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Constructing Sacred Sites as a Form of Collective Memory: The Sacrificial Stone on Toomemägi Hill in Tartu

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Abstract: Sacred natural sites retained their relevance in Estonian culture during and after the shift from mainly oral to mainly literary culture. However, the framework for conceptualising sacred natural sites has changed. Premodern sites have acquired new meanings and functions (notably those associated with national identity) and new sites have been taken into use. The article will present a typology describing the different ways of conceptualising the sacred natural sites that is current in Estonian culture and will offer a case study of a sacred site with a pivotal role in Estonian national identity, the sacrificial stone on Toomemägi hill in the city of Tartu.

Keywords: sacred natural sites, national identity, collective memory, Estonia

Introduction

The conservative landscape patterns of Estonia have included and include to this day a network of sacred natural sites, including but not limited to sacred trees and groves, springs and sacrificial stones. It can be presumed that sacred sites adjacent to villages that are known to have existed in the Late Iron Age (from 1050 AD to 1200 AD) have been used as such from before the nominal

Christianisation of Estonia in the 13th century (Valk 2017: 139–143; on sacred natural sites in general, see Wild, McLeod 2008). Local oral tradition, typically recorded since the end of the 19th century, associates sacred natural sites with practices such as celebrating feast days, healing and other magic as well as orally transmitted folktales.

Since the inception of the project of constructing Estonian national identity in the 19th century, sacred natural sites in Estonia (both as generalised, abstract categories like sacred groves, and as concrete sites) have also acquired new meanings derived from more modern schools of thought as important signifiers of national identity. In addition, new sacred natural sites have been created since the 20th century. Such sites give tangible form to conceptions, spread by means of Romantic literature, of perceived 'ancient Estonian' sacred sites. However, the premodern meanings and functions of many sites have persisted, changed and intertwined with modern ones.

In order to facilitate the comprehension and analysis of this varied picture, I will first present a typology describing the different ways of conceptualising sacred natural sites that is current in Estonian culture. My aim is to shed light on how premodern and modern attitudes, narratives, customs and practices intertwine and blend in association with different physical landscapes and even non-material, purely semiotic or symbolic places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*). Consequently, I will present a case study of the sacrificial stone on Toomemägi hill in the city of Tartu that will demonstrate the commingling of both premodern and modern notions on sacred natural sites that operate in different layers of collective memory.

The treatment is partly informed and inspired by the theory of collective memory developed by Aleida Assmann (2006) that distinguishes between different layers of collective memory: (1) **social memory**, which extends the individual memory into the communication of a small group and lives and dies in interaction between people (cf. "Folklore Is Artistic Communication in Small Groups", Ben-Amos 1971); (2) **cultural memory**, which both (a) defines a canon of heritage for a larger group (such as the imagined community of Estonians) and (b) allows for the recording of dormant heritage not current in functional memory; (3) **political memory**, which forges the identity of a nation, including rituals of national importance that symbolically unite the polity. It is crucial to understand that relationships between these notional lay-

ers of collective memory are fluid and dynamic and that the borders between the layers are porous.

Shifting meanings and changing functions of Estonian sacred natural sites

The typology below differentiates between various cultural practices for conceptualising and making sense of sacred natural sites and representing or reflecting on such sites. The purpose of the typology is to provide a framework for describing in a generalised manner the different fates of traditional sacred natural sites in Estonia and concurrently to provide an analytical tool to facilitate the empirical description of such sites. In total, I will distinguish eleven types on the two axes representing, firstly, different types of practice and discourse and, secondly, different types of sacred natural site. The key distinction on both the axes will be between premodern (traditional) and modern (literate, post-traditional), while allowing for hybrids as well as the absence of a practice and practices divorced from real locations. The distinction between premodern and modern will roughly correspond to the different (sub)systems of culture distinguished as orality vs literacy or non-written vs written culture (*sensu* Ong 2002 and Lotman 2019). In the typology below, the premodern and traditional practices, conceptions and other phenomena of culture also tend to be local, whereas the modern and literary tends to represent wider cultural phenomena, often with a common national background.

	No practice	Premodern tradition	Modern tradition	Both premodern and modern tradition
No site (or deterritorialised, disembodied site)	Ø	**I Informed ethnographic nostalgia,** cultural memory as dormant archive records	**II Romantic nostalgia**, landscape representations based on European literary examples, such as 'ancient Taara sacred oak groves'	**III Hybrid ideas** drawing both on national myth and folklore publications, for example, a desire to offer coins or ribbons in a sacred oak grove
Premodern site	**IV Abandoned sites**: knowledge of the site may be confined to archives dormant possibility of a 'second life'	**V Premodern vernacular tradition on the wane**: old people know the site and may adhere to the tradition	**VI Former sacred natural sites become profane landmarks**, previous traditions are transformed beyond recognition	**VII** Local living and **transforming tradition** at a traditional site used by the local community along with new religious or spiritual movements
Modern site	**VIII Abandoned modern sacred sites**, especially from the 1930-1940s and 1990s formerly used by new religious movements	**IX Premodern customs find new sites**: ribbons or coins offered to sites not considered sacred in the past	**X** Modern sacred groves of **civil religion**; sanctuaries of **new religious movements**	**XI Intermingled premodern and modern traditions at modern sites**, for example offerings of ribbons to bases of stork nests as a fertility rite at weddings

Table 1. A typology of the current ways of conceptualising sacred natural sites in Estonia.

I Firstly, a premodern tradition relating to the nature of and practices in sacred natural sites can be displaced and disembodied, that is, it becomes estranged from its contexts so that it is connected to no particular site. This can be construed to mean **informed ethnographic nostalgia**: orally transmitted texts originating as from within the *social memory* of a small group can be conserved as dormant archive records and thus enter *cultural memory*. Consequently, there are people familiar with the Estonian tradition of sacred natural sites through the mediation of such archive texts, or, alternatively, through previously local oral vernacular memory that has been decontextualised. At a generalised level, such information has taken root as part of Estonian functional cultural memory. A tradition of this kind can be re-embodied and re-actualised as social memory in locations perceived or recognised as appropriate, forming practices classified below in types VII, IX, and XI.

II Secondly, a typical and dominant form of the expression of a modern tradition with no spatial context can be termed **Romantic nostalgia**. This follows the 18th- and 19th-century Western European Romantic literary tradition of finding the sublime and sacred in nature, 'localising' it into the Estonian national discourse, although, typically, without spatial references. This includes lofty ideas of ancient 'Taara sacred oak groves' which are ultimately of literary origin. Such imagined landscapes migrate from text to text and have played an important role in discourses forming and conveying Estonian national identity, thus representing an instance of *cultural memory* that in turn supports *political memory*. When embodied and actualised as *social memory* in new landscapes designed to follow such representations (or in existing landscapes found to conform to them), this tradition contributes to the formation of practices described in types X and XI below as well as contributing to those classified into type VII.

III Thirdly, elements of the above two ways of perceiving sacred natural sites in Estonia (here treated as historically and conceptually distinct) often appear in conjunction with each other. Such **hybrid ideas** draw on sources that are mainly literary in origin and character (such as national myth, Romantic notions of the sublime) as well as those that are derived from local oral tradition, such as publications of folklore. This can be expressed by a desire to offer coins or ribbons (as in local vernacular tradition) in a sacred oak grove (as represented in Romantic-era art celebrating the ancients' purported affinity with the

sublime in nature) that can be embodied in practices analysed below in types VII, X and XI. Again, this represents *cultural memory* that can be actualised as *social memory*.

