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MYTHOLOGICAL, HOLY OR CULT PLACES?

Prof. Juris Urtāns raised a substantial question regarding the naturalness of natural holy places during the conference devoted to the archaeology and folklore of natural holy places in Kernavė in 2008. This point attracted the attention of researchers and was repeated as a key subject for discussion at the conference in Turaida in 2009. The conference theme, natural holy places or holy places in nature, directly connected with this issue, soon became part of the international discussion on natural holy places in the Baltic Sea region and elsewhere.

Here I will contribute to the above-mentioned discussion while adding some Lithuanian data: I begin with a brief summary of my studies on natural holy places, followed by a brief account of the results of the River Neris expedition in the second part of the article. This survey, carried out in western Belarus and eastern Lithuania in the summer of 2007, revealed a number of sites similar to those usually called *natural holy places*. This point I found relevant enough to the discussion on natural holy places in the Baltic Sea region.

Natural holy place: term and concept

There is no serious reason to doubt that native terms defining sites of religious significance originated in the pre-Christian past of the Baltic and Finno-Ugrian tribes. There are several terms known in Lithuanian (*alka* or *alkas*), in Latvian (*elks*), in Estonian and Finnish (*hiis*) as well as in the Saami language (*sieidi*). But the English term natural holy place, provisionally accepted by the participants of the first conference devoted to sacred groves in Tartu in 2008, should itself be thoroughly investigated! There is the question of the choice of a term appropriate for common international use, as well as the question of what the concept natural holy place really means.

Today there are several variations of natural holy place known in the historiography of the Baltic countries, like sacred natural site of non-Christian character (Valk, 2003, 572), holy natural place (Valk, 2004, 300), sacred place

(Vaitkevičius, 2004), ancient cult site (Urtāns, 2008), and some others. But in my view, linguistic questions and problems related to the translation of native terms into English as well as into German or French* should be resolved on a local level, taking into account the situation and traditions in each particular country. However, the definition of natural holy place – a term translated into English and once proposed as universal – should be discussed.

In the discourse of Baltic researchers natural holy place means a place directly connected with the pre-Christian cult traditions (cf. Valk, 2003, 300) or related to the pre-Christian religion and mythology in general (cf. Vaitkevičius, 2004). This proposition does not contradict the linguistic explanation, which in general terms I found very similar to the supposed concept. Thus, natural holy place has a kind of double meaning: there is nature appearing as the space (i.e. surroundings of particular holy place) and at the same time as the natural character of the holy place itself.

From the Lithuanian perspective, the natural space seems to be the most important issue. The holy objects themselves rarely possess man-made features. Stones represent something of an exception, but this is not an established rule. Moreover, Christianity – the other main stream of faith in Lithuanian history alongside Baltic religion – has never focused on natural surroundings for its holy places. Urban areas are the most common and normally accepted by Christians; the holy places usually include buildings or some other artificial structures (e.g. crosses).

Even when established in nature, a Christian holy place will never use natural objects instead of artificial ones. While integrating natural objects into the frame of the holy place, Christianity will always modify them or add some man-made elements (Fig. 1). This is a significant conclusion based on observation of typologically diverse natural holy places in different parts of the Eastern Baltic region.

	Baltic religion	Semi-Christian forms (syncretism)	Christianity
Space for holy places	Nature	Nature (usually)	Urban area
Character of holy places	Natural	Combined	Artificial

* In recent years the term sacred natural site has spread worldwide and has become internationally accepted (cf. *Verschuuren*, 2010).



Fig. 1. The Eršketynė natural holy place in the vicinity of Darbėnai (Kretinga District). The holy stone has already been transformed into a base for a granite plaque with Christian symbols carved in it. Moreover, all the Christian elements (buildings, figurines and structures) contradict the concept of the naturalness of natural holy places (photo: V. Vaitkevičius (2009)).

In conclusion, it should be stressed that nature and natural are absolutely normal characteristics of the Balts' holy places, both with regard to the surrounding space and character of the place itself. The term natural holy place is relevant when dealing with the Balts' holy places and discussing them in English.

Since I have mentioned only the visual appearance (i.e. form) of the holy place, the question concerning other features remains open. Besides this, I myself have faced the problem of further division of natural holy places, based on the character of evidence recorded in relation to the site.

