

# Romuva (religion)

**Romuva** is a **modern revival** of the **religious practices** of the **Lithuanians** before their **Christianization** in 1387. Practitioners of Romuva claim to continue living **Baltic pagan** traditions which survived in folklore and customs.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup> Romuva is a **polytheistic** pagan faith which asserts the sanctity of nature and **ancestor worship**. Practicing the Romuva faith is seen by many adherents as a form of cultural pride, along with celebrating traditional forms of art, retelling Baltic folklore, practising traditional holidays, playing traditional Baltic music, singing traditional ***dainos*** and songs as well as ecological activism and stewarding sacred places.<sup>[4]</sup>

Romuva primarily exists in Lithuania but there are also congregations of adherents in **Australia**, **Canada**, **Russia**, the **United States**,<sup>[5]</sup> and **England**.<sup>[6][7][8]</sup> There are also Romuviai in **Norway**, for whom a formal congregation is being organized.<sup>[9]</sup> There are **believers of Baltic pagan faiths** in other nations, including **Dievturība** in Latvia.<sup>[10]</sup> According to the **2001 census**, there were approximately 1,200 people in Lithuania identifying with Romuva. That number jumped to around 5,100 in the 2011 census.<sup>[11]</sup>

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## Romuva



Flag of the Romuva religion

High priestess ( <i>krivė</i> )	<u>Inija Trinkūnienė</u> (2015-present)
Founder	<u>Vydūnas</u>
Origin	20th century
Members	~5,100 (2011)
Official website	<u>romuva.lt</u> ( <u>http://romuva.lt/</u> )
based on pre-1387 Lithuanian paganism	

See also

Notes

References

Further reading

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## Etymology

The terms *Romuva*, *Romovė* and *Ruomuva* came from medieval written sources in East Prussia mentioning the pagan Baltic temple **Romowe**.<sup>[12]</sup> The word has meanings of "temple" and "sanctuary", but, further, also "abode of inner peace".<sup>[13]</sup> The Baltic root *ram-/rām-*, from which *Romuva* derives,<sup>[14]</sup> has the meaning of 'calm, serene, quiet', stemming from the Proto-Indo-European *\*(e)remā-*.<sup>[15]</sup>

## History

### Ancient and medieval Lithuanian faith

Whatever religion the original inhabitants of the Baltic region had predates recorded history.<sup>[16]</sup> Mesolithic hunters, gatherers and anglers of the region practised a religion focused on their occupations. Marija Gimbutas controversially suggested that agrarian settlers of around 3500–2500 BCE were examples of earth-worshipping **Old Europeans**. After this, Indo-Europeans entered the area and brought with them their Proto-Indo-European religion. This religion, including elements from the religious past of the region, evolved into the paganism which is attested in the Middle Ages and later.<sup>[16]</sup>

The adherents of this Baltic religion prospered relatively unhindered until the 9th century when they began to come under pressure from outside Christian forces.<sup>[17]</sup> The Annals of Quedlinburg mention a missionary, Bruno of Querfurt, who was killed along with 18 men by Yotvingians while attempting to convert the pagans in the area of Lithuania and Prussia in 1009 CE.<sup>[18]</sup> This was the first time the **name of Lithuania** was mentioned in written sources.<sup>[19]</sup> Other sources suggest Bruno had been killed for violating The Holy Forest and destroying statues of gods.<sup>[20]</sup>



A pattern of the world tree, Austras koks, also commonly used as a symbol of Romuva.