IV Fourth, a large proportion of Estonian historical sacred natural sites can currently be described as **abandoned** if there is no current active knowledge of the former use of the site as sacred by people who are familiar with the physical landscape in question. Within the Assmanns' model, this represents *social memory* that has ceased to exist as such. Knowledge of such sacred natural sites might be confined to archives as *cultural memory* (dormant, waiting for someone to connect the record of a legend or a local practice with a place on the map or a landscape). This allows for the theoretical possibility of a 'second life' in cases where the physical landscape has not changed too drastically. Therefore, if people in possession of disembodied knowledge about such a site (as sketched in types I and III above) come into contact with an abandoned site, this can result in a revival or reinvention of tradition as described in types VI and VII below.

V Fifth, the 'preservation' of vernacular tradition in a traditional sacred natural site (for example, with knowledge of the tradition confined to older people who know local legends and may or may not adhere to traditional customs) can in practical terms mean an instance of a preliterate oral **tradition on the wane**. This conservative preservation of tradition within local *social memory*, beloved of the antiquarian sort of ethnographic interest, is to be distinguished from practices that form type VII below, as this type includes living and thus naturally transforming traditions that take on new features or elements over time. Some traditions on the wane can find themselves reinvigorated by hybridising into practices discussed under type VII. Alternatively, the significance of the site could be perpetuated in a different and profane way (see type VI) or can be forgotten leading to the abandoning of the site (see type IV above).

VI Sixth, in some cases, former sacred natural sites have become **profane landmarks**: premodern vernacular tradition has gone extinct, transformed beyond recognition or been supplanted by a modern one, while the location or landscape itself has retained symbolic significance. This can mean the repurposing of a historic sacred natural site as a natural monument while the sanctity of the place is forgotten, representing *social memory* that has been subsumed by *cultural memory*. This is to be distinguished from the 'heritagisation' of a

site whereby it is transformed from a focus of religious and magical activity to a historical monument by means of putting the oral traditions into a different context (cf. type VII below). However, if dormant knowledge of the former sanctity of such a site is reawakened from the archives (see type I above), there is a chance that a sacred natural site can be 'restored' (see type VII below).

VII Seventh, the local living and **transforming tradition** at a historic sacred natural site can be seen where the site has retained functions at least partly similar to those of the premodern or preliterate age among the local people and has been concurrently taken into use by new religious or spiritual movements. It is common enough that traditional sacred sites become associated with motifs disseminated through Romantic-era or later nationalist literature. This can be a part of the wider process of transforming local sacred natural sites into national historical monuments and giving them new functions within a national heritage that has been minted in Estonia since the 19th century. It is also possible that there is no perceived or significant discrete boundary between older and newer practices and conceptions for the people using the site, with the different layers of tradition embodied in the practices at the locus blending together. I consider such processes of hybridisation, where local *social memory* is supported by the wider *cultural memory*, to be signs of a healthy and evolving tradition that can remain viable in the future: sites that have such hybrid heritages seem more likely to be remembered and stay relevant in culture for longer.

VIII Eighth, there are **abandoned sacred natural sites that had been taken into use relatively recently**. Due to the scarcity of empirical data, this category can be expected to include a few examples and is dominated by two kinds of site: firstly, private sacred groves (*koduhiis*, see H. S. 1944) founded from the 1930s and the 1940s by adherents of the *taarausk*, the 'national religion' (saturated with Romantic nostalgia as described in type II above; see Vakker 2012) and abandoned by the 1950s due to the persecution of the faith under Soviet power; secondly, there was a brief but intense blossoming of new religious movements and spirituality movements in Estonia in the 1990s just before and after the implosion of the Soviet Union, which probably spawned landscapes of special spiritual importance that subsequently fell into disuse. Both categories represent now extinct *social memory* inspired by larger currents of *cultural memory*.

IX Ninth, viable **old customs tend to find new sites**. This can be seen in ribbons or coins offered to sites not considered sacred in the past. Such migration

of customs to new sites is natural within a living tradition, as new settlements can be expected to acquire new sacred natural sites as long as the tradition remains alive and productive beyond preserving old localised practices and as long as the tradition has functional value among practitioners. This partly depends on traditional ways of recognising inherently sacred sites. However, based on current Estonian data, it is difficult to reconstruct such 'traditional' selection criteria for sacred natural sites (if there ever was such a coherent, comprehensive and stable set of criteria). Current selection criteria for new sacrificial sites can depend on simplified extrapolations of ethnographic material known within the canon of today's active *cultural memory*, with such new sites possibly representing embodiments of vague nostalgia described under type I above, constituting innovative islands of social memory.

X Tenth, **new sacred natural sites have been founded and invested with traditions deriving from modern ideas**. This category includes the new sacred groves of civil religion (such as newly planted oak groves) as well as the natural sanctuaries of new religious movements (such as 'energy' sites discovered by people claiming to have powers of extrasensory perception). In the case of new civil religion sacred sites, symbolic representations from the current active layer of cultural memory can be seen to induce changes in landscapes that in turn create new islands of social memory and concurrently support rituals belonging to the sphere of political memory that provide symbolic support for the cohesion of the nation. This is an example of the intertwining of different layers of collective memory.

XI And, last but not least, **hybridisation of old and new traditions at new sacred natural sites** is possible. Offering coins to stones and ribbons to trees is a premodern tradition that has remained known and widespread even today, and both can be observed at sites that have been taken into use following their identification as sacred following a modern-era conception. An example of this type is the custom of visiting stork nests as part of a wedding ceremony and tying ribbons around the tree or electricity pole on which the stork nest is located. Another example of this type is the stone commonly referred to as the 'sacrificial stone' next to the mediaeval cathedral on the Toomemägi hill in Tartu, which I will discuss in detail below. The stone probably came to be seen as an ancient sacred site due to Romantic notions of the role of the hill before Christianisation (Tvauri 2001: 74–75).

The sacrificial stone and surrounding landscape on Toomemägi hill in Tartu

Due to the prominence of the location in Estonian culture, the most notable example of the intertwining of different layers of collective memory at a modern sacred natural site can probably given by describing the different cultural and landscape processes involving the sacrificial stone and surrounding landscape on Toomemägi hill in Tartu.

The stone has attracted, in addition to offerings of coins and ribbons, new kinds of tradition such as the ritual burning of lecture notes by students at the end of the term or playing a role in wedding ceremonies. Stones that have offerings to divine or otherworldly forces placed on them are a staple of Estonian landscapes. With 400 sacred stones recognised as national monuments, there is on average a sacred stone for every three and a half thousand people and many are both logistically and culturally accessible, retaining a role in the collective memory. In the following, I will present a somewhat paradoxical case study of the best-known example to exemplify the hybrid and inclusive nature of contemporary landscape processes around Estonian sacred natural sites.

In the following, I will first discuss the modern-era literary origins of the notion that Toomemägi hill had been an important sacred site in the period before the Baltic Crusade in the 13th century, moving on to an examination of the known history of the sacrificial stone. A more detailed account will then be made of activities of the Tõlet religious group in their vigorous use of the stone and the surrounding landscape as a sacred site in the 1980s and 1990s, concluding with some remarks on the current role of the stone.

