

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### THE SEVEN-YEAR CONFERENCE SERIES ABOUT HOLY PLACES HAD A WORTHY ENDING IN ST. PETERSBURG

In 2007, the first international conference in the series “Holy Places around the Baltic Sea” was organised at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu. The purpose of the conference was quite clear: it was supposed to bring together researchers studying holy places. The first conference aptly characterised the situation in this field of research: although researchers from different countries knew each other, contacts were casual and knowledge of sources in different regions was random. The one-day conference, which was hard to fill with papers, was followed by a two-day excursion to the holy places in the north-east and south-east Estonia. The tour turned out to be the most fruitful part of the event as discussions were initiated right on the spot, not on the basis of pictures shown on the wall. When a decision was made in Tartu to have another conference of the kind, obviously nobody imagined that it would develop into a series continuing for seven years and embracing the eastern and southern coast of the Baltic Sea.

The first conference in Tartu was followed by the next one in Kernavė, Lithuania, in 2008, then in Turaida, Latvia, in 2009, on Seili Island, Finland, in 2010, in Kętrzyn, Poland, in 2011, in Kaliningrad, Russia, in 2012 and in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 2013. All the conferences took place at the beginning of May and were combined with a tour of the neighbourhood, with an emphasis on local holy places. Although an excursion could be regarded as entertainment, it constituted an integral part of the conference, enabling the participants to gain firsthand experience of these places. However, personal emotions and impressions outweigh any good and detailed descriptions. Maybe gaining personal experience about holy places in different countries could be regarded as one of the most important results of the conference series.

When speaking about holy places in the Baltic Sea region, we often emphasise their *naturalness*, which is especially clearly expressed in the usage of a special term *natural holy place*. This was also demonstrated by several papers as well as the Turaida conference title “Natural Holy Places or Holy Places in Nature”. At the same time, some of the presentations strongly doubted the whole concept of naturalness. It seems that in the Baltic Sea region the notion *natural* is mainly needed in contrast with sacral buildings (churches, chapels, etc.) which are also holy places. Therefore, it could rather be more sensible to use a notion *non-official holy place* or something like that when discussing alternative religious places in the Christian period.

Proceeding from the general term *natural holy place*, a concept has evolved of a relatively uniform phenomenon, which, although it has subdivisions, such as sacred trees, stones, springs, hills, forests, etc., is generally universal. It was this particular argument disseminated mainly in literary sources that was refuted during the excursions most clearly (at least in the author’s opinion). While the holy places in Estonia and north of Latvia (where the tour of Latvian conference took place) were similar to each other, it was difficult to find any equivalents in the Estonian material to Lithuanian *alka*(sacred grove)-places associated with strongholds and other power centres.



*Participants of the conference “Complexity and Regional Aspects of Natural Holy Places” on an excursion at Staraya Ladoga. Photo by Žilvinas Montvydas 2013.*

This indicates that the traditions related to holy places have largely been different. In addition to these, conference papers have discussed a number of places which cannot be categorised as classical *natural holy places*, yet nobody contests their holiness. As an example, we could mention building sacrifices in medieval and early modern period towns, which are far from nature, yet still in a religious context. Also, examples from a more distant past have been discussed under the umbrella term of natural holy places, as, for instance, votive depositions of possible religious objects from the Middle Iron Age. All this indicates that the umbrella term should be further explained and expanded, in terms of the context, with a new content.

Just like holy places differ from each other, each country has also followed their own traditions in their studies. While in Kaliningrad, which suffered severely during the 20th century and featured changes in population, only one “classical” holy place was shown – an erratic boulder split in two – then in the Catholic-background Poland only pre-Christian archaeological sites were demonstrated as holy places. It is likely due to these differences that Estonia and the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea in general is regarded as the only region in Europe in which so-called natural holy places are preserved. To support this view, during the whole conference series no researchers could be found to deliver a paper on this topic in Western Europe or Scandinavia. However, it is more probable that the problem actually lies in the research situation and thus neither in Western Europe, nor in Scandinavia non-official holy places have become research objects. This was well illustrated by Ceri Houlbrook’s paper delivered at the

