

THE MYTHICAL FLIGHT PATHS OF LAKE SAUKA

JURIS URTĀNS

Abstract

Lake Sauka is the largest lake in the district of Augšzeme in Latvia. It features very often in tales and legends, which mostly relate the story of its flight and its settling down in its present location. The nearest place from where it might have flown is approximately 30 kilometres away, but the most distant place is about 70 kilometres away. The places of origin, flight routes and conditions of settling down mentioned in numerous tales, when confronted with modern knowledge about the layout of archaeological sites, allow us to see yet unknown connections between the mythical world reflected in tales, and the real world represented by the relief and by archaeological sites.

Key words: Lake Sauka, folklore, mythical flights, archaeological sites.

Lake Sauka is located in the south of Latvia, in a region called Augšzeme, or Sēlija. It is the largest lake in Augšzeme (Plate III, Fig. 1). It covers an area of 7.5 square kilometres, and is 6.2 kilometres long, 1.5 kilometres wide, and 9.5 metres at its deepest point. Although the lake is not overgrown, its shores are reedy. The area is hilly and picturesque. Today, the shores of the lake are quite densely populated. There is a fairly large number of known archaeological sites on the shores of the lake, although since there has not been a complete archaeological survey of the shores, some unknown archaeological sites could still exist there, probably occupation layers of ancient settlements. The best-known archaeological sites on the very edge of the lake are the Sauka hill-fort and its probable cult hill (for further information about Sauka hill-fort, see Urtāns 2006, p.48ff), the ancient burial ground at Bridāgi, the Medieval cemetery in Sauka by the Plūmes homestead, and the Medieval cemetery by Bincāni. Slightly further away from the lake there are some more archaeologically important places: an ancient burial site by the Sauka rectory, a Medieval cemetery by Ormaņkalns, Lones Medieval cemetery, and others.

Lake Sauka is often mentioned in legends, it is the most frequently mentioned location in the Augšzeme area (Vīksna 2006, p.184). At present, we have more than 70 folk tales concerning the lake, and many legends about it have been published (Šmits 1937, p.421ff; Ancelāne 1988, pp.77-78; 1991, pp.142-143, 271ff; 1995, p.98; Vītola 2008, p.210ff). It is well known that not all versions of the legends have been collected; the number of tales available, however, is large enough for them to be considered adequately representative. While it should be noted that Lake Varieši or Silabebri at Ungurmuiža on the opposite side of the River Daugava is also sometimes called Sauka Swamp and Lake, and

it is not always possible to discern precisely to which of these lakes the local legends refer, generally Lake Sauka or Silabebri at Ungurmuiža is associated with a comparatively smaller number of folkloric texts.

Local legends about Lake Sauka mostly tell of the lake flying and landing in its current location. From a mythical point of view, the flight of a lake and the subsequent choice of landing place is an understandable phenomenon. An analysis of tales about Lake Sauka flying seems interesting, with the emphasis on the flight path of the lake. This analysis becomes even more unique when aerial reconnaissance of the lakes of Augšzeme associated with cultural history is undertaken, which to a large degree follows the same paths along which the mythical flight of Lake Sauka occurred.

Local legends referring to the flight of Lake Sauka can be divided into a number of thematic groups, which partly repeat themselves and overlap. The mythical flight of the lake is described by the following themes within the associated folkloric texts:

- the reasons why Lake Sauka flew
- the places from where Lake Sauka arose and flew
- how Lake Sauka flew
- how Lake Sauka found its current location
- what Lake Sauka covered when landing in its new location
- the relationship between Lake Sauka and neighbouring lakes.

From the point of view of this analysis, in which local legends refer to the topography and/or real places in the cultural landscape, the original location of the lake should be determined, which is usually indicated fairly precisely in the local legends: the flight path of the lake, the current location of the lake, where it landed and where it submerged real places, and other lakes and places which have been named in relation to the

flight of the lake. With this approach, it is possible, through aerial reconnaissance, to check and view in reality what is included in the local legends.

Although there are many different local legends about the locations from which Lake Sauka has flown, the main flight path of the lake can be identified. This direction is related to north-northeast.