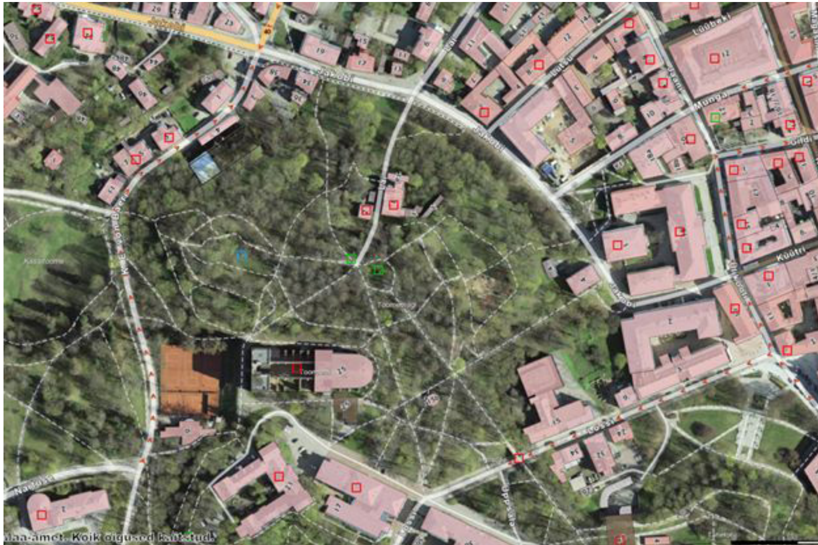

Figure 1. The hill of Toomemägi in the centre of Tartu. The ruins of the cathedral are marked '25' in the centre of the map, the sacrificial stone (marked with a blue square) is located to the northwest of the ruins between footpaths marked in dashed lines. The main building of the University of Tartu is marked '18' in the east. Red squares denote architectural monuments. Background map by the Estonian Land Board.

The name Toomemägi in Estonian means Dome Hill and is derived from the German *Domberg* (historically also *Thumb, der Thums Berch, Domb Berg, Duhmberg*, *Doemberg*; see Hermann 1965: 633; Ernits 2016) after the mediaeval cathedral (*Domkirche*) located on the hill. The cathedral itself, built in the 13th century shortly after the Baltic Crusade, has been in ruins since the 16th century. At the end of the 18th century, the hill was used as a pasture for goats and cows from the city below.[1] However, part of the cathedral was renovated and taken into use as the university library at the beginning of the 19th century after Russian emperor Paul I endowed the university with the area (Kõivupuu 2011: 174). At the same time, the hill itself was landscaped and became a picturesque park, and is now a popular recreation area complete with pathways, benches and children's playgrounds. The main university building, the intellectual heart of the city, is a short walk away and students' daily pathways cross the hill. The city of Tartu in turn is considered the intellectual capital of Estonia as the seat of, from 1802, the only, and now the leading, university in the country.

Toomemägi hill, in the centre of Tartu. The ruins of the cathedral are marked '25' in the centre of the map, the sacrificial stone (marked with a blue square) is located to the northwest of the ruins between footpaths marked in dashed lines. The University of Tartu main building is marked '18' to the east. Red squares denote architectural monuments. Background map by the Estonian Land Board.

According to a widely accepted but unproven belief originating in the 19th century, the hill was an Estonian sacred site before the Baltic Crusade and the construction of the cathedral in the 13th century. The stone near the cathedral has been identified as a sacrificial stone despite the absence of archaeological evidence or records of vernacular traditions on the matter. The pre-Christian sanctity of the site was asserted as an indisputable background fact in a text that is foundational to the Estonian nation, the fictional 'legend' *Wannemunne's Sang* ('The Song of Vanemuine') by Dr Friedrich Robert Faehlmann, released in 1840: "Da kam nun Alles zusammen, was Leben un Odem hatte, um unsern Domberg herum, auf dem ein heiliger Hain stand." ('There came all together who had life and breath onto our Dome Hill where a sacred grove stood.') (Faehlmann 1840: 43.) Toomemägi (as Taaramägi near the river Emajõgi) is also one of the few sacred natural sites mentioned in the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*, written by Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1862), that can be topographically identified as a reference to a real landscape in our world (Heinapuu 2019: 270).

Tvauri (2001: 74) remarks that Faehlmann was probably inspired by the view, commonly held in the 19th century, that the word Tartu, recorded by the chronicler Henricus de Lettis as Tarbatu,[2] is to be derived from the name Tharapita, or Taara, reported to be the 'great god' of the Estonians by the same chronicler during the Baltic Crusade.[3] In the introduction to the first three of his eight fictional legends, Faehlmann explains the name as Taara paik 'site of Taara': "Der Name ist Estnisch, und mag Anfangs Tara paik (erinnert an den alten Deutschen Namen Tarapat) geheißen haben." ('The name is Estonian, and it may originally have been Tara paik (remembered in the old German name Tarapat).') (Faehlmann 1840: 40). However, subsequent onomastic and etymological research considered it more probably that Tarbatu is derived from the archaic Estonian word for the European wood bison (*Bison bonasus*), *tarvas*. Tarwanpe, the attested name of the fortified settlement in the centre of today's city of Rakvere, whose Lower German name Wesenbergh supports this etymology, as *wesent* is bison in Lower German (Ariste 2010; Ernits 2021).

Another probable supporting factor for considering Toomemägi hill is the hypothesis, popular in the national mythology, that Catholic churches in the 13th century were built on earlier Estonian sacred sites, which makes it seem plausible to speculate that the location of any 13th-century Gothic church might be a former sacred grove, although it is nigh impossible to find any proof either supporting or contradicting this claim. This serves as an example of how, due to the scant documentation of early mediaeval Estonian history and the crucial role of historical narratives and symbols in the nation-building process of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the boundaries between the methods and narratives of Estonian academic historiography and historical fiction have often become blurred, not least in the eyes of the wider audience.

A generation after Faehlmann, the pseudohistorical Romantic imagery the hill had attracted was aptly summarised by Dr Theodor Mühlenthal, who sequentially conjures up scenes from the supposed initial discovery of the hill relating to the ancestors of the Estonians, the cult of ancient gods, and the historical conquest of Tartu by Yaroslav the Wise, Grand Duke of Kyiv, in 1030, and forward to the subsequent fall of the Estonian fortress to German crusaders in the early 13th century:

> *A dark thicket of wood covered the slopes of the valley, as a mighty oak grove grew on the western ridge. … Thunder roared and out of the clouds fiery bolts of thunder flashed into the oak grove. "Up there on the hill", the spies said, "lives* Taar*, this is a mound of thunder." …* Taar *or* Tör *was the highest god of this people of hunters. … Centuries passed. … On the said Töripää columns of sacrificial smoke shot up, here was the holiest site for worshiping* Taar*, here in the sacred oak grove the ghostly rustling of the leaves was united with the sounds of* Vanemuine*'s zither and with the words of prayer spoken with the words of the Estonian people's song. … Yaroslav took his warriors to the indicated place. The Olympus of the Estonians was vanquished. … Two centuries had passed into the folds of time since Yaroslav and there came pious pilgrims with cross and sword from the west. They, too, reached the same site near the river Emajõgi, vanquished the fortress and, on the stead of worshiping* Taar *they built a cathedral in honour of Saint Dionysius.* (Quoted by Dr Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald in a letter to Dr Georg Schultz-Bertram dated 18 September 1872, published in Kreutzwald 1959: 309–310.)

