

Pilėnai and Margiris: history and legend

SUMMARY

The subject of this book is familiar to almost every Lithuanian in contrast to almost every foreigner who may find himself/herself at a loss trying to grasp from the title what this book is all about. The situation is, however, far from hopeless and it is necessary to call for only one clue to improve it considerably. The story of Pilėnai may be epitomized as that of Lithuanian Masada. The popular and so far the most widely believed version of what happened in the castle of Pilėnai and with its defenders and their leader Duke Margiris in February 1336 prompts one to accept it as one of the most heroic examples of Lithuanian bravery. According to that version, the defenders of the castle offered a prolonged and bloody resistance and only when it was no longer possible to hold out against the overwhelming forces of the Teutonic Order and its supporters, they set the castle and all their property on fire and then committed mass suicide in order to escape slavery. The moral of the story is meant to convey the message about how heroic Lithuanians of old days were in defending their motherland and freedom. Following critical investigation into relevant sources and after having come to grips with the received wisdom of Lithuanian historiography, it became clear that such an image is highly spurious and steeped in romantic imagination, which even now is one of the most enduring traits of modern Lithuanians.

As early as 1936 there were attempts at critical engagement with this story, notably by the Lithuanian historian named Adolfas Šapoka, but

they proved to have been only the first attempts that failed to reveal the true character of the story by removing the subsequent layers of historiographical and literary works which came to be heaped upon it from the fifteenth century onwards. The critical approach could not be further developed in Soviet Lithuania since this story was exploited in perpetuating the image of blood-stained Teutonic Knights (a Western foe *par excellence*, as it were) who used to be set in sharp contrast to medieval Lithuanians who excelled in defence against the aggression of Western feudal lords, an aggression (*Drang nach Osten*) which was equally dangerous to Lithuanians and their comrades-in-arms, the Slavs. The first real steps aimed at critical evaluation of the story were taken only in recent times. Earlier historiography was strongly indebted to the view of nineteenth century Prussian historians such as Max Töppen and Theodor Hirsch, whose opinion about the reliability of the main source of our knowledge – the fifteenth century Latin version of the chronicle of Wigand of Marburg – was rather skeptical, if not hypercritical. Such a view was conducive to giving much credit to that account of Pilėnai defence which was made available in the pages of sixteenth century Prussian historian Caspar Schütz (†1594). The latter scholar was the last to have used the chronicle of Wigand in its original German version, which is no longer extant. It must be stressed that not so long ago the Latin version of the said chronicle received a rehabilitation from the Polish historian Sławomir Zonenberg (1994). The research of this scholar has shown that this version, despite obvious flaws, contains almost the entire text of the original chronicle, not only part of it, as was earlier generally assumed. Despite his keen observations, in this particular case of Pilėnai, S. Zonenberg seems to have adhered to the traditional view which favours the text of C. Schütz at the expense of the extant Latin text of Wigand of Marburg. In our turn, we must emphasize that the extant Latin text of the chronicle of Wigand of

Marburg represents the latest (and most exhaustive) primary source, while all later ones are to be regarded as secondary.

Close reading into the story as it is represented in the Latin text of Wigand has revealed a totally different picture from that which was produced by later authors. It turned out that the defenders of the castle became panic-stricken on sighting the approaching enemy troops and even before the very siege began they fell into despair and lost confidence in their being able to defend the castle. Then bloody chaos broke out with mutual killing and destruction of property. Some of the mounted warriors rode out from the castle and sought to make their way through the ranks of attacking crusaders, which was not successful at all. Thus the suburb of the castle had been taken as *en route* before the siege of the proper castle began. Later on the crusaders' handling of siege weapons caused Duke Margiris to lose heart with the result that he was moved to kill his wife and his warriors – the latter voluntarily accepted death at the hands of their lord. The further fate of Margiris himself is unknown (his picturesque suicide has turned out to be the literary invention of a much later date). One of the most striking features in this story is almost a total lack of active resistance on the part of Lithuanians. An essential remaking of this scene was carried out by the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz (1415–1480). He invented the *first* signs of active Lithuanian resistance and brought them to the fore of all the story. We managed to establish that some of the most spectacular details (e. g. the killing of their children and wives by Lithuanians) were borrowed, most probably, from historians of classical antiquity. In this respect the sieges of the towns of Astapa (206 BC) and of Abydos (200 BC) as described by Livy seem to have been the most readily available examples for Jan Długosz. Such a way of embellishing the story with fictitious material was further carried on by sixteenth century humanistically educated historians (e. g. Maciej Strykowski). They were

quite at ease to find many more examples to illustrate their accounts of Pilėnai. In this respect C. Schütz also deserves special attention, because he succeeded brilliantly in producing a full-fledged story of the defence of Pilėnai. In this respect his success was so great that his story was believed to be the most reliable one for many centuries.

