Use and reuse of ancient sacred places in Mikytai, Žemaitija National Park, NW Lithuania

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Introduction

The study of the ancient sacred places in Lithuania was a rather slow process in the twentieth century. Many ideological and methodological controversies surrounded the subject. The multidisciplinary character of the ancient sacred places and ambivalent ideological attitudes towards them were the factors that affected the issue greatly.

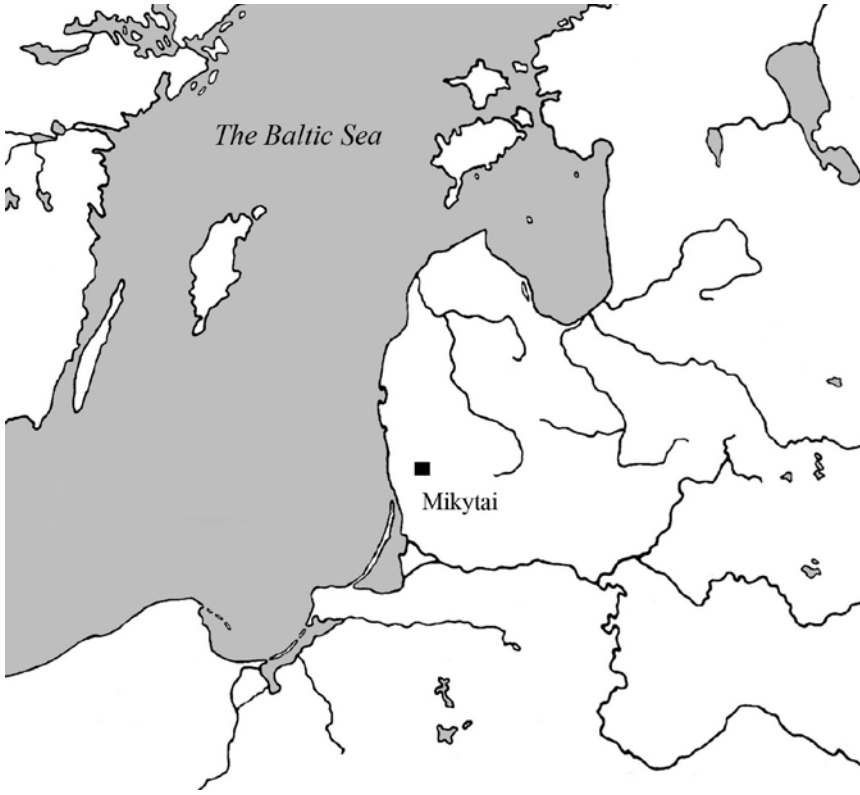
Nowadays nearly 2500 ancient sacred places have been recorded in Lithuania. This figure includes hills, arable fields and meadows, groves and trees, rivers and springs, lakes and wetlands, stones, hollows. There are also some known caves located in exposures on riverbanks.

Ancient sacred places are a highly characteristic type of monuments in Lithuania's protected areas, which cover the most natural lands. Usually sacred places located in protected areas are well preserved, and therefore they deserve special consideration.

The complex of ancient sacred places of Mikytai is located in North-western Lithuania, within Žemaitija National Park. As many other protected areas of the country, this national park was founded in 1991, soon after the independence of Lithuania was declared.

The core of the Žemaitija National Park is Lake Plateliai, located in the middle of the site, although numerous other

< An oak with holes and two trunks grown together on the north-eastern slope of the Alka Hill.



The location of the Mikytai Site in the Baltic Sea Region.

places of interest are located in its periphery. Žemaitija (*Samogitia* – in Latin) is a renown region for its history and cultural heritage.

Although Christianity has been officially introduced into Žemaitija in the early fifteenth century (Jucas, 2007: 31-38), real changes in the worldview of the local population took place only in the late sixteenth century, during the Reformation and the reaction against it. Syncretism of inherited Baltic (and also Indo-European) spiritual traditions and Christianity is highly characteristic of the religion of the Žemaitija region. It is sometimes described by the term 'Folk Christianity' that includes ancient sacred places: sacred trees, sacred springs, and sacred stones being in passive or active use today. Especially the votive treatment and offerings of this kind are prevalent and practised in Žemaitija. Small wooden chapels, crosses of different size, figurines of the Saints as well as numerous other offerings are brought to the ancient sacred places.

