

15. CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN THE SACRAL LANDSCAPE OF LITHUANIA

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Introduction

From the thirteenth century the authorities driving the crusades in the eastern Baltic strove to Christianize the Prussian, Lithuanian, Livonian, and Estonian tribes. These attempts evolved into a war that lasted for two hundred years and which radically changed the political map, the lands, and the inhabitants along the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. In 1387, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was Christianized by the Polish clergy by the order of the country's ruler Jogaila. The political situation of Samogitia (the western part of Lithuania) was unstable as it was the focus of an ongoing struggle against the Teutonic Order. In 1413, the inhabitants of Samogitia were officially Christianized by Grand Duke Vytautas. These historical events signify the key moments of the present paper concerning the sacral landscape of Lithuania, which introduces the sacred places of the Balts — sacred and/or cult sites, and discusses the changes of the thirteenth century linked with the rise of the pantheon of deities within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Since the breaking point was the introduction of Christianity, the paper gives a brief overview of the process and nature of Christianization. Finally, it considers the fate of indigenous sacred places following Christianization and highlights the features of the sacral landscape of the modern period.

It should be noted that no clear-cut line between the sacred sites associated with the religious practices of the Balts before and after the official baptism of Lithuania is drawn: with certain reservations, the sites linked to Christian cult practices before the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can also be treated as a continuation of pre-Christian sacred places, for only around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did the attention of church builders turn from the place and its sacredness

to the persuasive quality of the building, its exterior, and interior.

The Period of the Baltic Tribes and of the Early Grand Duchy of Lithuania

There are no exhaustive written sources from this period on the religion and mythology of the Baltic tribes (associated with the period from the fifth to the twelfth century), or on their sacred places. The sacred places associated with indigenous religious practices within the territory of Lithuania came to the attention of archaeologists in the nineteenth century, but their professional examination only began a hundred years later. It was at that time that the concept of the Balts' sacred places started evolving, but to date scholarly opinion is divided about this subject. Vytautas Urbanavičius, the director of numerous archaeological excavations, demonstrated in the second half of the twentieth century that finds in sacred places were rare, mostly isolated, and belonged to a protracted chronological period (Urbanavičius 1977). Prolonged use of the Balts' sacred places before and after Christianization was one of the central themes of Urbanavičius' (1994) research on indigenous religion. Later, the author of the present paper adjusted the definitions of the Balts' sacred places and of the sacral landscape, emphasizing the importance of complex research, and revealed that geographical, linguistic, historical, and folklore data on the sacred places were as significant as any of the archaeological finds (cf. Vaitkevičius 2006; 2011).

The conclusions of intergrated research on the Lithuanian word *alka* (the Latvian *elks* and the Prussian **alka* are related to it) support the reconstructed pic-



Figure 15.1: The *Alka* hill of Mikytai (Skuodas district).
Photo by V. Vaitkevičius. 2008.

ture of the sacred places of the Baltic tribes: *alka* (fem.) or *alkas* (masc.) is a word with both vernacular and religious meanings: (1) a sacred grove, (2) an offering site, and (3) an offering (Vaitkevičius 2004, 7). The spread of several hundreds of place names *Alkos kalnas*, *Alkupis*, *Alko bala*, and numerous similar names shows that before the formation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania there existed several different traditions of sacred places in the sparsely populated land with a dense cover of woodland. There were sacred places in woods and groves, on hills, in fields and meadows, on the banks of rivers, on the shores of lakes, and along bogs. Single trees, stones, springs, hollows, crevices, and caves that are rare in the landscape of Lithuania should also be approached as elements of the aforementioned sacred places.

According to the available data, *Alkos kalnai* (Alka Hills) dominate Western Lithuania (Fig. 15.1), and their area extends northwards and beyond the border with Latvia. Single Alka hills have been recorded in Central Lithuania in the vicinity of Raseiniai and Raguva. Alka hills are the dominating *topos* of chains of hills of several dozen metres high, as well as low hills that are just a few metres high; sometimes their tops stretch for two to three hectares. Archaeological investigations of Alka hills have not yielded any specific evidence of cult practice yet, although these sites are associated with folk stories that priestesses kindled sacred fires there, that offerings were made, and that bodies of the deceased were cremated there. The precise sites where these rituals were performed on or beside Alka hills have been forgotten. Woods, streams, and bogs bearing the same name often lie beside Alka hills. Most of these sacred places are part

