

S03E04: Beekeeping, Mushrooms and Sculptures: A Glimpse into Traditional Lithuanian Life

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([00:07](#)):

Hello and welcome to the Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery podcast. The producers of this podcast would like to acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, Fire Keepers of the Haudenosaunee, the indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands Syracuse University now stands. And now, introducing your hosts, Phil Arnold and Sandy Bigtree.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:30](#)):

Welcome back to Mapping the Doctrine of Discovery podcast. My name is Phil Arnold. I'm faculty in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University and the founding director of Skä-noñh Great Law of Peace Center.

Sandy Bigtree ([00:45](#)):

Hi again. I'm Sandy Bigtree, a citizen of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, and I'm on the Collaborative for the Skä-noñh Great Law of Peace Center, and also on the board of the Indigenous Values Initiative.

Philip P. Arnold ([00:59](#)):

And we're sponsored, as always, by the Henry Luce Foundation. Today we have a great friend and colleague with us today, Eglute Trinkauskaite. Eglute is a full-time faculty member in humanistic studies at the department... Eglute is a full-time faculty in humanistic studies department at Maryland Institute College of Art or MICA. She holds her PhD, MPhil, and MA in religion from Syracuse University, and her BA in religion from Hunter College, City University of New York, where teaching and research interests focus on indigenous and ethnic traditions, the natural environment, and globalization.

([01:50](#)):

Her latest writing explores complex layers of culture and religion in post-Soviet Lithuania. Her current writing projects focus on the continued vitality of indigenous religion and its imprint on modern Lithuania and its diaspora throughout the Baltic region. Eglute is taught at Syracuse University, Hamilton College, Nazareth College of Rochester, New York. She's an active member of the AAR and the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies. Thanks very much, Eglute. It's wonderful to be with you today.

Sandy Bigtree ([02:30](#)):

And we're so excited you're at MICA. I mean, you're surrounded by all these wonderful artists and I know you're such a colorful person and creative and where you come from in Eastern Europe. We need to learn more about all of this, but your students, in studying the doctrines of discovery have provided even us with some beautiful artwork that can just capture some of the heart-wrenching problems of these decrees.

Philip P. Arnold ([02:57](#)):

We have it up all over our house.

Sandy Bigtree ([02:57](#)):

They are, yeah. Anyway, welcome.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([03:01](#)):

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Thank you Sandy and Phil. It's a real honor to be here with you. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today and thanks for bringing up MICA. I love teaching at MICA. I consider myself to be very, very lucky to be working with the artists every day, to be surrounded by art, and I find that to be incredibly inspiring and I could not imagine a better place for me to be at. So thank you for acknowledging that as well because I'm very happy to be there.

Philip P. Arnold ([03:34](#)):

So maybe we could start with ancient Baltic religion. I mean, I think many of our listeners would be interested in knowing what that is.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([03:43](#)):

Yeah, it's a very, very good question. So it depends on who is speaking, but for the sake of simplicity, I will be talking about Baltic religion and unpack a little bit the terminology that is used to describe ancient Baltic religion.

([04:05](#)):

So let's say the insiders and the practitioners of Baltic religion do call it Baltic religion or ancient Baltic religion. And this is the self-referential and preferred term because this is the religion that existed before the introduction of Christianity. It's the native, pre-Christian, indigenous religious tradition. And because of the many complex layers of history and Christianization and missionization and wars and subjugation, a lot has been lost. But there are survivals and fragments from which it is possible to do some reconstruction and even revitalization of this Baltic religion.

([05:05](#)):

So the main sources for it are multiple. So we have historical sources written mostly by foreigners, by missionaries, by travelers. We have archeological sources that are very valuable today because they also can be interpreted in relationship to the oral tradition as well. They usually confirm the oral tradition and historical sources. And linguistic sources, especially when it comes to typology or place names. So we have basically, to repeat all of that, we have language linguistic sources, the oral tradition, historical sources that need to be treated with suspicion, and archeological materials. So those are four main sources. And they all require different methodology to be interpreted and to be worked with. So you really need interdisciplinary approach to work with this material.

([06:16](#)):

Now we also have outsiders, scholars working or being curious about ancient Baltic religious tradition, and often in scholarly text, we see problematic terms used like paganism and referred to as pagan or paganism. And I'm very curious who started this habit. And I think also it points to the historical sources, and the issue is in Christianity because usually Christians called non-Christians or unbaptized peoples pagans.

