

# Agrarian rituals giving way to Romantic motifs: Sacred natural sites in Estonia

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**Abstract.** Semiotic mechanisms involving sacred natural sites – or areas of land or water with special spiritual significance – that have been focal points in agrarian vernacular religion have been transformed in modern Estonian culture. Some sites have accrued new significance as national monuments or tourist attractions and the dominant way of conceptualizing these sites has changed.

Sacred natural sites should not be presumed to represent pristine nature. Rather, they are products of complex culture-nature interactions as they have been formed in the course of traditional land management as well as different semiotic practices, including ritual and conservationist ones. The existence of sites encompassed by the term defies and blurs the rigid distinction between nature and culture.

Individual sacred natural sites and categories of such sites can act as signifiers for a variety of different signifieds concurrently, acting as confluences of different sign systems and thus exemplifying the creolization of these systems as well as bringing about the hybridization of different landscape traditions in certain loci.

Estonian literary culture has adopted motifs and narratives that define sacred natural sites more readily from other literary traditions than from the Estonian vernacular tradition; in turn, the vernacular tradition has also adopted and assimilated literary Romantic motifs.

**Keywords:** sacred natural sites; landscape; monuments; orality; literacy

One of the most salient forms of culture-based conservation has been the identification and protection of sacred natural sites, which often harbour valuable biodiversity and protect key ecosystems.

Thomas Schaaf (2008: ix)

## 1. Introduction

Sacred natural sites are a worldwide phenomenon that are closely related to experiencing and perceiving the supernatural and the sacred in its everyday manifesta-

tions. In literate societies whose religious life is dominated by formal specialized institutions, such sites can be left to the margins of institutionalized culture.

In addition, conceptual systems that are based on the rigid distinction between nature and culture may hinder understanding sacred natural sites. Such sites should not be presumed to represent pristine nature but should be conceived of as products of complex culture-nature interactions as they have been formed in the course of traditional land management as well as different semiotic practices, including ritual and conservationist practices. The existence of sites encompassed by the term defies and blurs the rigid distinction between nature and culture. This makes sacred natural sites a fitting subject for ecosemiotic study, as ecosemiotics studies the role of environmental perception and conceptual categorization in the design, construction, and transformation of environmental structures (Maran, Kull 2014: 41).

The way sacred natural sites function in traditional oral culture is best characterized with the help of the concept of 'vernacular religion' or "religion as it is lived: as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" (Primiano 1995: 44) because the traditional customs and beliefs associated with sacred natural sites form an integral part of "individuals' sometimes wonderfully unique, sometimes wonderfully ordinary religious lives" as they are "actually lived" (Primiano 1995: 41).

Sacred natural sites have functioned in Estonia within a context of an oral and mostly agrarian traditional culture. The customs maintaining the sacredness of such sites emphasize the social cohesion of the local community and its relationships with non-human supernatural beings and forces (including the dead). Sacred natural sites do not fit the general Western semiotic opposition of nature and culture as such sites inhabit an ambiguous position somewhere between generally accepted implicit notions of 'culture' and 'nature' (cultural vs. natural landscapes), 'tangible' and 'intangible' heritage.

In the article, I explore how the current Estonian public discourse on sacred natural sites has been influenced by the dialogue between different literary and oral traditions. I will concentrate on the fundamental changes that have taken place in conceptualizing Estonian sacred natural sites after the transition from an oral society to a literate one. As a defining premise, I have built on the notion – as notably developed by Walter J. Ong (2002) – that the functioning of a mainly oral culture is fundamentally different from that of a mainly literate culture and thus spawns different ecologies of meaning. I presume that oral and literate culture represent different spheres that can exist side by side but will nevertheless represent different semiotic sub-systems of culture (cf. also Lotman, Uspensky 1978).

In the traditional pattern of land use, sacred natural sites, such as sacred hills, trees, groves and springs, represent abodes of supernatural entities or forces where certain taboos and restrictions on activity and behaviour are observed. This reflects the vernacular understanding of nature and the supernatural forces at work therein.

Rituals performed at sacred natural sites are means of communicating with supernatural creatures (including ancestors) and are often performed to ensure or restore luck or health.

After the spread of literacy and the written Estonian culture in the latter half of the 19th century, the role of sacred natural sites has changed profoundly. This includes the transformation of such sites from sites of vernacular ritual into officially recognized natural or historical monuments in the dialogue between traditional culture and national identity. In the process, such sites have become facilitators of communication between different cultures or sub-systems of culture that help to hybridize and blend different traditions. I will describe samples from three sets of texts that each characterize different traditions of seeing Estonian landscapes.

(1) Traditional oral texts on Estonian sacred natural sites that reflect the vernacular religion and that have been systematically recorded since the end of the 19th century; contributions to the archives are being added to this day on the basis of recent fieldwork. I have mostly relied on published samples of archive material (Koski 1967; Eisen 1996; Loorits 1935; Rimmel 1998; Hiimäe 2011).