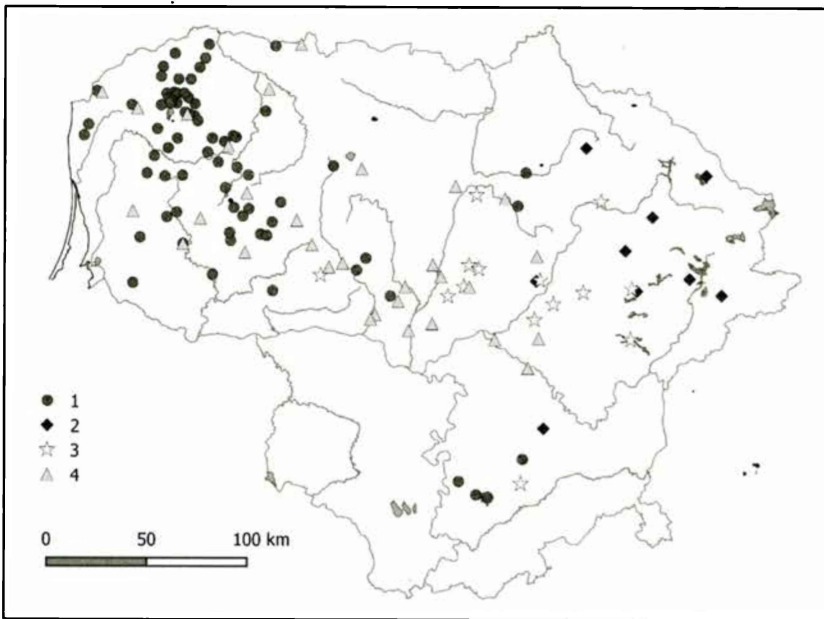


Figure 15.2: The Alkupis stream, a left tributary of the Nevėžis at the sacred site of Gustonys (Panevėžys district). Photo by V. Vaitkevičius. 2013.

of archaeological complexes which are dated from the fifth to thirteenth centuries on the basis of associated hillforts and burial grounds.

In East Lithuania, *Alkos* are mostly fields adjoining rivers and lakes, the areas of which range from several ares to 20–25 hectares. In some cases *Alkos* are islands of 0.5–1 hectare, or pairs of islands which transform into peninsulas when the water level drops. *Alkos* are also parts of lakes, small lakes, and bogs. The data on the mythological and religious significance of these sacred places is insufficient, but their geographical connection with fifth-to-thirteenth-century burial mounds and first-to-fourteenth-century hillforts is clear.

Central Lithuania is an intersection of — and something of a transitional area between — two distinct traditions characteristic of eastern and western Baltic tribes (Map 15.1). A few Alka hills and numerous Alka fields along rivers, bogs, and streams (Fig. 15.2), the latter being from several to ten kilometres long, have been recorded here. Very few sacred places of other types have been recorded along the shores of Alkupiai of Central Lithuania, but the shortage of this kind of data might be related to large-scale historical farming — cleared woods, drained bogs, and ploughed soil. All the more so that the image of *deivė* — the ancient Baltic water goddess — survived for the longest time in the tales and beliefs of the inhabitants of Central Lithuania. As a rule, *deivės* are depicted in twos or threes and possess the features of the *laumė* (fairy), *ragana* (witch), and, quite frequently, of the souls of the dead. In folk tales associated with burial places, primarily first-to-fourth-century burial mounds within stone circles in Samogitia and North Lithuania are often linked to sacred places.



Map 15.1: Hills (1), islands (2), lakes and bogs (3), and streams (4), which were called *Alka*. Drawing by V. Vaitkevičius. 2014.

It goes without saying that the *Alkos* known from sixteenth- to twentieth-century historical, linguistic, and folklore sources reflect the diversity of Balts' sacred places only to a very small extent. Sacred places were called not only by a common word; they also had names derived from the names and epithets of gods, goddesses, and mythological beings. The latter are difficult to recognize as more often than not they are unique.

Before the formation of the state, the sacral landscape of Lithuania was characterized by discrete natural places that are extremely difficult, if at all possible, to date. This sacredness is deep, well-defined, deeply rooted, and universally recognized. In the sacred places of the Baltic tribes it is seen, heard, and felt in a variety of ways. It is characterized by its ability (power) to revive, to stir religious feelings, and to attract new generations of worshippers. The traces of the founders of these sacred places are hard to find, although one cannot reject the possibility that the tops of some of the *Alka* hills were adapted for rituals by shaping them, while the recesses, hollows and bowls on some of the stones in sacred places were deliberately hammered for ritual purposes.

The Rise of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

The first scholars to consider the supposed reform of the Balts' religion and efforts to create a state religion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were mythology researchers Algirdas Julius

Greimas (1990, 357–59) and Vladimir Toporov (2000, 67–69). The initiative of founding the state was taken by a single family which, assisted by military force, created and consolidated new political, administrative, and economic structures. Centuries later the traces of these events remain inscribed in the living language and place names, and, to some extent, in the world-view of the inhabitants (for more on this, see: Dubonis 1998, 46–67). Ideology, which also manifests itself as religion, is inseparable from political changes.

