

William of Malmesbury's "Fortune" (Gesta Rerum Anglorum II 12) – An Attempt at a New Interpretation

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The article constitutes an attempt to interpret one of the newly discovered source texts concerning mediaeval Slavdom, which is William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of English Kings. The author analyzes a passage devoted to the cult of "Fortune" among the pagan Lutici tribes which is described in a fragment of the chapter 'De Henrico Imperatore' devoted to the allies of the empire. The fragment in question concerns the Veleti – the pagan allies of emperor Henry III in the years 1045–1055. On the basis of an analysis of the description of prophesies from the horn of the statue of Fortune, the author tries to justify a hypothesis that the presently missing German source of this fragment (dating back to the middle of the 11th c.) was based on a 15th book 'Diversarum hereseon liber' by Filastrius of Brixen, an early mediaeval author of the 4th/5th century, whereas the cult described by William of Malmesbury concerned a female goddess with uranic-pluvial connotations (whose proper name had been substituted in the Roman interpretation by "Fortune") in one of the cities of the northern Veleti.

Keywords: William of Malmesbury, medieval sources, Slavs, cronicle, Veleti, cult, Fortune

William's of Malmesbury (ca. 1090 – ca. 1143) Chronicle of the kings of England, one of the newly-discovered source texts concerning Medieval Slavdom, has recently become the subject of two different interpretations, whose authors are R. Zaroff and L. Ślupecki.¹ In this article, an attempt to re-interpret the passage about the cult of "Fortuna" among pagan Veleti, contained in the devoted to the allies of the Empire chapter on Emperor Henry the Third, was made.²

¹ L.P. Ślupecki, R. Zaroff, William of Malmesbury on Pagan Slavic Oracles: New Sources for Slavic Paganism and its two Interpretations, "Studia Mythologica Slavica", II, 1999, p. 9–20; L.P. Ślupecki, William z Malmesbury o wyroczniach słowiańskich, "Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis", No 2675, Historia CLXX, Wrocław 2004, p. 251–258;

² The passage on the Veleti's Fortuna is repeated after the Gesta by the chronicles such as Helinald, Alberik and others: *Helinaldi frigidi montis monachi guntheri cisterciensis Opera omnia. Chronicon*, Patrologiae cursus completus, Patrologiae tomus CCXII, ed. Migne, Paris 1855, p. 931; *Chronica Alberici Monachi Trium Fontium*, Monumenta Germaniae Historiae, Series Scriptores, 23, Leipzig 1925, p. 778; *R.P. Aloysi Novarini Veronensis, clerici regularis, Schediusmata sacro-prophaana: hoc et, observations*, LVGDVNI, M. DC. XXXV, p. 328; *Speculi maioris Vincentii Burgundi Praesulis Belvacensis, Ordinis Praedicatorum, Theologici doctoris eximii, tomus quartus*, Venetis MDXCI, p. 347; *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden monachi cestrensis*, London 1869, s. 282; *Johannis Capgrave Liber de Illustribus Henricus*, *Rerum Britannicarum mediaevi scriptores*, 7, ed. F. Ch. Hingeston, London 1858, p. 25; M. Frenkel, *Dissertationes historicae*

William of Malmesbury started to write *Gesta Rerum Anglorum* being the source of the passage on the religion of Polabian Slavs that interests us in the 20s of the 12th century. In his 2nd book, the chapter *De Henrico Imperatore* presents the Polabian tribes, called Vindelici and Veleti, which in the years 1045-1056 were the allies of Emperor Henry the Third (1039–1056). German source from the mid-eleventh-century, from the reign of Henry the Third, used by William in writing his chronicle is not known, but it is supposed that the tendentious coloring of the information contained therein, depicting the glory of the German ruler, not necessarily in line with the historical facts, has its source in this lost text:

Vindelici vero **Fortunam adorant**, cujus idolum loco nominatissimo ponentes, cornu dextrae illius componunt plenum potu illo quem [quod] Graeco vocabulo, ex aqua et melle, Hydromellum vocamus. [...] Unde ultimo die Novembris mensis, in circuitu sedentes, in commune praegustant; et si cornu plenum invenerint, magno strepitu applaudunt, quod eis futuro anno pleno copia cornu responsura sit in omnibus; si contra, gemunt.³