Romuva ceremony

Beginning in 1199, the Roman Catholic Church declared crusades against Baltic pagans.<sup>[17]</sup> Grand Duke Mindaugas was Christianized with his family and warriors in 1251 so that the Crusades might be ended by the Church.<sup>[21]</sup> But Mindaugas still worshiped pagan deities as the Hypatian chronicle mentions. He sacrificed to the pagan Supreme god (\*Andajus, later Dievas), Perkūnas, Teliavelis (god of smiths), and \*Žvorūna (goddess of forests and hunters). Despite any insincerity and realpolitik in his Christian faith, some subsidiary states of Mindaugas' Grand Duchy rebelled in protest. In 1261 Mindaugas renounced his Christian faith as his official conversion failed to placate the Crusaders.<sup>[22]</sup>



Romuva ceremony

Even in the face of Crusaders, by the time of Grand Duke Gediminas, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania expanded its influence until it formed the political centre of a vast and prosperous "pagan Empire".<sup>[23]</sup> Lithuanians thus survived late into history as appreciable representatives of ancient European paganism, preserving this tradition as the official, state religion until the late 14th and early 15th centuries when Christianity was finally accepted by the states of the Grand Duchy, again for political reasons.<sup>[24]</sup> Lithuanians were thus the last non-nomadic people in Europe practicing a European ethnic religion.<sup>[17][25]</sup> Unofficially, Lithuanians continued in their adherence to traditional paganism.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Revival

The Romantic epoch started in the 19th century. This led Lithuanians to look back to their past for both intellectual and spiritual inspiration. The national revival started and Lithuanian intelligentsia idealised ancient paganism and folklore.<sup>[26]</sup> Some historians wanted to prove the beauty of ancient polytheism and even started creating new aspects of Lithuanian mythology. One of the most famous of these was Theodor Narbutt who edited Ancient Greek myths and created new Lithuanian ones.<sup>[27]</sup>

In the beginning of the 20th century, ancient pagan traditions were still continued in folklore and customs.<sup>[28][29]</sup> People were celebrating ancient pagan festivals mixed with Christian traditions.<sup>[30][31]</sup> Such festivals include Vėlinės (day of dead souls, common with Celtic Halloween), Užgavėnės (festival when winter ends and spring begins), and Rasa or Joninės.<sup>[30][32]</sup> For Užgavėnės, people in Samogitia may dress in costumes including masks and burn an idol of an old lady, called More or Giltinė, goddess of death.

## Modern folk religion

The philosopher Vydūnas is taken as a sort of founding father of Romuva.<sup>[33]</sup> He actively promoted awareness of and participation in pagan festivals.<sup>[33]</sup> Vydūnas saw Christianity as foreign to Lithuanians, and instead he brought his attention to what he saw as the spiritual vision of the adherents of the traditional Baltic religion. He ascribed to this a sense of awe in their cosmology, as they saw the universe as a great mystery, and respect for every living being as well as the earth in their morality, as they saw the whole world and every individual as a symbol of life as a whole.<sup>[34]</sup> The Divine was represented by fire, which was as such used ritually to worship the divine and

itself held sacred. Vydūnas had given special treatment to this religion of the Lithuanians in his drama *Amžina ugnis* (*An Eternal Flame*). Among this and other works, Vydūnas exalted the faith as being on the highest level of spiritual expression, along with other forms which he recognized.<sup>[35]</sup>

Domas Šidlauskas-Visuomis (1878–1944) began to create Vaidevutybė (Baltic paganism) in 1911. In the 1920s the Latvian **folk religion** movement **Dievturība** was started by **Ernests Brastiņš**. The main problem was that the first movements were based on limited folklore sources and influenced by Far Eastern traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Even so, the idea of Romuva did not die during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania.

## Soviet suppression

The Lithuanian pagan movement was stopped by **Soviet occupation in 1940**. Due to the nationalist nature of Romuva, the faith was suppressed during the Soviet occupation and many practitioners were executed or deported to forced labor camps in Siberia. After Joseph Stalin's death the cultural life became more free.

