

# IMAGES ON THE STONES AT SCEBIARAKY VILLAGE IN NORTH-WEST BELARUS

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on five stones with ancient incised images containing the symbol of a pole with a semicircle or a cross at its top. This symbol had a cosmological meaning and represented a projection of the “heavenly sphere” onto a flat surface. The strict orientation of the stones and the symbols to the north indicates a ceremonial “world axis” directed to North Star. This symbol of the “world axis” was used during funerary rituals at gravestones. The Scebiaraky site is an example of Baltic sacred stones (*stabas*) in the Baltic-Slavic contact zone.

Key words: sacred stones, mythological “world axis”, “heavenly sphere”, funeral ritual, stone barrows, stone burials, Baltic-Slavic contact zone, ritual crosses.

## Introduction

In the 1990s a group of five stones was documented at the village of Scebiaraky in the Vilejka region of north-west of Belarus (Fig. 1).

The stones are located in a forest, one behind the other, forming a line. The first contains a slightly inclined image of a pole with a triangle at its top and a horn turned upwards. A similar image is depicted on the second stone. The third stone contains the simplest image – just a pole with a semicircle at its top. On the fourth stone is a distinctive cross on a pole and a horn turned upwards. The final image, on the last stone, contains a pole with a semicircle together with a small cross (or possibly another semicircle) at its top and a horn turned downwards.

The stones at Scebiaraky village are absolutely unique in Belarus. They contain the only examples of images of a horn in the territory of the republic. The long vertical line – a particular representation of a “pole” – is common to the images on all the stones, although different compositions – triangle, semicircle and cross – are found at its top.

No image in the Scebiaraky complex is repeated and it is possible to suppose a certain *system* in this sequence of images. The consecutive arrangement of images on the stones fits the idea that they were a single composition. This is especially important, because in other cases we deal with separate images on single stones.

Naturally, it is necessary to combine possible mythological parallels in order to attempt a decoding of these symbols' meaning. In hoping to propose and explain mythological parallels to the symbol set, it is necessary to use materials from the folk cultures of the Balts (Lithuanians, Latvians and surviving fragments of re-

ligious-mythological ideas of other tribes), and Slavs (primarily Belarusians). In short we are dealing with cultural phenomena of the Baltic-Slavic contact zone.

## The astronomical hypothesis

The key fact is that the Scebiaraky stones are strictly arranged on a North-South line. If an observer watches the images he looks due North. Such precision in the arrangement could not arise by chance. At that time, such an accurate orientation to the North was only possible by using astronomy. That is why we are able to assume that the images had (at least partly) a cosmological meaning that was connected and included into concrete astronomical movement. The orientation to the North means that the symbols are connected with the northern constellations and, primarily, with the North Star (Pole Star). An observer could see it over the stone complex at night.

The direct orientation to the North shows that the symbol of a pole with a semicircle could have been comprehended as a mythological axis connecting the terrestrial world with the North Star. The name of the North Star is connected with a concept such as a column, pole, or nail in many parts of the world, including our region. Belarusians named the North Star ‘the Big Column’ (Karpenko 1985, p.22). The name ‘Column’ is widespread in some regions of Russia and among other Slavic peoples, as well as among Estonians, Mongols and Turks. Polish Catholic legend supported the idea that there exists a pole connecting the North Star with hell (Cetwiński, Derwich 1987, p.189).

A possible conclusion is that the image of a pole with a semicircle is a graphic representation of the heavenly sphere. As such, it is the simplest representation

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Fig. 1. The Scebiaraky stone complex, Vilejka region. Photograph by V.Obukhovski.

of the movement of the heavens at night. Such movement creates the sensation of “a heavenly dome”. This heavenly sphere was fixed upon, and supported by, a kind of “world column”.

### Sacred stones

The name of the village close to which the stone complex is located – Belarusian *Сцебяракі*, *Сціберякі* (Russian *Стеберяки*) – gives us important information.

In the territory of north-west Belarus we find names such as *Сцён-камень*, *камень Сцяпан* “stone [called] Stepan”. This originates in a myth connecting such stone names with people called *Стенан* (*Stepan*). The best known stone with the name of Stepan is located near to the source of the river Vilija and local inhabitants still honour it nowadays. Edward Liaukou was the first to propose a paronymic transition of these names from the Lithuanian word *stabas* into the Belarusian

language and mythological tradition (Liaukou 1992, p.139-140).

