

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.

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