A clandestine Romuva group is known to have existed within a labor camp in **Inta**, Russia. After the members were released and returned to Lithuania around 1960, some of these practitioners, along with Jonas Trinkūnas, formed the *Vilnius Ethnological Romuva* and began organizing public celebrations of traditional Lithuanian religious holidays, starting with Rasa in 1967. In 1971 the Soviets expelled the members from the university they attended and exiled the leaders.<sup>[36]</sup> By 1988, when the power of the Soviet Union was waning and Lithuanian independence was on the horizon, Romuva groups began reorganizing in the Baltic nations and practising their religion in the open.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Independence

Romuva was recognised as an Ancient Baltic faith community in 1992 after independence in 1990. Under the auspices of the *Law on Religious Communities and Associations* which was passed in Lithuania in 1995, Romuva gained recognition as a "non-traditional" religion. Lithuanian law requires a minimum of 25 years of existence before such a religion can receive the state support reserved for "traditional" religions. In 1990, Trinkūnas created Kūlgrinda, a band that performs in many Romuva festivals.

The community was organized and led by *krivių krivaitis* (high priest) Jonas Trinkūnas until his death in 2014. He was buried according to the old Baltic traditions.<sup>[37]</sup> His wife Inija Trinkūnienė was chosen as the new *krivė* (high priest) and her ordination was held on 31 May 2015, in Vilnius on the Gediminas Hill. She is the first woman to become *krivė* in the long pagan history.<sup>[38]</sup>



A Romuva procession led by Jonas Vaiškūnas in 2009.

On 24 May 2018, Seimas passed a proposal in the first reading for granting state recognition to Romuva and began discussing it in the parliamentary committees.<sup>[39]</sup>

## Religious practices

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The Baltic *aukuras* or "**fire altar**" is a stone altar in which a fire is ritually lit. Participants wash their hands and face before approaching the aukuras, and then they sing *dainos* or ritual hymns as the fire is lit. Food, drink, grasses and flowers are offered to the flame as the group sings the *dainas*. After the primary offering, participants offer their own verbal or silent prayers which are carried to the Gods with the smoke and sparks of the flame.

A Romuva priest is known as a *vaidila* (plural *vaidilos*), and a Romuva priestess is known as a *vaidilutė* (plural *vaidilutės*). As a recognised figure of authority in his or her community, the priest must have the proper skills and knowledge he or she needs to conduct religious ceremonies to honour the Gods.

A Romuva shrine is a field with one or several idols in front of a sacred fire where sacrifices are burned, known as an *alka*.



Fire altar or aukuras

## Romuva centres

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Samogitian Sanctuary was originally planned to be rebuilt on Birutė hill in Palanga but was not agreed to by the mayor of Palanga. Instead, it was built on a hill near Šventoji which also has 11 sculptures of pagan gods. There are four main festivals in a year:

- 23 March - Vernal equinox
- 22 June - Summer solstice
- 23 September - Autumnal equinox
- 20 December - Winter solstice



Samogitian Sanctuary

## Relation with Hinduism

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The Romuva religion shares similarities with Hinduism. For example, in Lithuanian, the word *darna* means harmony and coherence, and for Lithuanian pagans, that is a religious tenet as well – the balance of the world. It also superficially resembles the word **dharma**, **Hinduism's cosmic order**. The linguistic similarity between *darna* and *dharma* is likely a coincidence – scholars say the two do not necessarily share an etymology. But for Lithuania's Romuva community, which traces its traditions back to ancient folklore, it is evidence



of a connection to India, Hinduism and **Sanskrit** that has become a part of their Romuva identity, along with its pantheon of gods and fairly standard pagan rituals. Some believe that the connection between Hinduism and Romuva made Romuva to be more than a "primitive, shamanic religious tradition".<sup>[40]</sup>

**Jonas Trinkūnas**, a leading founder and priest of modern-day Romuva, performed marriages in the same manner as Hindu Vedic weddings. Mantras and chants were recited and the couple took vows after doing rounds of the fire.<sup>[41]</sup>

**Jonas Trinkūnas**, further claims that **Rajputs** were the ancestors of a Romuva tribe that once ruled Lithuania for many years and some of their ancient practices are practiced today.<sup>[42]</sup>

Similar to the '**posh bada**' ceremony in **Rajputana**, the tribe celebrates a 'posh jimo' ceremony in Lithuania. Names of some deities are similar in both cultures. The Romuva worships Lord Kalki, and the images of the god inscribed on their coins bear similarity to the Indian iconography.<sup>[43]</sup>

Mathur the co-founder of 'The Friends of India Society' at the **University of Vilnius**, claims Lithuania uses "jami mate" to refer to mother Earth similar to Indian word "Jamin Mata" meaning mother earth, both use **Swastika** Iconography.

