

Negotiating Cultural Otherness: Translating the Names of Lithuanian Mythological Household and Water Beings

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Abstract. This article examines the translation of the names of Lithuanian mythological household and water beings into English. It explores how these beings function within mythological tales, what cultural meanings they embody, and the specific challenges their names pose for translators. The study addresses issues related to the choice between domestication and foreignization strategies, with a focus on maintaining the cultural specificity of the source text while ensuring its comprehensibility for English-speaking readers. Employing a comparative cultural approach, the article analyses selected mythological names and proposes possible translation solutions. The discussion is supported by illustrative examples drawn from the English translation of Norbertas Vėlius' collection of Lithuanian mythological tales.

Keywords: Lithuanian mythology, household beings, water beings, translation strategies, domestication, foreignization, comparative cultural analysis

Kultūrinis kitoniškumas vertime: lietuvių mitologinių namų ir vandens būtybių pavadinimų perteikimas anglų kalba

Santrauka. Straipsnyje aptariami lietuvių mitologinių namų ir vandens būtybių pavadinimų vertimo į anglų kalbą ypatumai, apžvelgiama, kaip šios būtybės veikia mitologinėse sakmėse, kokias kultūrinės reikšmės jos įkūnija ir kokių iššūkių gali kelti jų pavadinimų vertimas. Nagrinėjama savinimo ir svetimavimo vertimo strategijų pasirinkimo problematika, atsižvelgiant į siekį verčiamame tekste išlaikyti kultūrinį savitumą ir užtikrinti jo suprantamumą anglakalbiam skaitytojams. Pasitelkiant lyginamąją kultūrinę analizę, nagrinėjamos konkrečios pasirinktos mitologinės būtybės ir siūlomi galimi jų pavadinimų vertimo variantai. Analizė paremta realiais pavyzdžiais iš Norberto Vėliaus parengto lietuvių mitologinių sakmių rinkinio vertimo.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: lietuvių mitologija, namų būtybės, vandens būtybės, vertimo strategijos, savinimas, svetiminimas, lyginamoji kultūrinė analizė

Introduction

Stories of mythological beings have long been interwoven into Lithuanian folklore, shaping collective imagination and providing a lens through which communities interpreted the mysteries of existence. Lithuanian mythological tales (*sakmės*) – the narrative genre in which these figures most vividly appear – occupy a particularly significant place in the nation's oral and later written tradition. According to Donatas Sauka, the supernatural content of these narratives is experienced and testified through the individual's consciousness, revealing traditional modes of thinking, fears, and attempts to explain existential phenomena (Sauka 1982: 141–142). Norbertas Vėlius, a leading researcher of Lithuanian mythology and compiler of extensive collections of mythological tales, notes that many storytellers did not regard these narratives as imaginative inventions but as accounts of real occurrences. The events were often presented as having happened to neighbours, acquaintances, or more distant members of the community. Vėlius observes that, unlike fairy tales, where everyday life is transformed into a realm of magic and impossibility, mythological tales reshape reality while still adhering to its fundamental logic. They also lack the formalised openings and closings characteristic of fairy tales; instead, their narratives begin plainly, as if a fragment of ordinary life had simply been lifted and embedded within the story (Vėlius 1979: 5). Such narratives, older than fairy tales and richer in mythic origins (Balys 2000: 329), thus represent a crucial link between the archaic worldview and later folk imagination. Through their recurring characters – *laumė*, *laimė*, *aitvaras*, *kaukas*, *undinė*, *vilktaikis*, and others – they encode collective experiences and moral values that have shaped the Lithuanian cultural identity for centuries.

Since Lithuania adopted Christianity relatively late and often through coercive rather than voluntary conversion, remnants of the pre-Christian worldview persisted in oral tradition long after the official Christianisation (Puhvel 2001: 223). As Sauka (1982: 144) observes, mythological tales and other similar genres combine elements of pagan and Christian worldviews, reflecting a syncretic understanding of the sacred and the profane. Therefore, the translation of such texts is crucial for preserving cultural symbolism and collective memory. In this sense, translation becomes not merely a linguistic act but a negotiation between cultural systems, whereby the translator's decisions shape how the mythic heritage of a small nation is represented and perceived beyond its borders.

Moreover, while it is crucial to preserve and transmit cultural meaning when translating folklore itself, including authentic mythological tales, translators may also encounter folklore indirectly in original literary works, where mythological motifs, characters, or allusions appear, as such texts are often multilayered and intertextual. According to Vėlius, mythological tales and the mythical world they reflect continue

to affect Lithuanian writers with no less force, even when belief in the existence of mythological beings has waned (Vėlius 1979: 8). He observes that individual mythological images or entire tales, creatively integrated into an overarching artistic conception, can be found in the works of almost all Lithuanian writers – “from Kristijonas Donelaitis, Simonas Stanevičius, and Motiejus Valančius to contemporary poets and prose writers” (p. 11). Moreover, during the Soviet period, literature was subject to strict censorship; yet once the political thaw began, Lithuanian writers, particularly poets, renewed their engagement with folklore and mythology. These motifs became so prominent that they distinguished Lithuanian literature of the time from all other works published in the Soviet Union. Bronius Vaškėlis (1990) also identifies numerous authors whose work is inseparable from Lithuanian folklore and mythology, including Henrikas Radauskas, Antanas Škėma, Justinas Marcinkevičius, Antanas Miškinis, Jonas Aistis, and Kazys Bradūnas. It may be argued that this tendency continues to shape contemporary Lithuanian literature, as mythological motifs and archetypes remain a productive source of narrative, symbolic, and thematic inspiration across diverse genres, including magical realism (e.g., Jurga Tumasonytė), poetry (e.g., Antanas Šimkus), inventive reinterpretations (e.g., Kotryna Zylė), and children’s fantasy (e.g., Justinas Žilinskas). Therefore, the relevance of this topic extends beyond the translation of authentic folkloric narratives to encompass original literary texts across diverse genres, scholarly studies on Lithuanian culture, folklore, and mythology, as well as other textual materials.

