

## Joachim Lelewel, Edda, and Lithuania

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What is the connection between these three topics? 200 years ago, in 1807, Joachim Lelewel published a small book known as *Edda Skandinawska* in Vilnius. The book was written in Polish, and it was the first retold variant of *Edda* published in Lithuania. It is a significant event, since we have not been spoiled by numerous editions on or of Old Norse literature in Lithuania. Actually, only a few works of Old Norse literature have been translated into Lithuanian so far. Among them, there is *Egil's saga*,<sup>1</sup> *The Saga of Knytlings*,<sup>2</sup> an anthology on Old Norse literature, which contains several excerpts of *The Book of Icelanders*, *The Book of Settlement*, *The First Grammatical Treatise*, several fragments from the *Poetic* and the *Prose Edda*, as well as excerpts from several other sagas.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, every attempt to present this marvellous literature to the reader – the modern or the old days one – is worthy of attention and discussion.

The precise name of Lelewel's book is *Edda czyli księga religii dawnych Skandynawii mieszkańców* ('Edda or the book on religion of the Old Scandinavian inhabitants'). It contains a chapter on the Old Germanic, Celtic and other tribes, a short presentation of both *Eddas* and finally a short paraphrase of the *Eddas*, first of all of the *Younger Edda* (only *Völuspá* and *Hávamál* from the *Elder Edda* are briefly discussed), supplied by an index of proper names.

1 *Egilio saga*. Iš senosios islandų kalbos vertė Svetlana Steponavičienė. Vilnius, Vaga, 1975.

2 *Kniutlingų saga*. Iš senosios islandų kalbos vertė Ugnius Mikučionis. Vilnius, Vaga, 2002.

3 *Mimiro šaltinis*. Senųjų islandų tekstų antologija. Sudarytoja ir vertėja Rasa Ruseckienė. Vilnius, Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2003. See also *Skaldų poezija*. Parengė Rasa Ruseckienė, Ugnius Mikučionis. Vilniaus universitetas, 2002.

Joachim Lelewel  
(1786–1861), the  
author of *Edda  
Skandinawska*.



One should keep in mind that Joachim Lelewel was 21 years old at the time of the publication of this book, and it appeared 11 years before his contemporary Rasmus Rask published the first complete edition of both *Eddas* in Stockholm in 1818, the latter event having evoked enormous interest in the Old Norse literary heritage in Europe.

Though Lelewel's personality has been widely studied and is well-known, we would like to mention several details from his biography, which may be of interest in the context of our conference. First of all, he was a well-known, probably the greatest Polish historian of the first part of the 19th century, a scientist-erudite, bibliophile and polyglot. From his paternal side, he is of Austrian or Swedish ancestry,<sup>4</sup> descended from early immigrants to Poland via Prussia and France, where Lelewel's grandfather finally settled down in 1732.<sup>5</sup> Wherever Lelewel's ancestors came from, Lelewel showed himself as a very active Polish public character and

4 See *Polski słownik biograficzny*. Wrocław [etc.], 1972, t. 17/1, z. 72, s. 25.

5 See Piročkinas, A.; Šidlauskas, A. *Mokslas senajame Vilniaus universitete*. Vilnius, 1984, p. 270; cf. Śliwiński A. *Joachim Lelewel: Zarys biograficzny*. Lata 1786–1831. Warszawa, 1932, s. 3–4.

politician – all his life he fought and defended democratic and republican ideals. He was elected deputy of the Polish Parliament in 1829. He enthusiastically joined the uprising of 1830–1831, and was one of its most active participants. He was even a member of the rebel government, responsible for faith affairs and education. Appealing to Russian soldiers, he created the slogan “*Za wolność naszą i waszą*” (‘For our and your freedom’). Nevertheless, it was not only his political activities which made him a prominent figure in the Polish history. In his time, he amazed the academic society with his innovative conceptions and incredible diligence.

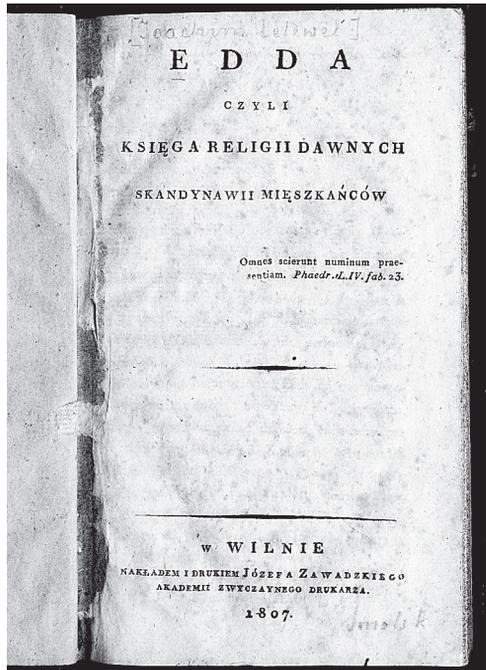
Lelewel studied at Vilnius University (1804–1808, mostly classical philology under the guidance of *Gottfried Ernest Groddeck*), where later he started to teach history (1815–1818), and eventually became a professor (1822–1824). He must have been a brilliant lecturer, and his lectures on Polish history were enthusiastically accepted not only by academic youth, but also by a broader audience. His first lecture had to be postponed because of an overcrowded auditorium – around 1500 listeners came to listen to him! His further lectures used to draw crowds of about 400 people.<sup>6</sup> His courses fitted a romantic world-view and had a big influence on students, especially Adam Mickiewicz and the Philomath Society (a conspiratorial student organization at Vilnius University in 1817–1823).<sup>7</sup> In 1824, after the arrest and trial of the most active members of the society, Lelewel was expelled from University as a *persona non grata* for the Russian Tsarist regime. Afterwards he lived in Warsaw, and later in emigration in Paris and Brussels.