The assumption that Toomemägi had been an Estonian sacred site before the Baltic Crusade is uncritically repeated in later literature, such as in the poem "Isade hiis" ('The Sacred Grove of the Fathers') by the poet Gustav Suits (1950: 17–22), as well as by archaeologists and scholars of toponymy writing about the hill. It is remarkable that the assumption was accepted as true and 'deriving from folklore' by the City Archaeologist of Tartu, Romeo Metsallik, when interpreting excavation finds as late as in 1996:

> *Accepting the position, derived from folklore, that ancient Tartu, Tarbatu, had a wide religious background in the neighbourhood (this was after all the location of the sacred hill* [hiiemägi] *or place of Taara* [Taarapaik], *the sacrificial stone* [Ohvrikivi] *and the Holy River Emajõgi* [Püha Emajõgi]*, it seems plausible that items produced in a workshop that had been fit into a scheme that has a symbolic meaning in nature might have had affixed magic powers to them by certain rituals.* (Metsallik 1996: 1359)

In summary, despite extensive research into how the fictional and literary pre-Christian Estonian pantheon came into being (e.g., Viires 1991), the wider public and even intellectuals not directly related to philology could not be expected to distinguish between Romantic literary invented traditions and texts deriving from recorded oral vernacular folklore. Thus hybrids of these two are probably bound to continue circulating within wider Estonian cultural memory for some time yet.

The archaeologist Andres Tvauri supposes that the notion of the hill's sanctity can be traced to Faehlmann's assertion as well as the presence on the hill of a smooth-surfaced stone with two regular-shaped depressions that has been identified as a sacrificial stone (Tvauri 2001: 74–75).

Friedrich Ludwig von Maydell's illustration to Wannemunne's Sang by Fr. R. Faehlmann, published as a plate alongside the legend in *Verhandlungen der Gelehrten Esthnischen Gesellschaft zu Dorpat 1(1)* in 1840, shows birds and animals as well as people gathering in the sacred grove on Toomemägi hill to listen to the song and harp of Vanemuine, the fictional ancient Estonian god of song and music.

A sacrificial stone symbolic of antiquity

Against the backdrop of the wider cultural forces described above, the purported sacrificial stone has become a signifier in the landscape that symbolically embodies and represents all the notions described above, as it is the only visible element in the semiotically overburdened landscape of the hill that can be unambiguously associated with 'ancient Estonian' indigenous heritage. In addition to the ruins of the cathedral, which currently house a historical museum as well as a two viewing platforms in the twin spires, and the sacrificial stone, the inhabitants of the hill also include seven monuments to poets, scientists, scholars and intellectual leaders of the Estonian nationalist movement from the 19th and 20th centuries. However, these other monuments are seen to have their origins in the second millennium *post nativitatem Christi*, whereas the sacrificial stone, dated in official sources to the first millennium (e.g, Metsallik 2011) can be seen to hold the symbolic continuity of Estonian culture from the golden age of ancient, pre-Christian independence to this day. This, along with its central location, makes the stone a potent symbol that keeps attracting new meanings and practices.

Despite the prominence of the stone's current location, its initial location as a sacrificial stone is unknown (Metsallik 2011). According to Tvauri, there are no records or any other data about traditional vernacular sacrificing activity at the stone and the two depressions in the surface, which probably motivated the notion that the stone was sacred, are probably natural in provenance. Tvauri concludes that there is no certain evidence to associate the stone with the pre-Christian settlement of Tartu as the stone's smooth surface implies that it was unearthed in the 19th century when sand and gravel were being excavated at nearby Kassitoome (Tvauri 2001: 74; Kõivupuu 2011: 174).

The first mentions of the stone from the 1880s state that it was exhibited near the Old Anatomical Theatre about half a kilometre southeast from where it is now, and was dug into the ground either in 1879 or 1880 as a 'heathen relic' (Tvauri 2001: 74; Metsallik 2011). This decision was reversed after the 10th Russian Archaeological Congress, in Riga in 1896, and the stone was again exhibited on Toomemägi hill (Metsallik 2011). After several subsequent moves, the stone was placed in its current location in 1926 (Tvauri 2001: 74; Kaasik 2017:

94–95), but this fact remains little known and therefore the majority of people seeing might naturally assume that it had been there since time immemorial.

Thus, the stone has come to play the role of the physically most accessible sacrificial stone to 20th-century Estonian students and professors of archaeology. With its imposing appearance, it is no wonder that it became, despite its exceptional nature, akin to a yardstick against which other sacred stones in Estonia were measured, as Tvauri notes (Tvauri 2001: 74). The stone has attracted and retained, in addition to offerings of coins on the stone and ribbons tied to adjacent trees, there are new traditions such as burning lecture notes, etc., as mentioned above. Marju Kõivupuu notes that during the Soviet era (before 1991), newly married couples went to the stone, where wishes were made, champagne offered and pictures taken; coins and candles could almost always be found on the stone. In independent Estonia, the stone's association with wedding ceremonies has remained alive and the area around the stone has served as an outdoor backdrop for theatre performances by Vanemuine theatre. (Kõivupuu 2011: 174–175.)

The burning of lecture notes (Kõivupuu 2011: 174) has caused some damage to the stone, prompting Malle Salupere, a noted researcher into the cultural history of Tartu, to write an op-ed piece in the city's newspaper *Tartu Postimees* in 2004:

> *The oldest exhibit on Toomemägi is the ancient Estonians' sacrificial stone, wrought and brought here by the ice sheet at least a dozen millennia ago. Just ten years ago, it seemed that the smooth-surfaced stone with polished depressions could stand for centuries but now it is on its way to irreparable collapse: the whole upper surface has splintered and the decomposition continues. Soon the depressions will no longer be visible. I thought that the adverse weather conditions of the last few years were to blame but some days ago I was enlightened by a knowledgeable resident of Tartu. In fact, students have developed a custom of burning lecture notes on the stone, and sometimes flames reaching the treetops have been seen.* (Salupere 2004)

Due to the spread of information technology as well as the better availability of both printed and digital materials to students, the importance of previously central hand-written lecture notes has declined and so, as Marju Kõivupuu notes, the custom of burning lecture notes on the stone has all but vanished (Kõivupuu 2011: 175).

Experimental use in a tumultuous age

In the late 1980s, the area around the sacrificial stone was taken into more active use by the Tõlet religious youth group, who strove towards the formation of an Estonian revivalist native vernacular religion. As part of the wider and immensely popular heritage movement in the late 1980s, which was one of the vehicles for the restoration of the Republic of Estonia's political independence, Tõlet was nominally founded as a 'heritage protection club' in 1987 and became one of the founding local associations of the nationwide Estonian Heritage Society in the same year (on the group in general, see Kaasik 2000; Kuutma 2005: 58–70; Västrik 1996; Dresen 2020).

The membership of Tõlet included university and secondary school students and other young people aged between 17 and 25 who resided in Tartu, although they were from different parts of Estonia, including a significant group from rural backgrounds. The most productive and persistent form of the club's activity is remembered to be communal meals and discussion on Thursday nights, called *pudruõhtu* ('porridge night'). In addition to the formal members of Tõlet, this circle included other people and hangers-on interested in the discussions and in company. (Kaasik 2000; Västrik 1996.) Thus, a loose community with a centre and peripheries and its own distinctive social memory was formed.

The number of formal members in the club never exceeded twenty although the number of those involved in the activities seems to have been larger by an order of magnitude. Ergo-Hart Västrik notes that in 1992, the list of participants in the spring school held by Tõlet in the sacred grove of Samma (Tammealuse), a place fairly distant from larger Estonian population near the village of Viru-Nigula in Virumaa, extended to 130 names. By publishing their own journal, with a circulation of several hundred copies, writing articles in mainstream newspapers, giving public presentations at public events, arranging public events of their own and appearing on TV, the members of Tõlet succeeded in promoting their agenda to a wider audience (Västrik 1996: 88). This agenda always had wider ambitions to steer Estonian culture back towards its perceived roots among the traditional cultures of other Finno-Ugric indigenous peoples in the former Russian Empire, who in turn formed part of the wider sphere of Northern Eurasian (and, by extension, North American) Indigenous peoples.