This village name Scebiaraky *Сцебяракі* can be connected with the Latvian word *Staburags*, plural *Staburagi* which clearly derives from the Latvian *stabs* ‘a column’ and *rags* ‘a horn’. We should also mention the Lithuanian *stabas* ‘a sacred stone’. In fact, all the semantic layers also have a connection with a stone complex and its images. It is possible to see these stones with complex composite images that included a pole with a semicircle as part of broader practices using sacred stones in the Baltic region. We would suggest that these sacred stones carrying the image of a world axis were in fact analogues of this world axis.

The name *Сцебяракі* evokes the nearest toponymic analogue – the Latvian legendary rock by the Daugava river known as *Staburags*. Legends existed describing the creation of the *Staburags* stone by giants (Latyshskije predaniia, p.101-102).

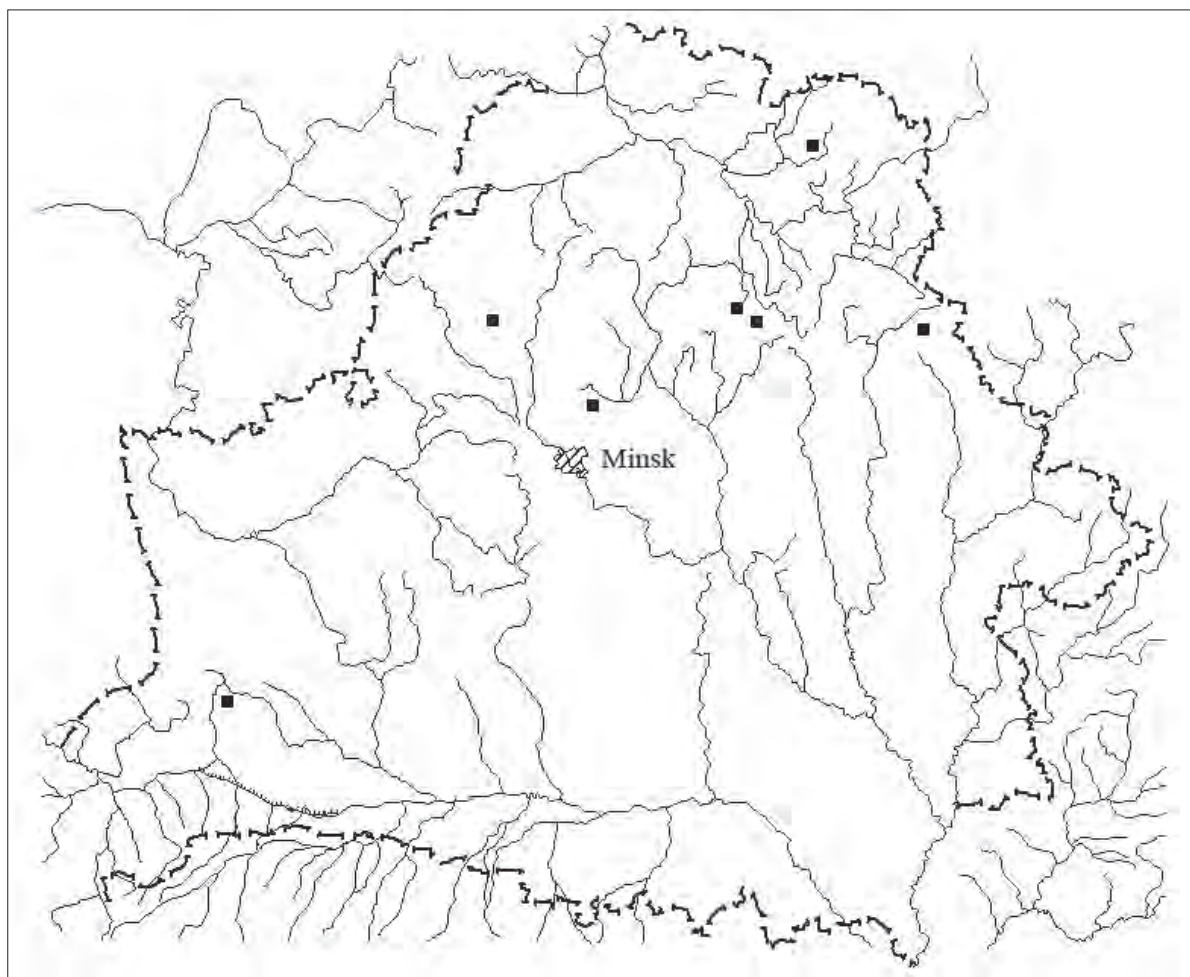


Fig. 2. Distribution map of gravestones discovered to have the image of a pole with a semicircle.

