, Grunau explores the foundation mythology of the



Prussian people (the 'Cimbri' and 'Bruteni'), in attempts to reimagine Prussian identity and heritage in a period of intense conflict and division. It is this external imagining of a different religion and culture which is most interesting, and the way in which Grunau uses it to delineate a Prussian identity. These are themes which are still incredibly relevant today. By studying embellished or imagined narratives, we can better understand the agendas of those writing them.

About this Edition

The printed edition from which this translation has been produced is a critical composition of several manuscripts of Grunau's chronicle, some of which are no longer extant. Trust has been placed in the edition, due to both the editorial methods employed, and comparison with a sixteenth-century copy of the autograph manuscript for fidelity. The use of multiple manuscript copies for the edition provides more confidence with regards to copying errors, and where inconsistencies between the manuscripts appear, editorial footnotes have been made. There are around ten remaining copies or partial copies of the manuscript, although the autograph manuscript is believed to have been lost when Königsberg State and University Library was destroyed during the Second World War. The number of copies and their varied locations (including Stockholm, Toruń, Berlin, Dresden, Vilnius and Gdańsk) is suggestive of a broad textual transmission, and there were claims that Grunau's narratives were still widely circulating into the nineteenth century.

For the translation itself several dictionaries were consulted, such as the *Frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch* by Oskar Reichmann and the *Kleines Frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch* by Christa Baufeld. To maintain fidelity with the original, proper nouns have remained untranslated and with their original spellings, and where possible syntax has been preserved; occasionally it was necessary to modify this to make the English translation more readable.

Further Reading

Bojtar, E. *Foreword to the past: A Cultural History of the Baltic People*. Translated by S. Rédet and M. Webb, Central European University Press, 2000.

- A comprehensive approach to the language, origin and mythology of the Baltic people (although his argument is unfairly dismissive of Grunau).

Christiansen, E. *The Northern Crusades*, 2nd edition., Penguin, 1997.

- A general history of the period and region.

Verbeke, W., L. Milis, and J. Goossens, eds. *Medieval Narrative Sources: A Gateway into the Medieval Mind*, Leuven University Press, 2005.

- This collection of essays provides an excellent discussion of fact and fiction in medieval narrative sources.

von Jeroschin, Nicolaus. *The Chronicle of Prussia by Nicolaus von Jeroschin: A History of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia 1190-1331*. Translated by M. Fischer, Routledge, 2010, Ashgate.

- For an accessible chronicle of the history of Prussia, this translation of Nicolaus von Jeroschin's work by Mary Fischer is essential.

Wadyl, S. "The Sacred Sphere of Prussian Life in the Early Middle Ages." *Sacred Space in the State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia*, edited by J. Wenta, Nicholas Copernicus University Press, 2013, pp. 39-54.

- A discussion of pre-Christian religious life in Prussia.



Prussian Chronicle | Preussische Chronik

Vonn dem namen der Preuschen abgöttir vor der zeit der bekehrungk.

Of the names of the Prussian false gods before the time of the conversion.

Von anbegin die einwoner des landes zu Preussen wusten noch von gotte noch von gotthin zu sagin, sundir die sonne sie geerht haben. Do aber die Cimbri qwomen, die brochten mit ihn 3 bilde ihrer abgotte, den einen Patollo sie nanten, das ander Potrimpo, das dritte Perkuno. Diese zu wirdigen sie haben gezwungen ire nogwer und sie mo- ste sie fur almechtige gotthe halten.

From the beginning, the inhabitants of the land of Prussia knew neither of god nor gods to speak of, rather they honoured¹ the sun. Then, however, the Cimbri came; they brought with them three images of their false gods: one they called Patollo, the second Potrimpo, the third Perkuno. To honour these gods, the Cimbri conquered their neighbours, and forced them to consider their gods as all-powerful.²

Patollo der obirster abgott der Bruteni also ettwan genant die einwoner Brudenie itzundt Preussen genant. Dieser war ein irschrocklicher got des nachtes spuck im hause zu treiben sunderlich in den hofen der edlinge. Voraus er unsinnigk thette, wen man des Kirwaidens beful nit hilt, und qwam viel mol, wie ehr ettlich erschreckt des nachts, domit sie den todt dovon hetten. So imandt war und sei- nem bilde zu Rickoyott ein erungk gelobet hette, so er is nicht balde hilt, er mit seim schuldiger dy passio spilte, und sein opphir war alles theuer dingk.

Patollo [was] the highest³ false god of the Bruteni, as the inhab- itants of Brudenie, now called Prussia, were formerly known. He was a terrifying god of the night, haunting houses [and] floating, particularly in the courtyards of nobles. Above all, he would act unreasonably if the command of the high priest was not fol- lowed, and came many times; he so frightened some during the night, that they died from it. If someone had promised an hon- our to his image in Rickoyott,⁴ and he did not fulfil the promise soon, then [Patollo] played out the Passion with the offender, and his sacrifice was all expensive things.

