

## REVIEW

### NATURAL HOLY PLACES. VALUES AND PROTECTION.

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In many ways, it is surprising that natural holy places that were counted as part of the Estonian national identity as early as the 19th-century awakening only became objects of wider and more systematic academic research at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries. The first general descriptions of Estonian non-Christian holy sites were completed by the end of the 18th century (Hupel 1774; Hiärn 1794). From the basis of the common national romantic movement and the national identity that was under formation during the 18th and 19th centuries, a relatively stereotypical treatment of beautiful oak groves was formed, where ancient and free Estonians worshipped their gods and burnt their dead, prior to Christianity being introduced with fire and the sword (Merkel 1798; Jung 1879; Loorits 1935). The described treatment of *hiis*-sites became an ideological tool, and despite the folklore, according to which, in addition to beautiful hills and forests, swamps and clear fields were also considered *hiis*-sites (Eisen 1920), the romantic understanding can still be traced even now. The understanding of *hiis*-sites changed slightly in the second half of the 20th century, which was not the most favourable time for the study of religion, but when support for the national identity was continuously needed. Instead of the 19th-century romantic vision, academic studies of the 1920s and 1930s were used more, showing the rich variety of holy places and their strong connection with villages or single farmsteads. A view of natural holy sites deriving from the pre-Christian period, and thus directly connected to the religion and world-view of free and ancient Estonians, was then permanently adopted. Consequently, the first monograph of *hiis*-sites by an Estonian author was published only at the end of the 20th century (Rommel 1998). A decade later, a more systematic tradition of research into Estonian natural holy places can be discussed.

Until now, the treatments have predominantly been written by Estonian authors in Estonian, and have thus had a relatively modest influence on the international reader. This collection of articles, dedicated to Agne Trummal, the director of the National Heritage Board, who passed away prematurely, is definitely the most thorough and manifold treatment so far. Natural holy places are observed by different researchers from different fields, and, as a result, we can form a picture that is incomparably more diverse than the state of research has allowed until now. Although the articles are in Estonian, they are provided with English summaries, in order to attract the attention of researchers outside Estonia.

There is a clear emphasis in the collection towards issues of the protection of *hiis*-sites and other natural holy places. As Mall Hiimäe says (p.232), the role of these holy sites is not so much the perception of sacredness, but 'it is more a question of the feeling for home and the roots of the people that we know.' Hiimäe is absolutely right, and holy sites as symbols of the identity are just as important to Estonians as they are to most people in the world. This is shown by the very positive and strong feedback and the wide public response to the preservation campaign for natural holy places during recent years.

What are the natural holy places under discussion? It is very characteristic that none of the articles in the collection provide a definition, although several articles are concerned with presenting a sort of classification of holy places. It can be perceived from several articles that we are dealing with something that is characteristic of the Finno-Ugric world, and when studying Estonian natural holy places we have to use analogies from this area. The main aspects uniting Estonian and Finno-Ugric holy sites are, on one hand, their wealth in forests, and, on the other hand, the rules of behaviour

according to which a holy place must not be damaged, trees must not be cut down, or branches broken. But similar features can be found for most natural holy places around the world, including Christian shrines, so maybe we should not limit ourselves to parallels from Estonia or our Finno-Ugric 'kinsmen', but also look more bravely towards the south and the west?

Many articles give the impression that natural holy places are reflections of a religious whole deriving from times that started to disappear in the 19th and the 20th centuries. True, authors have referred to the destruction of *hiis*-sites that took place in the Middle Ages and the Modern Period, as well as the relatively late introduction of some holy sites. But natural holy places as such are treated as uniform and principally unchanging in time. This ahistorical approach is intrinsic to wider treatments of natural holy places (Insoll 2007, p.141). Considering the dynamism and re-interpretativity (cf. *interpretative level*, Whitehouse 2004) of folk religion, and the fact that holy places have changed in time before, even without outside or violent intervention, and that they have been abandoned and new ones introduced, we can obtain a relatively new perspective on these sites. Although Heiki Valk mentions this in his article (p.144), the collection is dominated by a timeless approach, whereby natural holy places are all treated as homogeneous.