The closest place to Lake Sauka from which it could have flown (Fig. 2), and which is the most heavily represented in folkloric texts (13 texts), is the Strubenči swamp in the Sēlpils area, which is located approximately 30 kilometres from Lake Sauka (Plate III, Fig. 3). On contemporary maps, this swamp is called Alināni swamp or moor (for a wider overview of Sēlpils area place names and their origins, see Avotiņa 2003). There are many archaeological sites around the Strubenči swamp, of which the most significant are the Ilenāni ancient burial ground and the Jumprava hill at Ilenāni on the northwest side of the Strubenči swamp, a number of archaeological sites at Alināni on the northern side of the swamp, the many archaeological sites to the northeast of the Strubenči swamp by Lake Baltiņi (the Baltiņi ancient burial ground, Baltiņi health spring, a number of Devil's stones, Baltiņi settlements I and II, an unlocated footmark stone, and others), and archaeological sites to the south of the Strubenči swamp by Arbidāni, Zaķēni and Aizporāni. In one tale, it is claimed that the Strubenči swamp is similar to Lake Sauka: 'In the Pikstere area there is a place where Lake Sauka used to be located. There is a valley which is seven miles long and three miles wide, with the same island and the same stream flowing out of it: there are the same horns and bays as Lake Sauka has today' (*Piksteres pagastā ir tāda vieta, kur agrāk bijis Saukas ezers. Ir izmērīta 7 verstis gara un 3 verstis plata ieleja, tāda pat sala un tāda pati upīte iztek*) (LFK 119, 404). It must be said that this observation does not conform to reality, and also that some uncertainty appears in the local legend in the form of the word *esot* (in the original Latvian), which could be an indication that the storyteller himself is not convinced of the tale. In another tale, it is said that while Lake Sauka was flying to its new location, a number of pieces fell off, which today form Lake Paslavītis, Lake Ceplītis and, the biggest piece, Lake Pikstere (LFK 914, 937). It should be noted that all of these lakes are located on an approximate line which connects Strubenči swamp with Lake Sauka. While Lake Sauka was taking off from the Strubenči swamp, one piece broke off, which continued to be called Ninītis, a former name for Lake Sauka. In other tales, Ninītis is described as a pool in a marsh. A lake with this name does not appear on contemporary maps in the Strubenča swamp, or anywhere in the vicinity.

The second most popular theory for the place from which Lake Sauka began its flight to its current location is the Gnēvja swamp (five tales), which is listed on contemporary maps as Gņevis, and is located north-west of Stukmaņi. This place is over 40 kilometres from Lake Sauka (Fig. 2).

The furthest place indicated by tales from which Lake Sauka flew is Piķapurvs, which is located in the Sausnēja area of the Madona region. Two different local legends have been recorded relating to this area, but the context suggests that there were more tales, meaning that they were fairly widespread. Today, Piķapurvs is a largish swampy forest (Plate IV, Fig. 4). Significantly, it is related to other tales about a bloody battle which, due to a mistake, occurred between friendly forces, and the blood which flowed into the lake, this being the reason why the lake flew away. This tale can also be related to real archaeological objects, because Krievu Island at Piķapurvs is the site of a barrow burial field from the Early and Middle Iron Age (Moora 1929, p.129 (No. 152); LA, p.339). Krievu Island is a raised sandy area, just under a kilometre long, surrounded by swampy ground (Avotiņa 1999, p.192). Over time, the barrows have been largely destroyed; however, today three mounds around 20 metres wide and one metre high have been preserved, and these are significant features of the local cultural historical landscape. Perhaps the people who knew tales about the origins of Lake Sauka from Sausnēja Piķapurvs had some connection with or knowledge of this place? It should be noted that in the tale about the origins of Lake Sauka, it is mentioned

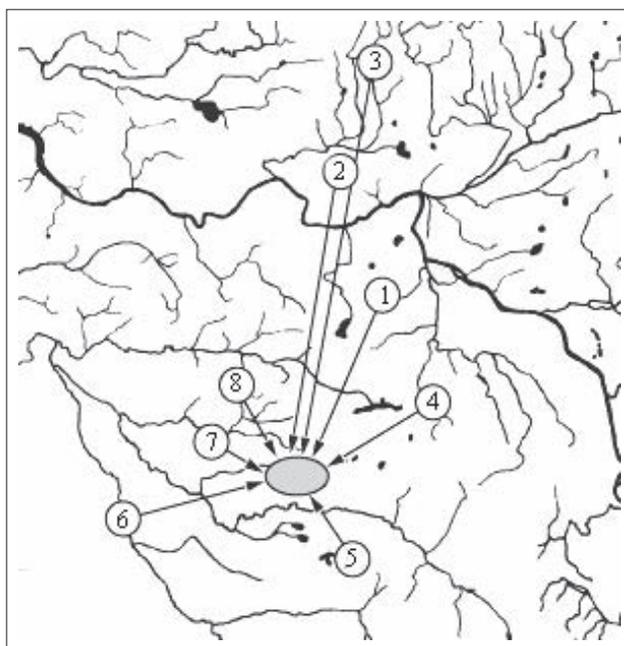


Fig. 2. The flight paths of Lake Sauka: 1 the Strubenči swamp; 2 the Gnēvja swamp; 3 the Piķapurvs swamp; 4 Lake Lelītis; 5 Lake Dumbļis; 6 the Mēmele area; 7 the Krievu kakts swamp; 8 the Lielzalve area.

