

## I. ROZPRAWY I ANALIZY

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**Giedrė Buivyte**

The Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore

ORCID: 0000-0001-5500-5237

e-mail: [giedre.buivyte@gmail.com](mailto:giedre.buivyte@gmail.com)

### *Arbor Mundi* in traditional oral poetry: Old Icelandic and Lithuanian perspectives

*Arbor Mundi* w tradycyjnej poezji ustnej  
z perspektywy staroislandzkiej i litewskiej

**Abstract:** The article discusses the world tree as reflected in the Old Icelandic collection of poems the *Poetic Edda* and in Lithuanian folk songs. The author investigates the poetic diction of the selected sources of traditional oral poetry to disclose their symbolic meaning and connection to myth. The analysis focuses on the poetic manifestations of the world tree as a model of the cosmos and as an evergreen tree of life. The selected Eddic poems and Lithuanian folk songs reveal the significance of the world tree as a structural marker, which defines the relationship of the centre vs. periphery, i.e., the known (organised) vs. the unknown (chaotic) space. The emphasis on the tree's upward orientation is viewed as an implication of its sacred status. The life-giving characteristics of the world tree are explored in relation to the image of dew, which symbolises the fertility and fecundity of nature in the *Poetic Edda* and the health and fertility of the bride in Lithuanian folk songs.

**Key words:** world tree, traditional oral poetry, Lithuanian folk songs, the Poetic Edda

## Introduction

Traditional oral poetry is a unique source of ancient wisdom and archaic worldview conveyed by means of poetic vocabulary. The defining feature of traditional oral poetry is the symbolic mode which allows for the meaning of a poetic text to be unravelled in the process of close reading. Mythical

structures prevail in the design of poetic diction, for it is the intersection of the sacral mythic world and the profane life that is reflected in traditional oral narrative. The current investigation is carried out under the premise that even though in the course of time myths changed and were transformed into folk songs, riddles, charms and laments, the main culturally significant images were preserved in oral poetry and encoded in various poetic devices of traditional oral narrative. Therefore, traditional oral poetry has to be decoded to be properly understood: “the entire system is implicit in any of its details, and a myth is equally present in a kenning or an allusive skaldic poem from the pagan period” (Lindow 2002: 44). In this article, traditional narrative is viewed as a paradigmatic model, encompassing different genres of traditional oral poetry. It is vital to note that myth underlies various types of traditional narrative:

Sacred myth, a narrative form associated with religious ritual, is one kind of mythic narrative; but legend and folktale are also mythic in the sense of traditional, and so is the oral epic poem. One of the great developmental processes that is unmistakable in the history of written narrative has been the gradual movement away from narratives dominated by the mythic impulse to tell a story with a traditional plot. (Scholes et al. 2006: 19)

The material selected for the analysis in this paper encompasses the oral poetry of two distinct traditions that relate to myth in different ways: while the *Poetic Edda* is a source of mythic lore itself, Lithuanian folk songs contain only reflections of mythic worldview and mainly focus on peasants’ way of life. The object being researched comprises the mythological poems *Völuspá* (‘The Seeress’s Prophecy’<sup>1</sup>), *Grímnismál* (‘Grimnir’s Sayings’), and *Hávamál* (‘Sayings of the High One’) from the Old Icelandic collection of poems the *Poetic Edda* and selected Lithuanian folk songs from the songbooks of Antanas and Jonas Juškos, as well as from the *Book of Lithuanian Folk Songs*. The *Poetic Edda* is viewed as one of the most important sources of Germanic mythology and heroic legends, and as a striking example of medieval oral poetry (cf. Sørensen 2000: 20). Although recorded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Eddic poems are believed to have previously existed in the oral tradition (Clunies Ross 2000: 44–45). Meanwhile, the Lithuanian section of the investigated material covers the collection of roughly five and a half thousand songs (almost a third of them – with melodies) collected by Antanas Juška in Veliuona, which he published together with his brother Jonas Juška as *Lietuviškos dainos* ‘Lithuanian Songs’ in three volumes in 1880, 1881, 1882, and *Lietuviškos svotbinės dainos* ‘Lithuanian Wedding Songs’, published in

<sup>1</sup> Here and further in the text, the translation of the *Poetic Edda* (including the anglicised versions of names) by Carolyne Larrington (2014) is quoted.