These Baltic parallels are also supported by the presence of similar carved symbols on rocks found within the territory of modern Latvia. The world axis is found at the centre of these images too. And these symbols in Latvia are connected with pagan cosmological representations of space (Laime 2003, p.2-20).

### Symbols on funerary stones

In some regions of north-western Belarus, one of the symbols seen on the Scebiaraky stones – namely a pole with a semicircle or rarely with a triangle – is often encountered on gravestones. But in these cases it is always incise and found in isolation.

The pattern of occurrence of this symbol on funerary stones has not yet been systematically determined (Fig. 2). However, some preliminary data have been collected. In Pruzhany, for example, there is a stone in the form of a cross with anthropomorphic characteristics and containing the image of a pole with a semicircle in the middle (Plate V: Fig. 3). Some images are located near to the Vilija river and Scebiaraky stones.

A stone from the Logojsk region was brought into the Museum of Stones at the Institute of Geological Sciences of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (Fig. 4). Similar symbols are also noted in the north of the Borisov region and in the Lukoml', Orsha and Gorodok regions.

### Ethnic and chronological attribution of the complex

The region of distribution of funerary symbols in the form of a pole with a semicircle can help to establish the ethnic attribution of the creators of the Scebiaraky complex.

Everywhere one can find gravestones with this symbol located near to burials in stone tombs, which date from the end of the eleventh to the end of the sixteenth centuries). Archaeological studies have established a direct connection between these burials and earlier burials in stone barrows. And, according to the Belarusian archaeologist Alla Kvjatkovskaia, the burials of these archaeological cultures in north-western Be-

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larus are connected, in their turn, to the Baltic tribe of Yatvingians (Kviatkovskaia 1998, p. 26-27, 176-187). The pagan meaning of the funerary rituals in these cultures has, it seems, remained constant in spite of other changes (Kviatkovskaia 1998, p.173).

Gravestones containing the image of a pole with a semicircle are related either to the late period of existence of stone tombs or to traditional burials that replaced stone tombs at the end of the sixteenth century. Similar symbols can be found in cemeteries adjacent to the emergent Christian symbolism – crosses.

The Scebiaraky stone complex is located in a region where Yatvingian stone tombs are closely linked with burials of the Slavic tribe of Krivichs. Barrow burials were widespread in the Krivichs territory until the end of the twelfth century. Pagan beliefs were also maintained here for a long time during the Middle Ages. Yet some funeral stones containing the symbol of a pole with a semicircle also exist in the interior of the Krivichs territory. It is unclear whether this symbol implies the existence of separate Baltic enclaves or whether it had no particular ethnic connotation in the Baltic-Slavic contact zone and was simply connected with wider religious-mythological ideas.

In other words, the pole-with-semicircle image could be a pagan symbol that was not connected in those times with particular ethnic groups, but rather as a whole with the common development of pagan beliefs in the north-western part of late Kievan Rus and subsequently in the territory of the Great Duchy of Lithuania.

### Funerary ceremony

Why did this cosmological sign appear on gravestones? Since antiquity, the symbolism of a pole on a tomb is a feature of funerary rites in the region, among both Slavs and Balts.

Many Eastern Slavic tribes incorporated a pole in their tombs in early times. Describing the customs of the tribes of Radimichs, Vyatichs and Severians, the *Primary Chronicle* mentions that these tribes put small vessels containing the ashes of the dead on poles near to roads (Povest' 1999, p.11, 147).

The oldest funerary monuments in the Lithuanian tradition are arguably *krikštai* – the wooden poles that symbolized the sacred “world tree”. These columns assisted the souls of the dead to progress towards the upper world.

Accounts of cremation ceremonies appeared subsequently. The funeral rites of the Dukes of the Great

Duchy of Lithuania are described in the most detail. Following the will of the legendary Duke *Shvintorog*, the cremation ceremony began to be carried out traditionally in the sanctuary of Vilnia / Vilnius. The chroniclers describe this ceremony in detail. A corpse was burned together with many personal items and symbols of authority, whereupon

“they collected the ashes and buried them in the ground, having put with them lynx and bear claws in case there should be a day of reckoning, and they spoke, saying that the god would come to judge people and would sit down on a high mountain, judging fair and sinful men, and it would be difficult to get on to that mountain to face that godly courthouse without lynx or bear claws” (Hronika 1975, p.31).