We observe the decline in the use of the Pilėnai story in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The position of Lithuanian historian Albertas Vijūkas-Kojalavičius SJ (†1669) seems to be typical of this period of time. He knew of Pilėnai and the suicidal acts committed there, but did not admire them because of his application of the Roman Catholic attitude towards suicide. The story of Pilėnai was bound to revive with the inception of Enlightenment and Romanticism. Prussian historians such as August L. Schlözer, Ludwig von Baczko, August von Kotzebue and especially Johannes Voigt were instrumental in making the Pilėnai defence a striking example of pagan bravery and of their fight for freedom. These ideas appealed to romantic historians active in Lithuania in the first half of the nineteenth century. Among them Teodor Narbutt contributed most to making the reading audience of Lithuania familiar with that story, which came also to encapsulate the idea of suicide on others' behalf, so characteristic of Polish Romanticism. However it took some time for this story to become popular among people whose native language was Lithuanian.

The image of Pilėnai began its journey into the Lithuanian domains of collective memory at the end of the nineteenth century, at the time when Lithuanian intelligentsia started to revive and propagate a version of Lithuanian identity which, in their eyes, was the truly authentic one. Collective identity is impossible without relying on the resources of collective memory, which not only increases national cohesion by means of a common past, but also enhances the feeling of national pride and of

belonging to a certain ethnic community by invoking images of a glorious past. The leaders of the Lithuanian national movement consciously sought after such images, which might be harnessed to the task of constructing national identity. Thus Pilėnai and Margiris became part and parcel of these activities.

One of the projects carried out by Lithuanian national intelligentsia in an attempt to “revive” collective memories consisted in translations and literary emulations of those Polish romantic writers whose works demonstrated their deep affection for the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The prime of place among such authors came to be attributed to those nineteenth century Polish romanticists who in their work used to deploy the literary images of Pilėnai. The image of Pilėnai was transplanted from Polish Romanticism to the landscape of Lithuanian cultural memory as an evident proof of the inextinguishable qualities of national nature, of the importance of mother tongue, and as a striking example of Lithuanian bravery. All that came squarely within the programme of national revival. It is difficult to establish a pecking order of positive ideas and senses associated with the image of Pilėnai as it was used in the discourse of Lithuanian nationalism, but one of the most enduring ideas was that which presented the defence of Pilėnai as a historical proof of Lithuanian bravery in defence of their freedom and national identity. The image of Pilėnai as the best example of Lithuanian bravery was bound to become a core around which more fleeting ideas and messages used to be attached from the late nineteenth century onwards. Most frequently it was the different political regimes that used to infuse “new ideas” into the received image of Pilėnai. In this way they tried to exploit its potential at mobilizing ethnic Lithuanians in the interests of different political agendas. In the inter-war period, Lithuanian Republic exponents of Lithuanian nationalism propagated the Pilėnai story as the model of how bravely one must defend his/her

own ethnic community. In the wake of Soviet occupation of Lithuania the image of Pilėnai was in a sense monopolized by the Soviets who were quick enough to exploit it in their own interests. In the course of World War II the Soviet ideologues exploited the image of Pilėnai, as well as other episodes from the Lithuanians' fight against the Teutonic Knights, in their anti-Nazi propaganda and in their attempts to involve Lithuanians in a struggle against Nazi Germany. Later on the image of Pilėnai proved very useful in implanting a version of Soviet patriotism. The image of Pilėnai as the model of Lithuanian bravery was valid in Soviet Lithuania, but then it was made devoid of nationalist qualities and used to be presented in the light of the Soviet doctrine of the friendship of peoples (in this particular case, as an example of comradeship between Lithuanians and Russians). After the demise of the Soviet regime, the image of Pilėnai came once again to play the role of an instructive example of how one's ethnic community must be defended. Now it is already two hundred years as this image holds a dominant place in the domains of Lithuanian cultural memory as the proof of the most "real" Lithuanian bravery.

This book is made up of two main parts: historical investigation and source publication. The latter part allows one to follow how the account of Pilėnai developed throughout the centuries, from the late fourteenth and down to the mid-nineteenth.