

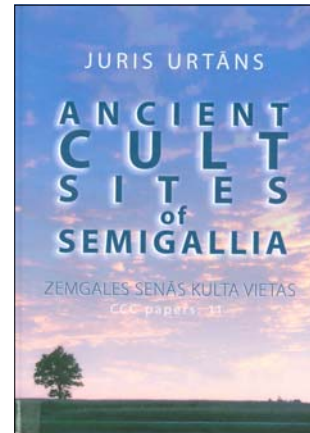
BOOK REVIEW

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.

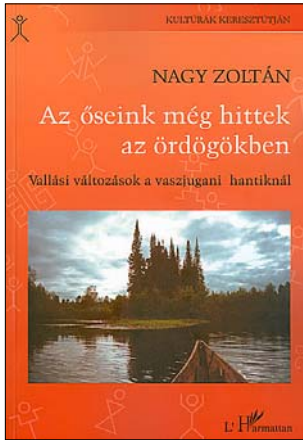
Urtāns has made an intriguing contribution to his study by adding examples of new cult sites in the region. Similar studies have generally focused on ancient cult sites and neglected new ones. However, while taking into account the dynamics of folklore, the main source for studying holy places, it is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

Tõnno Jonuks

A BOOK ABOUT CHANGES IN THE RELIGION OF THE VASYUGAN KHANTY



Nagy, Zoltán 2007. *Az őseink még hittek az ördögökben. Vallási változások a vaszjugani hantiknál. [Our Ancestors Still Believed in Devils. Changes in Religion among the Vasyugan Khanty.] Kultúrák keresztútján 6. Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézete, PTE Néprajz-Kulturális Antropológia Tanszék, L'Harmattan, 352pp.*

Research into the religion and folk belief of the Ob-Ugrian people is a traditional research topic in ethnology. What new can be said about such a thoroughly researched field? This question is even more relevant if we are talking about the religious system of the Vasyugan Khanty, as this group of Eastern Khanty has nearly disappeared by assimilating into the Russians. Vasyugan

lies in the middle of the West Siberian Plain, east of the Ural Mountains, the western tributary of the Ob River, in the Kargasoksky district of the Tomsk Oblast.

Zoltán Nagy, head of the Department of Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Pécs, Hungary, attempts to use new methods of approach to this question in his recently published PhD dissertation. He consciously knows what he is looking for, and interprets the earlier studies to serve his purpose. In order to achieve his objective “to describe and analyze the religious system, or rather the change of the religious system” he compares his own, contemporary fieldwork with descriptions of earlier papers of those who have conducted fieldwork. The main topic of the book is the description and analysis of the sacred places that have been found in the surroundings of the investigated village. Beside the temporal comparative study the author has tried to draw parallels between the religious and the social structure of the Vasyugan Khanty. Nagy has carried out his fieldwork in one village, Ozernoye, which has only five houses. To concentrate on the present day of such a small community is also a new approach in Ob-Ugrian studies.

The title of the book, which translates as ‘Our Ancestors Still Believed in Devils’, provocatively throws light upon the trends in religious changes with a single sentence. The Khanty informant makes it clear that he himself does not believe in “devils”, or at least he has not founded his life on the belief in “devils”. In the Russian sentence the pejorative word “devil” represents the devaluation of the Khanty native religion, marking the former deities that were called Father and Mother, and were revered as helping forces are now only demons.

Nagy has carried out three longer fieldworks among the Vasyugan Khanty, first in 1992, then in 1998–1999 and 2001. As the area is becoming even more Russian, it has not been in the focus of academic research. In Ob-Ugrian studies, and in the ethnographical studies about the Fenno-Ugrian peoples in general the unity of language and culture

has played a major role. The Vasyugan Khanty dialect has nearly disappeared, so contemporary research seemed to be useless. But Nagy has a different opinion, claiming that “[t]he Vasyugan Khanty culture cannot be regarded as an extinct one, as according to the logical formula of the subsistence, as long as Vasyugan Khants exist, they have culture, and therefore there is a Vasyugan Khanty culture” (p. 10). Within the dissolved community in the Vasyugan basin the author explores a small but coherent Khanty group and his results refer mainly to them. The researched village, Ozernoje, used to be the area’s religious center, as one of the most important sacred places of the Vasyugan Khanty is found near the village. Nagy was a guest of the Milimov family, who were the keepers of this sacred place.