*The Lithuanian and Samogitian Chronicle* describes the funerals of several Dukes conforming to such a ceremony: the legendary *Shvintorog*, *Gedemin*, and finally *Kejstut*, in the year 1382 (Hronika 1975, p. 41-42).

Recent folkloric sources also explain the meaning of the ceremony, saying that dead men need to scale the mountain of “glass” or “sharp stones” on which the supreme deity will be waiting for them. According to Lithuanian songs, the Sun dances “on the silver mountain in silver boots” on the day of the summer solstice, June 24<sup>th</sup> (Gimbutas 2004, p.210). An image of this mythological mountain has been connected with the heavenly dome for a long time (Gimbutas 2004, p.198).

We would also draw attention to the following Lithuanian folklore concerning a distant country in the West: the land where the sun comes down has “a grey stone and a solar tree or an iron column, and two horses that are near to a column” (Gimbutas 2004, p.198). Thus, in the other world there is also a pole or tree which is supporting the heavenly dome.

When we consider the funerary ceremonies of Slavs or Balts, it is clear that the main overall task of all recorded rituals is to transport the souls of the dead into the upper, heavenly world. Accordingly, we can postulate that the same applied to funerary customs among those who built the stone tombs with the image of a pole with a semicircle depicted on their gravestones. This symbol was a good representation of cosmological creation and of interrelationships with the other, upper world. The use of a stone containing the image of a pole with a semicircle could also have been an alternative to building an additional column. Perhaps this change was influenced by the Christian custom of erecting burial stones. A gravestone with this symbol was also a representation of the world axis.

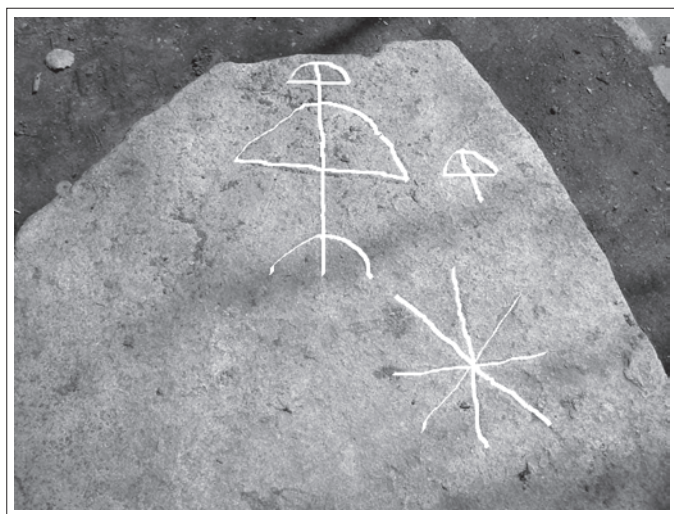


Fig. 4. A stone from the Logojsk region with the image of a pole with two semicircles.

### Funerary barrow

Notwithstanding the main idea of a funeral ceremony – to move the soul of a dead man into the upper world – late Lithuanian folklore and legends describe other places where souls may reside or else pay short visits to the world of living people. The souls of the dead are imagined to be present in the neighbourhood of the world of the living, within funerary objects such as barrows, columns and stones (Gimbutas 2004, p.197).

Among the compound images containing the symbol of a pole with a semicircle from north-western Belarus, there is a specific variant with hemispheres consistently located one above the other. In this case, the symbolism of a pole with several semicircles helps to explain the mythical idea that the souls of the dead were simultaneously in the heavens and nearby the world of living people.

A pole with a semicircle could not only be comprehended as a representation of the heavenly sphere, but simultaneously alluded to the funerary barrows of the Balts as a structural model of the Universe. The barrow could be interpreted as another sphere, another world alongside the upper “heavenly” world.

Given this, we should draw attention to an important feature of the Yatvingians’ barrows. They have been covered by stones or, more likely, naturally consisted of piled stones. Funerals in barrows covered by stones form a very old tradition in Baltic lands.

Such stone barrows correspond to the mythical idea of stone heavens widespread among Indo-Europeans and among Balts in particular.

This enables us to understand the mythical idea contained in Baltic folklore that the souls of dead ancestors existed simultaneously in the upper heavenly world and close to the world of people, within various funerary objects. These worlds were connected by a funerary “world axis”. This axis, in the form of a column or symbolic images, enabled movement between the worlds.

During a feast devoted to the worship of the ancestors, living people met their souls in places where there were burials. At such times a column or the symbol of a pole with a semicircle embodied not only the opportunity of movement upwards, but also the idea that the souls of the dead might return for short periods to this world.