1883 (Sauka 2007: 378–379), as well as *Lietuvių liaudies dainynas*, ‘The Book of Lithuanian Folk Songs’, an ongoing serial scholarly publication of songs divided by genre and provided with scholarly introductions and melodies, which currently contains 25 volumes.

One of the main images recurrent in traditional oral poetry and closely linked to mythic worldview is that of a supernatural tree, representing the structure of the cosmos – the world tree. This article proposes an analysis of the world tree as reflected in the poetic diction of selected lays from the *Poetic Edda* and Lithuanian folk songs. The world tree as depicted in the poetic texts of the two traditions, shaped under different historical, cultural, and geographical conditions, in each case manifests peculiar characteristics which may be linked to myth. It should be noted that the current paper does not aim at a complete and exhaustive study of this image in Old Icelandic and Lithuanian traditions but rather attempts to investigate the symbolism of the world tree as a model of the cosmos and as a tree of life – the source of vitality and fertility.

### Theoretical premises and methodology

The representations of the world tree in both Lithuanian and Old Icelandic traditions have been thoroughly studied over the years. Since medieval times, chronicles had mentioned the cult of trees in the territories of pagan Lithuania. Lithuanian folklorist Norbertas Vėlius presented his theories and insights on the ancient Lithuanian notion of the world tree in an exhaustive study (1983), where he emphasised the correlation between the concept of the world tree and the oppositions high/low, as well as the geographical territory occupied by the Baltic tribes. The Lithuanian ethnologist Nijolė Laurinkienė (1990) discussed the reflections of the world tree in Lithuanian calendar songs and presented a comparative analysis that included songs from other traditions (Latvian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian, Germanic). An overview of the various functions that a tree had in pagan Lithuanian religion, mythology, and politics by the scholar of Baltic religion Gintaras Beresnevičius was published posthumously in 2019. The concept of the world tree was discussed from the archaeological perspective by the scholar Marija Gimbutas (1963), the tree of life in folklore and ethnography was examined by Pranė Dundulienė (2008). Recent studies on the subject focus, *inter alia*, on dendromythology (Razauskas 2016, 2017, 2020), the verification of historical data on tree veneration (Vičinskas 2016), the fusion of pagan and Christian elements as observed in ethnographic crosses hung on trees (Zabulytė 2012).

Meanwhile, contemporary research on the Germanic world tree Yggdrasill varies from the field of archaeology (Andrén 2014), to those of cultural anthropology and religion (Murphy 2013; Kvilhaug 2017), ecology (Abram 2019), etc. The vast scholarship of previous decades and centuries that explores the world tree in the Germanic sources and the *Poetic Edda* specifically could not be overviewed within the scope of this article, yet several relevant works should be mentioned. The definitive contemporary translation of the *Poetic Edda* by the medievalist Carolyne Larrington (2014) was consulted in the process of conducting the investigation; the translation of the poems by Ursula Dronke with extensive scholarly commentaries on Norse mythology (1997) was also examined, as well as Clive Tolley's overview of trees in Norse tradition (2009).