1. Mythological Beings in Translation

In folklore, mythological beings are regarded as living entities believed to inhabit the human world, often depicted as possessing a tangible physical form and engaging in active interactions with humans. As Jonas Balys (1956: 10) notes, the popularity of such beings shows that Lithuanians felt a close and intimate connection with nature, since many of these creatures were associated with fields, forests, water, and other elements of the natural environment. It is important to note that mythological beings appearing in Lithuanian mythological tales constitute a group of lower deities and do not include the higher Baltic deities or the broader Lithuanian pantheon. In this article, the terms ‘mythological beings’ or ‘mythological creatures’ are preferred over ‘spirits’ to emphasise their tangible embodiment in Lithuanian folklore, though ‘spirit’ is used where necessary to align with Anglophone terminology.

The very names of such mythological beings function as cultural realia or culture-specific words, carrying symbolic weight and reflecting the worldview embedded in the Lithuanian language (Pažūsis 2014: 42). As emphasised by Vėlius, insight into this

sphere is essential for understanding not only national culture and history but also the broader patterns of intercultural contact (Vėlius 1977: 282). In this article, only several representative examples have been selected for analysis, chosen to illustrate the main translation strategies – foreignization and domestication – and to evaluate their appropriateness in conveying the cultural and semantic nuances of Lithuanian mythology. In translation theory, these two strategies are understood as contrasting ways of negotiating cultural difference. Domestication generally aims to minimise traces of foreignness by adapting the source text to the cultural and linguistic norms of the target audience, resulting in a fluent and seemingly “transparent” translation that reads as if originally written in the target language. Foreignization, by contrast, draws attention to the cultural specificity of the text by preserving elements that may appear unusual or unfamiliar to the target reader, thereby making the origin of the translated text visible (Venuti 1995). These strategies form the conceptual framework for examining how Lithuanian mythological beings are rendered in English and how much of their cultural distinctiveness is retained or diminished in translation.

Another noteworthy aspect of this analysis is that mythological terminology in English presents distinct challenges for translation. Unlike Lithuanian, which evolved within a specific ethno-geographic and cultural context, English functions as a global *lingua franca* used by speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, many English mythological terms – such as *faery*, *elf*, and *goblin* – originate in Celtic and Germanic traditions and have become widely recognised cultural symbols within the English-speaking world. Accordingly, this cultural foundation offers a valuable interpretative framework for understanding how broader English-speaking audiences may perceive Lithuanian mythological beings.

2. Comparative Cultural Analysis

The further comparative cultural analysis focuses on two selected groups of mythological creatures – household and water beings – as they occur with particular frequency in Lithuanian folkloric narratives, embodying essential aspects of the traditional worldview: household beings reflect the intimate relationship between humans and their domestic environment, while water beings symbolise dependence on and reverence for natural forces within traditional culture. Moreover, both groups present notable translation challenges, as they often overlap with similar figures in other European traditions, raising questions of equivalence and substitution. Their prominence, cultural significance, and complexity thus make them especially suitable for examining the implications of different translation strategies.

2.1. Household Beings

One of the most frequently occurring household beings in Lithuanian mythological tales is the *aitvaras* (also referred to as *aitivaras*, *aičvaras*, *eitvaras*, and similar regional variants) (Běťáková and Blažek 2021: 23). It should not, however, be misunderstood or translated as *kite*, a meaning often listed first in bilingual dictionaries, since in a mythological context the word denotes a supernatural creature rather than a lightweight object flown in the wind. The distinctive ability of this being is to change appearance and take on various forms, while its primary function is to bring wealth to its owner (Vėlius 1977: 160). Although it assists its master, the *aitvaras* is generally regarded as a malicious, almost demonic creature (p. 165), since it delivers riches only to the household in which it resides, leaving others impoverished. Moreover, it may also turn against its owner if mistreated or if certain ritual obligations or rules are neglected. In many tales, the *aitvaras* is depicted in flight, most often associated with fire and noted for its elongated shape (p. 148). Some accounts add that it possesses a head and tail and can transform within living spaces into a bird, animal, or human (p. 151).

Although references to the *aitvaras* had long circulated orally in Lithuanian folklore, transmitted through mythological tales and legends across generations, the earliest verifiable written source mentioning the name appears in the first printed Lithuanian Catechism by Martynas Mažvydas in 1547 (Běťáková and Blažek 2021: 23), where the *aitvaras* and pagan deities are contrasted with the Christian God. This appearance of mythological terminology in a religious didactic text further confirms the persistence of pre-Christian beliefs long after the official Christianisation of Lithuania, as noted earlier.

The etymology of the Lithuanian term *aitvaras* is not entirely clear, with linguists and folklorists proposing different origins. Vėlius notes that similar mythological beings appear in Latvian, Germanic (particularly German), Finno-Ugric, and Slavic (especially Belarusian, Lusatian, and northern Polish) traditions, and also connects the *aitvaras* to flying dragons in Iranian folklore (Vėlius 1977: 165; 1979: 9). This suggests that the *aitvaras* is part of a broader mythological context and not a figure unique to Lithuanian folklore.

