

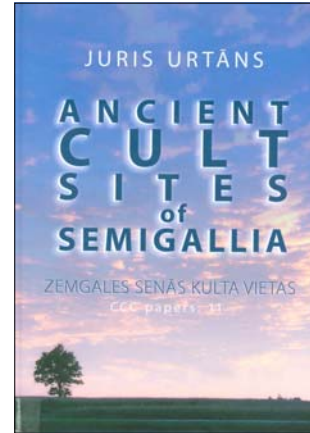
## BOOK REVIEW

### A BOOK ON SACRED SITES OF A REGION IN LATVIA

Urtāns, Juris 2008. *Ancient Cult Sites of Semigallia*. CCC papers 11. Rīga: Nordik, 221 pp.

Estonian and Latvian natural sacred places have many things in common and one similar feature has been their development: Christianity was forced upon the population of both countries, in foreign language and as a result of foreign occupation. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the tradition of natural sacred sites with its largely non-Christian rituals is very strongly represented and actively preserved in these two countries. Next to historical similarities, Estonia and Latvia share another common feature: namely, the majority of literature published on natural sacred sites is available only in local languages. In this light it is quite remarkable that Juris Urtāns has published a largely English-language book on the natural sacred sites of a Latvian region. Urtāns has gathered all the available data on Semigallia, has mapped the total of 239 ancient cult sites in the region, and the result is a thorough overview of the sacred sites in the region. For the enjoyment of Latvian readers, the book is complete with a lengthy and comprehensive summary in Latvian. The book concludes with a list of ancient cult sites in Semigallia, together with the location and brief comments in the Latvian language.

The monograph opens with a concise overview of the history and sources of research. Unlike many other studies on sacred sites, Urtāns has placed more emphasis on source criticism, considering all three types of sources: archaeological, written and folkloric. Clearly, none of these types can be solely relied on in the study of ancient cult sites, and whoever studies these has to take into account the development history of sources as well as problems with interpreting these. This has sadly been too often neglected in research, resulting in the publication of rather questionable interpretations. Urtāns concludes that archaeological sources either prove or question the data of other types of sources, because interpreting archaeological material is rather difficult (what is a cultic or a sacred find?). In terms of written sources, the author has pointed out that especially the early documents are rather generalising and of no help in finding specific sites. More recent written texts, those from the 18th–19th century, date from the period when the function of natural sacred sites had changed and the surrounding landscape was interpreted according to Christian understanding. This leaves folklore the main source of information about the location of natural sacred places, and particular attention should be drawn on compound place names including the words connected with sacredness (*svēts* ‘holy’, *upuris* ‘offering’, *baznīca* ‘church’, *velns* ‘devil’, *saule* ‘sun’, *dievs* ‘god’) or the names of deities (Jānis, Māra, Laima). True, as far as folklore is



concerned, it is important to note that accounts of oral lore have been recorded at the time when the use of the sacred places was in decline. The places on which folkloric material is available quite possibly reveal something about the traditions of the past, but dating the folklore constitutes another, rather large research question. Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn here is that the sacred sites which have been identified on the basis of different types of sources could be used as examples in further discovery of sacred places on which no oral lore is available.

The main part of the study introduces the different types of sacred natural sites. Many of these – sacred springs, stones, and trees, etc. – can be found in different regions. Even the sources in which these places are mentioned refer to these as typical sites: in addition to the place name including the word ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’, information about the place can be found in folklore accounts which include many universal motifs: for instance, tales about churches sinking underground, lakes moving from their place after baby diapers were washed in their water, places where witches were punished, bodies of water associated with the devil, and so on. Even though many of the tales are universal and known throughout Europe, and regardless of their relatively recent date, these may suggest that there was once a site which was considered sacred. Also, the tradition of sacred trees is analogous to that in many other regions: for instance, the traditional sacred oak under the roots of which the master or mistress of the house left a food offering is known in Semigallia.

A characteristic feature in the Baltic area, especially Latvia and Lithuania, is the use of stones. Stones with large conical cup-marks dating from the 16th–17th century have been found in these countries. These are the only cultic places which can be found not only based on folkloric information but also have visible features. It is worth noting that little or no lore information is known about the stones that once were located in farmyards or their close vicinity. Presuming that these stones were connected to former cult places, this situation demonstrates how quickly oral information about a sacred site can be lost.

In Latvia, the sacred natural sites are often connected with central places and hillforts. In folklore, the concept of sacredness has been attached to strongholds and hillocks on which they stand, even though archaeological research so far has not confirmed that rituals were carried out at these sites. And could this even be possible? Zebrene Idol Hill (*Elka kalns*) is probably the best case-study of using different sources and disciplines. Versatile and rich folklore about this sacred site speaks about a prominent hill surrounded by lakes and bogs. In addition to folklore evidence, it has been discovered that the highest part of the hill was once surrounded by a stone wall or bank, and phosphate analysis indicated slight evidence of human activity on the hill. Perhaps the most important feature of this site is the bank of stones, because many Latvian and Estonian folk narratives have mentioned walls or fences surrounding the sacred sites. In Estonia, a single sacred grove surrounded by a stone fence has been discovered on a 17th-century map and archaeologically studied on a sacred grove hill.

Next to traditional sacred places identified on the basis of folklore, Urtāns discusses place names containing the names of mythological characters. This is an uncharted territory for Estonian scholars, but has been definitely practised in Scandinavia. This may result from the different traditions of Christianisation or even differ-

ences in pre-Christian religion, but virtually no toponyms referring to the name of a deity (except for single places which name contains the deity name *Uku*) have been preserved in Estonia. Latvian *Jānis*, *Pērkons* and others seem to be quite common in place names, and appear to allude to former sacred sites.

Urtāns has made an intriguing contribution to his study by adding examples of new cult sites in the region. Similar studies have generally focused on ancient cult sites and neglected new ones. However, while taking into account the dynamics of folklore, the main source for studying holy places, it is possible to employ the principles behind choosing new cult sites as analogy in studying the 'ancient' ones.

The most precise dating of cult sites that the author presents in the book is 'ancient'. Single examples, such as the Krote Brūveri spring where archaeological artefacts from the 11th–12th century have been found provide insufficient evidence about the time the sacred sites were used or about changes in their use. This leaves largely open the question about the chronological timeline of these sites. Here it should not be ignored that a large part of sacred sites may have been taken into use quite recently, in medieval or modern times, and should not necessarily be dated to ancient and pre-Christian times. This fact is confirmed, for example, by the dating of many offering stones to the 16th–17th century.

Juris Urtāns' book is, no doubt, a highly comprehensive overview of the sacred sites in a region in Latvia and conclusions drawn here are applicable as comparative material also elsewhere in the world. One of the major values of the book is the fact that the author has provided an overview of all the sacred natural sites in the area, thus demonstrating the versatility of natural holy places and the fact that the same community may have used more than one sacred sites, and has shown that the onetime sacred landscapes have been far more complex than us, modern scholars, can perceive on the basis of our limited sources.

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