In this paper, traditional oral poetry is analysed, taking into account the fact that its performance includes the levels of sound and imagery: “the special nature of rhythm in oral narrative traps the images from the real world, working them into a system which parallels and mixes them with images from the art tradition” (Scheub 1978: 72). The imagery employed in traditional oral poetry seems to be inseparable from the rhythmic performance as the latter gives it structure and artistic restraints. These insights are echoed in Calvert Watkins's concept of “poetic grammar”, which distinguishes the level of sound (metrics, phonetic devices) and the level of meaning (grammatical figures, poetic diction, formulas, and themes) in traditional oral poetry (Watkins 1995: 28). On the phonetic level, the significance of phonetic devices (rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance) is accentuated. In this regard, alliterative verse is a distinctive feature of medieval Germanic poetry, whereas Lithuanian folk songs employ diminutives and onomatopoeic refrains as the principal phonetic devices. The second level is that of diction, or specific poetic devices employed in a poetic text. In traditional oral text, a poetic device, be it a metaphor, a simile, or a kenning, is not regarded as a self-serving poetic invention but rather as a vessel carrying the mythic content recognised by the audience as a certain mythological “norm”.

### **The sacred tree as a model of the cosmos**

Since ancient times, the image of a tree has been employed to represent the structure of the cosmos. While in the *Poetic Edda* one may encounter passages which explicitly mention and detail the mythic world tree Yggdrasill, in Lithuanian folk songs more obscure references to exceptional trees prevail. Below we discuss several examples from the sources of both traditions which portray such trees.

In the *Poetic Edda*, the world tree Yggdrasill is depicted in the mythological poems *Völuspá* (stanzas 2, 19, 27, 46–47), *Grímnismál* (stanzas 29–35, 44), and *Hávamál* (stanza 138). *Völuspá* is the introductory poem of the *Poetic Edda*: it provides a detailed account of the cosmogonic-eschatological cycle of Germanic mythology. The poem recounts how the god Odin summons a *völva* ‘seeress’ to gain the knowledge of the events of the past and the future. In stanza two of the poem, the seeress mentions the *miotvið mæran* ‘Mighty-Measuring tree’: this epithet, emphasised through the alliteration of the letter ‘m’, refers to an exceptional tree which serves as a model of the extant cosmos, or, in Clive Tolley’s words, contains “the whole measure of the universe” (Tolley 2009: 332). Ursula Dronke accentuates the context in which the tree is introduced: the mystery of its birth is left “outside of the chronological narrative of cosmic growth”<sup>2</sup> – the narrative which opens the subsequent stanza with the poetic formula *Ár var alda* ‘Early in time’ and which describes the primordial chaos and the creation of the cosmos (Dronke 1997: 32–33). In this respect, Yggdrasill is a symbol of the cosmic order – it does not yet exist as a grown tree in the primordial chaos and acquires its significance as a representation of the cosmos only after the creation of the universe. Further in the poem the tree is described as sacred when it is mentioned that god Heimdall’s hearing is buried *undir heiðvönom helgom baðmi* ‘under a bright-grown, sacred tree’ (stanza 27).

Meanwhile in *Grímnismál*, a poem recounting how Odin, disguised as Grimnir, is compelled to reveal ancient mythological knowledge to his uncongenial host, king Geirroð, it is disclosed that gods convene at Yggdrasill’s ash “to give judgements” (stanza 29). Yggdrasill is also singled out as an exceptional tree: *Ascr Yggdrasils, hann er oztr víða* ‘Yggdrasill’s ash is the most pre-eminent of trees’ (stanza 44). The poem depicts the mythic tree as a model of the universe – under its roots, Yggdrasill unites *Hel* (the realm of the dead), *Jötunheimr* (the realm of giants), and *Miðgarðr* (the realm of people):

31. *Priár rotr standa á þriá vega  
undan asci Yggdrasils;  
Hel býr undir einni, annarri  
hrímþursar,  
þriðio mennzcir menn.*

31. Three roots there grow in three directions  
under Yggdrasill’s ash;  
Hel lives under one, under the second,  
the frost-giants,  
under the third, humankind.