In translation practice, however, the *aitvaras* has posed persistent challenges. In Balys' 1956 collection of Lithuanian folktales, the name was rendered as *cobold* (Balys 1956: 184–185). Vėlius discusses certain parallels between the Lithuanian *aitvaras* and the Germanic *kobold*, whose features and functions partially overlap, though the *kobold* remains primarily a German folkloric figure (Vėlius 1977: 167–170). The term *cobold* is not commonly attested in English-language folklore or mythological reference works. In Balys' later catalogues, the English rendering varies: *Raštai III* employs the broader term *goblin* (Balys 2002: 196), whereas *Raštai IV* returns to *cobold* (Balys 2003:

213). This suggests that no clear or widely recognised equivalent for the *aitvaras* has been established. Although various household spirits appear in Anglophone folklore, none share all of the distinctive functions of the *aitvaras* – its ability to fly through the sky in a fiery form and deliver wealth to its master. In the course of this research, a review of both folkloric and scholarly sources revealed no clear or widely recognised equivalent of the *aitvaras* in Anglophone traditions.

Another frequently mentioned household being in Lithuanian mythological tales is the *kaukas*. Although both the *kaukas* and the *aitvaras* are associated with domestic spaces, they should not be regarded as direct equivalents: the former does not typically bring money or other wealth to its master, whereas the latter does not appear in the form of a small dwarf and generally does not engage in household chores as the *kaukas* does. In the aforementioned Catechism by Martynas Mažvydas, the *kaukas* is likewise mentioned separately from the *aitvaras* (Běťáková and Blažek 2021, 96). The most significant difference often emphasised in scholarship is that the *aitvaras* belongs to the upper realms, flies, and has a fiery nature, while the *kaukas* is essentially unrelated to fire and is described as earthbound or even subterranean (Razauskas 2009: 18). Therefore, although the terms *aitvaras* and *kaukas* are sometimes used interchangeably, they constitute separate entities within the classificatory framework of Lithuanian folklore.

The *kaukas* is likewise not exclusively Lithuanian. It has counterparts across European folklore as various household beings that oversee grain, livestock, and protect their master's wealth. According to folklore scholars, a comparable figure in British folklore is called a *hobgoblin*, *hob*, or *Robin Goodfellow* (Běťáková and Blažek 2021: 23; Vėlius 1977: 166). The *hobgoblin* originates in Celtic folklore as a helpful household being performing domestic tasks. The term *hob* is thought to derive from a diminutive of *Robert*, while *Robin Goodfellow* is a related mythical figure (Monaghan 2004: 247). Various stories describe him as the son of a mortal woman and the supernatural being *Oberon*. His father taught him to shape-shift, and he eventually assumed the form of a household being known as a *brownie*, which became his permanent form (p. 397).

Therefore, this connection between the *kaukas* and British household beings extends to other figures in English folklore. The *brownie* is a household being known in Scotland and central Great Britain (Monaghan 2004: 61), and today, the term has entered common usage as a general name for household helpers. Typically depicted as a plump, dishevelled, small man assisting with domestic chores and tending livestock (p. 62), the *brownie* corresponds closely to the Lithuanian *kaukas*.

A related English household being is the *puck*, identified in 17th-century British folklore as synonymous with *Robin Goodfellow* (p. 388). Like Lithuanian mythological household beings, the *puck* resides in barns (p. 384). It is noteworthy that in Samogitia (a historical and ethnographic region in north-western Lithuania), along the Lithuani-

an Baltic coast and in northern Lithuania, as well as in neighbouring Latvia household beings were called *pūkis*, *pūkys* or *pukis*, which scholars trace to the German *puck* (Balys 2000: 54; Běťáková and Blažek 2021: 27). This indicates that such beings were familiar across various European cultures. However, while this etymological connection is important to acknowledge, the term *puck* is not widely known among contemporary English-speaking readers and does not function as a commonly recognised designation for a household being. This limited familiarity should therefore be considered in translation. Based on the abundance of folk narratives, however, the *brownie* emerges as the most neutral, popular, and widely recognised term. This designation is intelligible to both specialists and general readers.

Another Lithuanian household being, named *damavikas* (a Slavic loanword), is rarely addressed in English-language scholarship. In Lithuanian folklore, *damavikas* denotes a household creature closely related to the Belarusian *дамавік*. The name derives from the Slavic root *dom* (house, home), which makes its semantic field transparent. In certain Lithuanian narratives, the name *damavikas* is used as an alternative designation for the *aitvaras*, especially in regions adjacent to Belarus (Vėlius 1977: 145). Mythological Lithuanian household beings are brought into closer relation with their Slavic counterparts through their shared locus of habitation. According to Vėlius, in various cultures, it was believed that domestic beings resided in peasant houses. The *aitvaras* likewise dwells in places favoured by the Slavic household beings: in storerooms, on rooftops, in granaries, barns, and threshing houses (p. 168). In addition, the *aitvaras* is partially linked to the Slavic *дамавік* or *домовой* by another function – stealing wealth and carrying it to its master. However, the motif of wealth-bringing is less consistently associated with the Slavic figure than with the Lithuanian *aitvaras*. This overlap underscores the extent of intercultural borrowing but does not create a true functional equivalence between the *aitvaras* and the *damavikas*.

Comparing all the mentioned Lithuanian and Anglophone folklore household beings, it is evident that they are closely related and share many characteristics. In a comparative perspective, one can observe that, across cultures, two primary functions of household beings emerge: carrying or guarding wealth and tending to domestic affairs. Beyond these functional and external similarities, many share negative character traits, particularly vindictiveness. Household helpers in different cultures can become angry and even seek revenge (p. 169). For example, an enraged *puck* may throw objects at humans or attempt to crush them with heavy furniture (Monaghan 2004: 388). This demonstrates a recurring motif in multiple folklore traditions: household spirits benefit humans only insofar as humans show them favour.