Philip P. Arnold ([07:06](#)):

That's a Roman root, right?

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([07:07](#)):

Yeah. It's a Roman term, *pāgānus*, those living outside of the city, village people, country people. So it stuck. And I'm always curious when I come across it in textual sources, and even as far back as 2050s, there is a primary source that I came across from 1255. It's a papal bull issued by Alexander IV for King

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Mindaugas of Lithuania. And of course the original text is in Latin, and with all the formalities from Vatican archives, and that uses also the term pagan and paganism. So I know that you do work with the papal bulls, and every time I come across any papal bulls that involve Lithuania, I take a note of that. I was very excited to come across this primary source from the middle of 13th century. It was the first attempt to introduce Christianity to Lithuania.

Philip P. Arnold ([08:27](#)):

It's fairly late. That's late.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([08:30](#)):

It's really late, and it was a failed attempt because it didn't last very long. And so later attempts where the most successful attempt was in 1387 when when Jogaila accepted Christianity through Poland, and then Samogitia, the most stubborn so-called pagan region of Lithuania in the west of Lithuania, was finally Christianized in 1413. That's the official date.

([09:07](#)):

But I'll backtrack a little bit more to your question. What is ancient Baltic religion? So it actually has a pantheon. It has a pantheon that has sky gods. So the main sky god, Dievas, in Lithuanian, actually shares the same root with the Latvian sky god, and etymologically is linked to Indo-European sky god as well. And then there are Chthonic earth deities, and there are so many of them starting from Žemyna, which refers to the earth. And I really like how the Latvians use māte, which is the mother, earth mother. And that breaks down to so many smaller deities.

([10:10](#)):

I find it really exciting from the linguistic perspective, the richness of the descriptions of all the deities having to do with the natural phenomenon and the earth. So for example, in Latvian, there are descriptions like mother of the sands, Smilšu māte, and then mother of the graves, Kapu māte, and mother of the ghosts, Veļu māte, and then mother of the fields, Lauku māte, and mother of the flax, Linu māte, Mieža māte, mother of barley. And then just to expand that and to show you how important is the linguistic association, how important it is to know the language to understand these cultures is that they're very descriptive and they have to do with the everyday observations of the natural phenomenon and agricultural activity and everyday engagement with the natural world.

([11:31](#)):

So just to give you a little bit more of that taste, let's say... I'm also using Latvian because Latvian is very close to Lithuanian and there were all these beautiful descriptions like Krūmu māte roughly translates as mother of the bushes, Lazdu māte, mother of the hazel, Lapu māte, mother of the leaves, Ziedu māte, mother of the blossoms, and even mother of the mushrooms, Sēņu māte. Forest animals are ruled by the Lithuanian [inaudible 00:12:07], opposed to Latvian Meža māte, and then you have more descriptions like spirits of the house, the domestic deities. So basically this tradition describes a very animate worldview, full of spirits in the home, in the farmstead, in agricultural buildings, in the forests, in the fields, in the bathhouse. It's swarming with all kinds of spirits that have to do with the natural phenomenon and the way that humans engage with the natural world.

([12:48](#)):

So of course we have Latvian Pirts māte, which is the mother of the bathhouse, mother of the threshing house in Lithuanian, Gabjauja. Then you have Latvian Jūras māte, mother of the sea, mother of the waters, Ūdens māte, Upes māte mother of the rivers, Bangu māte, mother of the waves. Lithuanian

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Bangpūtys literally translates as the one who blows the waves. I find that description to be very beautiful. Then you have atmospheric deities like Vėja mātė, mother of the Wind, and Lithuanian Vėjopatis, master of the wind. Latvian Lietus mātė, mother of the rain, Miglas mātė, mother of the fog, Sniega mātė, mother of the snow, mother of sleep and mother of the market. So it's a very interesting breakdown of everyday activity and I'm very fascinated by that.

[\(13:55\)](#):

And currently I am working on a piece on the home spirits, domestics, familiaris and getting really into getting to know these domestic spirits. And the Jesuits, in the 17th century and later, were very curious about all these spirits that they even bothered to learn the local languages. They learned Lithuanian. But of course, because Lithuanian is not an easy language to learn that their knowledge of the language was partial. So the understanding of Baltic religion was also limited.