Sacred places called *Šventaragis* (Lith., *šventas* 'sacred', *ragas* 'horn') — valleys, hills, woods, and bodies of water — bordered on the estates of the ruler of the Lithuanian state in Vilnius and in some other locations (Vaitkevičienė and Vaitkevičius 2001, 313–17). Although

close to the sacred places of the preceding period, they possessed distinctive features. The *Šventaragis* sites were connected with the gods of the state pantheon: Andojas (water), Perkūnas (air), Kalvelis (fire), and the goddess Žvėrūna (woods). The same written source — the Chronicle of 1262 — retells the myth of Sovijus and links it to the worship of the above-mentioned gods. Sovijus was the first among the living to reach the world of the dead by the path of fire; in other words, he is associated with establishing the custom of cremation of the dead (Lemeškin 2009, 198–201).

The reformation of burial at the time of the formation of the Lithuanian state is confirmed by the custom of cremating the dead, which was being disseminated in Lithuania and Western Belarus in around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and merging differences between the Baltic tribes of Lithuanians, upland Lithuanians, Selonians, Semigallians, Curonians, Scalvians, Samogitians, and Yotvingians (Sudovians), which was happening at around the same time. Some of the traditions associated with sacred places were also spreading from the nucleus of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania via refugees from the conquered Baltic territories. For example, cylindrical stones with flat-bottom bowls from Eastern Lithuania were a distinctive feature of the Curonian sacred places in Western Lithuania during the Iron Age (Vaitkevičius 2004, 28–30).

The Christianization of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

The narrative of the Christianization of Lithuania in 1387 is essentially based on the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz's *Historiae Polonicae*. Długosz's narrative reached back to the last year of the rule of Grand Duke Jogaila — 1434. The chronicler emphasized that during the process of Christianization the ruler demolished sites associated with ancient cult practices (Vėlius 1996, 551–52, 572):

The king ordered that the temple and the altar [in the capital Vilnius] where they used to make offerings be demolished, the forests and groves that they believed were untouchable be cut down and ravaged, and, as if that was not enough, the snakes and grass-snakes that were kept in every home as gods guardians of home be killed and exterminated.

When writing about the Christianization of Samogitia in 1413, Długosz repeated himself, but Aeneas Piccolomini, who resorted to the narrative of Jerome of Prague regarding one of the first missions to Samogitia, wrote about the process in greater detail. According to him, the grass-snakes that the Samogitians kept in their homes were killed and burnt in public, the temple was demolished and the sacred fire put out, and the grove believed to be sacred and the oak — the abode of the gods — in the centre of it were cut down (Vėlius 1996, 591–92, 594–95).

As these events became distant, written and oral history began acquiring qualities characteristic of folklore. Nonetheless, up to the twentieth century, it preserved the main motifs of the Christianization narrative: that the baptism was extensive, that large numbers of people were baptized with river water and given shirts or hats to symbolize their rebirth; when sacred groves were being cleared and sacred places demolished, the old priests chose death and drowned themselves; the grass-snakes believed to be sacred were driven out of houses and burnt. First Długosz, later other authors, and then ultimately folklore provide narratives of the spread of Christianity and the teaching of the new converts. It must be pointed out that in Lithuanian the word *krikštyti* (christen, baptize) has an old and presumably pre-Christian meaning 'to bless, to consecrate', while the cross with all arms of equal length, upright or turned at an angle of 45°, which was widespread in pre-Christian Baltic culture and is linked to the god Perkūnas, has a clear meaning of sacredness and is associated with protection. This may explain

why cross-shaped pendants made in Livonia and other Christian countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are found in the graves of the dead cremated in accordance with the ancient custom.

Lithuanian archaeologists also raised questions regarding the notion of sacred landscape and its change during the years of Christianization: in 1983, multiple cremations, along with burial items of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries were found at the bottom of Obeliai Lake in the Ukmergė district (Urbanavičius and Urbanavičienė 1988, 35–46). In 2006, the archaeological expedition in Bajorai (Elektrėnai municipality) found a denar of Grand Duke Vytautas, minted approximately from 1392 to 1396, at the bottom of the former Švenčius (from the word *šventas*) Lake among the bones of cremated dead and burnt offered animals (Vaitkevičius 2012, 147). In 2010, the archaeological expedition in Semeniškės (Širvintos district) found a denar of Grand Duke Jogaila, minted approximately from 1387 to 1390 among cremated bones in the sandy bed of the Kernavė stream (Vengalis 2011, 127). The custom of spilling cremated bones in water is connected with Baltic mythology, yet it is more important to point out that all such burial sites are dated to the period when Christianity was introduced and later. Why was it at this particular time that, along with inhumation burials, the deposition of human remains in water was becoming increasing popular?