Archaeological data (single finds, features or structures) is, dare I say it, the feature that usually forms the dividing line between two categories of sites

among natural holy places. Archaeological finds do occasionally appear in the case of sites that are just *mythological sites*, but they constitute the main kind of evidence when talking about *prehistoric cult sites* (the latter usually being in nature, too). As can be seen in the table below, place-names, folkloric evidence and public customs reflecting sacred matters are particularly characteristic of *mythological sites*, but not of *prehistoric cult places*. The result obtained when combining features of a different kind and with different origins might perhaps even be described as the ideal concept of a *natural holy place*:

	Archaeological find in a particular context	Place-names of sacred character	Folklore texts: place legends, tales, etc.	Religious treatment and ethnographic traditions
1) Natural holy place as mythological site	1. – (Very rarely)	2. + (Often)	3. + (Often)	4. + (Often)
2) Natural holy place as prehistoric cult place	+ (Always)	– (Rarely)	– (Rarely)	5. – (Rarely)
3) Natural holy place (combining different categories)	6. + (Often)	+ (Often)	+ (Often)	+ (Often)

Natural holy places in the River Neris

As mentioned at the very beginning, I will present some data on the naturalness of natural holy places collected during the River Neris expedition in 2007. The following account will contribute to the general discussion and provide researchers with an illustration of the different categories of *natural holy places* that can exist (and actually do) in the aquatic space.

The River Neris (Вяля in Belarusian, *Wilja* – in Polish) has a total length of 510 km. It was thoroughly investigated in the course of fieldwork conducted under my direction in June 2007. This was an international – Lithuanian and Belarusian – affair, one part of which was organised in accordance with academic standards and yielded a huge amount of archaeological, historical, linguistic, ethnographical and folkloric data (for more details see *Vaitkevičius*, 2010). But the main point I focus on is the river and *natural holy places* located directly in flowing water.

Features discovered in the river during the expedition and examined as objects of our interest include certain parts of the river, such as pools, shoals, rapids (groups of stones), and single stones. Before dividing these features into categories, an important aspect of the background should be noted.

A river itself is not an ordinary, or at least usual, space for holy places. But water and features surrounded by it perfectly match the criteria of natural holy places. Beyond any doubt, the mythology of water shapes holy places to a great degree. The character of holy places surrounded by water is to a certain degree a reflection of water mythology itself (which consists of closely connected although separate concepts, namely concepts of life and death). However, I will stress not the general approaches to water as a substance or water in cosmology. We will deal with one particular river – the River Neris – which must be carefully considered as a unique phenomenon, having its own very individual pattern.

Every river is diverse in character. The River Neris is famous for of its dynamism and the character of its annual circle. Two main states of the river in the course of the year and two points of transition between them should be emphasized. There are several contrasts shaping the river: water and ice, warmth and cold, light and darkness, and life and death, as already mentioned above. The water level changes rapidly during the year as well, i.e. it rises highest when winter ends, while its lowest position is in August or September – when summer ends.

As regards the cultural aspect of the river, or in other words the river's impact on culture, we can say that May is the best time for travelling by boat or raft.* The suitable time for fishing is sometimes a complicated issue. Definitely, this depends on the appearance of particular fishes; it also has to do with different fishing techniques, such as catching pike in early spring after the ice has broken and spearing salmon at night in October or November using special lights on the boat.

The last important point to mention is the role of the river in religion. There are, of course, various reasons for performing rituals in the river itself, for example, passing dangerous rapids in the course of a trip or being in need of rain; trying to avoid fear of the river or needing to heal a horse in flowing

* Moreover, a trip by raft is a metaphor of the soul's journey to the Otherworld. Thus the Lithuanian word *sielis* means *raft*, at the same time *siela* denotes *the soul*.



Fig. 2. The Rooster's Stone (Gaidelis) near Krėslynai village (Jonava District) – the largest boulder in the River Neris. Place legends indicate the sacred significance of the site (photo: F. Žemulis (2007)).

water. Annual festivals connected with the River Neris used to cover almost the whole annual cycle.

But what exactly do we know concerning *natural holy places* in the River Neris? Here I will focus on the numerous rapids (groups of stones) and single stones. Sometimes a stone's appearance and its extraordinary shape, but most often the proper names, the origins of which are explained by story-tellers, indicate that we are dealing with *natural holy places*.

There are a large number of stones possessing animal names: the Rooster's Stone, the Sheep's Stone, the Ox's Stone, the Pig's Stone, the Cow's Stone, the Dog's Stone, the Mare's Stone, the Ram's Stone (also a rapid). Sometimes these have a shepherd in their company, too (cf. Herder's Stone near Papiškės village in Elektrėnai District). Numerous names indicate a direct connection between stones and religion, for example, Holy Stone, Priest's Stone, Mary's Stone,

Paul's Stone and Devil's Stone as well as the Wedding Stones, the Girl's Stone, and some others boulders on the riverbed.

The rest of the stones have rather diverse names. There is a Salt Stone (also two rapids in the River Neris possessing the same name), the White and Red Stones, the Golden and Silver Stones, a Nut Stone, a Cannon Stone, a Coffin Stone, a Greeting Rapid and some others.