Mikytai sacred places and the Alka Hill

The case of the ancient sacred places in Mikytai is quite different from other Lithuanian sacred sites. The Devil's name that appears in some of the place names of Mikytai as well as in the local legends referring to the Alka Hill does indicate that the original sacredness of the pre-Christian site has been transformed into fear and fright a long time ago. The name of the village 'Mikytai' might have derived from a surname, but at the same time, folk etymology draws attention to the meaning of the Lithuanian word *mikyta* 'the goat', because the ghost of the goat plays the central role in the numerous place legends related to the Mikytai Alka Hill (Vaitkevičius, 1998: 22).

From an archaeological point of view, the hill fort in-between the sites Mikytai and Šliktine is a significant mark in the prehistoric landscape dating back to the first millennium – early second millennium AD (Baubonis and Zabiela, 2005: 372-373). Couronian settlements covered a huge area from North-western Lithuania to South-western Latvia (Žulkus, 2004: 41). There is no information about a burial site in Mikytai. However, several findings were discovered during the reclamation of the Šata River valley in 1938 and 1970 (arms, jewellery, pieces of rider's equipment, etc.) and their appearance is characteristic of the sacrificial sites all around Northern Europe. In a marshy area located to the north of the hill fort some hundreds of items from the ninth to eleventh centuries AD have been found in two compact concentrations (Rimantiene, 1977: 132-133).

In historical times, at least for four or five centuries, the Mikytai village (*akalica* – in Polish) at the roads crossing was a settlement inhabited by noblemen. For this reason there were no regulations indicating that the villages were the property of the State (e.g. Grand Duchy of Lithuania). The representatives of the noblemen were the keepers of old customs in some cases. This might be supported by recent research carried out in Lithuania and Latvia. In both cases a kind of religious independence of the noblemen related to the ancient sacred places was discussed, and buildings of sacred places next to the villages that were inhabited by the noblemen were presented (Vaitkevičius 2008; Laime 2009).

Alka Hill (whose literal translation would be 'hill of the *Alka*') is the most significant landmark in the surroundings of Mikytai and it possesses the common Lithuanian name *alka* (feminine). For a long time *Alka* was widely accepted as the name for 'a sacred grove', 'a place where sacrifices were burnt', or 'sacrifice' itself (Vaitkevičius, 2004: 7). It is worth mentioning that *Alka* is one of the few Baltic religious terms of the pre-Christian period. Numerous 'hills of *Alka*' are highly characteristic of the Žemaitija region in Lithuania and the Couronia region in Latvia (Vaitkevičius 2004: 9-10). Usually they belong to archaeological complexes dated from the early fourteenth to the early fifteenth century, the same period when the Northern Crusades and Conversion ends. Evidently, the Mikytai Alka Hill was somehow connected with

The Mikytai Alka Hill in the landscape (view from the west).

the Mikytai hill fort, at least in a visual way, but the key point is the location of the complex of the ancient sacred places in the watershed area.

The Mikytai Alka Hill (184 m above sea level) is located in a woody and marshy watershed area in-between the basins of the Rivers Minija, Bartuva, and Varduva. It has a shape of a large irregular cone, and it represents the ground moraines – the gently rolling hills. All these are related to the glaciers which have disappeared some thirteen thousands years ago in Žemaitija.

The slopes stretching from 28 to 32 m are particularly important features of the site; the southern slope rises gradually, while the northern one is extremely steep. The Devil's Stone (red granite, 3.6 m in length, and 3 m in width) is located in the middle of the northern slope. On the top of the boulder there is a depression of 7–16 cm x 34 cm in size, the so-called Devil's footprint. The Prayer's Well, the second well-known feature in the area of the Mikytai Alka Hill, is placed on the eastern side. Currently, the dry 0.6 m deep hollow that has a diameter of 2.2 m and is paved with stones, is regarded to be the former place of the sacred spring (Vaitkevičius, 1998: 225-227).