In Lithuanian fairytales associated with magic, when cremated bones are spilled over the water the dead are revived like birds which later transform into humans (Vaitkevičienė 2013). During the wars against the Teutonic Order the custom of scattering of ashes in water might have developed as a conscious effort to speed up the period of time it took for the soul to reincarnate. At the same time, the ground consecrated by Christian clergymen was regarded as polluted, while the bodies of water and the underwater world, which were regarded as the abodes of evil spirits, preserved the sacredness of the ancient religion. The Balts had long called the underwater world *paskandos* (from the word *skęsti*, 'to drown') and believed it was the abode of the dead (Greimas 1990, 367).

The isolation and demarcation of sacred places and the division of space into the spheres of God and Devil were among the most characteristic features of the Christian period. The difference between sacred and cursed places is highlighted by several hundreds of Lithuanian place names formed with the words *šventas* (sacred) and *velnias* (devil); for comparison, the place

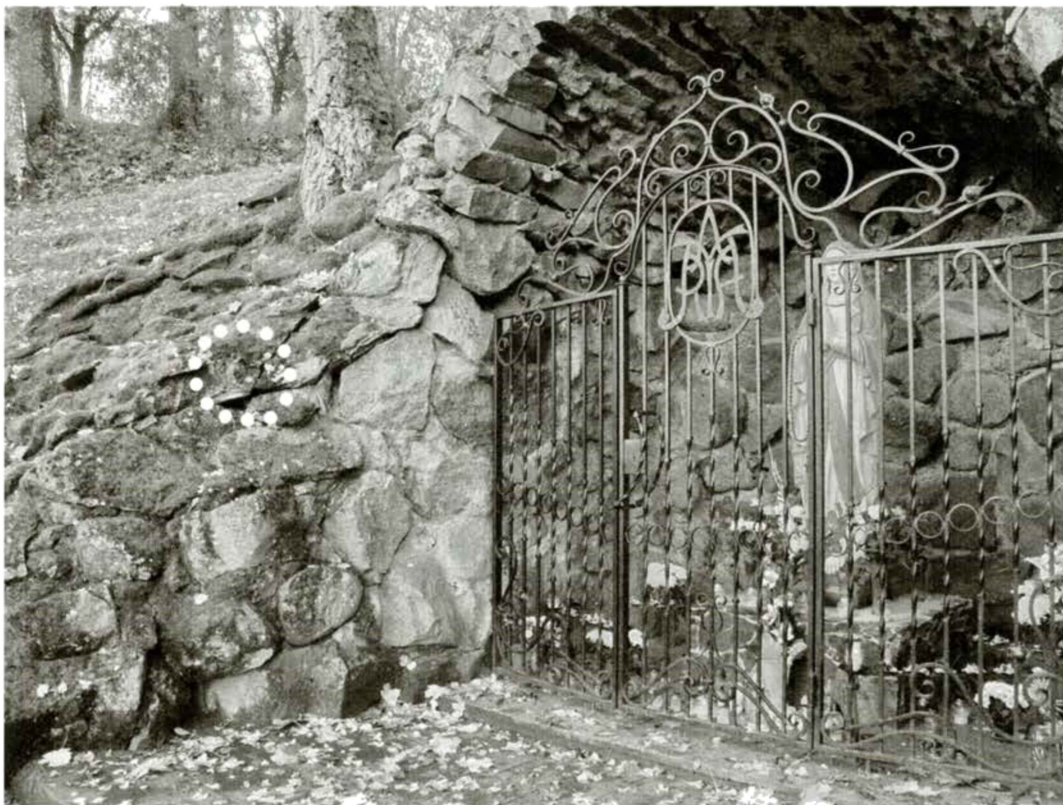


Figure 15.3:
A stone with a hoof imprint
in the vault of the Lourdes
grotto in Plungė. Photo by
V. Vaitkevičius. 2011.

names with the compound *velnias* appeared in written sources in the middle of the fifteenth century (Vaitkevičius 2006, 35–36). These place names are very important for further research into the sacred landscape of Lithuania. Firstly, they show that any place — a wood, tree, hill, field, meadow, lake, bog, spring, or a stream — could be sacred or cursed, and the boundaries between them could shift. For example, in 1908, a stone bearing the mark of a hoof and linked to the Devil was cemented into the vault of the Lourdes grotto which was being constructed in Plungė (Fig. 15.3).