It is the case that the very first, formal, and usual division of objects into groups according to their names is the prevalent practice among researchers of *natural holy places* in the Eastern Baltic countries as well as in Belarus and Russia. However, the variety of interpretations of the names and data relating to them suggests that categories based on names are of provisory character and should be verified. For instance, the biggest stone in the River Neris near Krėslynai village (Jonava District) is known as the Rooster's Stone, but it is related to religion – once the rooster prevented the Devil from carrying stones for a bridge (Fig. 2). The Cow's Stone near Apskrita farmstead (Elektrėnai District) is famous because of the perfect conditions for fishing. The stone's name indicates that the boulder yields food to every fisherman just as a real cow provides them with milk. Moreover, in Baltic mythology the cow has a particularly close connection with the concept of good fortune. The Greeting Rapid near Pilci village (Astravė District) (Fig. 3) is the third example of how different names could be explained and perceived. The name 'Greeting' is itself a reflection of the ritual performed here by raftsmen while travelling down the river. Bread and salt used to be offered to the river while saying special words: "I'm greeting you with bread and salt; take it, please let me go further" (Tyszkiewicz, 1871, 104).

The point is that all the stones and groups of stones possessing proper names have a certain meaning in the culture. The place-names do originate in the distant or recent past and always have something to do with either archaic or modern mythology. The same conclusion might be drawn from the investigation of stones located in the River Daugava. To define them, the general term 'stones of culture-historical significance' was introduced in recent years (for more details see Urtāns, 2007).

To sum up, the expedition along the River Neris discovered a large number of places significant for history and culture. Some stones in the riverbed are just elements of the cultural landscape. There are also *natural holy places* connected with Baltic mythology and religion as well as with Christianity. But

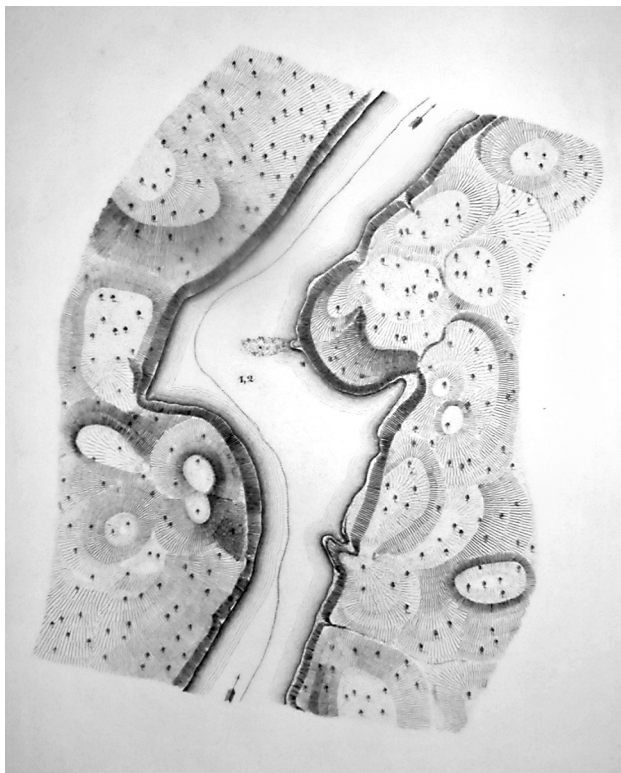


Fig. 3. The Greeting Rapid (Privital'naja) near Pilci village (Astravec District) is the very first obstacle of this kind in the River Neris. It marks the beginning of a fast and dangerous stretch of the river. A ritual observed while passing this site by raft or a boat is described by K. Tyszkiewicz in 1857. Drawing by J. Szantyr (1857/1859) stored at Vilnius University Library.

this is hardly enough to provide an exact definition of the subject. Due to lack of relevant information, the question of which kind of place we are dealing with, *mythological*, *holy* or *cult*, remains open. This shows that the question of the concept of the English term *natural holy places* in the Eastern Baltic is not yet resolved. Sites of religious significance are different here from those in the

region where Christianity was introduced some two, three or even more centuries earlier than in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, where this took place in the 13th to early 15th century. While the native terms for *natural holy place* (such as Lithuanian *alka* or Estonian *hiis*) are clear enough, some conceptual questions arise during translation into English. Appropriately enough, they have attracted the attention of researchers and in the future should be raised in a broader international context as well.

Summary

The question of the naturalness of *natural holy places* raised by Prof. J. Urtāns has attracted the attention of researchers and has recently become part of international discussion. There are at least two aspects to discuss. The first relates to language (namely to the translation of native terms into English for common use); the second touches on the concept of the *natural holy place*. Since nature is the usual setting for holy places of pre-Christian origin and the shape of these objects is mainly natural, the English term *natural holy place* seems to be relevant and appropriate for international use.

The second section of the article provides an example of how complicated the understanding of *natural holy places* can be. Single stones and groups of stones discovered during an expedition along the River Neris in 2007 are briefly presented. The author is aware that all the stones possessing proper names have a certain meaning and play a particular role in the culture. There are definitely *natural holy places* among them, but an exact definition of the subject is hard to produce. It is clear that the matter of the concept of the English term *natural holy places* as applied to the Eastern Baltic is not resolved and should be raised in the broader international context.

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