<sup>2</sup> Reflections of a “religious mystery” encoded in the mythical origin of Yggdrasil (Dronke 1997: 32) may also be observed in the poem *Hávamál*, stanza 138, which recounts Odin’s sacrifice – his hanging upside down from the world tree in order to gain the wisdom of the magic runes. Yggdrasil is introduced as “that tree of which no man knows / from where its roots run”. The last line of the stanza emphasises the mystery with double alliteration: *hvers hann af rótom renn* ‘from where its roots run’.

In the first line of the stanza, repetition of the number “three” may be observed wherein the poetic diction reveals the division of the lower part of the world tree. Similarly, the repeated preposition “under” connotes the vertical axis: the roots are under the tree, the three realms are under the roots. The horizontal division of space observed in Eddic narrative might have been based on the existing cultural and geographical segments of medieval Icelandic society.<sup>3</sup> With respect to poetic grammar, this division is reflected in the poetic device of priamel, which occupies two final lines of the stanza. As the beings that dwell under the three roots of Yggdrasill are enumerated, the emphasis lies on the last member of the triad, which is also delineated by alliteration: *mennzcir men* ‘humankind’. Humankind is therefore contrasted with the mythical realms of Hel and that of frost-giants, which may be seen as a reflection of the “centre–periphery” relationship. However, Margaret Clunies Ross suggests viewing this relationship not as the binary opposition between the centre and the outside world but rather as “a series of territories belonging to different classes of beings” (Clunies Ross 1994: 51).

In Lithuanian folk songs the relationship of centre and periphery is also frequently embodied in the motif of a tree: it is employed as a vertical marker of space (a transformation of the *Axis Mundi*). According to Norbertas Vėlius, folk songs depicting the world tree might have had a ritual significance and a sacral meaning (Vėlius 1983: 182); Gintaras Beresnevičius elaborates that the introduction of a cosmogonic motif in a song, regardless of the further narrative, transfers the singing person to the sacred reality (Beresnevičius 1998: 40). In the course of time, this sacral meaning lost its significance, and the mythic (no article needed) images were reduced to poetic ones. Vėlius views this premise as an explanation for the frequent motif of a tree in the beginning of Lithuanian folk songs (Vėlius 1983: 182). The exceptional status of a tree is often emphasised when it is depicted standing in the middle of a vast space (usually a lake or a field):

1. *Vidur jūrių ir marelių  
Aukštasis kalnelis,*

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<sup>3</sup> Aron Gurevich proposes that the mythic perception of the cosmos was mirrored in the historical arrangement of farmsteads in medieval Iceland (Gurevich 1969: 45–46). The author maintains that the topography of settlements is related to the basic elements of the universe: “At every important point of the world, namely, in its centre on earth, in heaven, at the place where the rainbow, which leads from the earth to heaven, begins, and where the earth joins heaven – everywhere there are farmsteads, mansions, burghs” (ibid.).

2. *Ant to kalno kalnužėlio**Žalias qžuolėlis* (JLD 395).

(‘In the middle of seas and lakes there is a high hill, a green oak tree grows on that high hill!’).<sup>4</sup>

The sequence of poetic images in the quoted stanza reveals a centre-oriented dynamic: the stanza begins with the image of water, advances with the image of a hill, and culminates with the image of a green oak tree. The formula *vidur[ys]* ‘in the middle of’ is a common introduction in Lithuanian folk songs: an exceptional tree may grow *vidury dvaro* ‘in the middle of an estate’ (JLD 384), *vidur vieškelėlio* ‘in the middle of a public road’ (JLD 911), *vidury girios* ‘in the middle of a forest’ (JLD 415), *vidury jūrelių* ‘in the middle of the sea’ (JLD 1163), etc. The oak growing on a hill emphasises the upward orientation of the tree, hence, its symbolic connection to the heavenly realm. Similar function may be seen in the epithets describing Yggdrasil: *hár baðmr* ‘a tall tree’, *ascr standandi* ‘the tree standing upright’ (*Völuspá*: stanzas 19, 47).