Although the text used by William was lost,⁴ a probable source used by the anonymous German author as a canvas for the description of "savage" customs of controversial allies of the emperor is known - this could have been an early Christian book *Diversarum hereseon liber* by Filastrius, where in the passage devoted to the heresies among the Jews the author mentions the heavenly goddess Tanit, the wife of Baal Hammon, "Queen of Heaven" worshiped by heretics (i.e. the followers of late syncretic cults) in North Africa. Female deity is called "Fortuna Caeli" here. The said source could have been a direct basis for the description of a deity worshiped in a Slavic Polabie, the Slavic name of which was replaced in the text with Latin theonym due to the strangeness and incomprehensibility of "barbaric" language:

Alia est haeresis in Iudaeis, quae Reginam i quam et **Fortunam** Caeli nuncupant <**adorant**>, quam et Caelestem vocant in Africa.⁵

This fragment of the book seems to be of great importance for the purposes of reading out the semantics and pragmatics of the William's text about Slavs, since in both cases we are dealing with the theological polemic against the views considered to be heresy – expressed directly in the book of Filastrius, whilst in the *Gesta's* source implied

tres de idolis slavorum, Scriptores rerum Lusaticum, ed. Ch. G. Hoffmannus, Lipsia & Budissa 1719, p. 113; Theodoricus Engelhusius, *Chronicon* T. II, Scriptores Rerum Brunsvicensium, ed. G. W. Leibnitz, Hanover 1707-1711, p. 1086. See also: J. Kollár, *Sláva bohyně a původ gměna Slawůw čili Slawjanůw*, W Pěsti 1839, p. 245 and A. Naruszewicz, *Historia narodu polskiego*, t. I, Lipsk 1836, p. 49. This source was therefore known in historiography long before R. Pettazzoni quoted it in his work on the margins of other deliberations, but, until recently, it was not included in the corpus of sources for the history of the Western Slavdom (it is not included in, among others, the F. Meyer's choice of sources).

³ *Willelmi Malmesburiensis Monachi Opera omnia*, Patrologia cursus completus: Series Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne, v. 179, Paris 1899.

⁴ It was probably a panegyric in honor of the emperor or an unknown German chronicle reporting profusely on current political events at the court of Henry the Third.

⁵ *Gnostica, Judaica, Catholica: collectaed essays of Giles Quispel*, ed. Johannes van Oort, Leiden and Boston 2008, p. 401.

in the ideological layer of the work. The difference boils down to the fact that the ancient source mentions “Iudaeis”, whilst the German anonymous author from the 11th century (Gesta’s source...) probably mentioned, in addition to “Vindelicos et Leuticos”, “Saraceni et Turchi” as negative examples of apostates from the one true faith (heretics). The pragmatic function of this passage of the William’s source on Veleti was to point out that the faith of the allies of the emperor was false and that they still remained - “as the only among currently living” tribes - in the darkness of false doctrines, as the author indeed stated that: “even Saracens and Turks worship God the Creator...”.

Another issue in the interpretation of which the cited passage proves to be extremely helpful is to determine the function of the female deity, referred to in both text as “Fortuna”, from Latin. While in the alleged ancient source the concept of the heavenly deity is expressed directly (*Caelesta* epithet), in the William’s description the relationship with heaven only becomes apparent through the semantic analysis of the divination performed at the shrine of “Fortuna”. Taking into account the meaning of magical operations described by him, “horn divination” turn out to be specific to pluvial or aquatic magic, related in primary cultures to the cults of uranic deities.⁶ The aim of Fortuna’s November Oracle is probably to ask the goddess what the next year’s crops will be like, however this was done by asking about water. Plenty of water meant heavy rain, little water – low rainfall and drought. Her followers probably believed that the goddess was “holding water”, and the signs revealed her bad or good will towards the tribe. This allows one to see in the Veleti’s “Fortuna” a rain and - indirectly – heavenly deity, functioning in the religious system of pagan Slavs.