Ergo-Hart Västrik notes the close association of the group with the so-called folklore movement and calls Tõlet "the extremist wing of the folklore movement" (Västrik 1996: 94, 98). The aim of the folklore movement was to promote, often in urban contexts, knowledge and practical skills pertaining to authentic traditional music and dance by creating possibilities to learn traditional ways of singing and songs, continuing the living traditions of playing traditional instruments known to village musicians with no formal musical education, and promoting traditional ways of dancing, as practiced at vernacular rural celebrations. This movement started in the 1970s in opposition to official Soviet cultural policies that promoted 'folklore collectives' or groups convened for stage performance whose repertoires included adaptations of folk songs into the Western musical tradition and staged performances of dance numbers. In contrast to the official 'folklore' groups, whose purpose was to perform to audiences, the folklore movement emphasised transplanting the vernacular mechanisms of transmitting this heritage into an urban environment from their former rural settings. This included an emphasis on singing, playing a traditional instrument and dancing as a mainly communal activity with no dedicated 'performers' or 'audience' and undertaken for one's own pleasure. The folklore movement was supported by researchers into folk music whose mutual contacts were institutionalised in the eight Finno-Ugric folk music conferences held between 1976 and 1996. The conferences included concerts and common celebrations and provided learning opportunities for enthusiasts of folk music.

Ahto Kaasik, a former member of the group, notes in his reminiscences that the sacrificial stone on Toomemägi hill "received offerings already before Tõlet" but claims that the activities intensified on the initiative of the group:

> *Flowers from wedding parties, candles from heartbroken young people, coins, as usual, from the common people. … But now Tõlet took possession of the site, going there to give offerings on Thursday nights, making fires on solstices and accumulating strength on other (festive) days. The example found followers. More and more other folk started visiting the sacrificial stone for the same reasons.* (Kaasik 2000.)

Probably the most influential single event in this process was a public ceremony held at the stone on the eve of the Tartu Heritage Protection Days on 13 April 1988. The festival, held in Tartu from 14 to 17 April 1988, was formally the fifth

nationwide assembly of heritage protection clubs and is now remembered as the first mass political event on the path to the reestablishment of the independent Republic of Estonia as it brought together several thousand people who openly displayed support for Estonian independence (see Lukas 2013).

The ceremony, as with similar ones there and in other locations, was called a 'public incantation' (*avalik loits*), referring to a traditional genre of word magic that indeed played a central role in the ceremonies. Jonathan Roper defines incantations or verbal charms, commonly known as "spells" as "traditional verbal forms intended by their effect on supernature to bring about change in the world in which we live" (Roper 2003: 8). Incantations were traditionally used to persuade or deter certain creatures or phenomena, to alleviate tensions, cure diseases or harm something or someone, to increase one's own power and reduce that of ill-wishers, or to convey messages to the universe and higher powers, nature and people (Kõiva 2019: 9). The perhaps unknowing innovation here in contrast to the Estonian vernacular tradition was that the incantations in the ceremony were collective and performed in public, whereas in Estonian folk religion, incantations are to be said in a private and concealed way so as to maximise the efficacy of the magic (Loorits 1935). According to a description by Paul Ariste, "incantations were uttered in a silent and rapid manner" (Kõiva 2019: 24).

According to the account by Tõlet members Lauris Toomet and Art Leete (1992) summarised below, the ceremony was performed by members of Tõlet, of the alternative student theatre group Munev Aine, as well as by secondary school students in Tartu. To lead and introduce the proceedings, Tõlet had co-opted the actor Jaan Kiho, founder and leader of the Munev Aine theatre group.[4]

The ceremony was preceded by the collective singing of archaic folk songs (an activity that can also have nearly religious connotations, especially in the case of mythological songs) about hundred meters away from the sacrificial stone near the monument to the poet Kristjan Jaak Peterson. As the singing stopped, Jaan Kiho started drumming with a shaman drum next to the sacrificial stone, attracting the crowd. During the drumming, in a wider circle around the sacrificial stone, torches were lit by performers in the ceremony, who then moved through the crowd towards the stone and, by putting their torches on the ground, lit a bonfire next to the stone that had been prepared for the occasion. The other performers remained standing in a small circle around the leader and two girls with torches remained standing between the crowd and the circle,

one of them holding a vessel with grain. Jaan Kiho started the incantations by more rapid drumming and then sang a traditional archaic folk song that has also been used as an incantation for making clouds part (*Mis on see ilmuke udune*; variants of the song have also been arranged as choral pieces) before continuing drumming to accompany the rhythm of the three incantations performed by two members of Tõlet. (Toomet, Leete 1992.)

The first of the three incantations pleaded with the ancient Estonian gods to return to the land and in particular to Tartu, using the 13th-century name Tarbatu for Tartu and the equally archaic Oandi ~ Ugandi for the lands around it:

> Meie enda oma maa jumalad / Maa jumalad kust te olete ära läinud … Tulge siia Toome hiide / Tarbatusse Oandi maale … Ugandimaale uut elu tooge / Väge rahval te viimasel külvake / Hiis see seisab veel tammine … *('Gods of our own land / Gods of the land whence you have gone away … Come here to the Toome grove / to Tarbatu in the land of Oandi … Bring new life to the land of Ugandi / Sow power to the last people / The oaken grove still stands …')* (Toomet, Leete 1992.)

The second incantation turned to the land, the skies[5] and the gods in more detail:

> Mida sa maa oled maganud / Mida sa ilm oled oodanud / Omad jumalad maa jätnud … Päeva jumalad maa ootab päikest / Vihma jumalad maa ootab juua / Põllu jumalad põld ootab pidajat / Maa jumalad / metsa jumalad / Oandi ootab oma isandaid / Jõe jumalad / järve jumalad. *('Earth why have you been sleeping / Sky what have you been expecting / Earth you have left your gods … Gods of the sun the earth expects sun / Gods of the rain the earth longs to drink / Gods of the field the field longs for a farmer / Gods of the earth / gods of the forest / Oandi longs for its masters / Gods of the river / gods of the lake')* (Toomet, Leete 1992.)

At the beginning of the latter part of the second incantation, grain was offered by participants throwing it into the fire, marked by the words "Maa vilja anname" ('We give the fruit of the earth'), and the incantation pleaded with the gods to give "luck" and "power" (õnn, *vägi*, *jõud*; all central concepts in vernacular religion) as well as independence to the land, forest, field and people. The third incantation sought to increase the knowledge, power and numbers of the people, probably in reference to the political processes underway: "Tundjaks me saagu,

saagu teadijaksi … Tugevaks me saagu, saagu vabaksi … Saagu meid kolmi, saagu kolmi nägijaksi / Saagu meid kolmisadaksi, kolmisada nägijaksi / Saagu meid kolmituhandeksi, kolmituhat nägijaksi / Nägijaksi, jõudijaksi …" ('Let us become knowers … Let us become strong and free … Let there be three of us, three who will see / Let there be three hundred of us, three hundred who will see / Let there be three thousand of us, three thousand who will see / Will see, will have the strength …') The incantation was finished with an acceleration in the drumming and concluded with a single strong stroke by Jaan Kiho, who then sang a traditional adjourning song (Toomet, Leete 1992).

The ceremony was notable as it was relevant on all the three levels of collective memory discussed here. At its core was the social memory of a small group of activists experimenting and trying to find or rediscover an authentic and archaic vernacular religion for themselves (cf. Västrik 2015; subsequently, similar but less prominent ceremonies were held near the stone on the solstices and the site was used in some of the wedding ceremonies of couples from the Tõlet circle). However, the ceremony also had important dimensions in the common cultural memory and was part of an effort to mobilise Estonians as a political entity that has become a part of the national political memory.