last conference in St. Petersburg, which discussed wish trees in Scotland, the trunks of which have been covered by coins driven into the wood as tokens in order to gain the fulfilment of wishes. Despite a few exceptions, researchers from western countries are, as a rule, only negligibly interested in holy places, which is especially interesting if we consider the trend of the past decades to investigate non-conventional topics. One of the possible reasons might be that archaeologists were the initiators of the current conference series and also constituted the majority of the participants, whereas holy places have traditionally been the domain of folkloristics and linguistics. However, holy places in these fields rather seem to be a marginalised topic, and have largely become a sphere of research for archaeology.

The reasons why natural holy places became significant for Baltic researchers are certainly multifaceted. On the one hand, it is the material associated with the religion of the past times: there are no striking and (seemingly) easily interpreted ancient relics in the Baltic Sea region, such as henges or megaliths. Also, we lack such complete myth narratives as those in Scandinavia. On the other hand, however, during the 19th-century enlightenment and romanticism period, paganism became one of the attributes of national identity and, as its only material expression was landscape objects, these holy places deserved an unproportionally great interest on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea as compared to other regions. Maybe these two factors, in combination with the private interest of researchers, are the reason why natural holy places feature the most well-established research tradition namely in the Baltic countries. Undoubtedly, the fact that holy places are still in use has also contributed to the interest of academic researchers in these studies.

Despite the Baltic-centred topic and negligible research elsewhere, the conference hosted several researchers of international renown, such as Timothy Insoll from Manchester University, Rudolf Simek from Bonn University, Leszek Słupecki from Rzeszow University, etc. However, the most significant result of the conference series is definitely the formation of an operating network and merger of several younger-generation researchers.

The series that continued for seven years has until now yielded three publications (*Folklore*, Vol. 42, in 2009, *Archaeologija Baltica*, Vol. 15, in 2011, and *Kulturas Krustpunkti*, Vol. 5, in 2011) and three more are forthcoming, so the series has undoubtedly justified its existence. Several conferences raised issues and topics for further investigation. Many presentations were case-based and focused on examples. However, instead of introducing the material, we would need a more methodological approach, and in addition to the comparison of traditional archaeology and folkloristics, other disciplines should also be involved. Only a few presentations dealt with the rich source material of modern age travelogues, and the issue of historic maps was never discussed. One of the future research directions could be co-operation with natural sciences to study ecology and land use throughout different periods and, on this basis, reconstruct the appearance and background system of holy places. Also, material culture associated with holy places and their preserved traces deserve more detailed research.

In the future, the temporal aspect of holy places should be studied further and the former ahistorical approach should be replaced by a context-based one. Considering the temporal factor would be a step further from the crucial question whether the natural holy places are pre-Christian. According to traditional approach, everything outside

the currently official religion belongs to the pre-Christian period. It is obvious that the concepts under the umbrella term *natural holy places* are not unambiguous and that non-official holy places could have been used also during the Catholic or Protestant period. However, even if the history of some holy places can be traced back to the pre-Christian period or even earlier, the activities and beliefs associated with the places have considerably changed in time. Therefore, the question of pre- or post-Christianisation is not relevant as practically all the source material about local holy places dates from the folk tradition of the late 19th and the 20th centuries. And the question of the position of non-official holy places in medieval or Modern Age societies would be even more interesting and important than speculations about their datings.

A new sphere of research that emerged during the past few conferences is the use of holy places today. It is not only academic circles that are interested in holy places, and the meaning of holy places in contemporary world is definitely wider than just providing evidence of a former religion. Here we should also emphasise that in Estonia the circle of people currently using the holy places is supposedly the most influential and partly also determines the academic approach. Yet, the users of holy places also influence the sources and shape the new meanings of these places. Considering the fact that such new religious movements are gradually gaining a firm footing, new opinion leaders emerge who determine the use of holy places.