After the introductory chapter of the book we get acquainted with the habitation, settlement construction and demographic data of the Vasyugan Khanty. Khants traditionally lived quite far from each other. This hunter-fisher community amounted only to 1,024 people in the whole river-valley. After the immigration of Russians – who came there first because of political reasons and later, after striking petrol in this region because of the work opportunity – this number increased by 50 times. This affected the development of the settlement system, many new villages were founded, and they increasingly acquired a more important role in the region. The occupational system changed completely, too. The role of hunting and fishing was dwarfed by the work in the industry, so the Khanty, who could not adapt to these changes because of their educational qualification and traditional life, were reduced to a second-class minority. As a result of these changes the Khanty social structure disintegrated and the former forms of communication that had served as a cohesive force disappeared. The natives had to breast this new situation, being separated from each other or in smaller communities. The Khanty group living in Ozernoje is such a community. Ozernoje became independent of the neighboring Aipolovo in 1910, and then the village had 31 inhabitants. In its prime there were 140 inhabitants in the village, but today only a few desolate houses have remained. After introducing the village, Nagy analyses the social organization of the village using the parish register of the church and other written sources. The clan’s marriage habits refer to the social structure. Among the Vasyugan Khants, five clans which include several families can be distinguished. According to earlier literature, the clans are exogamous, but examining the parish books, it is not so obvious. Families that had the same family name composed a lineage and were severely exogamous. The lineages diverged even in location. For the sake of perspicuity, the author presents the system of connections between the clan of the Vasyugan Khanty families and their settlement. According to this, we learn about the two important aspects of the Khanty social organization: the relationship and the location. These two aspects will have a great role in the examination of the sacred places.

In the second part of the book Zoltán Nagy introduces the Vasyugan Khanty system of deities. He uses mainly Kustaa Karjalainen’s (1922) order, and after that talks about the present situation of the system and the tendencies of change based on his own fieldwork. Christianity had a great influence on the pantheon of the Vasyugan Khanty. Torem became the most important deity; his figure has fused with the Christian God, so compared to him, all the other deities became simpler and more or less evil and demon-like. The former helping spirits are now regarded as devils. This belief

can be found also in Russian folk belief. The cult of local deities and house spirits is disappearing. In the present culture the elements of Russian folk belief and scientific theories have a great role. School and television are the sources of this knowledge. Nagy convincingly presents on the example of a television advertisement how the image of a Khanty house spirit has changed (see further Nagy 2003).

While demonstrating the Ob-Ugrian system of sacrifices, Nagy again uses Karjalainen's system (Karjalainen 1922), as he finds this the most useful. Nowadays the system is less complicated: there are only a few living sacred places and local deities. The communal feasts have disappeared together with the community, the sacrifices are only individual. The feasts of the Christian religion can be found in the Khanty religion, too, but some elements of the Khanty folk belief are present in the local Russian folk belief.

Nagy's research focuses on the sacred places and on the beliefs, activities belonging to them. His novel method of distributing these places is worth explaining here, as it can be applied also in other research topics. The first group is the sacred places in nature. Firstly, they are the living sacred places, where a local deity resides, where sacrificial ceremonies are held, and where strict rules of behaviour and taboos are observed. Secondly, they can be former sacred places, where people no longer make sacrifices, but still remember these ceremonies. They can be mythical places, in which deities used to live, and memorials of a heroic past. This group also includes cemeteries. The second group is the sacred places in houses. Three important places are mentioned: the sacred corner, the loft, and the stove.

Ozernoye is the ritual center of the Vasyugan, so the network of sacred places is dense around the settlement. Zoltán Nagy investigates 13 sacred places. The most important of them where worship is still carried out is the Păi Imi Peninsula, first mentioned in 1882. The goddess of the peninsula, Păi Imi, is regarded as the mythical mother of the local Khanty community, so she has to take care of the wellbeing and good fortune of the inhabitants. She or the members of her family appear in the origin myths of nearly all the sacred places in the area. In the 19th century male members of the community used to address her at the turn of seasons and made a sacrifice in front of her idol chamber. The men also brought some food from the women's sacrificial meal, so all the Khanty people were joined in the community with the goddess. By the present day the communal food sacrifices have disappeared, but individual, mainly object sacrifices are still made in order to gain health and good luck. The sacred place is still actively visited, but it does not function to strengthen the ritual unity of the community.

The next sacred place that is discussed is the so-called Hammer Island Sacred Place. Apropos of this place the systemization of the material used by Zoltán Nagy is clearly evident in the further part of his book. As there is often only little to say about the sacred places, he digresses into several topics which lighten parts of the Khanty culture. These digressions are interesting and valuable, but sometimes they are only loosely connected to the sacred place. The Hammer Island used to be a sacrificial place for good hunting luck, so we can read about elk worship. Discussion about the Musical

Peninsula introduces Ob-Ugrian cultic musical instruments and the connection with the supernatural. Of course these shorter essays cannot explicate the topics in depth.