Sandy Bigtree [\(14:41\)](#):

Well, maybe they understood enough that it was all-

Eglute Trinkauskaite [\(14:43\)](#):

We understood enough to produce a distorted view of it or to produce a partial view of it or to produce some texts that are a little bit funny sounding.

Sandy Bigtree [\(14:59\)](#):

When you have a relationship of mother with a natural world, that is not something you're going to dominate. You don't dominate your mother. And so if they're coming into install a patriarchy, they're going to immediately either ignore the language and set up a new structure, which is what they did here.

Philip P. Arnold [\(15:20\)](#):

I mean, yeah, how do you shift from a matrilineal deity system, if you like, to a patrilineal one, right? To a higher-

Sandy Bigtree [\(15:32\)](#):

Which represents control, and the hierarchy.

Philip P. Arnold [\(15:34\)](#):

Right, so missionization was part of their learning the language, right?

Eglute Trinkauskaite [\(15:42\)](#):

Absolutely.

Sandy Bigtree [\(15:43\)](#):

In this work we have people who have made comments, "Why are you branching out into Europe?" Because these doctrines of discovery have nothing to do with what took place in Europe. But with what you're saying, it's a continuation, we have to go back to the origins of Christianity.

Philip P. Arnold [\(16:00\)](#):

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And the fact that it took root or Christianity was imposed so late in the Baltic area becomes a precursor to what happens in the new world. I wonder what you think about that.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([16:18](#)):

Yes, it's a very good point. And Sandy, your point about how do you disrupt this relationship with the most fundamental nurturing, relationship to the mother, to mother earth and to matrilineal system... So I think I agree, Phil, this was a precursor and was a good practice to prepare for more expansion and for more missionization across the Atlantic. Those Lithuanians and the Baltic people put up a fight. There were so many wars. Lithuanian history is so complex with dates. When I wasn't in school in Lithuania, all I remember were learning about battles and dates. And that was the reason why I did not really enjoy studying history, because it was all about wars and dates and battles. I just couldn't find that to be too exciting. I just did not find it to be interesting. So absolutely, I think this was a precursor.

Sandy Bigtree ([17:41](#)):

I know with the Jesuits coming into the northeast and the Woodland territories, they went right to the heart of the women. The women were resistant in fighting, to maintain and hold on to their matrilineal associations to Mother Earth. It's terrifying.

([18:05](#)):

So what they started, within 30 years of first contact, they began silencing indigenous voices and they wouldn't allow trappers to access some of the waterways they were now controlling unless they accepted Christianity. Right away, the men would go back to their longhouses and some of the women wouldn't let them back in the longhouses because, "We're matrilineal. You're disrupting everything that identifies us." But it's interesting reading about that, how they would pinpoint that. And they succeeded in many ways because they would give some of these trappers more money, and they gained more and more control this way and gave the Christian indigenous people more voice and more power, and in the same time, silencing the indigenous voice.

([18:57](#)):

And they knew how to go about to do that because they perfected it in Europe, already in Eastern Europe. It was astounding how they instilled these elective governments right from the beginning. And [inaudible 00:19:13] nations did not vote. They came together in raising leaders, but then those leaders-

Philip P. Arnold ([19:20](#)):

Consensus.

Sandy Bigtree ([19:20](#)):

Through consensus, but they were not recognized by the Jesuits this early in first contact. And then we've been fighting that since with BIA governments, there's Christian Indians in the Americas that consider themselves traditional because they've learned the traditions that were recorded by the Jesuits and other priests that came into the territory. But what those accounts were, in effect, retelling stories, but in a way of good against evil, that binary, and that is so destructive rather than having an interactive relationship with the world and each other. So what you're saying, I see this playing out in Europe as well long before they came here.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([20:12](#)):

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Yes. And your story, your narrative what it reminds me, Sandy, is of a bigger framework of Christian privilege and also the benefits that come along accepting the dominant religion of power. So when I read through the Northern Crusades and other descriptions of crusading in the Baltic territories is that western crusaders would get almost like frequent flyer mile points for going into Lithuania. What it reminds me is you get frequent flyer or frequent guest rewards and they would be called spiritual rewards. In other words, they would be convinced that their sins would be forgiven if they went into Lithuania or the Baltic territories and converted more and baptized peoples. So this comes with the rewards and benefits. It's almost like a corporate system that reminds me of franchise and pyramid schemes, of growth with benefits and points and credit cards and rewards.