Careful research has also shown that many sacred places which were called *šventa* or *velnio* after the period of Christianization were the legacy of the pre-Christian period. For instance, the distribution map of the lakes called *Šventas* coincides with the east Lithuanian area of the Barrow culture (with a chronological span from the third to the twelfth century), while most of the stones with *Velnias* toponyms or which were linked to the Devil in folklore are in the vicinity of the settlements and burial places from the pre-Christian period. In addition, some of these stones have marks characteristic of the Iron Age culture on their surface. Places referred to as sacred have been recorded in Suvalkija (the south-western part of Lithuania), Dzūkija (the southern part), Sėla (the north-eastern part), and in other lands where

the sacred places with the element *alkos* from the period of the Baltic tribes are unknown or their number is very scarce. Therefore, it seems likely that at certain places where the sacredness is linked to Christian saints such as John the Baptist (streams), Peter and Martin (stones), or Mary Magdalene and others, could have been designated during the period following Christianization.

The variety of sacred places in the sacral landscape of Lithuania is vast. It is difficult to find a sacred place dating to the period of the Baltic tribes that would not have any signs of later periods, just as it is difficult to write an accurate and exhaustive history of the evolution of sacred places: directly or indirectly, they were affected by changes brought about by the introduction of Christianity, with changes of social relations, economic development, religious identity, and many others societal factors. In mythological tales the Holy Virgin Mary, Christ, and Christian saints replaced indigenous gods and goddesses. Stories were eventually told about the Holy Virgin Mary splashing the stones of red granite with blood; that fir-trees were sacred because they sheltered the fleeing Holy Family under their thick branches; that the pike's bones in the shapes of a cross, a spear, an axe, and other tools resemble the suffering of Christ. In these tales, most of the sacred places associated with the Balts' pre-Christian religion receded into the distance.



Figure 15.4: The oak of Mingėla in the sacred place of Vieštvėnai (Plungė district). Photo by V. Vaitkevičius. 2009.

They were associated with devils and witches, or with historical conquerors of the country, and especially frequently with the Reformed Swedes, the Catholics' enemies (Kerbelytė 1973, 25, 28–29).

Christianity was changing the world-view of the Lithuanians, their values, ways of thinking, and lifestyle, and in this way exerted a strong influence on the sacral landscape. For example, due to the culture of fasting, people consumed more fish and other aquatic species; the virtual extinction of European pond turtles, popularly called 'iron frogs', can be attributed to the same reason (today they are listed in the Red Book); recreational hunting from the fifteenth to the first half of the seventeenth century saw the extinction of the native aurochs (*Bos primigenius*) that once belonged to the sacral space of Andojas, the god of the grand dukes. It was also the time when the forests of the ruler and the nobility were recklessly cleared. No mature oaks, which were marketable wood, were left either in the core of the state or in remote locations from the second half of the sixteenth to the seventeenth century. For example, in 1570, the forest of the nobles Petrašiūnai near Kaunas was cleared to such an extent that not a single tree was left there to make a single stake. Appalled by this situation, the noble owners decided not to set their foot in the forest for five years, and ordered their subjects to follow suit (Kiaupa 2010, 243). Clearing vast areas of woodland resulted in an increasing threat from flooding. In spring, water flooded the river valleys, eroded the banks, and to a smaller or larger extent destroyed places that had been sacred in pre-Christian society.

The sacral landscape of Lithuania was also altered by ponds and the construction of windmills, sawmills, and

foundries established on river banks. Historical sources from the modern era are effectively silent on the contradiction between religious images and economic activity near rivers and streams. However, analogies from neighbouring countries and the legends and tales recorded in Lithuania in the twentieth century show that dams were ruining the sacredness associated with the pre-Christian ideas of religion. One narrative refers to the stream of Kaniavėlė (Varėna district), which was eroding the dike of a dam; when this happened for the third time, the builder heard in his dream '*Kaniavėlė panelė Tau nemals!*' (Kaniavėlė the goddess will not grind for you!). The builder abandoned his idea of building the dam and it was never finished (Vėlius 1995, 76). There are many other folkloric examples of similar types of self-protection resorted to by a range of sacred places: the hills that did not want to be farmed, the lakes that did not wish to be drained, the stones that objected to being split into pieces, and others.

The Sacral Landscape of Lithuania in the Early Modern Period

The evolution of the sacral landscape after the introduction of Christianity was changeable. A level of permanence was inherited and preserved from the pre-state tribal period and the early period of the state. Changes were brought about by Christian values and thorough transformations in lifestyle that followed in their wake. According to historical sources, the sacred places of the ancient religion in Lithuania's administrative, political, and religious centres were destroyed during Christianization. Some of them were recast as the abodes of evil spirits, while the rest were reconfigured within the Christian value system. Some were consecrated and became Catholic churches or shrines (Fig. 15.4).