A seven-year conference series on the same topic must be tiring and the past few conferences also indicated that the initial freshness and excitement were gradually passing. So we deemed it wise to finish the series after having provided examples from the holy places of all the countries on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea and, what is even more important, after establishing a network and introducing different ways and traditions of research. Yet, no conference, especially a seven-year-long focused series, is enjoyable without participants, so we are grateful to all the participants and organisers. However, it would be wrong to leave the achieved results just drifting. Hopefully, after a certain pause and reconsideration of the topic, we can continue discussions about the tangibility and temporality of former religions as well as landscape phenomena.

Tõnno Jonuks

## INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM “CHARMS ON PAPER, CHARMS IN PRACTICE”

The 16th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) took place in Vilnius, Lithuania, on June 25–30, 2013, and within its framework an international symposium under the heading *Charms on Paper, Charms in Practice* was organised jointly by the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming, and the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.

The ISFNR working group has set an aim to coordinate research into charms in different countries, elaborate systematic methods of analysis and encourage studies into charming traditions, as well as to compile local and international catalogues of charms, corresponding scientific publications and databases. The chairman of the committee initiated in 2007 is Jonathan Roper (Great Britain/Estonia), and the members are Daiva Vaitkevičienė (Lithuania), Mare Kõiva (Estonia), Lea T. Olsan (Great Britain), Haralampos Passalis (Greece), Éva Pócs (Hungary), Emanuela Timotin (Romania) and Andrey Toporkov (Russia). The working group publishes an annual journal entitled *Incantatio* (<http://www.folklore.ee/incantatio>).

Conferences are organised regularly (at least every second year) and the proceedings are prepared for publication. The first conference was held in Pécs (2007), and was followed by similar events in Tartu (2008), Athens (2009), Bucharest (2010) and Moscow (2011). Two pre-conferences on the same topics were organised in London (in 2003 and 2005). An overview of the Moscow conference of 2011, *Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light*, was published in *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* in 2012<sup>1</sup>.

Four collections have been published with the proceedings of the previous conferences: *Charms and Charming in Europe* (2004, editor Jonathan Roper); *Charms, Charmers and Charming: International Research on Verbal Magic* (2009, editor Jonathan Roper); *Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light. Proceedings of the Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research's (ISFNR) Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming. 27–29th October 2011, Moscow* (2011, editors Tatyana Mikhailova, Jonathan Roper, Andrey Toporkov, Dmitri Nikolayev)<sup>2</sup>; and *The Power of Words: Studies on Charms and Charming in Europe* (2013, editors James Kapaló, Éva Pócs and William Ryan).

The Vilnius conference held on June 25–29 consisted of seven sessions with twenty-five presentations. Researches originated from the United States, Estonia, Ireland, India, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Croatia, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Switzerland, Hungary, Romania and Russia.

Many of the presentations discussed the traditions of European charms manuscripts, as well as conformity between written and oral texts. A number of speakers touched upon the social practice of manuscripts and the possibilities for using them in reconstructing the ritual practices of the past.

The first session under the heading *Verbal Charms in Practice* dwelt upon Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Bulgarian manuscript charms. Lea T. Olsan (Cambridge, Great Britain) analysed the cases in which medieval Christian charms manuscripts had been supplemented with citations from Roman poets. Ilona Tuomi (Cork, Ireland) spoke about four Irish medical charms that are preserved in the Abbey of St. Gall in Switzerland.

Ciaran Arthur (Canterbury, Great Britain) analysed the literary methods used in an 11th-century Anglo-Saxon charm, which is preserved at the British Library. Svetlana Tsonkova (Budapest, Hungary) characterised medieval Slavic charms and non-canonical prayers, which have survived in manuscript form or in writing on amulets.

The central topic of the second session was contemporary charms. James Kapalo (Cork, Ireland) introduced a peculiar phenomenon in Gagauz culture: Mother of God appears to women in their dreams, providing healing powers to them and helping to acquire literacy. Yukari Nagayama (Sapporo, Japan) shared her observations about the usage traditions of protective and harmful charms in the native people of Kamchatka. Daiva Vaitkevičienė (Vilnius, Lithuania) introduced to the audience the research carried out among the Lithuanian community in western Belorussia in 2010–2012, which was aimed at detecting the influence factors of folk medicine practices as social phenomena, as well as the network of charming specialists. Rajketan Singh Chirom (Imphal, India) analysed the Chupsa Moithemba tradition in Manipur state, India, drawing attention to the usage of charms in ritual contexts.