Philip P. Arnold ([21:49](#)):

Wow.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([21:51](#)):

That really struck me because it was so relevant to our today's experience as consumers who are... Corporations are competing for us as consumers, as customers. I hope that makes sense. I hope my parallel makes sense.

Philip P. Arnold ([22:12](#)):

Absolutely. So what would conversion be? What does that mean? Are people converted if they're killed? Are their souls captured by the crusaders if they're annihilated? I mean, I'm wondering what that looks like in the Baltic area.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([22:39](#)):

Yeah, so conversion, it's a good question because the missionary process, conversion sometimes was more humane and through discourse and through convincing, and often, most of the time it was a mass conversion of big masses of people that did not speak the same language. And it usually wasn't in some foreign language or Latin. So it did not mean much to the peasants in Lithuania who lived far away from urban centers. And Lithuania was very difficult to access because it was a very thick, forested area and full of marsh lands and swamps. So it was incredibly difficult for missionaries to access some places. And literally, people living in the forest call themselves Miškinis, which is also a name in Lithuania, a surname, describing basically a woodlands person, a forest dweller. Some of the conversion just simply wasn't that effective because it didn't mean much. It was a performative act, it was mass conversion.

Philip P. Arnold ([24:06](#)):

But the conversion would've come through the monarchs as well, right? That's what you were saying.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([24:12](#)):

Yeah, so-

Philip P. Arnold ([24:14](#)):

Or installed by the church or, say, is there an indigenous kingship or aristocracy or is that something that comes with Christianity?

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([24:25](#)):

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So Lithuanian, Mindaugas was a king, but that conversion or his own acceptance of Christianity did not last very long because then he was killed. But other dukes accepted Christianity mostly for political reasons, and they were not kings. But the church and their aristocracy were closely related for political purposes because that came through Poland when Jogaila married Polish Princess Jadwiga. So basically Lithuania, at the end of the 14th century, was pushed into the corner to either accept orthodox Christianity through Russia or to accept Roman Catholicism through Western Europe. And that was Poland. And it was a big turn. Does Lithuania want to be part of the west or east? And the choice was to align with the West. And it's interesting that Lithuania has always been at the crossroads of west and east because of its geographical location.

Philip P. Arnold ([26:05](#)):

That's a tough place.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([26:05](#)):

It's a very tough place to be, and currently, the country finds itself at the same place in the midst of the tensions between NATO and Russian aggression against Ukraine. And all of that history continues to play out today.

Sandy Bigtree ([26:23](#)):

Very stressful.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([26:25](#)):

Very stressful. Right.

Sandy Bigtree ([26:29](#)):

Terrifying actually.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([26:32](#)):

Do you need help catching up on today's topic or do you want to learn more about the resources mentioned? If so, please check our website at podcast.doctrineofdiscovery.org for more information. And if you like this episode, review it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. And now, back to the conversation.

Sandy Bigtree ([26:52](#)):

Now I like your work in the forests, and then you add the swampy areas and all I can think about are mushrooms, and the worry men. Maybe you could talk a little bit about your work-

Philip P. Arnold ([27:06](#)):

Some of the themes, yeah.

Sandy Bigtree ([27:07](#)):

... with these pre-colonial relatives.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([27:10](#)):

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Right, thank you. Thank you, Sandy. Those are themes that are dear to my heart. And I got into mushrooms very early as a child who picked mushrooms with my family. Now, don't get me wrong, we were not picking any magic mushrooms. I only learned about magic mushrooms here in the United States, mostly from my students who got very excited about magic mushrooms. But in Lithuania, no, we did not have malls or other exciting places to go to on weekends.

Philip P. Arnold ([27:53](#)):

And this is Soviet...

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([27:56](#)):

Under Soviet occupation.

Philip P. Arnold ([27:56](#)):

Yeah, right, right.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([28:00](#)):

So I think we still were backwards, and we went into woods to pick edible mushrooms. So I knew all my mushrooms and there were no mushroom guides or books. We just learned about mushrooms from our relatives, from grandmothers and aunts and uncles who were avid mushroomers. I think I didn't make much of that until I came back to Lithuania to visit and it was probably a very good mushroom summer, and my mother was cleaning mushrooms or we went to pick mushrooms and there was all this excitement in the kitchen about mushrooms. And the way that they talked about mushrooms really struck me because it was this effective excitement that it was this fever, like mushroom fever, right?