The description by William of Malmesbury was probably referring to Veleti, not to Vindelici. It seems that the pagans described by the German anonymous author were the same pagans with whom Emperor Henry concluded a nearly ten-year alliance, namely the federation of tribes called the Veleti Union rather than Vindelici (i.e. Rani), with whom the Emperor had no political contacts and who are not even mentioned in the chronicle. One should also stand against locating the description of pagan oracle in Radogoszcz - a “spiritual capital” of the Veleti Union, which housed the main sanctuary with Swarżyc’s temple surrounded by other gods and goddesses. The most important argument against the location of “Fortuna” in Radogoszcz is associated with the specificity of the main sanctuary of the Veleti Union, whose characteristics that can be found in the historical sources contradict such a hypothesis. A center in Radogoszcz was, in the light of recent studies, a cult’s gord isolated from society, located in an inaccessible area, “military” specialized and limited in its cult’s functions. It was not suitable for holding multi-tribal rallies, in contrast to the center of the cult of “Fortuna” – an urban gord with the Arkona-type temple, whose care could be extended to the sphere of agricultural economy, in which agricultural in nature harvest rites could had been held.⁷ The temple of “Fortuna” could have represented the same type of sanctuary as the temple of “Diana” in Magdeburg.⁸ In addition to being a female deity, the similarities between “Diana” and

⁶ K. Mikoś, *Boginie deszczu. Studium porównawcze*, Kraków 1997. See also: K. Mikoś, *Naczynie Paraskiewy/ Piatnicy. W poszukiwaniu pluwialnego symbolu słowiańskiej bogini deszczu*, “Nomos”, No 78 (2012), p. 92–121.

⁷ S. Rosik, *Interpretacja chrześcijańska religii pogańskich Słowian w świetle kronik niemieckich XI–XII wieku (Thietmar, Adam z Bremy, Helmond)*, Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Historia 144, Wrocław 2000, p. 117–118, 127, 129, 201.

⁸ Mentioned in *Annales Magdeburgenses*: C. H. Meyer, Fontes Historiae Religionis Slavicae, Berolini 1931, p. 57.

Veleti's "Fortuna" include topographical conditions: location in an urban town made it possible for the sanctuary to satisfy economic needs in the ideological sphere, associated with, for example, the agricultural economy.

The fact that both sanctuaries were founded in the little-tribal territory, in the direct proximity to the inhabited areas, suggests that these can be "sister" centers. Magdeburg – a port city by the Elbe River – could have been suitable for the center of aquatic cults due to cultural and spatial reasons (like coastal Arkona), which corresponds to the pluvial nature of the deity described by the German anonymous author.

Are there any data today which would allow us to locate the said center, beside the information on the nature of urban nature and location within the territory of the Veleti Union? It seems that it had to be an important town, associated with political rather than strictly religious power, as indicated by the pragmatics of the text, functioning in the sphere of political relations (which could have interested the biographer of Henry the Third), and not religious (which interested Thietmar, Helmond and Adam of Bremen, who were writing about Veleti only in the context of Christian missions). Perhaps this was the second, alternative decision-making center of the tribal union, based on the institution of the rally and the princely power, that the researches suppose it had once existed on the basis of the later split of the federation after 1056. This would be justified by a long-lasting and trouble-free coexistence of the sanctuary far from theocratic ambition prevailing in the center in which the political power is exercised by prince and the rally – in Dymin or another major center within the territory of Circipania and Kessinians. It has not been mentioned in sources, since pragmatic factors of the written sources led to the situation in which the church chroniclers did not record any centers of Veleti beside the religious ones, and the only source that could have contained more comprehensive information about the political realities, namely the William's of Malmesbury source, is cited by him only fragmentary. Perhaps, however, it should be linked to one of the smaller North Veleti towns, such as the temple in Malchow by Müritz Lake, destroyed in 1147, or "fanum" of Kessinians and Circipania in Chyżyn, existing until 1151.⁹

The location of the cult of "Fortuna" is clearly different than it was presented by Zaroff and Słupecki. It seems unlikely that this could have been any other town within the territory of Redariers or Tollenses other than Radogoszcz, since the "Gesta's" German source writes about it in the political context, which indicates a center competitive against Radogoszcz, most probably located in the north of the Veleti Union territory. Unlike suggested by L.P. Słupecki, also the function of the said Veleti's "Fortuna" should be considered as aquatic and rainy (linked closely to the needs of the agricultural society) than chthonic (in this way Słupecki takes into account the least important aspect of the "agrarian" rituals associated with the worship of this deity).