The third session focused on the topics of charms and Christianity. Toms Kencis (Riga, Latvia) dedicated his presentation to the Latvian version of the *Super petram* charm (St. Peter sitting on a rock). Haralampos Passalis (Thessaloniki, Greece) discussed the motifs connected with St. Sisinnius and the demonic Gillo in Late Byzantium and post-Byzantium Greek tradition. Andrey Toporkov (Moscow, Russia) generalised the use of the beginning and particularly the first verse of St. John's gospel ("In the beginning was the Word") as part of a charm and magic practice on the example of Christians of different countries.

The fourth session dealt mainly with magical manuscripts. Emanuela Timotin (Bucharest, Romania) shared her knowledge of the codicological features and spread of Romanian manuscript charms dating from the 17th–19th centuries. Eleonora Cianci (Pescara, Italy) analysed, on the basis of German medieval and Early Modern Age manuscripts, the versions of the Three Good Brothers charm. Aigars Lielbārdis (Riga, Latvia) introduced Latvian charm manuscripts as well as heavenly and chain letters similar to them.

The fifth session was dedicated to charms studies. Jonathan Roper (Tartu, Estonia) introduced two significant archives of European charms: the texts archive on approximately 23,000 index cards, established by Adolf Spamer (1883–1953) in Dresden, and the one deposited in Copenhagen, which was created by Ferdinand Ohrt (1873–1938), researcher in the field of European word magic. Nicholas Wolf (New York, United States of America) spoke about charm manuscripts in English and Irish, dating from the years 1700–1850, which include materials on medicine, as well as prayers and secular poetry. Saša Babič (Ljubljana, Slovenia) discussed the research traditions of Slovenian charms, as well as the main types of healing charms. Davor Nikolić and Josipa Tomašić (Zagreb, Croatia) introduced the rich prayer-like charms collection in Croatian archives, the texts of which can be divided into exorcism and apotropaic prayers.

The sixth session dwelt upon charms, demons and fright. James Kapalo (Cork, Ireland) and Haralampos Passalis (Thessaloniki, Greece) compared Greek and Gagauz healing rituals against fright. These charms are used in the case of diseases and post-traumatic conditions caused by fright. Judit Zsuzsanna Kis-Halas (Tartu, Estonia)

presented the Hungarian versions of the same charms, supplementing them with comparisons from all over the world, including South America. Larissa Naiditch (Jerusalem, Israel) analysed dialogue in German charms (“Begegnungs Segen”).

The last session focused on various phenomena bordering between charms tradition and social practices. Emese Ilyefalvi (Budapest, Hungary) discussed obscenity in Hungarian charms. Åsa Ljungström (Uppsala, Sweden) gave an overview of attitudes towards charms manuscripts preserved in family lore throughout four hundred years (from the 17th to the 20th century). Evgeniya Litvin and Anna Kozlova (St. Petersburg, Russia) analysed the new forms of charms aimed at losing weight and enlarging breasts, which are disseminated on the Internet. Julia Ladygienė (Vilnius, Lithuania) discussed, by way of communication theory, standard situations between the magic specialist and the patient.

The conference programme and abstracts have been published in the book entitled *Folk Narrative in the Modern World: Unity and Diversity. The 16th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research. June 25–30, 2013. Vilnius, Lithuania. Program and Abstracts. Vilnius 2013.*

Andrey Toporkov

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Vol. 50, pp. 156–161, available at [www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol50/n04.pdf](http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol50/n04.pdf), last accessed on December 4, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> The collection is in two languages and its parallel heading in Russian is *Zagovornye teksty v strukturnom i sravnitel'nom osveshchenii. Materialy konferentsii Komissii po verbal'noi magii Mezhdunarodnogo obshchestva po izucheniiu fol'klornykh narrativov.*