In the longest article in the collection, Ahto Kaasik gives an overview of the programme of Estonian historical natural sanctuaries, and describes more closely the reasons, problems and different stages in carrying out the programme. Through the programme, a completely new and different picture emerges, where necessary specialists in the authorities engaged in the protection are active, specific protection regulations are elaborated, and so on. However, this situation is so far nowhere to be found yet in the world. There are several areas where natural holy places have been put under protection, they are preserved and kept preferably for the executors of rituals connected to them; but until now an official system for the protection of these places does not yet work anywhere. Moreover, a planned and capacious database with previous fieldwork and cameral studies, as well as the ensuing protective system for the places, is not known anywhere else in the world. Can we hope that Estonia will be a pioneer in this?

Aare Kasemets concentrates in his article on the role of natural holy places in the contemporary self-perception and world-view of the Estonians. Several juridical and official aspects are presented in the article that are important in launching the *hiis*-programme, but also in the treatment of natural holy sites in a general sense.

The article by Heiki Valk concentrates on the treatment of natural holy places from the standpoint of the archaeologist. He admits that classic archaeological fieldwork cannot offer much to the study of holy sites, and it is comparatively more relevant to analyse the connectedness of holy places with other archaeological sites and to try to date them in that way. Valk discusses the function of holy sites and the classification that emerges on the basis of it. A special emphasis in his article is paid to different problems of source criticism that primarily concern the linking together of folk traditions and archaeological data, as well as the determination of holy places, their age, or their wider significance.

Eerik Leibak treats holy sites as natural communities, concentrating primarily on *hiis* as a holy forest. As an important conclusion, he points out that *hiis*-sites, and natural holy places in a wider sense, are such diverse objects that it is not right to create a uniform solution for their protection. By this, *hiis*-sites would be acknowledged as the 'dead' heritage, and they would be treated as separate objects with which a connection to the living community is non-existent.

Auli Kütt, in her article about behavioural norms in holy places, continues the direction of her earlier research. By using the local tradition of the Estonian Folklore Archives, she discusses how indigenous people behaved in their holy sites, and what general and local regulations there were. The main emphasis of the article is on the prohibitions and punishments that accompanied violations of these bans. As a conclusion, Kütt admits that holy places were allowed to develop freely, and as a result, holy sites should be treated in their initial meaning as natural stands similar to primeval forests where an occasional human influence was present.

Mall Hiimäe, in her article, analyses the genre problematics of the folk tradition, and observes the tradition connected with Estonian holy places in the four-dimensional model created by Ben Amos (1976). With the emphasis on local traditions, in the case of the tradition connected to holiness, the need to study the context, including the contemporary context, is stressed.

Mari-Ann Rimmel gives an overview of the folk tradition associated with *hiis*-sites in Estonia. A strong emphasis is put on the reliability of the tradition and the evaluation of its date. In this context, Rimmel highlights the shortness and principality of tradition, and points out that we can rarely find *hiis*-lore describing details. Rimmel considers this phenomenon to be 'the fossil backbone' of folklore which refers to the old date of tradition, where single details do not play a significant role any more.

Kärt Vaarmari gives an overview of four court cases in the USA and Australia that concerned the protection of natural holy places. Commencing with an outline of the corresponding Estonian legislation, Vaarmari reaches the conclusion that natural holy places fit in neither with present heritage protection nor nature conservation legislation. We are dealing with far too complex phenomena. Vaarmari also analyses several different issues that concern the official protection of natural holy places. It is also important that Vaarmari points out differences between US and Australian cases and the Estonian situation: while in the first cases natural holy sites are characteristic of native ethnic minorities, in Estonia they can be considered intrinsic to the indigenous people of the land, with 'primeval value' as a significant criterion. And again, we come to a question raised in several articles: how can we determine the age of natural holy places?

The article by Marju Kõivupuu discusses a specific kind of natural holy place: cross-trees that are primarily widespread in southern Estonia. The article gives an overview of the tradition of cross-trees associated with the culture of death, and shows analogues in the attachment of the soul of the dead person with a tree elsewhere in the world. An important part of the article is dedicated to the persistence of the tradition of cross-trees and the protective aspects of the trees.

As a conclusion, it is important to note that many articles in the collection do not offer any explicit results, but the prospects for future research. In combining a research group from so many different fields, a strong base has been set for later studies.

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