The mention of the worship of the pluvial female deity allows one to restore an undoubtedly important trait of the Old-Polabian mythological system, namely the existence in the pantheon of deities of male and female deity doublet taking care of rain and abundance. Convergent descriptions of divinations, the similarity of artistic representations and – as it can be guessed – identical functions of Svetovit and "Fortuna" testify to the fact that this couple represented in the mythological plan a complementary duet of

⁹ L.P. Słupecki, *Słowiańskie posągi bóstw*, "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej", 1993, No 1, p. 38; S. Rosik, op. cit., p. 279–280.

“guardians” and custodians of water resources, whose powers were not limited to atmospheric phenomena, but were extended also to abundance and plant vegetation. While in the case of the male deity (Svetovit) we can guess that it was the well-known figure of the Storm God (Perun), “Fortuna” has not so far been convincingly linked to any of the known Slavic goddesses.

The issue of identifying the female deity described by William of Malmesbury with any documented figure from the pantheon of pagan Slavs remains open. However, pluvial powers of Mokoš seen in the light of recent research on the linguistic and cultural reconstruction of the image of this goddess, in conjunction with probable traces of her worship in the Old Polabian toponymy,¹⁰ allows one to link not mentioned by name Slavic deity with the aforementioned figure. This would result from the fact that the deity’s name, which in the William’s of Malmesbury source was replaced by the theonym of Latin *Fortuna*, was the Old Polabian name **Mokošb* (preserved in local names). Her “unpleasant” to the ear, barbaric-sounding name was then replaced in the German text with classical counterpart by association with the Roman *Fortuna*, which occurred as a result of reading Filastrius and other early Christian authors from the fourth century.¹¹

At the end, it is worth to mention the issue of knowledge of the William’s text in the earlier historiographical tradition. The omission of “Gesta” (as well as some other source texts) by F. Meyer and ignorance of the earlier works by contemporary historians gives the impression of “discovery” of this source and bringing it back for the Slavic studies. It is a false impression, since what happened here was the elimination of marginal – at first glance – source texts and information from the scientific discourse. Later researchers generally did not tend to come back to them, since they were influenced by the most accessible choice of sources and did not attempt to make their own library inquiries. The proof that such inquiries are, however, necessary is “rediscovery” of the chronicle by William of Malmesbury for the studies of the religion of the Slavs.

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¹⁰ T. Witkowski, *Perun und Mokoš in altpolabischen Ortsnamen*, “Onomastica”, XVI, 1971.

¹¹ For example Prudentius and Ammianus Marcellinus: “Formatum Fortune habitum cum divite cornu, sacratumque domi lapidem consistere parvus spectarat, matremque illic pallere paecantem” (*Aurelii prudentii Clementis V. in lib. Contra Symmachum, Praefectum urbis*, Magna bibliotheca veterum patrum et antiquorum scriptorum ecclesiasticorum, T. VII, (ed.) Marguerin de La Bigne, Parisiis M. DC. LIIII, p. 543); “mundanam cornucopiam Fortuna questans” (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Contra fortuna quae memoratur*, XXII. 9. In: Mauricii Hauptii Opuscula, ed. U. von Wilamowitz, Moellendorf 1875, p. 497).

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“Fortuna” Williama z Malmesbury (*Gesta Rerum Anglorum* II 12) – próba nowej interpretacji

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Artykuł zawiera próbę interpretacji jednego z na nowo odkrytych tekstów źródłowych dotyczących średniowiecznej Słowiańszczyzny, jakim jest Kronika królów angielskich Williama z Malmesbury. Autor analizuje passus na temat kultu “Fortuny” u pogańskich Luciców, zawarty w poświęconym sojusznikom cesarstwa fragmencie rozdziału De Henrico Imperatore. Dotyczy on Wioletów – pogańskich sojuszników cesarza Henryka III w latach 1045–1055. W oparciu o analizę opisu wróżb z rogu posągu Fortuny autor uzasadnia tezę, że zaginione obecnie źródło niemieckie tego fragmentu (z połowy XI w.) opierało się na XV księdze *Diversarum hereseon liber* Filastriusa z Brixen, wczesnośredniowiecznego pisarza z IV/V w., a rytuał opisany przez Williama z Malmesbury dotyczył kultu bóstwa żeńskiego o konotacjach uraniczno-pluwialnych (którego właściwe imię zostało zastąpione interpretatio Romana “Fortuna”) w którymś z ośrodków miejskich północnych Wioletów.