It is important to consider not only the classificatory distinctions established in folklore studies but also the evidence of the tales themselves. In everyday usage, people often employed the names of Lithuanian mythological beings interchangeably, treat-

ing them as near-synonyms. Bronislava Kerbelytė (2011: 209) notes that the wealth-bringing creature is more commonly referred to as *kaukas* in Samogitia and as *aitvaras* in Aukštaitija, and some tales likewise demonstrate that this function may be attributed to all three beings: *aitvaras*, *kaukas*, and *damavikas* (Vėlius 1979: 39, 41, 46). Therefore, in authentic mythological tales, the boundaries between these beings are not entirely fixed – some mythological creatures may be known by several names, and identical or very similar beings can have different regional designations.

2.2. Water Beings

Although Lithuanian mythological narratives contain numerous accounts of encounters with water-dwelling creatures, Kerbelytė notes that many figures appearing in the tales, such as lake or fish guardians, are portrayed as nameless or even invisible, being heard rather than seen (Kerbelytė 2011: 215). Consequently, any attempt to describe distinct Lithuanian water beings must rely on the set of consistently attested names found in authentic mythological tales and other folkloric materials. For the purposes of comparative cultural analysis, it is crucial not only to have names but also more concrete depictions – bodily form, appearance, or character traits – that allow meaningful parallels to be drawn. Therefore, the present discussion focuses on water beings that are both reliably documented in narrative sources and described in tangible terms, such as *undinė*, *narė*, and *sirena*, rather than on sporadic or regionally isolated designations.

Lithuanian folkloric creatures *undinės*, also occasionally referred to as *sirenos* or *narės* (Vėlius 1979: 30; Balsys 2005, 156), as well as their equivalents in other traditions are commonly associated with water (Vėlius 1979: 324; Balsys 2005: 159; Monaghan 2004: 325). In Lithuanian mythological tales, the *undinė* is usually portrayed as a beautiful woman with long, fair hair and a fish tail as her most distinctive feature (Vėlius 1979: 29). The use of synonyms like *narė* is justified by nearly identical descriptions: for instance, in the tales, *narė* is described as “half woman, half fish” (p. 30). Although these beings are also occasionally referred to as *sirenos*, they should not be confused with the ancient Greek mythological *sirens* – creatures that are half woman, half bird, whose singing brings death to humans (Vėlius 1979: 326; Lurker 2005: 173). The term *sirena* likely entered Lithuanian folklore via Slavic intermediaries from Greek sources (Balsys 2005: 157) – while the Greek *sirens* are bird-like, the adoption of the term *sirena* for Lithuanian water beings reflects a conceptual influence from Classical culture rather than a literal correspondence.

Folktales often reveal a darker side of the *undinė*: they may attempt to drown curious onlookers lured by their songs (Vėlius 1979: 30). Such motifs likely reflect a human desire to explain mysterious phenomena, accidents, or misfortunes. Similar beings were well-known in Britain, where stories of half-human, half-fish creatures were

widespread (Monaghan 2004: 325). Although male counterparts (*merfolk* or *merman*) appear occasionally (Monaghan, 325–327; WNED 1994: 628), they are far less common; most of these beings, like in Lithuanian folklore, are female and called *mermaids*. The second syllable *maid* refers to a young woman, while the first, *mer*, derives not from the French word for *sea* but from the Old English *meer* (lake) (Monaghan 2004: 326). Celtic mermaids were associated with both freshwater and the sea, with freshwater beings sometimes also called *lake maidens* (p. 379). Like many mythological beings, mermaids could also be categorised under the broader term *fairies* or the more specific *water nymphs* (Piesarskas ir Svecevičius 2002: 843; WNED 1994: 1134).

Today, the term *mermaid* often evokes Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid*, popularised by animated adaptations. However, folk narratives present a more diverse image: some *mermaids* are beautiful, others grotesque, with green teeth, red noses, pig-like eyes, or tangled green hair, yet they retain the power to attract men (Monaghan 2004: 326). Like Lithuanian *undinės*, Celtic water beings sing to lure, and sometimes hypnotise, humans (usually men) to facilitate drowning (p. 325) – a central function in both traditions.

It should be noted that some English sources use the term *undine* (WNED 1994: 1134). This name is known across many European cultures, deriving from the Latin *unda* (water) (p. 1134). While it is impossible to read all English-language folk tales, existing research and encyclopaedic sources indicate that this term rarely appears in authentic folklore; instead, it is more common in the 19th-century European Romantic literature (Evans-Wentz 1911: 135; Sherman 2008: 303). Such literary reinterpretations, while important in the broader history of European literature, are distinct from authentic folklore and therefore remain beyond the scope of this study.

2.3. Proposed Translation Solutions

As demonstrated by the comparative analysis, no exact equivalent of the *aitvaras* can be found in English-language folklore traditions: while such beings typically assist their masters with domestic tasks, they generally neither bring external wealth nor are depicted in fiery or flying form. Consequently, the foreignization strategy may be applied when translating into English, retaining the Lithuanian name *aitvaras*, while providing additional information about its appearance and primary functions, using terms such as *wealth-bringing household being* and similar descriptors. Alternatively, to avoid overloading the text with foreign terms where precise accuracy is not required, the name *aitvaras* may be rendered using a general term for male mythological beings, such as (*hob*)*goblin* – a translation encountered in scholarly works on Lithuanian folklore (Balys 2002: 193) – or the previously mentioned *brownie*. In such cases, readers will understand that the text refers to a mythological household being, while other aspects of its functions and appearance may emerge naturally within the narrative.