On the wider level of collective cultural memory, the ceremony drew on well-established myths of the sanctity of the place where it was performed as well as an image of archaic pre-Christian Estonian culture. Traditional incantations, known from printed collections of folklore and especially from the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* (Lönnrot 1849; the epic was called virtually a sacred text at least by the prominent Tõlet member Lauris Toomet at the time), have played a symbolic role in both Estonian and Finnish collective cultural memory both before and after the ceremony described. Archaic incantations tend to follow the same metre as archaic runo song (*regivärss*, Kalevala-metric songs; Kõiva 2019: 19; Siikala 1999: 64) and thus the incantation genre has influenced later literary poetry and music. A prominent example is the choral work *Curse upon Iron* for tenor, bass, mixed choir and shaman drum[6] by the Estonian composer Veljo Tormis (1973), based on the text of an incantation for healing wounds from sharp iron tools included in the *Kalevala* (Lönnrot 1849: 51–56), translated into Estonian by August Annist and further modified by the poets Jaan Kaplinski and Paul-Eerik Rummo, which can be considered the best-known work by Tormis, performed often both in Estonia and elsewhere in the world.

Stylistically, the texts of the incantations demonstrate a hybridisation of traditional incantations, the style of 19th-century Estonian patriotic poetry that, in an Ossianic vein, sprang from imitating traditional folk song style but ended up establishing a new poetic language with its own canon of metre, style and vocabulary, most notably in the epic *Kalevipoeg* (Kreutzwald 1862). Another work of art that can be counted among the probable influences on Tõlet incantations is "Taevatelgede laul" ('Song of the Sky Loom'), performed by Tõnu Tepandi, an actor at Vanemuine theatre between 1970 and 1983. The text of the song is a Native American invocation or prayer starting with the words "Maa – meie ema, / ilm – meie isa, / meie oleme teie lapsed" ('Earth, our mother, / sky our father, / we are your children'), translated by the Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski presumably from an English translation (credited only as 'Indian folklore') into slightly archaised Estonian free verse. The song, half chanted and half sung in an idiosyncratic way was performed at numerous concerts by Tõnu Tepandi among other renderings of Estonian poetry and reached a still wider audience after being published on an LP record (Tepandi 1982). The significant step taken by Tõlet was to blend these strands of cultural phenomena together into an explicitly religious ritual that was performed at a location considered to be an ancient sacred site.

Finally, the ceremony was doubtless a ritual of political significance with the aim of uniting heritage protection movement activists, numbering several thousand, who had come together in support of Estonian cultural identity and political independence during a period of rapid change in society. With regard to the political memory of the nation, the ceremony was a ritual exhibiting symbols of continuity drawing on the mythos of the golden age of the Estonian nation before the Baltic Crusade. As with the whole heritage protection movement, history had the role of legitimising national aspirations for the future. The public ceremony was part of a very important political event in the brooding national awakening, as Tartu Heritage Days are in hindsight seen as a formative moment in the process of regaining Estonian political independence.

Wooden statues of gods on Toomemägi hill (1989–1992)

Figure 2. The sacrificial stone on Toomemägi. The stone plate next to the stone, designed and installed by the engineer Johannes Maadla in 1960, says in Estonian and Russian: "The archaeological monument sacrificial stone is under state protection." Photo: Raul Veede, CC BY-SA 3.0 he vicinity of the sacrificial stone on Toomemägi hill. Photo: Raul Veede, CC BY-SA 3.0

From the autumn of 1989, members of Tõlet erected altogether three statues of gods (commonly referred to as *puuslikud*, 'wooden images of gods') next to the sacrificial stone on Toomemägi hill. This was a part of a more comprehensive vision to make the area around the sacrificial stone into a sacred site and a space for conducting ceremonies. The statues stood on the hill until April 1992 when they were taken down and destroyed against the backdrop of a conflict between Tõlet and the Word of Life evangelical Christian congregation.

In the era of transition from the authoritarian and highly regulated regime of the Soviet Union to a more liberal legal system under the restored Republic of Estonia, all law and regulation was in flux to the point of occasional anarchy,

so that such an initiative within the public space of the city seems to have fallen into a regulatory grey area of spatial planning. The first statue was erected in October 1989. The largest of a three, a statue of a fertility deity (*sigivushaldjas*) took the strength of ten men to erect in March 1990, with the third erected in the autumn of 1991. The statues were carved from the trunks of fallen trees. (Leete 1992; Kaasik 2000; Västrik 1996: 92.) The statues were displaced and restored to their locations several times in March and April 1992 and were finally destroyed and disappeared. According to most accounts, students from outside Estonia who were studying at the local Word of Life movement Bible Seminary were implicated in the demise of the statues (Västrik 1996: 92; Ringvee 2012: 279; Leete 1992).

The Word of Life charismatic Christian movement had been persecuted by the Soviet authorities, including the KGB (as were virtually all smaller denominations due to the perceived risk that such subversive groups were dangerous to the existing system of power) and was denied official registration before 1990. Despite this, it had a notable underground following among students in Tartu with meetings conducted in private apartments. In 1990, the Tartu congregation of the Word of Life movement founded their own Bible Seminary, the first of its kind in the Soviet Union. The seminary attracted students from Russia (Khabarovsk, Abakan, Yakutsk), Ukraine (Lviv, Kyiv) and Armenia (Yerevan). (Eier 2000.)

Despite their differences, Tõlet and Word of Life shared some similarities, starting with partly overlapping aims, as both groups were in favour of Estonian political independence and facilitating the downfall of the authoritarian Communist Party regime. Roughly similar in size and strength and drawing their followers mainly from the among students, both were also somewhat visible in the public space in Tartu. Somehow a public ideological confrontation between the two groups came about and there was a 'public meeting' between Tõlet and the Word of Life congregation on 5 March 1992 that apparently failed to bring about any reconciliation (Leete 1992).

However, Art Leete has refused to put the full blame for the demise of the statues of gods on 'external culprits', citing the indifference of the Tõlet community toward the statues:

> *Now would perhaps be an appropriate time to stop seeking culprits from without and to consider our own actions. Was it necessary to start taunting*

> *the people of the Word of Life? … How often did we go to feed the statues on Toomemägi?*[7] *How much did we care about them? Who knows. In any case, our own* mistakes *should count as a cause for the disappearance of the statues.* (Leete 1992: 22.)

Ringo Ringvee cites the destruction of the statues as the most extreme occurrence of overt confrontation between Christians and representatives of 'other spiritual practices' from the transition era of the 1990s, noting that there had been only one other comparable case, one of vandalism and arson against the properties of a Baptist congregation in the small city of Rakvere by young people interested in Satanism in 1999 (Ringvee 2012: 279–280).

Thus, the initiative of erecting wooden statues of gods turned out to be a controversial religious innovation that failed to make a lasting mark on the landscape of the hill.[8] In the following, I will discuss the probable cultural sources of the innovation. I consider it likely that there were three main sources of the idea to erect wooden statues of gods known in the collective social memory of the Tõlet circle: first, a report in the 13th-century *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae* about the destruction of Estonian 'images and likenesses of gods', second, the traditions surrounding the Seto god Peko known from the 20th century (see Ränk 1934; Valk 2019), and third, the living tradition of making statues of deities in the Khanty tradition of Western Siberia, known to some members of Tõlet from first-hand experience.