### Ritual columns

Despite the preceding discussion, preliminary archaeological excavations in the immediate vicinity of the Scebiaraky stones have not revealed burials. One possibility, then, is to reject the idea that the complex had a funerary origin. In addition it is evident that the Scebiaraky images are more complex than on those funerary stones with one symbol.

Stones containing symbols of the “world axis” can also be considered as a created “world axis”. Cosmological symbolism is attributed not only to sacred stones but also to poles erected during the course of various rituals. In fact there are many rituals among the Slavs and Balts in the region at which a column performed an important ceremonial function. During those rites, the creation of a cosmological structure was necessary.

The symbolism of a column and the ceremony of its erection in Slavic and Baltic cultures reflect traditions originating in an ancient pagan epoch. It is possible to discern at least four major semantic forms of a ceremony of erecting a pole or its analogues of ceremonial, ritualistic “world support”:

- funerary rituals;
- the erection of a pole during the course of calendrical rites;
- the sacred perception of a central pole in a village house; and
- the erection of a ritual pole or house pole during special ceremonies, for example a wedding.

The erection of a pole was an integral part of certain calendrical rites among the Slavs and Balts. During feasts in Pancake Week and on *Kupal’ė*, putting up

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a pole is one of the best known ceremonial events among the Eastern Slavs. The tops of the poles were often crowned by solar signs, these columns then forming the focus of all ritual actions.

It is also customary among Lithuanians to erect a column or a tree of the Sun – *Saulės Medis* – on the day of summer solstice – on *Kupolė* or *Rasa*. In eastern Lithuania, three branches placed on top of a column were explained as being the Sun, the Moon and a star. The cosmological semantics of an erected column is clearly visible in calendrical rites.

The main central column in the village dwellings of Slavs and Balts, which supported the roof, was especially revered. This central column was particularly significant in the ritual life of families of Eastern Slavs (Bajburin 2005, p.174). A very significant reflection of this occurs in the Belarusian wedding ceremony called “*столбовой обряд*” “column rite” because the basic actions took place around a column. Gods were present here, and the application of a ritual formula meant that these gods would “forge” the wedding, performing the main ceremony of connection between the newly-weds. N. Nikols’kii has compared this column in dwellings with the family altars of Mediterranean and Near Eastern antiquity (Nikol’skii 1956, p.144-176). Belarusians have also preserved the sacred nature of the central column in ancient names for it, such as “*дзе́д*” ‘grandfather’, “*каневы слуп*” ‘horse’s column’ or simply “*конь*” ‘a horse’. For a long time, the last two have been compared with Sanskrit *aśva-yupa* ‘a horse-column’ which was represented as “a world column”. It follows that this name can be linked to ancient Indo-European heritage (Bajburin 2005, p.174; Ivanov 1974, p. 75-138). The cosmological semantics of the column supporting the roof in Lithuanian houses was emphasized by the engraving of symbols of the Sun, Moon, and stars in the upper part and images of horses or grass-snakes in the lower part.

Lithuanians had a custom of erecting special columns during significant events, such as a marriage, illness, or epidemic, or to proposition for a good harvest. Maria Gimbutas proposed that such columns with symbols of the Sun, Moon and stars at the top had a cosmologi-