So war er auch ein got der todtin. So imandt man starb und man wolt bekarjen¹ die oppherungk der götthin und erungen den waydtlotten, so qwam er ins gehoffte des vorstorbenen und spuchte die nacht, und sie wenig ader nix thettin, er qwam widder, sie musten me thun und geb- in, quam er zum dritten mole, so musste man menschin blut opphirn. Darumb mit namen nicht lange geharret, man qwam ken Rickoiot und gab eim waidlotten ein gobe, und dieser im schnet eine wunden in den arm, domit das blut herausliff, noch welchem man horte ein brummen in der eichen, und dis war ein zechen, und es solt vorricht sein, und qwam dornoch nimmer wider und spuchte.

Thus he was also a god of the dead. If someone died and one wanted to be niggardly with the sacrifice to the gods and the tributes for the priests, then he [Patollo] came into the farm- stead of the deceased and haunted in the night. And if they did little or nothing, he came again, [and] they had to do and give more. If he came for a third time, then human blood must be sacrificed. Therefore with names not long delayed,⁵ one came to Rickoiot and gave a gift to a priest; this priest cut his arm,⁶ so that blood flowed out, after which one heard a humming in the oak tree. This was a sign, that the matter was satisfied,⁷ and thereafter [Patollo] came and haunted no more.

Potrimppo der ander abgott der von Brudenia war, und dieser war ein gott des gluckis in streitten und sust in anderen sachin. Wen man diesem Potrimppo sust ein ehr solt thun, der waydlotte musste 3 tage fasten und auff der blösen erden schlaffen, und weiroch zum irsten must man in dem feuer burnen, das mit waxe irneht werde, und dieser teuffel auch wolt, man solt ein kindtlein tödten zu ehre, und man is auch thette. Über die mosze Patollo Potrimppo hetten ein wolgefallen in menschin blute, so man is im vorgos zur ehre vor der eichen.

Potrimppo was the second false god from Brudenia, and this one was a god of good fortune in conflicts and in other things. When one wanted to honour this Potrimppo, the priest had to fast for three days and sleep on the bare earth; above all, in- cense had to be burned in the fire, which had been fed with wax. And this devil also wanted a small child to be killed to honour him, and this was also done. Patollo and Potrimppo had a lust for human blood beyond measure,⁸ thus one shed it in his⁹ hon- our before the oak tree.



Perkuno war der dritt abgott, und man in anruffte umbs gewitters willen, domit sie regen hetten und schon wetter zu seiner zeit und in der donner und blix kein schaden thett, und so is qwam, und ein gewitter war im gantze lande und wo dy woren, die diesen gott anbeten, sie knitten sich nieder und schrien: dewus Perkuno abselo mus, wen sie dis vor ein festes hiltten, zu der zeit des gewitters ire gotthe mit dem kirwaiden und mit anderen waidlotten redte, und sie gobin is auch ausz vor ein worheit, und sie mit in geret hetten und dem folcke stetis wu was neues einsatzten zu halten.

Wurschayto abir Borsskayto war der fierde abgot. Die 3 genanten götthe Patollo, Potrimppo, Perkuno man nindert mit oppherungk mochte ehren den zu Rickoyott, do ir bilde stundt in der eichen, diesem Borskaiten abir sie mocht-enn im opphernn in allen dorffernn, wo ag ein eiche stunt. Diesen die Bruden in selber zu einem gott irwelten, wen is war ihr kirwait gewesen Bruteno und er sich mit Witouito irem konige und seinen brudern selbir geopphirt umb gnade willen der gantzen gemein. Das oppher, das man im that, war ein jung fisch, und dis so is zu Wurschayto aber Borszkayto qweme und is solt bitten den gott, und er den dienern sein wulte vil fisch geben und is gesundt behalten.

Szwaybroto war der funffte gott, und in auch selber die Brudeni einen gott gemacht haben um der liebe willen, wen so er ihr koning war und Witowuto genant mit seinem bruder Bruteno dem kirwaiten; sie sich lebendigk vorbrandten vor der eichen, wie den obene ist gesagt worden, mit welchem tode die Bruteni meinten, die zwene bruder hetten gottheit irlangt und sessen bey in. Diesem man auch uberall oppherte vor einer eichen und war ein gott, der in bescherte vil hunner, gense, entvogil und man im muste opphiren ein jungk sogefackill.

Curcho war der 6. gott, und diesen sie hetten von den Masuren genomen. Darumb auff der stel itzundt Heiligenbeil genant sein bilt und eiche mit dem feuer war, und do man brandte gedrossen korne, wezen adir meel, honigk, milch und dergleichen. Diesem man auch vorbrandte zur ehren die ersten garben des getreides und solchir manirung vil. So ist am Hockerlande am habe ein stein genant zum heiligen stein, auff diesem ein iglicher fischer im den irsten fisch zur ehren vorbrandte, dan er im gerne irgreiff. Und ein solchs man auch andirswu thun mochte, idoch alhie war seine sonderliche stelle zu dem lobe.