Though brief, the description by the chronicler Henricus de Lettis of the felling of wooden statues of Estonian gods somewhere in the north of Estonia in 1220 is the first written account of an Estonian sacred natural site as well as one of the most thorough depictions of Estonian vernacular religious practices in the 13th century. It amounts to a few sentences:

> *There was there a mountain and a most lovely forest in which, the natives say, the great god of the Oeselians, called Tharapita, was born and from which he flew to Oesel. The other priest went and cut down the images and likenesses which had been made there of their gods. The natives wondered greatly that blood did not flow and they believed more in the priest's sermons.* (Henricus 2003: 193–194.)[9]

The interpretation of this passage has led to much speculation since the 19th century but due to the absence of any other written or material evidence pertaining to the events directly most of it remains hypothetical. However, the passage has established itself as one of the staples of Estonian collective cultural memory and is now conventionally linked – albeit with scant evidence – to Ebavere hill in Virumaa (see Heinapuu 2019: 267–268).

A depiction of missionaries cutting down Estonian images of gods by Friedrich Ludwig von Maydell (1842).

Tõlet members' intense interest in the Siberian Khanty and other Finno-Ugric (as well as other Northern Eurasian and North American) vernacular traditions was ideologically motivated by the notion that an important part of Estonian ethnic religious tradition had been lost in the centuries after the Baltic Crusade. This narrative has been present in Estonian culture since the Romantic national awakening that produced the discourse of yearning for an ancient golden age (see Type II above). This type of nostalgia has subsequently been hybridised with informed ethnographic nostalgia (see Type I above), which came to extend its interest beyond the boundaries of strictly Estonian tradition. Such developments follow and parallel the post-Jacob Grimm interest of German scholars in delving into mediaeval Icelandic written tradition to construct a more holistic picture of pre-Christian German religion and share the same scholarly comparative-historical approach.

Ants Viires (1991: 142) notes that Estonian public discourse in finding appropriate cultural symbols to unite the Estonian nation under Soviet power and in the conditions of 'intensifying Russification' turned toward 'ancient times' and toward the cultures of other indigenous peoples of the Eurasian forest belt and the arctic peoples of Northern Eurasia in the 1970s and 1980s (see also Kuutma 2005). One further motivation for this was the notion that peoples speaking other Uralic (Finno-Ugric and Samoyed) languages share a history with Estonians as 'kindred peoples' (*hõimurahvad*). Finno-Ugric cooperation started as trilateral between the three newly independent nations of Hungary, Finland and Estonia in the 1920s against the backdrop of a modern European cultural framework and institutions, including trilateral cultural congresses.[10] Paradoxically, the forced annexation of Estonia into the Soviet Union in 1940 facilitated, in the following decades, research in Estonia into the Uralic languages spoken by peoples living in the territory of the current Russian Federation. As travel within the Soviet Union was unhindered and inexpensive, this made

ethnographic and folkloristic research into the cultures of these peoples easier and further advanced interest in the more archaic features of these cultures, partly as an extension of efforts to gain a better insight into the undocumented eras of Estonian prehistory.[11]

This initially mainly academic interest became the basis of more personal contacts and some convergence among academics, writers and artists from Estonia and the Finno-Ugric peoples of the current Russian Federation. Ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork as well as scholarly cooperation starting in the 1960s (the congresses of researchers in Finno-Ugric studies remain the pinnacle of this cooperation) was later, from the 1990s, supplemented by Finno-Ugric folklore and theatre festivals, as well as some cultural and NGO cooperation verging on ideas of mutual Finno-Ugric political solidarity, including the world congresses of Finno-Ugric peoples and the Youth Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples (MAFUN).

In the case of Tõlet, some members' personal contacts with the Khanty culture in Western Siberia came to play a significant role in the religious development of the group. Other Finno-Ugric cultures were seen to provide crucial knowledge, experience and information that could be used to fill gaps in Estonian tradition. In addition to material images of local gods, points of interest included a native tradition of shamans or priests who are communally recognised authorities in vernacular religion and pass on their specialist skills and knowledge to following generations of similar specialists; communal vernacular religious practices (as opposed to personal and secret magic practices); non-Christian traditional funeral rites and, more generally, the search for a holistic system of vernacular ethnic religion, which was felt to be lacking. As Ergo-Hart Västrik notes, members of the Tõlet circle "tried to synthesise the Ugric spirit from the experience" of other Finno-Ugric traditions. The idea was that the more and less distant kindred nations in Russia (for example the Mari, Mordvinians, Udmurts, Komi, Mansi and Khanty) had retained something (i.e. a certain world outlook or spirit) that Estonians had lost. (Västrik 1996: 95.) However, the Khanty language is linguistically quite distant from Estonian: the closest language to the Ob-Ugric Khanty and Mansi language is Hungarian. Likewise, the Khanty traditional way of life is similar to other Siberian peoples and is based on hunting, fishing and reindeer herding in contrast to mainly agrarian Estonian traditional culture.[12]

In the Khanty tradition, the best-known deities (luŋk or juŋk) are "spirit-protectors of single kin and settlements, and protectors of the Khanty living along a certain river." (Kulemzin 2006: 107) Of these local spirits, images have been always made: "simple wooden columns with rough anthropo- or zoomorphic features" (Kulemzin 2006: 108). These Khanty wooden figures of gods are shaped like horizontal poles that can be higher than a metre and a half (Karjalainen 1918: 175). The rough manufacture of these images is due to the traditional prohibition on making them similar to people or animals. The sites where these statues stood has played an important social role, as the gods required periodic and occasional visits, connecting the Khanty settled in isolated kin groups (Kulemzin 2006: 108).

Although the statues of gods on Toomemägi hill failed to remain standing, similar statues of supposed ancient deities have been erected more recently in less prominent places in Estonia. Mare Kõiva and her co-authors cite influences from the Erzya woodcutting tradition from the 2000s, another fruit of Finno-Ugric cooperation, as a contributing factor (Kõiva et al. 2020).

A Khanty wooden figure of a deity from a sacred site near Salekhard (Karjalainen 1918: 175).

Conclusion

Various cultural forces have conspired for more than a century and a half to make the sacrificial stone on Toomemägi hill one of the most prominent sacred natural sites in Estonia, weaving together strands of perceived mediaeval history, Ossianic myth, vernacular religion and student customs. The stone on the hill has become a focus for living and viable wedding customs as well as a sight for people interested in pre-Christian Estonian heritage, coming to embody valuable elements of cultural memory.

Following earlier designation as a monument and respective measures of official protection, the sacrificial stone on Toomemägi hill, as it is known, has been designated an archaeological monument under the Estonian Heritage Protection Act (Allik 1997) and, more recently, also a protected sacred natural site (Terik 2022). I agree with Marju Kõivupuu's opinion that the stone actually functions as a sacrificial stone (Kõivupuu 2011: 174) and consider such protection as well founded, but rather due to the stone's contemporary significance

from the 19th century onwards than its earlier history, which remains unverifiable and speculative.

The rich pseudohistorical speculation and newer Romantic-inspired mythology around the stone and the practices centred on the stone that are reinforced by this cultural heritage make it in fact one of the most prominent sacred natural sites in Estonia today, definitely meriting designation as a national monument. It is an issue of heritage policy to consider whether the current designation as an archaeological monument is appropriate or should such phenomena be accorded some other official form of protection, perhaps even under a more flexible general scheme of classifying monuments.