Ancient traditions persisted despite the introduction and proliferation of Christianity. The village cemetery and chapels on the Alka hills in Senoji Jūtilis (Kretinga district), Puokė (Skuodas district), the village of Alkas (Plungė district), and in other locations show that sacredness has been recognized there until the present. Elsewhere it is witnessed by place names, folklore, and persistent local beliefs. The efforts expended in the preservation of such sacred places are striking. People say that when the forest of Kegriai (Mažeikiai district) was being cut down, a tiny chapel was hoisted up in the oldest pine tree that was believed to be sacred, and it saved the tree from the woodcutter's saw. To protect the Mekiai stone with God's feet (Šiauliai district) from destruction dur-



Figure 15.5: A stone with a narrow-bottomed bowl at the entrance of the chapel in the cemetery of Kurmaičiai village (Joniškis district). Photo by V. Vaitkevičius. 2015.

ing the years of Soviet occupation, it was brought to a person's home and was taken back to its original location after the re-establishment of Lithuania's independence in 1990.

Stones with narrow-bottomed bowls were held in family altars and were devoted to domestic gods — *Pagirniai* — who appeared in the guise of grass-snakes. During the land reform in the middle of the sixteenth century (which was yet another restructuring of the landscape in the early modern period), the inhabitants were moved to settlements that were rectangular in their plan and where personal land was allocated in the form of strips. Along with their old houses and belongings, people brought those stones with them. Such attachment to earlier traditions manifests itself into the present day and the stability of people's relationship with sacred stones, and the extent of this phenomenon has surprised researchers. In the vicinity of Joniškis, these stones found their way as holy water containers (stoups), to the sixteenth-to-eighteenth-century chapels of Balkaičiai, Ivoškiai, Jakiškiai, Kurmaičiai, and other villages (Fig. 15.5). In some farmsteads stones with bowls were also used for the same purpose.

Not all stones believed to be sacred were preserved in their original places or moved to new ones. It was quite typical in the early modern period and through to the present day for the stones from former pre-Christian sacred places to be used in the construction of churches. For instance, a footprint stone was brought to Sužionys

Church in the Vilnius region in 1720. In 1833, the larger part of the so-called 'Devil Stone' in the village of Kernavė (Kaunas district) was used for the construction of the steps of Raudondvaris Church; in 1925, a shard of Lupionys stone with a bowl that was called the 'Devil's Foot' by some and 'God's Hand' by others was cemented next to the entrance to the Kužiai Church (Šiauliai district).

From the seventeenth to the first half of the eighteenth century, during the Baroque era, the picture of the sacral landscape was fundamentally changed by crosses, shrines, and shrine crosses (little shrines hoisted up in trees mostly along roads, in village cemeteries, and *placės* famous for their miracles where vows were taken (Fig. 15.6); they are a unique feature of Lithuanian small sacral architecture) that were put up outside churchyards, squares, at crossroads, farmsteads, and other places. In this way the carriers of Christianity and their supporters — the Catholic Church, religious orders, and the nobility of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania — reached the remotest parts of the country, consolidated the victory of the new religion over the advocates of the Reformation and the last guardians of the traditions of the ancient religion. It should be noted that at the same time castle and estate courts in Lithuania were sending people condemned for witchcraft to the pyres. There exist opinions that only in the first half of the seventeenth century the last adult Samogitian was christened (for more on this, see Bumblauskas 2014, 192–96), and the development of the network of parishes was effec-



Figure 15.6: Shrines in the trees of the old village cemetery of Pacžerė (Mažeikiai district). Photo by V. Vaitkevičius. 2011.



Figure 15.7: The interior of the Ugionys chapel (Raseiniai district), built on the stream believed to be sacred. The cover of the well is under the statue of the Holy Virgin Mary. Photo by V. Vaitkevičius. 1994.

tively finished. The religiosity of the country's population intensified even more during times of crisis, in particular during the 1654–1667 war against Muscovy and the Kingdom of Sweden.

Under the direct or indirect influence of the Counter-reformation, the same period was associated with numerous apparitions and other unusual religious events. It has been observed that smaller or greater miracles usually happened in the spaces where Catholics competed against Reformed Christians (Savukynas 2012, 104–18). Such was the background of the first, and so far the best known, apparition of the Holy Virgin Mary in Šiluva (Raseiniai district). Frequently, the nature of the miracle sites of the Catholic Church was similar to that of the pre-Christian sacred places: the Holy Virgin Mary was frequently seen above a stone (Šiluva), her image appeared in a tree (Šilėnai, Vilnius district), in a spring (Ugionys, Raseiniai district, Fig. 15.7), and even in the depths of a lake (Galvė Lake in Trakai). Churches

famous for their miracles were increasingly attracting more interest. From 1639 to 1642 the first Stations of the Cross in Lithuania were founded in Žemaičių Kalvarija (Plungė district). It should be stressed that pilgrimage created road networks that embraced the sacred places of both the Balts' religion and Christianity; believers very often stopped at springs and sometimes spent the night there.