Besides its location, the special status of a tree in Lithuanian folk songs transpires as the number of its branches is specified. A tree with nine or a hundred branches may be viewed as a reflection of the cosmic world tree (cf. Laurinkienė 2000: 31; Vėlius 2014: 132):

3. *O ir išdygo**Žalias qžuolėlis,*4. *Tas qžuolėlis**Su devyniomis šakelėms* (JSD 52).

(‘A green oak tree has sprouted, that oak tree has nine branches’).

1. *Ei, augo, augo**Žalias medelis,**Ažuolas šimtsakėlis,**Vidur čysto laukelio* (JLD 1146).

(‘A green tree grew, an oak tree with a hundred branches grew in the middle of an empty field’).

With respect to the subsequent narrative of quoted songs, the motif of exceptional trees is not often developed in the stanzas following introduction (except for the songs where the tree is paralleled to a dead relative in detail; such parallel may be traced back to the beliefs that the souls of the dead live in trees (Beresnevičius 1990: 42–48). The description of a tree is usually followed by a narrative depicting events that were important for the peasant community (courtship, marriage, forced recruitment to the army, etc.). Here it is important to reiterate that the function of this motif might have been

<sup>4</sup> Translations of Lithuanian folk songs are mine. A literal translation is given instead of a poetic one to render the meaning of songs as accurately as possible.

that of transcending the surroundings of peasant life and incorporating them into the ‘sacred reality’ through song.

Another vital aspect of the world tree’s position in space is reflected in a motif common to both Old Icelandic and Lithuanian traditions, which could be titled ‘a spring under a tree’. In *Vǫluspá*, it is stated that Yggdrasill stands over Urd’s well – the well of paramount significance, where Norns, mythical beings who decide the fate of humans, dwell: *Þaðan koma meyjar, margs vitandi, / þriár, ór þeim sæ, er und þolli stendr* ‘From there come girls, knowing a great deal, / three from the lake standing under the tree’ (stanza 20). In a more obscure manner, this sacred spring is also mentioned in relation to the utterances made by a wise man: *Mál er at þýlia þular stóli á, / Urðar brunni at* ‘It is time to declaim from the sage’s high-seat, / at Urd’s spring’ (*Hávamál*: stanza 111), which could be a reference to the meeting of gods.

Lithuanian folk songs also depict a spring flowing under a tree. This is often a place where young men encounter young girls, washing themselves or washing clothes, e. g.:

8. *Ant to kalno, ant aukštojo,  
Stovi žalia liepužė.*

9. *Po ta liepa, po žaliąja,  
Teka šaltas šaltinėlis.*

10. *Tame šaltam šaltinėly  
Dvi seseli žlugtą skalbė.*

11. *Ir atjoja bernužėlis  
Bėro žirgo pagirdyti* (JLD 83).

(‘On a hill, on a high hill, a green linden tree stands. Under the green linden tree, a cold spring runs. In the cold spring two sisters were washing their clothes. A young man came to water his bay horse’).

Further narrative of this song and other songs on this topic deals with the theme of defloration, conveyed in traditional symbols (e. g. the young man threatens to feed the girls’ rue wreath, the symbol of her chastity, to his horse, etc.). Ultimately, in both traditions the place under the (world) tree and near a spring appears to constitute the surroundings of important occurrences, where either events of mythic significance or the developments of peasant life unfold.