Perceived ancient heritage played a central role at the inception of modern Estonian na-tional identity and cultural memory in the 19th century, as a glorious past seemed a conditio sine qua non for the existence of a nation. Toomemägi then became a focus of the notions of an ancient golden age. These notions were drawn on in the flamboyant rituals – not without political connotations – on the hill in the late 1980s. Since then, Estonian national identity has become less political and confrontational. This development is aptly mirrored by the fact that the sacrificial stone on Toomemägi hill became a backdrop of family-friendly summer theatre productions such as Robin Hood, A Midsummer Night's Dream or Ronja, the Robber's Daughter in the late 1990s.

The Estonian language is perceived to be at the core of Estonian national heritage (Kultu-uripäranditeadlikkus 2023, Heinapuu 2023). Thus, the national awakening and a yearning for strong national symbols with political connotations in the late 1980s, as exemplified the Tartu Heritage Protection Days of 1988, can be construed as a backlash against official measures taken to limit the use of Estonian and promote the use of Russian by the authorities of the Soviet Un-ion in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. During this period, signs of cultural heritage were perceived and emphasised as proof of Estonians' existence as a distinct cultural group, and, by extension, as proof of a right to exist and persist by speaking and thinking in Estonian.

The reestablishment of Estonian government institutions after the collapse of the Soviet Union made it possible to restore the status of the Estonian language as the most usual language in services provided by both the government and private institutions. An Estonian citizenship has allowed a civic Estonian identity to develop next to the ethnic one. The re-established Office of the President of Estonia as well as Estonian Defence Forces and other state

institutions can am-ply provide ready-made ritual for cementing a common political memory. Additionally, it could be argued that the presence of Estonian government representatives alongside those of former colonial powers in international bodies like the institutions of the European Union have created a new symbolic repertoire of political memory. Thus, the photographic record or a television news report of an official visit of a Western European head of state or government into Estonia may – by asserting the status of Estonia as a valid political and cultural entity – today serve a similar purpose as a torchlit ritual next to a sacrificial stone in 1988. I consider these developments as an important background factor that has shaped the current role of the sacrificial stone mainly as a locus of rituals that are limited to smaller groups, such as participants in wedding parties while it retains its strong symbolic value in mainly non-performative cultural memory.

Notes

[1] In Estonian vernacular religion, sacred natural sites are usually considered off limits for this kind of activity. However, the ability of the community to enforce such traditional rules was often hampered by the German-speaking authorities who could not be expected to share such sensibilities.

[2] *Castrum Tharbatense*, *in provinciam Tharbitensem*, *in Darbeten*, *apud Tarbeten*, *in Tharbete*, *in Tharbata*, *prope Tarbatam*, *eis Tarbatenses*, *in Tarbeta*, *in Tarbetam* (HCL XV 7, p. 126; XV 7, p. 128; XIX 3, p. 160; XXIV 1, p. 210; XXV 2, p. 222; XXVI 7, p. 234; XXVII 3, XXVII 5, p. 242).

[3] *Tharapita*, *Tarapitha*, *ut Tharaphitam*, *Tharapitha*, *Tharaphita* (HCL XXIV 5, p. 216; XXX 4, p. 268; XXX 5, pp. 270, 272; XXX 6, p 272). For general treatments of Tharapita, see Sutrop 2004 and Viires 1990.

[4] While this can be seen to shift the whole event well onto the theatre side of the fluid boundary between theatre and ritual, it is important to note that aspects of theoretical and practical shamanism were not completely alien to the theatre scene in Tartu and actors there could even be expected to be most experienced people in archaic ritual techniques at the time. By the late 1980s, an influential movement within Estonian theatre centred in Tartu had long been experimenting with ritual elements from the shamanistic cultures of Northern Eurasia (including the use of shaman drums) along with more local Estonian folklore. This included melding texts and practices of these traditions together in theatre productions to develop a language of theatre that would offer a more indigenous alternative to the prevailing Western European theatre tradition, a way of

both going 'back to the roots' and simultaneously cultivating a new creative tradition for the future. The leader of this strand of theatre has been the director Jaan Tooming who also led the in-house acting school, or 'studio' within the large institutional theatre Vanemuine in Tartu from 1972 to 1976 and again from 1985 to 1989. The instruction of future actors included a lecture course from 1973 to 1974 by the polymath folklorist Uku Masing, a dissident with a notable following in Tartu, on the mythology, folklore and shamanism of the boreal, or circumpolar, indigenous peoples of Northern Eurasia and North America. On the basis of notes by participants and Masing's manuscript, the text of the lectures was subsequently distributed in the intellectual *samizdat* scene of Estonia and finally published in print in the more liberal *glasnost* era (Masing 1989). Masing's thesis that the vernacular Estonian culture and religion belonged to the circumpolar indigenous circle had been accepted a core tenet by Tõlet.

[5] Following archaic usage, the word *maa* here is ambiguous, as it can polysemically mean either land, country, earth, the lower half of the cosmos, or the country of Estonia in particular, or all of the above. The word *ilm* in the next verse likewise polysemically means weather, sky and the heavens above, or the upper half of the cosmos. As a compound, *maailm* means the world, or the whole cosmos. In archaic Finno-Ugric myth, the sky (*ilm*) is associated with the deity Father of the Sky and the earth with Mother Earth (Siikala 2002: 24–25; Loorits 1998: 67). However, myths clearly explicating this complex have not been recorded in the Estonian folklore archives, excepting the possible obscure hint at *hieros gamos* reflected in the belief that the land is dangerous to sit on before thunder has struck the first time in spring.

[6] The drum that inspired Tormis to write the piece and the one he used during the first performance of the work was a Koryak shaman drum brought back from an expedition to the Kamchatka Peninsula by the writer, documentary film director and later Estonian president Lennart Meri in 1960 (Lõhmus 2020; Kaljuvee 2007). Although elements of shamanism can be found in Estonian traditional religion, there is no known vernacular tradition of drumming in the vein of Siberian shamanism and neither are there any reliable historical records about such a practice in Estonia. This is in contrast, for example, to the Saami tradition where there is no living vernacular tradition of drumming but ample historical records and oral traditions relating to the practice.

[7] 'Feeding statues' refers to the custom, also known in the Seto and Khanty tradition and apparently revived by Tõlet, of giving offerings to supernatural beings by leaving food beside their physical images or statues. This may include spreading fat on the mouth or lips of the statue of a god.

[8] For a more comprehensive account of recent wooden deity statues in Estonia, see Kõiva et al. 2020.

[9] In the original Latin: "*Ubi erat mons et silva pulcherrima, in qua dicebant indigene magnum deum Osiliensium natum, qui Tharapita vocatur, et de illo loco in Osiliam volasse. Et ibat alter sacerdos succidens imagines et similitudines deorum ibi factas, et mirabantur illi, quod sanguis non efflueret, et magis sacerdotum sermonibus credebant.*" (HCL XXIV 5: 216.)

[10] Most of Europeans, including the former colonial powers of all the three independent Finno-Ugric nations of Hungary, Finland and Estonia, speak languages belonging to the Indo-European family of languages. In the historical linguistic sense, the Uralic language family is not related to the Indo-European languages. Uralic languages share several prominent typological traits with Turkic languages that gave the rise of the hypothesis, not currently supported by the current consensus of linguists, that both Uralic and Turkic languages are branches of a proposed larger Ural-Altaic or Turanic language family.

[11] Calling the language family 'Uralic' was partly motivated by seeing the original, pre-dispersion home of the Uralic languages and peoples somewhere in the east, perhaps close to the Ural mountains. This has been a contributing factor for the notion of seeing the Siberian and Arctic peoples as an image of a prelapsarian Arcadia from which the Uralic-speaking peoples to the west have diverged.

[12] For a general overview of Khanty traditional religion, see Glavatskaya 2021 and Kulemzin et al. 2006.

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