Perkuno was the third false god, and one called upon him for the sake of the weather, so that they would have rain and nice weather at the right time and thunder and lightening would do no damage. And thus it happened, that a storm was in the whole country and there were those who prayed to this god, they knelt down and cried: "dewus Perkuno abselo mus;"¹⁰ if they performed this before a feast day, at the time of the storm, their god spoke with the high priest and with other priests. And they passed it off as a truth, that they had spoken with him, and [said] constantly to the people what new commitments they should maintain.

Wurschayto or Borsskayto was the fourth false god. Nowhere except at Rickoyott, where their images stood in the oak tree, could one honour the three aforementioned gods Patollo, Potrimppo and Perkuno. However, they could sacrifice to this Borskaiten in all villages where an oak tree also stood. This one the Brudeni themselves chose as a god; when he was their high priest Bruteno, he and Witouito their king (his own brother) sacrificed themselves for the sake of mercy for the whole community. The sacrifice that one made to him was a young animal, and this if it came to Wurschayto or Borszkayto and it should be a request to the god, and to those who wanted to be his servants he would give many animals and keep them healthy.

Szwaybroto was the fifth god, and the Brudeni themselves had made a god of him too for the sake of love.¹¹ When he was their king and called Witowuto, they burned him alive before the oak tree, along with his brother Bruteno, the high priest, as stated above. The Bruteni believed that through this death the two brothers had attained divinity and remained with them. To this god, too, one sacrificed anywhere before an oak tree. And he was a god who gave them many chickens, geese and ducks, and one had to sacrifice a young piglet to him.

Curcho was the sixth god, and this one they had adopted from the Masovians.¹² Therefore, in the place now called Heiligenbeil¹³ stood his image and oak tree with the fire, and there one burned threshed grain, wheat or flour, honey, milk, and the like. To honour this god one also burned the first sheaves of corn and many of such manner of things. At the port in Hockerlande¹⁴ there is a stone known as the holy stone, upon which a common fisherman burned the first fish in his honour, which he [Curcho] gladly took from him. And such a thing could be done elsewhere too, however this was his particular place of worship.



Critical Notes

Transcription

- 1 Bekargen → to live a poor and meagre life.

Translation

- 1 In the sense of worshipped, or venerated.
- 2 A more literal translation might be 'to honour these gods, they conquered their neighbours and they [then] had to consider them as almighty gods.' However, the multiple indefinite pronouns are less clear in English.
- 3 More literally 'most superior,' but in the sense of most senior or highest.
- 4 According to the author Simon Grunau, Rickoiot (or Rickoyot, the spelling varies) was the most important site of worship for the ancient Prussians, comprised principally of a huge oak tree and the images of the Prussian gods. The site was a pseudo-monastery where priests, priestesses, and the high priest both resided, worshipped and served the gods. However, there is little evidence for the existence of an exact site of Rickoiot, and in creating his Rickoiot, Grunau almost certainly combined elements of Peter von Dusburg's 'Romovia' and descriptions of other religious sites such as Adam of Bremen's description of a sacred tree at Uppsala.
- 5 The meaning of this particular clause is not clear; one interpretation is that once identified or named, one would not delay in coming to Rickoiot to give the appropriate veneration.
- 6 Literally 'cut a wound on his arm.'
- 7 The issue of not having performed adequate worship should be settled, in the sense of 'usually this would be enough to resolve matters.'
- 8 Mosze → Mose or Mosse → Masse.
- 9 The switch to the singular here may simply be to keep the focus on Patollo; whilst both Patollo and Potrimppo have the lust for human blood, Grunau has already discussed the worship of Potrimppo and thus this particular reference is reserved for Patollo.
- 10 This phrase seems to be borrowed from an early Latvian language, loosely translating to 'God Perkuno, have mercy on us.' See A. Putelis, 'Historical Sources for the Study of Latvian Mythology', *Cosmos: the Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2003, p. 78.
- 11 Presumably the implication here is out of their love for him and desire that he should remain with them in some form.
- 12 The Duchy of Masovia lay to the south of Prussia, and from the middle of the fourteenth century was formally a fief of the Polish crown. Aleks Pluskowski discusses some of the archaeological evidence for a cult of Curcho and his or her worship in his book *Holy War and Colonisation: The Archaeology of the Prussian Crusade*, London, 2012, pp 70-4.
- 13 There is still a town at this location, called Mamonovo, in the Kaliningrad Oblast. The name *Heiligenbeil* means 'Holy Axe' and William Urban attributes this name to a legend claiming that a group of missionaries used an axe to cut down a nearby tree which had been worshipped by the Prussians (See William Urban, *The Samogitian Crusade*, Chicago, 2006, pp 158-9. Wigand von Marburg (a chronicler of the Teutonic Order) narrates that there was an Augustinian Monastery founded there around 1370 (*Chronica nova Prutenica*).
- 14 According to Grunau, Hockerland(e) was a previous name of Pogesania, a region of Prussia. In his narrative Hockerland was named after its ruler 'Hoggo,' and its enduring name of Pogesania was derived from his daughter.