([29:01](#)):

Now affect is such a big field in the study of religion. It's a big deal. But I do pay attention when somebody's excited about something, and was just pure mushroom fever, mushrooms as emotion. It really drew my attention. And I think that's how I started my dissertation, is from exploring what is it about mushrooms that is so culturally exciting because I did not see that here in the States where you just go to a market and you buy carrots and you buy mushrooms wrapped in a box in plastic wrap. So it's a very different relationship. And yeah, that's how I got into deeper spiritual meanings and ties of mushrooms and chthonic underground deities and the God of the Dead.

([30:03](#)):

The interpretation is that mushrooms are the fingers of the God of the Dead Velnias, which was demonized after Christianity because mushrooms do grow from under the ground, and they're just the fruiting bodies of a very large mycelium, a big mushroom that covers the entire crust of the earth. So what we see is just the surface of it, just like a blossom of a flower.

([30:36](#)):

When you think about all the gods of the dead, is that they are imagined as being ravenous because of the unstoppable of death. Death is a certain thing. Everything dies. It's a part of life. And so this regenerative function also is present in mushrooms. So it's very easy to draw these parallels between mushrooms as the decomposers from biological perspective and gods of the dead across different religious traditions as also as decomposers of dead bodies. And they are represented and imagined as being ravenous or insatiable because they are always hungry and ready to eat more dead bodies. And that's what mushrooms do in the woods.

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Philip P. Arnold ([31:38](#)):

But then they feed us, too.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([31:41](#)):

And they feed us too so you see this full cycle of life.

Sandy Bigtree ([31:43](#)):

And heal us.

Philip P. Arnold ([31:43](#)):

Heal us.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([31:46](#)):

And heal us, right. It's medicine.

Philip P. Arnold ([31:49](#)):

So the dead are always present?

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([31:51](#)):

Exactly. Your book, Phil, Eating Landscape, it's right there. We eat the landscape and the landscape eats us. I just love the title of the book and that book is so beautiful.

Philip P. Arnold ([32:07](#)):

And then of course, the swarming dead.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([32:10](#)):

The swarming dead.

Philip P. Arnold ([32:12](#)):

Right, bees. Right?

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([32:13](#)):

Bees.

Philip P. Arnold ([32:15](#)):

You're still fascinated with bees. I think of mushrooms, bees, and I think of Eglute.

Sandy Bigtree ([32:22](#)):

Oh, all the time. Yes.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([32:22](#)):

Thank you.

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Philip P. Arnold ([32:22](#)):

So tell us about bees. Yeah.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([32:28](#)):

My grandfather, my maternal grandfather was a beekeeper. And so I have a memory of that and he had beehives, and I grew up on that farmstead that I still remember as this ideal mythical place from my childhood that I obviously idealize. My mother was the first one to move away from that kind of lifestyle, also pushed away by the Sovietization of Lithuanian countryside. But she went to study in the city.

([33:06](#)):

So when she was pregnant with me, and she was a teacher in the kindergarten, and a bee stung her, and that was in the city, so you see this disruption between the country lifestyle and her moving into the city, and a bee stung her. And because she was allergic to bees, she did not know that at the time, that she fainted. And so it was a story of my life's beginning as well, because I was with her. And I interpreted that story as a bee possession. So I was possessed by the bees at that point. And I just think it's important to give voice to things that cannot speak for themselves, like trees and bees and mushrooms, that they need as humans to advocate for them.

Philip P. Arnold ([34:10](#)):

Especially bees these days.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([34:11](#)):

Especially bees.

Sandy Bigtree ([34:12](#)):

And everyone shared in the forest in harvesting mushrooms and herbs. It was a much more interactive sense. And here, now we have national parks. You're not allowed to forage. It's just another wall that separates us from the natural world. I remember you talking about worry men, and then they transitioned later into something else. Maybe you could talk about those carvings.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([34:50](#)):

Yeah, so the worry man, so I have written a piece about Rūpintojėlis, the Worry Man. So they are sort of like the Pensive Christ or the Worried Jesus, and they pop up in Catholic countries. But I interpreted it mostly in Lithuanian context. And [inaudible 00:35:22] carvers, the carvers that used to make wooden sculptures probably before Christianity came to Lithuania, there was that tradition of carving, and my grandfather, he could make anything. Furniture. He carved, he made his own tools.