Apart from the Devil's Stone and Prayer's Well mentioned in the place-legends, some other elements of the site should be mentioned. Namely, an oval-shaped pond full of water (10 x 25 m in size); a formation of two stones (of unknown origin), one on top of the other, both of remarkable shape and appearance as well as a table-shaped stone (1.4 x 1.6 m, 0.1 m high) surrounded by a circle of fourteen other stones.

Recently other new discoveries were made during the field-survey that took place in April 2011. Attention was drawn to certain trees bearing holes. Holes of different size and form were shaped in many trunks and (or) branches grown together. The species

of the trees varied, and included an oak, a bird cherry, two spruces, two maples, a pair consisting pine tree and a maple; they were recorded mostly in the north – north-western side of the Alka Hill. Those trees were used in special healing rituals and are known in Lithuania, the former territory of Prussia, as well as in Belarus, Russia and other countries. The holes in the trees represent gates in which the clothes of patients or sometimes sick children were put.

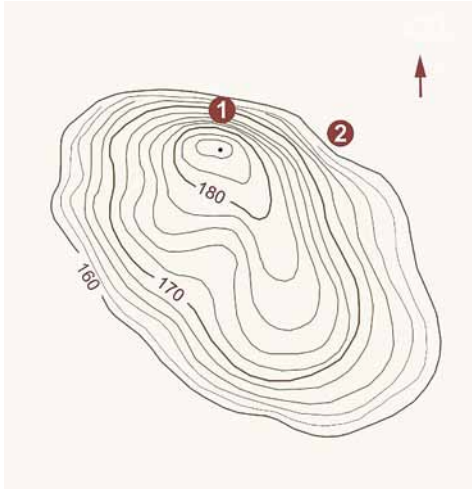
Finally, some other landmarks, such as earth mounds and a particular kind of ditch discovered within the area of the Alka Hill, might be regarded as a result of human activity during the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Legends and beliefs

An important part of the intangible cultural heritage of the Mikytai Alka Hill is a collection of narrations, place legends and beliefs which were compiled during the twentieth century. In 1926 Juozas Mickevicius (1900–1984) authored the first publication on the subject (Mickevicius, 1926). Later on he was followed by Jurgis Dovydaitis (1907–2001), Juozas Šliavas (1930–1979), and Antanas Šleinys (1897–?). The latter is a story teller and folklore collector, inhabitant of the Kruopiai village, and deserves special attention. His place legends are famous in Lithuania and are characterised by the author's very individual style, uncommon among the other story tellers. At the same time, however, his stories have a traditional form and character.

Generally there are a number of motives behind place legends. For instance, the Mikytai Alka Hill is considered the dwelling place of a particular goat that is usually depicted as a ghost that misleads local peasants, and frightens them. By bleating, the goat stays in a kind of active communica-

An indirect illumination of the northern slope of the Mikytai Alka Hill as well as the Devil's Stone in the evening sunshine



The topography of sacred places in Mikytai: (1) the Devil's Stone on the northern slope of the Alka Hill, (2) the Prayer's Well on the eastern foot. The scheme on the right implicates the mythological model of the complex of sacred places in Mikytai referring to the general meaning of the world's directions in the Baltic religion.

tion with the residents of the Mikytai village. This is a reciprocal relation. It is known that men used to produce a drone while blowing the boss of the wheel in a particular way, inviting the goat to the village (Šliavas, 1978: 74).

Another significant concept related to the Alka Hill concerns the mist. It is broadly believed that the Alka Hill produces smoke. This phenomenon is not related to a specific time of the year; the key point is that smoke over the Alka Hill always predicts considerable weather changes – the rainy weather will change into sunny, the coolness into warmness, and so on (Vaitkevičius, 1998: 224).

The extraction of salt on the Mikytai Alka Hill is discussed in numerous narrations as well (Vaitkevičius, 1998: 222-223). The motif of the extraction of salt is very characteristic of the Lithuanian tales; people are looking for salt in heaven, because salt resources are under control by God (*Dievas*) or Thunder (*Perkunas*) (Vaitkevičiene, 2001: 77-81). But in relation to ancient sacred places, salt is known to be found on the most remarkable sacred hills only.