that at Piķapurvs there was a lake 'which became flooded with blood during a large battle' (*kas kādā lielā kaujā aizmilzis ar asinīm*) (LFK 1674, 372). A number of versions suggest that Lake Sauka originates from a 'Krievu corner', although this indication is not certain (Lerhis-Puškaitis 1903, p.1305; Ancelāne 1988, pp.313-314). We might consider, though we cannot prove it, that the 'Krievu corner' in one version could be understood to be Krievu Island at Piķapurvs, which is tempting in order to increase the amount of tales that are related to the origins of Lake Sauka from Piķapurvs, although in the tales Krievu corner is said to be located west of Lake Sauka.

It should be remembered that Sausnēja Piķapurvs is quite a distance, some 70 kilometres, from Lake Sauka. The wide River Daugava flows between these places as well (and also between Gnēvja and Lake Sauka), which at the possible time of the appearance of the tales in the 18th to the 20th centuries was the border of Imperial Russia, and earlier the Daugava was the border between the Duchy of Courland and Swedish-ruled Vidzeme. Both linguistic and archaeological research indicate that the area in which Sausnēja Piķapurvs is now located, the southern slopes of the Vidzeme highlands, could have been ethnically connected with the Selonians since the Early Iron Age (Vilcāne 2001, p.63ff; Breidaks 2006, pp.542-543). If we are trying to find some correlation here, then these could relate to much earlier eras.

All three of the most popular places of origin of Lake Sauka are loosely located on a north-northeast axis (Fig. 2). Also, the number of recorded folkloric tales declines proportionally with the distance from Lake Sauka (the Strubenči swamp 13 tales, Gnēvja five tales, Piķapurvs two). The fact that more than one local legend has been recorded in distant places indicates that these tales are not anomalies. It is also significant that all three places mentioned are located on one axis, although we cannot know if in the mythological world the lake flew in a straight path, or whether during the flight it could have deviated. At the moment, no tales have been found which simultaneously mention two or three places of origin for Lake Sauka: each one indicates only one place of origin for the lake.

The other places of origin of Lake Sauka are mentioned only once in individual tales (the heart of the Mēmeles area, Lake Elkšņu Dumbļa, the Lielzalne area, the Krievu kakts swamp to the west of Lake Sauka, and an unspecified place, probably Lake Lelītis, to the east of Lake Sauka).

The landing place of the lake or the current location of Lake Sauka has a very detailed description in local legends. Lake Sauka lands in a place which is usually

identified as a cultural landscape: there were grassy meadows and fertile fields (LFK 1400, 9430), a valley with fields (LFK 1654, 5597), 'a grassy meadow' (*bi-jusi jauka ieleja*) (LFK 1400, 15801), a field (LFK 120, 237), cornfields (LFK 828, 17221), countryside (1654, 7081), meadows (LFK 929, 23553; 1400, 1581), and animals were put out to graze there (LFK 984, 41; 1393, 416). People lived there, and there was also 'an old house' (*viena veca māja*) in the valley (LFK 1654, 3772), several houses (LFK 828, 17221; 1654, 7081; 1654, 5597; 1665, 332), seven farms (LK 1640, 4306), Sauka hut (LFK 1400, 9430), a homestead called Saucieši (LFK 1637, 1012) or Sauka (LFK 1557, 2102), a large homestead belonging to a rich farmer (LFK 1614, 332), or a large homestead (LFK 17, 944, 21). By contrast, the valley in which Lake Sauka landed was also described as wild, untouched by humans, or scarcely touched, a place surrounded by hills (LFK 929, 19745), a wide, green plain (LFK 1400, 9430), a marshy meadow (LFK 1400, 15801), a hollow (LFK 1268, 985), a swamp (LFK 603, 133), or a large clearing (LFK 1654, 6594). A forest also grew there (LFK 119, 404). A stream or brook flowed along the valley (LFK 1006, 1; 1400, 9430; 861, 1243; 1910, 6571; 1213, 27; 1665, 332; 1703, 474). In a number of instances, this stream is called Dūņupe (LFK 603, 133; 1657, 4380). A stream with this name flows from Lake Sauka today.