All roads leading to parish churches played an important role in the sacral landscape of Lithuania. During their long journeys the pilgrims visited the sacred places of the Balts' religion: hills, trees, stones, streams, and springs. Here, young couples prayed for a blessing, for health, and children and performed various rituals on the way to the church or back from their wedding. Such episodes are evoked by sacred places bearing names such as 'Bride's Stones', 'Wedding Cemeteries', and the like. Mention should be made of Rambynas Hill in Pagėgiai municipality; up until the first half of the nineteenth century newlyweds brought offerings to the hill and to the stone on its top. When the Lithuanian movement of national revival began not long after that, celebrations of the summer solstice used to be held here with the participation of the Tilžė Association of Chanters.

Finally, it is important to note those Lithuanian sacred places that were used the longest (Map 15.2). These are deeply respected sites for taking vows at roadsides and crossroads, frequently in secluded dense forests where there was a chapel, a cross, or a shrine. Sacred places were located near trees, springs, and stones; the best known sacred place was on Jurgaičiai Hillfort (universally known as the 'Hill of Crosses', Šiauliai district), at the site of the timber stronghold that used to stand there in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. It is said that its history began in 1847, when the first wooden cross was put up there during a prayer for health (Griškevičius 1850, 148^v).

Usually the sites where vows were taken are protected by small communities; once a year a priest is invited to visit such a site. The relationship of believers with these sacred places is mostly personal and intimate, and up until the twentieth century the mythological narratives and certain liturgical activities associated with such sacred places, as well as their structure and individual elements, were still in the process of creation. For example, following the example of Lourdes, at the turn of the twentieth century a stone grotto with the statue of the Holy Virgin Mary was built at the foot of Birutė Hill in Palanga, a prehistoric hillfort and one of the best-known sacred places. The shrine near the Skudutiškis footprint

stones (of which there are at least two) that was believed to be sacred was built after the re-establishment of Lithuania's independence.

Stability and Change in the Sacral Landscape of Lithuania

Since prehistoric times, the sacred places of Lithuania have been affected by numerous political, cultural, and economic changes. Research into the changing sacral landscape is a complex task that demands extreme thoroughness. One thing is clear, though: if a sacred place is known today, the sacredness experienced there is recognizable, seen, or felt as it was in the past. This imparts permanency to the sacral landscape and ensures its continuity.

To a large extent, the ancient traditions of the sacred places dating back to the period of the Baltic tribes were formed by water. Fluctuations in the water level in the lowlands and hollows have long been used to predict the weather, harvest, and future. Emerging from subterranean sources and bubbling, springs that never freeze embody vital powers. The eastward flow against the sunrise is a significant image within the Balts' religion that heralds youth, happiness, and beauty. Rivers flowing westwards, to the Baltic Sea, embody the flow of life, passing time, and, at the same time, the very thin and shimmering boundary between life and death. Shoals

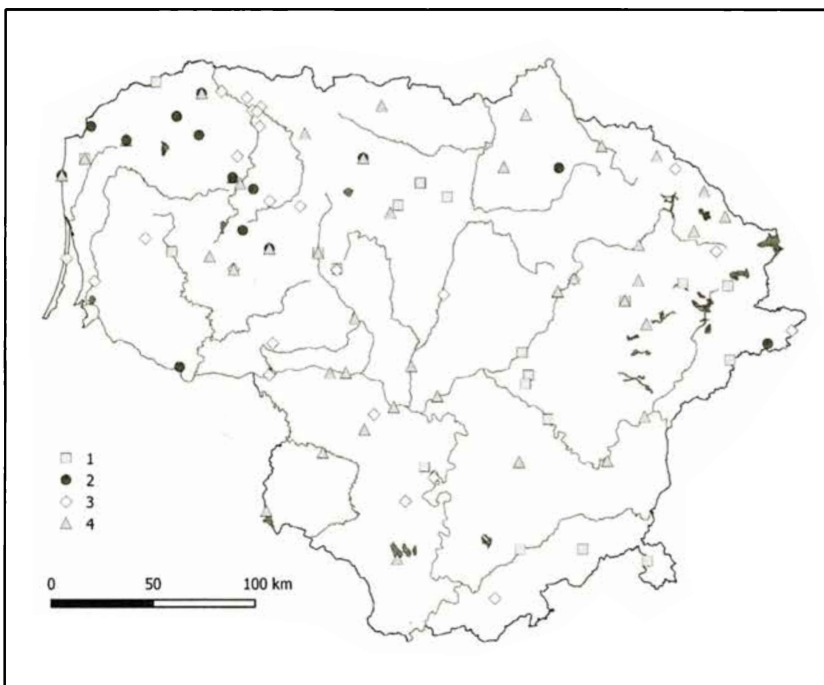
and river stones, which are often called the bridges of the Devil, arise like paths that connect the worlds of the living and the dead. Sites for burial mounds used to be chosen nearby. A special role is attached to the confluences of rivers and streams. Their mythological significance is defined, at least to some extent, by the image of the deities of the Neris River, which is the second longest in Lithuania, and of its largest tributary, the Šventoji: the deity of the Neris is depicted as a mare, and that of the Šventoji as a stallion.