In the case of the term *kaukas*, the domestication strategy allows the Lithuanian name to be rendered using the semantically broad British folklore term *brownie*, among other equivalents that may be selected depending on the context. When the foreignization strategy is preferred, the original term *kaukas* may be retained and, where necessary, supplemented with a brief explanatory note, while still being associated with these broadly corresponding English household beings whose primary role is to assist or perform domestic tasks. In Samogitian narratives, the variants *pūkis*, *pūkys*, or *pukis* can likewise be related to the phonetically similar *puck*, following the classification used in Balys' volumes (Balys 2002: 193).

With respect to the *damavikas*, the most appropriate solution is to retain the original Lithuanian form in English editions when the text engages directly with folklore or mythological narratives, accompanied by explanatory commentary where necessary. Substituting it with an English domestic spirit (e.g., *brownie* or *hobgoblin*) risks obscuring its Slavic origin and the cultural contacts reflected in Lithuanian tradition, though in more general or passing references such precision may be less critical. In cases where the foreignization strategy is preferable, retaining the Lithuanian form *damavikas* with a brief explanatory note (e.g., "a Slavic-derived household being") safeguards its historical and cultural context, particularly its link to Belarusian folklore and the long-standing interaction between Lithuanians and Slavs, especially in border regions where bilingualism facilitated its adoption into Lithuanian tradition. This strategy, however, should be reserved for contexts where accuracy is essential, since foreignization can disrupt reading fluency and reduce immediate comprehension.

When considering water beings, the optimal English translation of *undinė* could be *mermaid*, a well-known common noun that evokes associations in English-speaking audiences similar to those of *undinė* in Lithuanian. The rarer term *narė* may be translated as *mermaid*, *lake maiden*, *water fairy*, or *water nymph*. While the majority of Lithuanian mythological narratives describe encounters occurring in inland freshwater environments, such as lakes, rivers, or ponds, rather than in the sea, it remains crucial to recognise that designations such as *lake maiden* are contextually appropriate only for figures explicitly associated with lakes. This underscores the necessity of situational accuracy in translation. The term *sirena*, being non-Lithuanian in its origins and present in many European traditions, should be translated as *siren* in English. Using foreignization to retain the Lithuanian form *sirena* would generally be inappropriate, except in scholarly contexts demanding strict terminological fidelity. To preserve authentic Lithuanian water beings in translation, supplemental descriptive explanations can be added, for example, in footnotes or glossary entries: "water beings of the lower deities group", "half-human, half-fish", etc.

Table 1. Lithuanian mythological terms and suggested English equivalents

Lithuanian term	Suggested English equivalent(s)	Notes / Contextual remarks
<i>aitvaras</i>	<i>brownie, goblin, hobgoblin</i> (partial equivalents)	A flying, fiery, wealth-bringing household being
<i>kaukas</i>	<i>brownie, goblin, hobgoblin</i>	An earthbound household being; generally, assists with domestic chores
<i>damavikas</i>	<i>brownie, goblin, hobgoblin</i>	A household being of Slavic origin (from <i>dom</i> , “house”); related to Belarusian <i>дамавік</i>
<i>pūkis / pūkys / pukis</i>	<i>puck</i>	Regional Samogitian variant of a household being
<i>undinė</i>	<i>mermaid</i>	Female water being; half woman, half fish
<i>narė</i>	<i>mermaid, lake maiden, water fairy, water nymph</i>	A less common synonym of <i>undinė</i> ; <i>lake maiden</i> only suitable in lake-associated contexts
<i>sirena</i>	<i>siren</i>	A water being; half-woman, half-fish; distinct from Classical Greek bird-like sirens

3. Illustrative Corpus

This article draws on selected translation examples from *Laumių dovanos* (1979), a collection of mythological narratives compiled by Norbertas Vėlius, and its English translation *Lithuanian Mythological Tales* (1998; reprinted 2002) by Birutė Kiškytė, which serves as an illustrative corpus demonstrating real-life translation solutions. Both Lithuanian and English editions are significant: Vėlius’ compilation was one of the first major attempts to publish a substantial collection of Lithuanian mythological tales in a single volume. Previously, such tales were usually printed alongside fairy tales, and few were published. Vėlius collected 456 tales, many of which were published for the first time (Vėlius 1979: 11). Although earlier attempts to systematise and translate Lithuanian mythological narratives did exist – such as Langkusch’s 19th-century German collection *Litauische Sagen* or Jonas Basanavičius’ bilingual publications (Balys 2003: 209) – most of them were fragmentary or smaller in scale. Kiškytė’s English translations of 318 tales (in addition to the 454 translated into Russian in *Tsvetok paporotnika* by Jelena Solovjova, published in 1989) constituted one of the first substantial, coherent exposures of Lithuanian mythological tales to a wider international readership. The original collection of tales compiled by Vėlius was aimed at a wide audience, and it may be assumed that the Lithuanian and English editions target both general readers interested in Lithuanian culture and specialists in related fields.

Kiškytė’s translations of Lithuanian mythological tales, published two decades ago, remain highly relevant today, as their digitisation has made them widely accessible online.

As Leonavičienė (2014: 6) notes, translations in electronic form facilitate international communication, intercultural exchange, and the global dissemination of cultural heritage. Consequently, English-speaking readers seeking Lithuanian mythological tales or similar content are most likely to encounter these translations, both in print and online. In 2025, a search in English-language online sources using keywords such as *Lithuanian mythological tales* predominantly returns Kiškytė's translation of Vėlius' collection. This edition is widely cited, excerpted, and referenced, establishing it as one of the primary sources of information on Lithuanian mythology in English. While other materials – such as articles, cultural reviews, or encyclopaedic entries – occasionally appear, authentic English translations of Lithuanian mythological texts remain relatively rare. Therefore, Kiškytė's translation acts as a crucial intermediary between Lithuanian folklore and a global readership: it shapes the first impressions of Lithuanian mythological imagination, and its linguistic choices influence how Lithuanian mythology is represented internationally. For this reason, this translation serves as a valuable object of analysis for examining how Lithuanian mythological beings are presented to an English-speaking audience.