Mathur further claims "They have collection of nearly 50,000 songs which they sing but don't understand their exact meaning. Interestingly, these songs trace their origin to Rajasthan and are a matter of study. They even used these songs to unite the country against the Soviet rule,"<sup>[44]</sup>

In **Vedic Hinduism**, **Ashvins** are two twin gods who are represented as pulling the chariot of the **Surya** (the sun god).<sup>[45]</sup>

Similarly Ašvieniai are **divine twins** in the **Lithuanian mythology**, counterparts of **Vedic Ashvins**. The **Ašvieniai** are represented as pulling a carriage of **Saulė** (the Sun) through the sky.<sup>[46]</sup> Ašvieniai, depicted as *žirgeliai* or little horses, are common motifs on Lithuanian rooftops,<sup>[46]</sup>

## Interfaith relations

Romuva and Hindu groups have come together on numerous occasions to share prayers and participate in dialogue. These events have taken place in Lithuania,<sup>[47]</sup> Atlantic City, New Jersey,<sup>[48]</sup> Boston, Massachusetts,<sup>[22]</sup> Epping, New Hampshire,<sup>[22]</sup> and elsewhere.



Similarities between Romuva flag (left) and Hindu Sauwastika symbol (right)

## See also

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### Historical background

- [Baltic neopaganism](#)
- [Lithuanian mythology](#)
- [List of Lithuanian gods](#)

### Other Neopagan movements

- [Dievturība](#) - Latvian
- [Rodnover](#) - Slavic
- [European Congress of Ethnic Religions](#)

## Notes

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1. Dundzila (2007), pp. 279, 296-298.
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A Hindu priest officiating a Romuva ritual

19. Clark (2004), p. 196
20. Alfredas Bumblauskas, "Lietuvos tūkstantmetis" ([http://www.lietuvai1000.lt/nuorodos\\_pdf/Bumblauskas%20Lietuvos%20tukstantmetis.pdf](http://www.lietuvai1000.lt/nuorodos_pdf/Bumblauskas%20Lietuvos%20tukstantmetis.pdf)).
21. Dundzila (2007), pp. 287-288.
22. Dundzila (2007), p. 288.
23. Dundzila & Strmiska (2005), p. 242.
24. Dundzila (2004), p. 290.
25. Waldman & Mason (2006), p. 492.
26. Dundzila & Strmiska (2005), p. 244.
27. Barr (2010), p. 179.
28. Dundzila (2007), pp. 279 & 292.
29. Dundzila & Strmiska (2005), pp. 245-246 & 258.
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31. Dundzila & Strmiska (2005), pp. 258-270.
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35. Bagdonavicius (2000), p. 96.
36. For most of the claims in this paragraph thus far, see Dundzila (2007), p. 293. For Trikūnas' involvement with Ramuva, see Dundzila & Strmiska (2005), p. 246.
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## External links

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- Web site of Romuva (<http://www.romuva.lt/>) (in Lithuanian)
- World congress of Ethnic Religions: Romuva (<https://web.archive.org/web/20071222004636/http://www.wcer.org/members/europe/lithuania/index.htm>)
- Romuva (religion) ([https://curlie.org/Society/Religion\\_and\\_Spirituality/Pagan/Romuva/](https://curlie.org/Society/Religion_and_Spirituality/Pagan/Romuva/)) at Curlie

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