Aerial surveys of the west side of Lake Sauka showed various areas of different colouring on the bed of the lake, as well as some features which stand out above the water level of the lake. Investigating this part of the lake *in situ* revealed that the water level in Lake Sauka in the summer of 2006 was particularly low, and in some places features on the bed of the lake rose up 20 to 40 centimetres above the water level. The peat bed of the lake contained many eroded remains of trees and stumps, which created strange shapes (Plate III, Fig. 5). It is obvious that the local inhabitants, to whom the lake and its bed were well known, knew about these trees in the shallows of the lake. They could be used as an explanation for the tales of submerged houses, because the sunken trees could definitely be used as proof of this. Let us remember that the lake settlements in Vidzeme were also discovered largely due to local legends about flying lakes and sunken houses (Apals, Zelmanis 1998, pp.2-3).

Research on the bed of the lake also revealed some remnants of wooden constructions, in the form of stakes hewn with an iron axe. These stakes were driven in in rows, which have not so far been further investigated; and, furthermore, some of these were driven in alternately at an angle, and in front of poles which were driven in straight. It could be surmised that

the remains of fishing equipment have been discovered, which cannot currently be more precisely dated or described. It is known that in more recent times, Lake Sauka had special constructions installed in it for the storage of fish (Ribulis 2006, p.45).

Many local legends describe the places of origin of Lake Sauka, the flight paths of the lake, and its landing. By examining these tales with contemporary knowledge about the location of archaeological sites, and with the use of aerial and underwater archaeological research methods, we are able to identify some previously unknown correlations between the mythological world, which is reflected in local legends, and the real world, which is represented by topographical forms and archaeological sites. Aerial reconnaissance allows us to view these realities from the point of view of the flying lake.

Abbreviations

LA – BĪRONS, A., MUGURĒVIČS, E., STUBAVS, A., ŠNORE, E., eds. *Latvijas PSR arheoloģija*, 1974. Rīga: Zinātne.
 LFK – Latvian Folklore Record (Latviešu folkloras krātuve).

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Received: 18 December 2008; Revised 4 April 2011;
 Accepted 16 May 2011

Juris Urtāns
 Latvian Academy of Culture,
 Ludzas iela 24,
 Rīga, LV-1003,
 Latvia,
 urtans@lka.edu.lv

MITINIAI SAUKOS EŽERO ORO KELIAI

Juris Urtāns

Santrauka

Saukos ežeras yra didžiausias Augšzemėje (pietrytinėje Latvijos dalyje), apie jį ypač daug pasakojama. Padavimas apie Saukos ežero kelionę dangumi yra populiariausias tautosakinis motyvas visame regione. Grupuojant padavimų variantus, ryškėja keletas iš dalies sutampančių, iš dalies skirtingų siužetinių linijų.

Artimiausia vietovė, iš kurios, kaip pasakoja 13 padavimų tekstų, į savo kelionę pakilo Saukos ežeras, yra Strubenči pelkė Sēlpilyje, apie 30 km nuo vietas, kurioje ežeras telkšo šiuo metu. Viename padavime kalbama apie tai, kad Saukos ežerui skrendant į naująją vietą kelios jo dalys nukrito ir atsirado nedideli ežerai – iš tiesų, maždaug vienoje linijoje tarp Strubenča pelkės ir Saukos ežero telkšo keletas vandens telkinių.

Labiausiai nutolusi vietovė, iš kurios, pasakojama, skrydžiui pakilo Saukos ežeras, yra Piķapurvs pelkė Sausenejoje. Ant smėlėtos kalvelės minėtoje pelkėje yra supilti trys senojo–vidurinio geležies amžiaus pilkapiai. Piķapurvs nuo Saukos ežero, matuojant tiesia linija, nutolęs apie 70 km. Atskirai pažymėtinas faktas, kad – pagal kalbininkų ir archeologų tyrinėjimus – senajame geležies amžiuje tiek vietovė, kurioje telkšojo Saukos ežeras, tiek jo dabartinė vieta buvo apgyventa sėlių.

Visos vietos, iš kurių, pasakojama, Saukos ežeras pakilo į kelionę, yra išsidėčiusios apytiksliai vienoje linijoje. Didėjant atstumui nuo dabartinės Saukos ežero vietos, nagrinėjamų padavimų skaičius mažėja.

Vietovė, kurioje šiuo metu telkšo Saukos ežeras, yra žmogaus seniai įsisavintame kraštovaizdyje. Tačiau gausūs padavimai apie ežero kilmę ir jo kelionę dangumi atskleidžia iki šiol menkai arba visai nežinomus mitinio pasaulio bruožus, šio pasaulio sąsajas su konkrečiomis kraštovaizdžio formomis ir archeologinėmis vietomis.

Vertė Vykintas Vaitkevičius