([35:44](#)):

So the woodcarving tradition is big in Lithuania, and with the introduction of religious art through Christianity and churches, the wood carving tradition merged with the church tradition. And wood carvers would start carving the sculptures of Jesus or Pensive Christ, and they call them in Lithuanian, Rūpintojėlis, which shares etymology with the verb rūpintis, which means to worry or to care about something. And so you have this worried Jesus sitting on a stump, and usually you find these carvings of Rūpintojėlis all around Lithuania, next to crosses that also are indigenized crosses with the symbolism of the sun and other pagan elements. The Rūpintojėlis can simply sit at a crossroads or in some natural

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area near the water. It's signifying a place of rest or a sacred place. That's a combination of syncretism of Catholicism and pre-Christian Baltic religion.

Sandy Bigtree ([37:30](#)):

Or is it? I mean, it reminded me of our visiting Mexico, and we would go to various sacred sites where the conquistadors leveled pyramids and used the rubble to build Christian church. And then I remember David Carrasco pointing out to us one of the murals on the ceiling one time, and the angels, local indigenous people were, I'm not sure they were hired, but they did the paintings on these ceilings. But they would always paint sandals on the angels to ground them to walking on the earth. Is this a way to just hold on to a thread of their beloved mother earth? And the same with what you're telling us now? I don't think it was a synchronization. I think it was more of survival and trying to retain what's held sacred in your life.

Philip P. Arnold ([38:30](#)):

Yeah, because weren't you connecting those carvings to some spiritual dimensions of the woods, right? Something-

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([38:39](#)):

Oh, yeah.

Philip P. Arnold ([38:39](#)):

Yeah.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([38:40](#)):

Yeah. So there are so many layers, and I'm glad you brought it up, Sandy. Yes, there is a layer of adapting and survival at some point because you were probably going to be killed if you didn't.

Sandy Bigtree ([38:57](#)):

Absolutely. Choice, it was [inaudible 00:39:00].

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([39:00](#)):

Or lose your frequent flyer miles. So it would come at some kind of a loss. So survival and adaptation to the power structures of the new regime. But so many layers of the spiritual dimensions of wood as material, spirituality of wood. That is one of my favorite topics to work with because souls of the dead, vėlės, were believed to inhabit trees or to reincarnate into trees. So wood is a sacred material imbued with the spirit, imbued with the souls of the dead in Baltic religion. So carving a figure of Christ or Jesus is definitely ironic. But these fall carvers, because they're not trained in the history of religions, that they don't question. And so hopefully something gets to them or this podcast or something in Lithuanian. People are a lot more informed now. And with the growth of Romuva and the so-called Pagan community or Baltic religious community in Lithuania, I think that a lot of things are changing.

Philip P. Arnold ([40:52](#)):

I wanted to ask or share with you our experience of being in Vilnius-

Sandy Bigtree ([40:59](#)):

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With you.

Philip P. Arnold ([40:59](#)):

With you showing us around, and then introducing us to the Romuva.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([40:59](#)):

Romuva.

Philip P. Arnold ([41:07](#)):

Yeah, talk about that. Talk about where we went. I can't remember the name of this little village that we spent time in. It was a conference slash event or something.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([41:21](#)):

I'll remind you. So it was in 2017. We went to an indigenous culture seminar in Open Air Museum in Rumsiskes, which is not too far from Vilnius because Lithuania is so small. And we drove a big American-style SUV, and Phil, you drove, and that was very brave of you.

Philip P. Arnold ([41:45](#)):

I don't remember that.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([41:51](#)):

This wasn't like Romuva community, but I think there were some people who sympathized with Baltic religion in the same group, and there were also Catholics in that group. So it was a mix. And there was some tensions because of that, because you can always upset some people by saying something. And I always upset some people by saying something. That's okay.