The following analysis draws on Kiškytė's English translation of Lithuanian mythological tales as illustrative material to explore how foreignization and domestication strategies are applied in rendering culturally specific Lithuanian mythological names.

3.1. Overview of Selected Translation Examples and Supporting Paratexts

Table 2. Illustrative translation examples from *Lithuanian Mythological Tales* (1998)

	Lithuanian original	English translation
FOREIGNIZATION STRATEGY		
Direct transfer into the target text (without adaptation)	<i>aitvaras / aičvaras</i>	<i>aitvaras</i>
	<i>kaukas</i>	<i>kaukas</i>
	<i>damavikas</i>	<i>damavikas</i>
DOMESTICATION STRATEGY		
Approximate translation (substitution with functional equivalent)	<i>undinė</i>	<i>mermaid</i>
	<i>sirena</i>	<i>siren</i>
Approximate translation (generalisation)	<i>sireniukas</i>	<i>her son / the son</i>

Table 2 demonstrates that Kiškytė applied both translation strategies – foreignization and domestication – in rendering Lithuanian mythological creature names into English. Foreignization involved direct transfer of Lithuanian terms without phonetic or morphological adaptation, while domestication employed two types of approximate

translation: substitution with functional equivalents and generalisation. This suggests that the translator balanced fidelity to the source language and culture with adaptation to the target language and culture, making choices that were shaped by the specific category of mythological beings involved. Therefore, both strategies are employed not as opposing techniques but as complementary means of mediating between source- and target-culture perspectives.

In Kiškytė's translation of Vėlius' collection, the original Lithuanian names are smoothly integrated, with essential cultural information provided in the author's preface, where the names of Lithuanian mythological creatures are mentioned for the first time. In parentheses, their English equivalents or descriptive adaptations are provided, employing a strategy of internal adaptation (explication). Additionally, a brief English glossary provides detailed explanations of selected creatures (Vėlius 1998: 239), pairing English terms with concise descriptive notes that aid the reader's visualisation and clarify names retained in their original form by contextualising them through references to comparable figures.

In the edition, only one footnote addresses mythological names; it appears on the page of the first tale (p. 19) and explains that authentic Lithuanian names appearing for the first time are marked with an asterisk, referring the reader to the aforementioned glossary at the end of the book. The note also clarifies that names with established cultural equivalents are rendered in English through adaptation, whereas the more unique Lithuanian mythological names are directly transferred into the translation, i.e., left in their original form with additional explanations provided in the glossary. It is further noted that although Lithuanian nouns are inflected, the translation consistently preserves their nominative forms, with English plural endings added where necessary.

Overall, through the inclusion of paratextual elements and explanatory glosses, the translation effectively mediates between source- and target-culture perspectives, rendering Lithuanian mythological narratives accessible to English-speaking readers while maintaining their cultural specificity.

3.2. Translation Strategies Applied in Lithuanian Mythological Tales (1998)

In the preceding section, a cultural-comparative analysis was undertaken to establish the semantic and symbolic dimensions of Lithuanian mythological beings and to outline potential translation equivalents in English. Building on these insights, the present section examines how Kiškytė's translation negotiates between foreignization and domestication strategies in practice. The analysis considers whether the translator's choices align with the cultural and functional observations identified earlier, and how these decisions shape the representation of Lithuanian household and water beings for an Anglophone readership.

3.2.1. *Foreignization*. The Lithuanian mythological names listed under the foreignization strategy in Table 2 were transferred into the English translation without adaptation, preserving their original spelling and diacritical marks. In Kiškytė's English translation, these names appear italicised to signal their foreign origin. The only modification to standard English conventions is the addition of plural endings to the Lithuanian forms, which, unlike the names themselves, are not italicised: *damavikases*, *kaukases*, *aitvarases* (Vėlius 1998: 43, 46, 49). The following cases are examined to assess whether these specific translation decisions are justified not only in light of the comparative cultural analysis undertaken earlier but also within the context of the individual narratives in which the beings appear.

1) *Aitvaras* – *aitvaras* (direct transfer into the target text)

Although the term *aitvaras* is directly transferred into the target text through foreignization, Kiškytė's English translation supplements it with additional contextual information. In the introduction, a brief parenthetical note identifies it as a "wealth-carrying spirit" (Vėlius 1998: 13), while the glossary further elaborates, describing it as "a mythological being similar to a brownie that often carried around wealth" (p. 239), thus helping readers form a clearer mental image of these beings. Jurgita Vaičėnėnė, discussing the possible translation of *aitvaras*, argues that rendering it as *brownie* is imprecise and that a more accurate equivalent should be sought (Vaičėnėnė 2008: 127). However, while *brownie* or *goblin* are not true functional equivalents of the *aitvaras*, the glossary explicitly states that the beings are similar rather than identical. This comparison clarifies that the *aitvaras* is a household being loyal to its master, and it is evident from the wealth-bringing function that it is not a complete *brownie* equivalent. However, such distinctions are particularly relevant for specialists, folklorists, or researchers of comparative mythology, rather than for the general reader interested in Lithuanian mythological tales. Moreover, both the Lithuanian and English editions provide extended introductory descriptions of the *aitvaras*, discussing not only its primary functions but also folkloric imagery, origins, and evolution. Curious readers can thus familiarise themselves with these beings' representations in folklore in advance, which justifies the use of the foreignization strategy in this case. Therefore, the translation balances accessibility with cultural specificity.