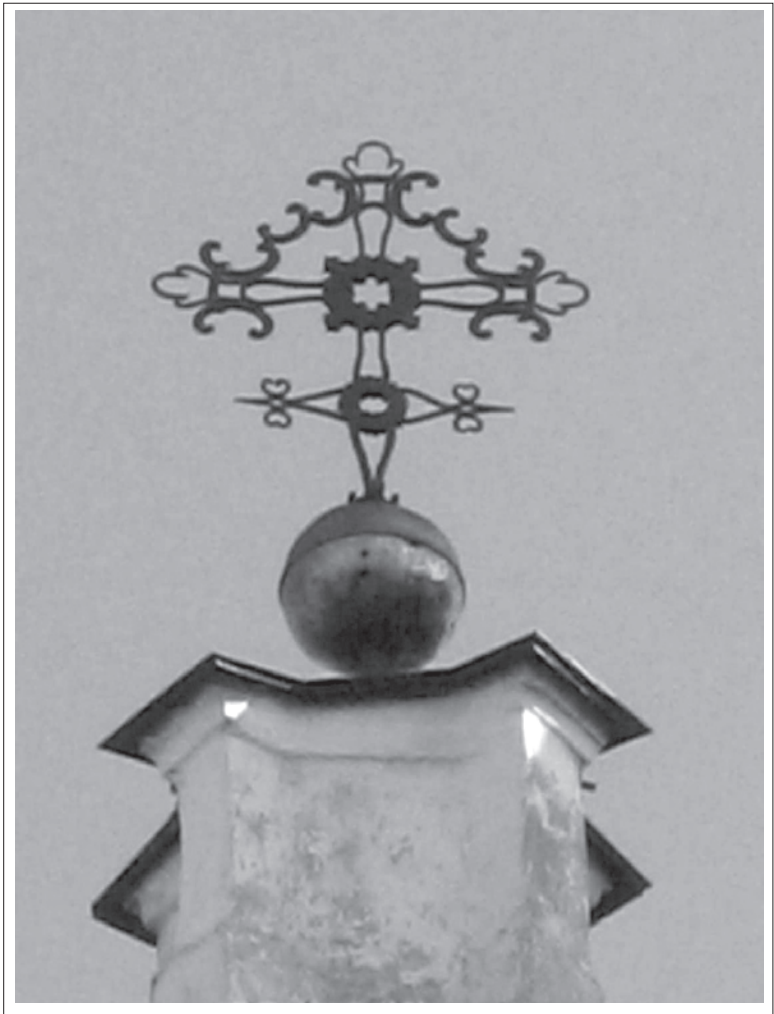


Fig. 5. Cross from the town of Slonim.

cal meaning (Gimbutas 2004, p.204; Vaiškūnas 2005, p.195-206).

In sum, the mythical semantics of a column represent, first of all, cosmological ideas on the creation of sacred communication with the other world at the necessary ritual moment.

### Penetration of paganism into Christian tradition?

We have already mentioned that the use of the symbol of a pole with a semicircle on funerary stones could be connected with the spread of Christian customs of erecting tombstones with Christian symbols. But pagan symbolism may also have penetrated in a different way into practices among the conquering Christians.

During the Christian epoch a transition took place from the use of a column to the use of a cross. As a result, the cross itself had evident pagan overtones for local populations. The Catholic authorities understood this and struggled against it: thus in 1426, the Bishop of Sambia



characteristically prohibited the erection of crosses in a cemetery, an example that demonstrates well the pagan basis of the local Baltic tradition (Čepienė 2000, p.45).

We are able to observe the continuation of the symbolism of the “pole-column-axis” in Catholic crosses both in Lithuania and western Belarus. In Lithuania, these traditional iron crosses on churches are well studied (Kontrimas 1991). Unfortunately, however, this cultural phenomenon has not been investigated in the territory of western Belarus, despite the fact that such crosses are still widespread.

These crosses typically have a compound form (Fig. 5 and Plate V: Fig.6). One of their main characteristics is that their upper ends often approximate to the shape of a sphere. The lower part, on the other hand, is either free from images or (more frequently) carries a symbol of the young Moon. Thus, these crosses also form a semicircle-sphere. Studying the continuity of the symbol of a pole with a semicircle and the traditional iron crosses of Lithuania and Belarus could be very perspicacious.

## Conclusions

Unfortunately, it is impossible at the moment to give a definitive interpretation of the semantics of the Scebiaraky stone complex. However, it is clear that it connects with Baltic sacred stones *stabas* and represents the ceremonial “world axis” directed towards the North Star. The purpose of constructing the stone complex was to create such an axis and to connect the world of living people with the upper world. This unique stone complex could give us significant insights into the manner in which paganism developed in the Baltic-Slavic contact zone and into the formation of religious ideas within the Great Duchy of Lithuania.

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## ŽENKLAI ANT STEBERAKŲ KAIMO AKMENŲ ŠIAURĖS VAKARŲ BALTARUSIJOJE

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### Santrauka

Straipsnis skirtas ženklams, aptiktiems ant penkių Steberakų (Сцебярэкі) kaimo akmenų Vileikos rajone. Dažniausiai šiuose ženkluose pasikartoja stiebo su pusapskritimi arba tam tikros konfigūracijos kryžiumi motyvas. Geografinė kompleksą sudarančių akmenų orientacija šiaurės kryptimi byloja apie astronominę orientaciją į Šiaurės žvaigždę ir kosmologinę simbolio prasmę. Stiebas su pusapskritimi vaizduoja pasaulio ašies laikomą dangaus kupolą.

Vertė Vykintas Vaitkevičius

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