In the Mikytai Alka Hill not much emphasis is placed on the period and rituals of the pre-Christian religion. Sometimes place legends do mention offerings sacrificed to the Prayer's Well (Vaitkevičius, 1998: 226-227) and washing of the dead at the well before cremation (the well was sometimes called the Death's Well – Šliavas, 1978: 73-74). The latter subject is unique and needs to be thoroughly examined in the future. Archaeological excava-

tions (precisely test pits) took place in Mikytai Alka Hill in 1971 under the leadership of Vytautas Urbanavicius. Neither structures nor artefacts referring to ancient rituals were revealed (Urbanavicius, 1972: 15-17).

One very important factor for the mythological interpretation of the complex of ancient sacred places in Mikytai is the morphology of the Alka Hill itself. The geographical position, topography, and shape are as important for our examination as all material evidences. Surprisingly, the shape of the Alka Hill, and its north-south direction, fits exactly the model of the Baltic worldview: the northern slope is as dark, cold, and wet as the southern is bright, warm, and dry (cf. Vaitkevičiene, 2001: 120-130). Taking into account the accessibility of the Alka Hill (none of the old paths lead to the northern side) it might be reasonably stated that the northern slope and the marshy foot look eerie and unworldly, in comparison to the southern area which was the main arena for every kind of action and activity.

The preliminary analysis of the road network around the Alka Hill proves what was just stated; the main road (also designed for transport) leads to the hill's top from the southern side, and the main path (designed for walking only) stretches from the west to the east approaching the Prayer's Well (again a symbolic expression).

The opposition east-west is slightly expressed but the Prayer's Well, the former site of the sacred spring, indicates that, very likely, east was connected to life and west was connected to death. Water flowing to the east has a special positive impact on people; according to the Baltic religion such water brings life, health, and beauty (Vaitkevičius, 2004: 45-46). In a particular way the trees bearing holes in the north-western area of the Alka Hill do represent a connection with the otherworld – during the rituals the holes of the trees used to play the role of a gate; while crossing the line between the two worlds every expected change is possible.

A complex of ancient sacred sites

To sum up, the features included around the hill, its location in relation to the watershed area, its topography and morphology, the place legends related to the mist and the extraction of salt indicate that the complex of ancient sacred places in Mikytai, although not thoroughly investigated yet, was used during the Iron Age and the Middle Ages as a sacred place of interregional character, one of the central places in the Couronian region (cf. Vaitkevičius, 2004: 51-52). The prehistoric sacred site lost its sacredness with the arrival of Christianity, most likely in the late sixteenth or seventeenth century – in course of the reaction against the Reformation as well as all pagan elements led by the Jesuits. Another turning point in the history of the Žemaitija region is the decimation of the local population during several outbreaks of plague in the period from

the mid-seventeenth to the first half of the eighteenth century (its last occurrence in 1709–1711).

Indications of the former sacredness of the Alka Hill in Mikytai can be found in the origins of its – name composed of the archaic religious term *alka*, a collection of place legends, and some particular features like the Devil's Stone and the Prayer's Well, which belong to the same complex. The cultural activities promoted by the managers of the national park have already changed the social attitudes towards the Alka Hill. The passive approach (general knowledge without further particular interest) became an active one. In the last decade, a Mikytai cognitive path (approximately 1 km in length including the wooden tower designed for sightseeing) became one of the most favoured trails inside the protected area. Žemaitija National Park hosts approximately 60 000 visitors every year, of which probably 1000 visit the Mikytai Alka Hill, too (Mrs. A. Kuprelyte, personal communication).

The Mikytai Alka Hill was an attractive ancient sacred place without any religious connotations, which is characteristic of the dissemination of ancient cultural heritage in Lithuania. Two factors, however, are positively affecting the perception of this ancient sacred place in Mikytai. Firstly, the Alka Hill is easily accessed by car, because it is located only some hundred metres from the parking area. Secondly, the cognitive path established by the managers of the National Park is equipped with the necessary infrastructure: special props mark the path course, information for the public is provided in Lithuanian and English, and sightseeing points are located on the top of the hill. In this way the fear and scare related to the Alka Hill in Mikytai have been transformed into tourist interest and education opportunities, creating another natural and cultural attraction within the national park. It is one of the few examples of this kind in modern Lithuania.

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