### The tree of life

One of the variations of the world tree is the tree of life – evergreen and symbolising vitality, fecundity, and fruitfulness. In this respect, the world tree



is often associated with water or moisture. The connection of the Germanic world tree with the life-giving aspect of water manifests in “its shedding of vital moisture upon the earth” (Dronke 1997: 33), as described in *Vǫluspá*:

<p>19. <i>Asc veit ec standa, heitir Yggdrasill hár baðmr, ausinn hvítaauri; þaðan koma döggar, þærs í dala falla, stendr æ yfir, grænn, Urðar brunni.</i></p>	<p>19. An ash I know that stands, Yggdrasill it's called, a tall tree, drenched with shining loam; from there come the dews which fall in the valley, green, it stands always over Urd's well.</p>
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The description of Yggdrasill entails the unmistakable characteristics of the tree of life: it is green, full of vitality, and everlasting – *stendr æ yfir, grænn Urðar brunni* ‘green, it stands always over Urd's well’. The permanent greenness of the ash which, as a tree, should be subject to the changes of seasons, is ensured by the mythical goddesses of fate, Norns: according to Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, Norns pour water from the Urd's well over Yggdrasill so that it does not wither; all things which have contact with this holy water are said to become white as an eggshell (*The Beguiling of Gylfi* 1916: 30).<sup>5</sup> The holy tree itself is *ausinn hvítaauri* ‘drenched with shining loam’ (the word *hvíta*, translated by Larrington as ‘shining’ (cf. Wolf 2006: 177, 182), has the primary meaning of ‘white’, according to Zoega's dictionary). The image of Yggdrasill is associated with two colours: it is the evergreen tree of life; yet it is also white and shining after contact with the water from the sacred Urd's well. Eleazar Meletinsky (1968: 117) claims that the epithet “white” is connected with the perception of sunlight and constitutes an archaic poetic device intended to convey the idealisation of the object it describes. Clive Tolley notes that with respect to religious symbolism, it is “natural to find an association of the tree, stretching up to heaven, with whiteness” (Tolley 2009: 329). Thus, the world tree in the Old Icelandic tradition is marked for its vitality (the symbolism of the colour green) and its holiness (the symbolism of the colour white). Tolley notes that the dew falling from the world tree implies fertility and may be compared with the water which drips from the horns of the stag, browsing the leaves of Lærad,<sup>6</sup> into the spring of Hvergelmir, where all the waters of the world have their beginning (*Grímnismál*, stanza 26), as well as with *dýrkálfr, döggo slunginn* ‘the young stag, drenched in dew’ in the heroic lay *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, stanza 38 (Tolley 2009: 328).

<sup>5</sup> Murphy emphasises that ash trees are not evergreen in the north, which attests to Yggdrasill's “mysterious, untraceable nature, sustained in life by the water poured on it by the three ‘weird sisters’ of the flow of time” (Murphy 2013: 8).

<sup>6</sup> Most probably, this is another name for Yggdrasill (cf. Lindow 2002: 207).

In Lithuanian folk songs, one of the common epithets that describe a tree with an exceptional status is *žalias* ‘green’ (e. g. formula *žalias ažuolėlis* ‘a green oak tree’). Since ancient times, the green colour of a tree has been viewed as a symbol of inexhaustible vitality; such stable epithets as ‘a green leaf’, ‘a green branch’, ‘a green tree’, ‘a green forest’, ‘a green rue’ are recurrent in the poetic vocabulary of Lithuanian folk songs (Stundžienė 2010: 28). The oak tree was believed to be a sacred tree in pagan Lithuania:<sup>7</sup> historical records mention it as the tree of the thunder god *Perkūnas*, or as the tree of gods (Balys 2000: 31; Vėlius 2012: 106; Beresnevičius 2019: 351–353).<sup>8</sup> Hence the unsurprising persistence of the poetic formula – in Ricoeur’s words, “symbols come to language only to the extent that the elements of the world themselves become transparent, that is, when they allow the transcendent to appear through them” (Ricoeur 1995: 53). In a similar way, the formula *žalias ažuolėlis* provides a poetic form for a culturally significant concept.

Nonetheless, the colour white may also be sometimes associated with a tree, as seen in this extract from a Lithuanian work song:

1. *Ant tėvelio dvaro*

*Balta liepa auga,*

*Po taj liepele*

*Aukso rasa krinta* (LLD 194).