Philip P. Arnold ([42:23](#)):

Well, I remembered that we gave a presentation on the Doctrine of Discovery to that group, and they weren't too happy about that, really. It maybe had some consequences, but I mean, it was published eventually or something, I guess. I'm not sure.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([42:40](#)):

Well, there is a video. The video is published on Indigenous Culture YouTube channel, and it has a lot of use. So I feel that they were very receptive and curious.

Philip P. Arnold ([42:56](#)):

Some were, some weren't.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([42:57](#)):

And they really loved your presentation. I got nothing but very good feedback from your presentation from the local community. You were like esteemed guests there.

Philip P. Arnold ([43:12](#)):

Oh, yeah.

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Eglute Trinkauskaite ([43:12](#)):

And they really loved your presentation and they felt honored to have you there.

Sandy Bigtree ([43:20](#)):

Well, we were very nervous talking about the Doctrines of Discovery because it's new work, and it's really hard when you're critiquing Christianity and how it had this impact. So yeah, it was a new territory for all of us there. And there was some discomfort, but on the whole, people were very receptive and we just hope we made an impact.

Philip P. Arnold ([43:45](#)):

No, it was a lovely event. I mean, we had a terrific time. I want to go back, in fact.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([43:50](#)):

Yeah, we have to talk about that bathhouse experience.

Philip P. Arnold ([43:54](#)):

Oh yeah, the bathhouse. What an intense bathhouse. Yeah. Tell us about bathhouses.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([44:00](#)):

Yeah, so just for the audience, we have to refresh a little bit. So every time an indigenous culture seminar takes place in Lithuania, now not in Rumsiskes because there was a fire a couple of summers later, and now they're protecting the museum, and they usually go and do it at some ecotourism farmstead in another part of Lithuania. And I missed later events, but I look forward to coming back to that group.

([44:37](#)):

But part of the event is also going to the traditional bathhouse in the evening. It's like Finnish sauna or Russian banya. In farmsteads, there was no plumbing, so people did not have showers or baths. So actually my parents' generation was the first one to have a bathroom in their apartment when I was growing up. But when I would visit my maternal grandparents, there was no bathroom as a room in the farmstead building. But there was a separate structure that my grandfather built, and it was made out of red clay, and I love that building. And they would fire it up on weekends. And men would go first, and it was gendered, a ritual. And the women and children would go after because it wasn't as hot as the first time.

([45:45](#)):

And so now, not many people have access to families with traditional bathhouses. So you have to either go and buy it as a consumer. So what we experienced is more of a service that is offered to a consumer.

Philip P. Arnold ([46:07](#)):

But I also remember it having certain herbs. It was very specific. Herbs that we were brushed with.

Sandy Bigtree ([46:07](#)):

Branches.

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Philip P. Arnold ([46:22](#)):

Branches. There was water given at certain times, splashed with water. It was ceremonial in many ways.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([46:30](#)):

It was ceremonial, and it was such a beautiful ceremony-

Philip P. Arnold ([46:35](#)):

It was.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([46:35](#)):

... by two bathhouse professionals, which is a new profession. And they were just lovely presenters of these ceremonies. And so a little bit more about vantos, those tree branches, usually either birch or oak or some other tree branches put together into a little broom, and they usually do a exfoliation and they beat you with those tree branches. But they did all kinds of movements and motions that were very gentle. Well, they're very fragrant because those tree branches, you have leaves on them and they smell so good from trees. So we experienced a really full ceremony with many steps involved, with some salts...

Philip P. Arnold ([47:37](#)):

Right, salts, yeah. Rubbing salts on you.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([47:40](#)):

Rubbing salts. And we had several turns and then we dipped outside in the pond to wash off the salts.

Philip P. Arnold ([47:49](#)):

That was great.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([47:51](#)):

Making some mud. And it was super intense. We lasted through several cycles, and I remember that I also did a presentation at the American Academy of Religion and wrote a paper on it. I felt conflicted a little bit about some of the new age elements introduced into this bathing tradition. And I think I want to come back to that body of work because, as my friend and editor Ellen Cutler pointed out, is that it's probably the only way to save some of these traditions is to add some new age elements.

([48:34](#)):

And that brings us back to the beginning of our conversation about these categories, pagans and neopagans and new age, that today, currently groups like Romuva and the new Pagans or the practitioners of Baltic religion tradition in the present, they suffer from being tagged and from being signified by these inappropriate categories and terms used by outsiders to other and to dismiss non-Christian traditions, non-dominant traditions.