Hills were believed to be sacred at the confluences of rivers and streams. The higher the hill the simpler it was believed the path of a prayer to the sky was. Equally important is the lighting of a hill, the light of the rays of the sun in the east and the warmth in the south, the soil and its composition, and the distant views from the hill-top. When speaking of the hills that are believed to be sacred, emphasis is placed on the three, seven, or even twelve churches that can be seen there. In this way the field of a sacred place expanded to include a locality and a region, thus building connections between the sacred places of the Balts' religion and those of Christianity.

It is believed that there is salt in the hills of the best known Lithuanian sacred places (salt and honey are the mythical resources of Perkūnas), while the steam rising from them predicts changes in the weather. The tales about these sacred places often mention sacred groves. The Medžiokalnīs oak grove in Kražiai (Kelmė district)

makes it possible to form an image of a sacred grove, at least to a small extent. Healing qualities of the tree's twigs, leaves, blossom, and fruit, the age of the trees, lumps on their trunks, the hollows, spaces between trunks and branches, the shape of the crown, the angle of the eastern and western lighting through the canopy, the strength of a tree, and water spurting from under its roots — all these can be seen as characteristics of sacred trees.

Spurting water is also mentioned with regard to sacred stones. It is believed that such water is the reflection of the Indo-European myth about the struggle between the thunder god and the god of the underworld. Great emphasis is given to the unusual powers of the snow, rain, and dew collected in the hollow on the top of a stone. Corn crakes, golden orioles, hawks and other birds within Perkūnas' sacral space thrive on this water,



Map 15.2: The best-known sacred places of Lithuania from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Drawing by V. Vaitkevičius. 2007.



Figure 15.8: The sacred place of Joskaudai (Kretinga district). In the foreground, a well on a stream near the stone on which the Holy Virgin Mary appeared; in the background, a chapel built in 1930, on the walls of which the names of its visitors are carved. Photo by V. Vaitkevičius. 2011.

which is called stone blood, and can drink nothing else. It is also linked to the red colour characteristic of granite boulders that are believed to be sacred in Lithuania. Red and other colours, the patterns of colours, the shape of stones, footprints, carved hollows, bowls, and other marks of prehistoric and early historic times are an inseparable part of the mythological narrative and a testament to sacredness.

After the introduction of Christianity, the sacred places of the Baltic religion were destroyed, abandoned, adapted to the needs of Christianity, or replaced by new ones. Larger or smaller Christian cult buildings came to dominate the landscape (Fig. 15.8). In individual and exceptional cases, the images of the Balts' world-view persisted until the twentieth century: people respected taboos regarding breaking a branch, cutting a tree, splitting a stone, or damming a river in a defined sacred place.

It should be stressed that the shifts in the sacral landscape were brought about not only by the changes in

the appearance or composition of sacred places, but also by new religious values, thinking, and associated lifestyles. In around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an essentially new Christian concept of a sacred place took root. Sacred places could not be imagined without a church, a chapel, or a cross, without a narrative at the base of their construction, without at least the most insignificant miracle or an unusual event, or without the images of the worshipped Holy Virgin Mary, Christ, or the saints represented on canvas or carved in wood. Most amateur cross-carvers created these images inspired by church art or by their imagination; many of such sculptures of the saints did not fulfil the requirements of the Church and as such they were not officially consecrated. The location of the churches built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries no longer played an important role and the mythological

narrative was no longer taken into account. The focus was turned to the building itself, to the altars and their provision.

The shift of attention from the natural place to the building and the geographical displacement of pre-Christian sacred places are the major changes of the sacral landscape in Lithuania after the process of Christianization takes hold. This phenomenon is closely related to, and is inseparable from, other cultural, social, and economic changes. Eventually, society marked and defined strict boundaries of sacred places and narrowed down their area to the wall around the churchyard that often borders on the market square and to the gate of the nearest cemetery. However, many dozens of open air Lithuanian sacred places with pre-Christian roots were still experienced. Today, unfortunately, the majority have lost this quality and have become sites of natural or cultural heritage, the foci of education and entertainment.

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