(‘At father’s estate, a white linden tree grows, under that linden tree, golden dew is falling’).<sup>9</sup>

The image of the white linden tree is integrated within the surroundings of a peasant’s life, i.e., the father’s estate. It may be observed that the epithet *balta liepa* ‘a white linden tree’ marks the transition from the literal description towards the symbolic: the colour white does not refer to the

<sup>7</sup> Germanic thunder god Thor is also associated with the oak tree: as stated in *Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldi* (‘Life of Saint Boniface by Willibald’), the sacred oak tree of Jupiter (for which pagans had their own name) in Hesse, Germany, was cut by Saint Boniface. It is presumed that in the Germanic religion this tree was “a symbol of the mythical world-pillar which sustained the sky” (MacCulloch 1998, 143). It was the perceived connection with the divine realm that made the oak tree a vital element in pagan rituals.

<sup>8</sup> Numerous historical sources note the veneration of trees in medieval Lithuania; separate cases of tree veneration were recorded even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Balys 2000: 31–32). The Lithuanian ethnologist Jonas Balys distinguishes several stages of veneration of trees: the belief in the magic power of a green twig; the belief in the similarity of trees to human beings; the belief that specific spirits and deities dwell in trees; the belief that the soul of a dead man dwells in a tree (especially in a tree which grows on a grave); finally, the infusion of Christian elements, e.g. placement of crosses on venerated trees (ibid., 33–35).

<sup>9</sup> This song belongs to the group of work songs sung during rye harvesting. In another song of this group, the golden dew is falling from the rye.

external characteristics of the tree but rather pertains to its perceived value in a similar way as the description of the mythical tree Yggdrasill, discussed above. It is the change of the traditional epithet “green” with the epithet “white” that encodes the sacrality through the medium of language: “one may not speak of the sacredness of nature without the symbolism that expresses and articulates it and thereby brings it to language” (Ricoeur 1995: 53). In the quoted song, the further narrative details how an orphan girl intends to wash herself with the golden dew in order to become more radiant. As explained by Bronė Stundžienė, in ancient Lithuanian rituals dew was thought to induce health and fertility; one group of Lithuanian calendar songs includes a motif of encouraging a young girl to collect “cold”, “golden” or “silver” dew which covers the leaves of trees (Stundžienė 1999: 91).<sup>10</sup>

In Lithuanian tradition, one of the most pervasive themes of songs is that of marriage and courtship. It is often in this context that a tree with a special status is depicted:

1. *Devyni metai,*  
*Ne viena diena,*  
*Kai rūteles pasėjau,*  
*Nė diegužis nedygo.*
2. *O ir išdygo*  
*Žalia liepelė,*  
*Viršunužėj kvietkelė*  
*Su devyniomis šakelėms*
3. *O kas šakelė,*  
*Raiba gegelė*  
*Ryts vakaras kukavo,*  
*Ryts vakaras alsavo,*
4. *Ik iškukavo,*  
*Ik išalsavo*  
*Nuo močiutės dukrelę,*  
*Nuo brolelio seselę* (JSD 289).

(‘It has been nine years, not one day since I have sown my rues. Not a sprout has grown. A green linden tree has sprouted; on its top there is a flower with nine branches. On its branch, a speckled cuckoo bird cuckooed each morning and each evening. It cuckooed the daughter away from her mother, a sister away from her brother’).