While talking about the memorial places of the heroes, the author notes that the sacred places often coincide with archaeological quarries. The Khanty believe that these places are connected with the time of heroes. This period and the local heroes, who are bound to a clan, are known in the epic tradition. Nagy takes the heroic epics one after another and tries to draw conclusions from them by showing the Khanty system of world periods. According to this system, the first period is the time of creation, the second is the time of song and tale, when the heroes turn into deities, and the third period is the above-mentioned time of heroes, which is a warlike time. This is partly the time of heroes, who do not turn to deities any more, partly the time of humans. Decadent time also appears in this worldview.

In connection with the cemetery the author compares a particular funeral, researched by participant observation with traditional descriptions and rules of funeral. He demonstrates that the customs change, lose their importance or disappear, as in this particular case. Still, the customs and rules seemed to be living and of decisive importance. As we do not have any description of specific funerals from the time of the traditional material, it is difficult to say whether these changes in the custom's force are a new development (as the author suggests) or the "ideal funeral" never reached fruition.

Explaining the sacred places of human sphere, Zoltán Nagy differentiates between the woman and man, holy and profane, clean and unclean part of the Khanty house and community. He offers several illustrations to show these differences, but unfortunately these apply only to the Vasyugan region (Pesikova 1997).

The author tries to extend his research of the sacred places to the whole basin of the Vasyugan. The lack of earlier collected material leaves this part incomplete, as the above introduced system cannot be used, but the known data of the sacred places can be found in the appendix. In this chapter Nagy tries to reveal the social definition of the holy places by drawing parallels between the local and affinity factors of the worship of the sacred places. The comparative tables present radically new information: the Khanty clans are seen as cult communities. Every clan had its own local sacred place, own hero, and own deity at the culmination of the culture. Today the table cannot be filled completely, but it still demonstrates the statement of the author. According to Zoltán Nagy the clan/village cult community seems to be a masculine ritual group, where local and genealogical aspects become mixed. Though women could not take part in sacrifices, there were sacred places for the women in the village, so the women, who came from several clans, visited the same sacred place. This fact demonstrates that the village was also a cult community. This point of view should be applied in the research of other Siberian ethnic groups.

As we have seen, this book is based on new and modern research and poses several new questions. It demonstrates that a well-known research field – the Ob-Ugrian religion – has persistent topics for anyone who would try to find deeper contexts.

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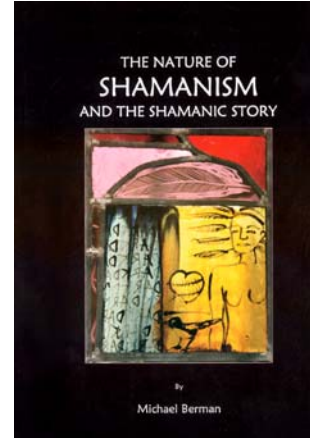
REVIEW OF MICHAEL BERMAN'S *THE NATURE OF SHAMANISM AND THE SHAMANIC STORY*¹

I have tried to write an academic review of Michael Berman's book and found myself reiterating Aado Lintrop's points. Then I tried respond to Lintrop and Berman jointly, and this also did not work. In every instance, my criticism of the Berman book was much harsher than Lintrop's. Indeed, I find Lintrop's review a remarkable demonstration of scholarly generosity and rhetorical temperance.

Berman's book is characterized throughout by an absolutely uncritical use of sources. Consider for starters the third paragraph of the introduction, where alongside classical scholars of religion like Durkheim, Marx (pace!), James, Muller, Radin, Van der Leeuw and, of course, Jung, one finds not only modern and contemporary scholars like Eliade, Hoppal, Hultkrantz and Smart, but also neoshamanist apologists such as Joan Halifax, Sandra Ingermann, Michael Harner, and Roger Walsh. Berman alphabetizes the whole list so that Halifax and Harner appear between Eliade and Hoppal, but such gestures of egalitarianism among academic unequals can be only gestures.