Philip P. Arnold ([49:20](#)):

They're not authentically religious then.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([49:23](#)):

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Exactly, because they don't fit the accustomed constitutional understanding of religion, which basically translates into Abrahamic traditions. In Lithuania, basically Christianity, the dominant religious tradition. So when Romuva asks for the official recognition from Lithuania, to be recognized so they would have the same as, which is the equivalent of Lithuanian... What is it? Yeah, I'll just call it same as Lithuanian, same as Congress. They deny the recognition because people in same as are not literate enough about what is an indigenous religion, what is a native religion. And so they're so deeply married to monotheism Christianity that they cannot accept any other religious expression, give it recognition.

Philip P. Arnold ([50:40](#)):

And you've also explained it in terms of a... After coming out of Soviet occupation, then Lithuania experienced a religious resurgence as a country, as a culture, which means that traditions that compete with this religious resurgence or renaissance in a way then become threatening, I suppose, to the current society. So I think that was helpful for us to understand as well.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([51:25](#)):

Yes. So after Lithuania's independence in 1991, I would say even, it started in late eighties with the Perestroika and the falling down of the Soviet Union, and Lithuania played the key role in that with Sajudis. So there was this cultural renewal, and with that, also religious renewal. And I'll talk more about this connection between Lithuanian nationalism and identity and Roman Catholicism in Syracuse next month when we have a conference on religious roots.

Philip P. Arnold ([52:10](#)):

Yeah, we don't have to talk about that now, but just to foreshadow.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([52:18](#)):

So when Lithuanians came back to the churches again, because they were not allowed to practice any religion under the Soviet occupation and suppression of religion, they did it with a vengeance. And because there was not enough education on religion in general, because anything about religion, including world religions, was not taught in schools, because you had atheism. We had military training, but we did not study anything about religion. That's why when I went to university here in the United States, I was very interested about learning about all kinds of religion because I was deprived of that growing up in Lithuania. So it was super interesting. Imagine all people experienced that, but they were only limited to Roman Catholicism and what the priest says in the church. Imagine that. Or they had faith classes in schools, but they only taught Roman Catholicism.

Philip P. Arnold ([53:34](#)):

Wow.

Sandy Bigtree ([53:36](#)):

Wow.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([53:37](#)):

But Phil, as you pointed out, there was all this competition coming through other channels, coming from Russia, new age stuff. I mean, they're so creative. Coming from India, coming from west, all kinds of new age religious traditions. When I was still in Lithuania, I went to somebody's home, the Hare Krishna

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people, they paraded through the streets, even under the Soviet regime. So now anything goes because it was from the closed market of one brother, the market all of a sudden opened up. It was free market, and any religious denomination, any spirituality flooded the post-Soviet terrain, which was deprived of religion and religious literacy too. It's an issue. So it's going to take time.

Philip P. Arnold ([54:40](#)):

Yeah, very interesting. It's just so fascinating, and I encourage all of our listeners to visit Vilnius-

Sandy Bigtree ([54:40](#)):

Oh, beautiful.

Philip P. Arnold ([54:49](#)):

... Lithuania.

Sandy Bigtree ([54:49](#)):

Beautiful country.

Philip P. Arnold ([54:51](#)):

A lovely town, and so much there. We just really touched on it. There's so much to talk about, but I think-

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([55:01](#)):

It was so fun visiting with you in Vilnius and Lithuania and walking the streets, and by the time our visit was over, you knew exactly how to get to places.

Philip P. Arnold ([55:14](#)):

Well, we knew our route. But it's been lovely to have you. Eglute, I think we'll conclude it there. But thanks so much for contributing to our podcast, and we'll look forward to seeing you soon.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([55:30](#)):

Thank you so much, both of you, really. It's been fun and a pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

Sandy Bigtree ([55:37](#)):

Take care.

Eglute Trinkauskaite ([55:38](#)):

Thank you.

Jordan Brady Loewen-Colon ([55:40](#)):

The producers of this podcast were Adam DJ Brett and Jordan Loewen-Colón. Our intro and outro is Social Dancing Music by Oris Edwards and Regis Cook. This podcast is funded in collaboration with the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University at Hendricks Chapel, and the Indigenous Values Initiative. If you like this episode, please check out our website and make sure to subscribe.

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