The first stanza of the song begins with two oppositions: nine years vs. one day, sowing rues vs. no sprouts resulting. Thematically, this song belongs to the category of wedding songs and the poetic images reveal a girl’s maturation and preparation for marriage, as the rue wreath symbolised a girl’s readiness

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the association of dew with fertility may be observed in another song: *Krenta rasa ant žolėlės, Žiedelius kraudama* ‘dew is falling on the grass, making the flowers bloom’ (LMD I 655/19/).

for marriage – her maturity, chastity, and vitality; as an emblem of these valuable qualities, it was used in the wedding ritual (Sadauskienė 2010: 140). The negation, repeated in the stanza (“not a day”, “not a sprout”) indicates the prolonged state of infertility as reflected in the lack of rue growth. The poetic narrative ensues with the imagery of a thriving linden tree – a symbol of vitality and fertility, which is first and foremost encoded in the epithet “green”. The connection of this poetic image with the mythic world tree is disclosed in the following lines, where the nine branches are mentioned. The number “nine” is a sacral number – as West maintains, “the number nine, or by augmentation thrice nine, occurs often enough in Indo-European religious contexts to suggest that it was a traditional sacral quantity” (West 2007: 329). It is crucial to note the role of the cuckoo bird which acts as a certain messenger of fate in the process of betrothal – its song predicts a girl’s marriage. Further on, the narrative of the song depicts various stages of courtship and betrothal. The dynamics and imagery of the song correlates with Toporov’s view that the world tree (in this case, together with the cuckoo bird) acts as an intermediary between the universe and a human being and offers transcendence of the oppositions rooted in the experience of human life (Toporov 2010: 274–275).

## Conclusions

A closer look at the image of the *Arbor Mundi* as embedded in Old Icelandic and Lithuanian traditional oral poetry reveals its key position in the archaic worldview. In the mythological account of the creation of the cosmos, Yggdrasill serves as the main image to represent the established order; meanwhile numerous Lithuanian folk songs that are further removed from myth still frequently depict a tree with exceptional characteristics. The epithets which describe the world tree in both traditions emphasise its orientation upwards: Old Icelandic Yggdrasill is *hár baðmr* ‘a tall tree’, *ascr standandi* ‘the tree standing upright’, and Lithuanian oak tree, which represents the world tree, usually grows on *aukštas kalnelis* ‘a high hill’. The traditional Indo-European numbers nine and tree (the quotient of nine) are employed to refer to either the roots (in case of Yggdrasill) or the branches (in the case of Lithuanian trees with a special status) of the world tree. The epithet “green” is observed as a permanent characteristic of the world tree or its variations in both traditions; in Lithuanian folk songs it constitutes a fixed formula *žalias ažuolėlis* ‘a green oak tree’. In certain instances (the Eddic poem *Völuspá* and Lithuanian folk songs featuring a linden tree), the world

tree is also described as “white/shining” which reveals its symbolic connection with the sphere of the sacred, while dew, dripping from the world tree, is associated with fecundity and fertility.

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### ***Arbor Mundi* w tradycyjnej poezji ustnej z perspektywy staroislandzkiej i litewskiej**

**Streszczenie:** W artykule omawia się koncepcję „drzewa świata” (*Arbor Mundi*) obecną w *Eddzie starzej* (*Eddzie poetyckiej*) i litewskich pieśniach ludowych. Analizie poddano słownictwo poetyckie w wybranych źródłach tradycyjnej poezji ustnej w celu ustalenia jego znaczeń symbolicznych i relacji do mitologii. W analizie skupiono się na poetyckich obrazach drzewa świata jako modelu kosmosu oraz wiecznie zielonego drzewa życia. Wybrane wiersze z *Eddy* oraz litewskie pieśni ludowe ujawniają wagę drzewa świata jako znacznika strukturalnego, określającego relację między centrum a peryferiami, tj. między

przestrzenią znaną (zorganizowaną) i nieznaną (chaotyczną). Nacisk na skierowaną ku górze orientację drzewa odbiera się jako wskazanie na jego świętość. Bada się życiodajne cechy drzewa życia w relacji do obrazu rosy, która symbolizuje żyzność i płodność natury wyrażonej w *Eddzie*, a także zdrowie i płodność panny młodej wyrażone w litewskich pieśniach ludowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** drzewo świata; tradycyjna poezja ustna; litewskie pieśni ludowe; *Edda starsza* (*Edda poetycka*)