It should also be noted that the regional variant *aičvaras* is likewise rendered simply as *aitvaras*, suggesting that the translator chose not to introduce phonetic variation that might confuse English-speaking readers, given that both forms refer to the same being in Lithuanian folklore.

2) *Kaukas* – *kaukas* (direct transfer into the target text)

Unlike the *aitvaras*, the *kaukas* has very close functional equivalents in English-language mythological tales, most notably *goblin* and *brownie*. In this case, however, trans-

lator Kiškytė also opted for the foreignization strategy, retaining the original Lithuanian name – a choice that ensures greater consistency within the domestic creatures section of the tales. In the glossary, the *kaukas* is described similarly to the *aitvaras* – as a wealth-carrying mythological being, though it is compared to the *goblin* rather than the *brownie* (Vėlius 1998: 239). The comparative analysis indicates that, while there are many similarities between the *aitvaras* and the *kaukas*, the function of bringing wealth is not typical for the latter. Nevertheless, the translation of Vėlius' collection features narratives in which these functions overlap, demonstrating that although the beings are categorised separately in scholarly typologies, the tales themselves often present shared motifs and employ the names interchangeably. In the translated collection, the *kaukas* is indeed depicted as a wealth-bringer, illustrating that in orally transmitted folklore passed down across generations, boundaries between mythological figures were not rigid. Consequently, neither the translator's chosen strategy nor the supplementary explanations provided can be considered inappropriate or inaccurate in this case.

3) *Damavikas* – *damavikas* (direct transfer into the target text)

Like the other household beings discussed, *damavikas* is directly transferred into English without modification. Its functions and general character are evident from the descriptions in the tales themselves. Furthermore, the glossary explains that this is “a word of Slavic origin meaning “house spirit” more or less equivalent in nature to the Lithuanian *aitvaras*” (Vėlius 1998: 239). Overall, retaining the term *damavikas* in the target text, accompanied by explanatory notes, effectively balances cultural fidelity with reader comprehension.

3.2.2. *Domestication*. As shown in Table 2, Kiškytė's English translation renders some names of Lithuanian mythological beings through the domestication strategy. This method of approximate translation entails either direct substitution with widely recognised terms or, in one instance discussed in this article, generalisation. In contrast to names retained through foreignization, domesticated forms omit distinctive Lithuanian orthographic features, illustrating a deliberate trade-off between preserving cultural specificity and ensuring accessibility for the target audience. In the case of water beings, domestication is further facilitated by the fact that such entities constitute a group of international realia: their essential characteristics and narrative functions are widely familiar across cultures, making it relatively unproblematic to find appropriate functional equivalents in English.

1) *Undinė* – *mermaid* (approximate translation, substitution with functional equivalent)

The selected English equivalent mermaid is clear, as it denotes a being characterised by a fish tail and performing functions closely analogous to those of the Lithuanian

undinė. Accordingly, within a domestication framework, rendering *undinė* as *mermaid* in English may be considered relatively straightforward.

2) *Sirena – siren* (approximate translation, substitution with functional equivalent)

As discussed, the term *sirena* is most appropriately rendered by its established equivalent in the target language, given its non-Lithuanian origin and widespread presence across European traditions. In this respect, Kiškytė's choice of translation can also be regarded as both accurate and contextually justified.

3) *Sireniukas – her son / the son* (generalisation)

The diminutive *sireniukas*, denoting the child of a *sirena*, is translated into English through generalisation as *her son / the son*. More broadly, the translation of diminutives from Lithuanian into English poses a well-known challenge. Diminutive forms in Lithuanian often convey nuances of endearment, smallness, or familiarity that are difficult to reproduce naturally in English. Consequently, when such forms are translated, their expressive nuances are typically diminished or lost, as English relies on lexical rather than morphological means to convey similar meanings. Given the absence of a direct English equivalent for *sireniukas*, Kiškytė's generalised solution is both logical and appropriate.

3.2.3. *Consistency and Rationale Behind Translation Strategy Selection.* In her English translation of *Lithuanian Mythological Tales*, Kiškytė employed a range of translation strategies and techniques to render the names of various mythological beings. Some of the names were retained in their original Lithuanian form (using the foreignization strategy), while others were adapted (using the domestication strategy). This variation reflects strategic decision-making rather than inconsistency. Certain mythological figures are well known across many cultures of the world, and Lithuanian mythological narratives concerning them contain few distinct motifs; therefore, the chosen functional equivalents may be considered accurate cultural counterparts. Other groups of mythological beings, however, are more distinctive in certain traits and display stronger national characteristics and cultural colouring.

The names *aitvaras*, *kaukas*, and *damavikas* were preserved in their original Lithuanian form, thereby enabling readers to experience the sense of otherness inherent in a foreign culture and to appreciate the originality of the tales. Accordingly, all of the household beings discussed were rendered through foreignization. By contrast, the names of the water beings examined – *undinė*, *sirena*, and *sireniukas* – were adapted, as these figures may be more appropriately situated within wider, cross-cultural mythological frameworks and considered international mythological realia; the translator thus chose precise functional equivalents that are widely recognisable to the target audience.

It should also be noted that, although Vėlius' Lithuanian edition includes a tale featuring the *narė* (Vėlius 1979: 30), this narrative was omitted from the English translation, and thus it is not possible to determine how the translator might have approached the rendering of this particular name. This omission is noteworthy, as *narė*, unlike the more internationally recognisable *undinė* or *sirena*, is a comparatively rare term. Its translation would have offered an especially informative case for examining how the translator addressed mythological water creatures for which no widely established Anglophone equivalent exists, and in which the choice between foreignization and domestication becomes particularly significant.