As mentioned, his scientific productivity was imposing – up to 1830, he published about 150 research works. The scope of his interests was immense – from history and historical geography to numismatics, cartography and bibliography. From *Edda Skandinawska*, which is of special interest to us, to, for example, *Géographie des Arabes* (1851). Many of Lelewel’s books remain as classics in their fields. *Edda* was actually the first published treatise of the young Lelewel. This book, along with several other books authored by Lelewel is kept at the Rare Books Department of Vilnius University library. We would like to mention at least some of them.

6 Śliwiński, A., op. cit., s. 116–120.

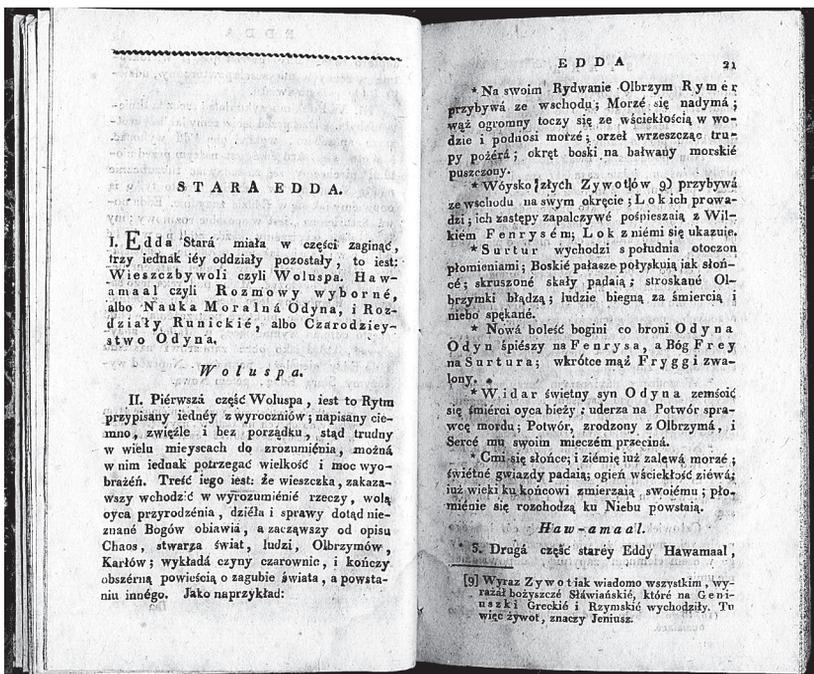
7 See, e. g., Venclova, T. *Vilniaus vardai*. Vilnius, 2006, p. 122.

A facsimile of *Edda Skandynawska*, 1807



*Historyka tudzież o łatwem i pożytecznem nauczaniu historyi*, Wilno, 1815. In this work Lelewel raises a new viewpoint on the historical method, considering the problem of the importance of historical sources. Lelewel's capital work on historical geography is *Badania starożytności we względzie geografji*, Wilno, Warszawa, 1818, widely accepted by leading European geographers of the 19th century, such as Alexander von Humboldt, Karl Ritter and others.<sup>8</sup> *Dzieje starożytne Indji...*, Warszawa, 1820 was the first – and for a long time the only – work on Indian culture in Polish. *Historiczna parallela Hiszpanii z Polską w wieku XVI, XVII, XVIII*, Warszawa, 1831 was an innovative work, applying the comparative method in history. *Numismatique du moyen-âge*, Paris, 1835. This is the most significant of Lelewel's work in numismatics, where he discusses and classifies Belgian, French, German, Czech, Swedish, Polish and other early medieval coins. Presumably, the publication laid the foundations of the medieval numismatics. Finally, one should mention the 5 volumes of *La Géographie du moyen-âge*, Bruxelles, 1849–1857.

<sup>8</sup> Vilnius University professor Gottfried Ernest Groddeck commented on the publication, that even if Lelewel had not written anything else this work would have been enough. (Śliwiński, A., op. cit., s. 90).



This is the largest Lelewel's work in historical geography and cartography, which remains classical up to now. The work was complemented by atlases with 177 maps, the plates entirely engraved by Lelewel himself (some of the maps even tinted in watercolors).

Lelewel died in Paris in 1861. He was buried in Montmartre, but in 1929, his remains were moved to the Rasų cemetery in Vilnius. In his will, Lelewel left his library to Vilnius University. The will was implemented in 1926. The University got about 4800 books and 397 atlases and maps.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Lelewel, Vilnius University is proud to have one of the best atlas collections in Europe.

Joachim Lelewel wrote in *Edda*, that if somebody would like to get to know more about this, let him read the *Edda* itself.<sup>10</sup>

With these Lelewel's words, let us proceed to the *Eddas* and sagas themselves.

9 Braziūnienė, A. *Senosios kartografijos rinkiniai Lietuvoje*. Knygotyra, t. 36, 2000, p. 36–37. A part of the collection can be seen in the room named in Lelewel's honor at Vilnius University library.

10 Lelewel, J. *Edda czyli księga religii dawnych Skandynawii mięszkańców*. Wilno, 1807, s. 54.