Lintrop has detailed the structure of the book and taken pains to be patient, when on page after page Berman abuses traditions of scholarly discourse by making mistakes for which undergraduates are chastised. Typically, Berman's rhetorical strategy is to assert a point – “In shamanism, rapture can be seen as one method of enhancing life's powerfulness” (p. 2) – and then quote from a scholar who is making a different point in an entirely different social, cultural or historical context. The scholar's quotation is presumed to legitimate Berman's assertion because both the scholar's and Berman's points are imagined as logically participating equally in a higher level of generalization. So Berman follows up his assertion about shamanic “rapture” with a quotation from Van der Leeuw that “the Israelite judges, for example, led their people to victory because the spirit of Jahveh had come upon them. This exaltation, this fullness of God, confers mighty power.” (quoted on p. 3). The quotation can appear to validate Berman's assertion only if one assumes, I emphasize *assume*, that the phenomenon described as the rapture that comes upon a shaman and that described as the “spirit of God come upon the judges” are the same, but how would one know, the Hebrew judges being long dead and we, the uninitiated, not being shamans? Lacking any matrix of comparators, this form of argument is no argument at all but simply a begging of the question from those already inclined to agree.

Yet all is not ecstatic among (neo)shamans. Part of the object of Berman's book, it seems, is to authorize himself by positioning himself as a revisionist of Harner, candidly challenging the founding father of neoshamanism as a commercial enterprise. Contrasting a neoshamanic narrative with that of a classic Eskimo narrative, he cheek-



ily points out that “the kind of apprenticeship neoshamanic trainees undergo bears no resemblance whatsoever to the hardships that indigenous shamanic apprentices had to pass through and indeed, if they did, it is highly unlikely there would be many recruits for such courses and many workshop leaders would soon go out of business.” (p. 54)

A remarkable passage begins on page 17 with a challenge to Harner’s belief that “there is nothing necessarily dangerous in what the shaman does. Such a definition ensures prospective workshop participants are not put off from attending as a result of any risk that might be involved.” (p. 17) He then argues with Harner’s assertion that shamans are distinguished from “magicians and medicine men” by the state of consciousness called ecstasy, an assertion which for Berman “raises the problem of what is ecstasy, as it can refer to a whole range of emotional states from mental dissociation to the transports of joy a poet or artist is said to experience [...] moreover, the words ‘ecstasy’ and ‘trance’ are frequently used synonymously [...] As the word ecstasy can be used to refer to so many different situations, which makes its meaning ambiguous, the word ‘trance’ is preferred for the purposes of this work.” (p. 18) Having deferred from the terminological ambiguities ‘ecstasy’ to the clarity of ‘trance’, Berman quickly becomes anxious to dispel any negative associations surrounding the latter term, preferred for its unambiguousness, asserting that “there is no reason to regard being in a trance state as anything strange. Indeed, all the time we spend sleeping or daydreaming can be regarded as time spent in trance states too.”

If you have been following thus far, like me you also may rightly wonder if any clarity has been gained by trading the term ‘ecstasy’ for the term ‘trance’. Or consider the following argument from (failed) analogy: “Just as psychology could never have constituted itself if people had no psyche and sociology could never have existed as a subject if people had not society, in the same way there could be no religion if people had no religious sentiment.” (p. 38) By this time, perhaps you like me have also begun to develop a genuine appreciation for Lintrop’s patience as a reviewer.

As for the “shamanic story” portion of the book, and the claim to introduce a new genre, this has all been treated generously by Lintrop as well. The “shamanic story” genre, it turns out, is any story based on a journey, real or imagined, during which the protagonist learns something. I cannot say I found reading this book to be such a shamanic journey. But Berman is too modest. He claims to introduce only one new genre, but ignores the implicit assumption that since, quoting Eliade, “All the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman’s vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection”, there are really TWO new genres, one *The Shamanic Initiation* embedded in the other, *The Shamanic Journey*. Of course, these two are together only specifications of the real master narrative, Rank-Campbell’s *Myth of the Hero*. By this point, it is clear enough that not only does this book not add anything new; it confuses that which already exists.

So for whom, then, is this book written? First and foremost, probably for Berman himself, who has some bones to pick with Harner and Ingermann and who, as a self-identified neoshamanic practitioner wishes to clear a space for his own shadow. Second, probably for neoshamanist neophytes for whom any book that has a variant of the word “shaman” in its title not once but twice must thus be doubly appealing. Finally for all those, forgetting Alexander Pope’s admonition about “a little knowledge”, who would

gloss 150 years of social science scholarship in a compendium of appropriate quotations. For the rest of us, on the other hand, the book must stand as a kind of amazement. Reading it brought to mind the judgment of the American historian James Beard, which I can only paraphrase because I do not have the exact quotation in front of me: "Its reasoning proved persuasive for those who found it satisfactory."

Andrew O. Wiget

NOTE

- ¹ See the book's first review "A Shamanic Book without Shamanic Stories" by Aado Lintrop in *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, Vol. 38, pp. 157–165 and Michael Berman's response in *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, Vol. 39, p. 129.