As Leonavičienė (2011: 42) notes, cultural substitution is appropriate when the translator identifies a target-culture equivalent capable of evoking similar associations in the reader. Naturally, when culture-specific terms are domesticated and replaced with functional equivalents in the target language, a certain degree of textual distinctiveness and cultural otherness (Roth 1998: 245) is lost, and readers' cultural horizons, to some extent, remain unexpanded. According to Pažūsis (2014: 285), for pragmatic reasons, translators sometimes combine two approaches – the borrowing of a culture-specific term and a descriptive (or explicative) translation provided in footnotes or commentaries. This is precisely what we observe in the translation under discussion: in cases where authentic names are retained and thus unlikely to evoke any cultural associations for readers, these potential losses are compensated through the editor's preface, which includes brief descriptions of selected mythological creatures, as well as an explanatory footnote, additional information in parentheses, and a glossary. In explicating cultural meanings in the English translation, both internal and external strategies were employed. The supplementary commentary suggests that Kiškytė's translation makes a deliberate effort to introduce readers to Lithuanian culture, which is likely to be relatively unfamiliar to them.

In the English translation under examination, only a few instances may raise questions regarding the rendering of mythological creature names. For example, the *kaukas* is defined in the glossary as a wealth-carrying being. Taken in isolation, this description might appear imprecise when compared with systematically collected folkloric and ethnographic material. However, within the context of the tales included in Vėlius' collection, this interpretation is appropriate, as the *kaukas* is indeed portrayed as bringing wealth in those specific regional narratives. Other cases discussed in the comparative analysis should not, therefore, be construed as evidence of mistranslation, since there is rarely a single, definitive solution when rendering mythological names across cultures; rather, those examples provide a useful reference point for translators and readers interested in exploring Lithuanian mythological terminology in greater depth.

While the analysis demonstrates that Kiškytė's translation strategies and explanatory measures are generally applied appropriately in the cases examined, it cannot be generalised to the entire translation. For instance, the mythological name of another household

being, *pusčias*, is rendered through foreignization (Vėlius 1998: 53) without any accompanying explanation in the glossary, unlike other foreignized names which are explained in the introduction, glossary, or elsewhere. Such issues, while noteworthy, fall beyond the scope of this article, and a comprehensive evaluation of the English edition would require a separate, more extensive study. Overall, the analysis confirms that, in the selected examples, the translator made deliberate and thoughtful decisions to convey cultural meaning, balancing fidelity to the source text with accessibility for the target audience.

4. Conclusions

The comparative analysis revealed that some Lithuanian mythological names belong to a group of international mythological realia, while others are more culture-specific and have only partial equivalents. However, among the groups examined, there are no completely authentic Lithuanian creatures unknown in other cultures, reflecting Lithuania's historical connections not only with neighbouring but also with more distant cultures. This article proposes possible interpretative equivalents or synonyms, whether single words, compounds, or short descriptive phrases, summarising either a specific mythological being or the broader group to which it belongs.

The analysis of the English translation of *Laumiu dovanos*, compiled by Norbertas Vėlius and translated by Birutė Kiškytė, demonstrates that, as with other types of culture-specific items, both domestication and foreignization are viable and sometimes complementary approaches. Both strategies have advantages and limitations, but in each case, the translator must choose the approach that minimises potential losses; however, some loss of cultural nuance is likely in either strategy, as it is often extremely difficult, if not impossible, to convey all aspects of cultural meaning in the translation. The translator of the discussed collection adopted both strategies depending on the nature of each mythological being. Names such as *aitvaras*, *kaukas*, and *damavikas* were retained in their authentic Lithuanian form to preserve cultural specificity and a sense of otherness, while *undinė*, *sirena*, and *sireniukas* were domesticated using functional equivalents familiar to the target reader.

The translator must make an informed decision in each case, guided by the purpose of translation, the target readership, the genre of the text, and the degree of cultural familiarity with the mythological figure. In authentic folklore and mythological narratives where precision is essential, or in translations aimed at specialists or readers with a strong interest in the material, original names should be retained, supplemented where necessary with explanations and comparisons to target-language equivalents. While specialists value foreignization for its preservation of cultural specificity, non-specialist readers with an interest in mythology can also benefit from encountering foreign terms accompanied by context or commentary, which enhances both understanding and en-

gement. Even when domestication is employed, including the original Lithuanian names in a paratext can support scholarly utility while also broadening cultural appreciation – though this option was not incorporated in Kiškytė's translation. Not every occurrence, however, demands such precision: in incidental or metaphorical references, straightforward target-language equivalents may suffice, allowing the translator to prioritise readability and communicative clarity.

Ultimately, the translation of folklore, including the names of mythological beings, constitutes a highly specialised area of translation that requires not only linguistic competence but also deep cultural, mythological, and contextual understanding. This is also relevant when translating culture-bound mythological references that may appear in other genres – literary, historical, journalistic, or other texts – where they often function as intertextual or symbolic allusions rather than literal folkloric elements. Without appropriate cultural knowledge, such names risk being misinterpreted or stripped of their semantic richness. This implies that the translation of mythological names should be viewed not as a mechanical lexical substitution, but as an interpretive act requiring a critical evaluation of both linguistic and cultural correspondence. The translation of mythological names lies at the intersection of linguistic precision and cultural mediation. Translators, functioning as cultural interpreters, must navigate the delicate balance between preserving elements of national identity and ensuring the text's accessibility to a global readership. When this balance is achieved, Lithuanian mythology not only becomes intelligible to audiences beyond its linguistic borders but also maintains its distinctive voice, enriching the shared mythological heritage of world cultures. Further research might explore how these dynamics unfold in contemporary literature, offering deeper insight into the evolving translation of Lithuanian mythological concepts.

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