(2) Mediaeval texts written by non-Estonians, as represented by *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae* (HCL), a chronicle covering the years 1180 to 1227 and documenting the Christianization and subduing of Livonians, Estonians and Latgalians in Livonia during the Baltic Crusade. This represents a written tradition in a context in which the majority of people were operating mostly in some kind of an oral tradition and literates constituted a minority. Thus it can be considered a record of a hybrid mode of thinking that has features of both a traditional oral and a more recent literate tradition.

(3) Literary texts in the European tradition from the 19th century onwards, represented mainly by the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg* (Kp), a text that spawned a whole universe of texts representing the newly formed Estonian nation.

## 2. How natural are sacred natural sites?

Sacred natural sites are defined as “areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities” in the guidelines for protected area managers developed by the UNESCO and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (Wild, McLeod 2008: xi). The concept can be used as an umbrella term that includes vernacular types and categories of sacred natural sites as conceptualized by local traditions.

The term can also be used in a sense that encompasses analytic terms like ‘sacrificial site’ or ‘sacrificial stone’, etc., prevalent in earlier research into sacred natural sites in Estonia. (Some authors writing about Estonian traditional sacred sites

have used terms like ‘natural holy place’ or ‘sacred natural place’, which I assume can be considered synonymous with ‘sacred natural site’.)

For the purposes of this discussion, I will consider sanctity to be something endowed to a site by the people who consider it sacred: it is arbitrary which sites from all potential sacred sites gain accepted cultural recognition as sacred. In this sense, I will generally follow the approach of Émile Durkheim (2008[1912]) and a general Saussurean approach to signification (assuming the relation between the signifier and the signified to be conventional or arbitrary). A Peircean perspective of sacred natural sites is useful in describing techniques of recognizing such sites or landscapes as sacred and of detecting signs and properties that make a site sacred in a given vernacular tradition.

A ‘site’ will be taken to mean a more or less discrete unit of landscape that can be referred to semiotically; it is signified, framed and bounded. A site has different meanings for different parties engaging in semiotic processes; meanings and sign systems used by each of them also inevitably converge and conflict in these processes, having meaningful overlaps that allow the observer to explore and delineate the common ground between the meanings.

While using the term ‘sacred natural site’, I would like to make a few conceptual remarks on the necessary reservations of interpreting it. Describing landscapes affected by human activity – including semiotic activity – as “natural” (as opposed to “cultural”) is problematic, or, as Simon Schama has said: “Even the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product” (Schama 1995: 9; cf. also Ingold 2000: 199).

It can be argued that a sacred natural site is a cultural product, or that these sites are, in essence, ‘semi-natural sacred sites’ as they have been formed by landscape processes such as traditional land management and cultural practices intervening in their supposed pristine natural state (if such a pristine state can be proven to exist at all, which in the case of sacred natural sites is doubtful, cf. Erickson 2008). Some such formative landscape practices in the Estonian sacred site tradition include visiting these places in great numbers or often enough to leave visible human trails in the grass (this includes communal dancing events); making ritual bonfires; giving as offerings non-perishable and non-organic objects like coins or other metal objects with the taboo of removing them on pain of contracting an illness; ritually cutting crosses into holy trees to commemorate the dead. These considerations are, in my opinion, valid to a degree. However, I take it that the existence of sites encompassed by the term ‘sacred natural site’ defies and blurs the rigid distinction between nature and culture, highlighting their intertwinement and entanglement with each other. Therefore sacred natural sites should be a fruitful province to be studied within the subdiscipline of ecosemiotics as it provides useful tools for understanding their

complex nature. In addition, I use the term ‘sacred natural site’ to distinguish between sanctuaries that mainly consist of built environment from those that do not.

While assessing sacred natural sites in terms of culture and nature, it is useful to draw on Kalevi Kull’s model of multiple natures in the semiosphere. Kull distinguishes zero, first, second and third nature in the human umwelt:

As a result of the differences humans can make, the nature in their Umwelt is distinguished into first, second, and third nature; what we think is outside the Umwelt, can be called zero nature. Zero nature is nature itself (e.g., absolute wilderness). First nature is the nature as we see, identify, describe and interpret it. Second nature is the nature which we have materially interpreted, this is materially translated nature, i.e. a changed nature, a produced nature. Third nature is a virtual nature, as it exists in art and science. (Kull 1998: 355)

Using this model, most traditional Estonian sacred natural sites near or in settlements would be a form of second nature – the sites are “materially translated” into the human umwelt and affected by cultural practices. Examples of this would include roadside sacred trees (e.g., the Mäesuitsu linden in Võnnu parish and the Ilumäe linden in Kadrina parish), wooded sacred hills near roads (Adavere Hiiemägi, Purtse Hiiemägi), sacrificial stones on farm lands, and even groves where there are trodden pathways in the grass, traditionally designated places for dancing and making festive bonfires or swings.

Sacred natural sites as first nature are possible, in case the taboos effective there include a blanket ban of human interference or approach (such as in the traditional approach to Japan’s sacred mountains that bans climbing the summits; cf. Lindström 2008b); however, the human interference on the surrounding area might still mean “materially translating” the landscape by isolating a patch of it. However, such instances should be very rare among Estonian landscapes.

In the Estonian literary culture of the 19th and 20th centuries, the prevalent form of sacred natural sites was one of third nature. Such sites were imagined or depicted on the basis of previous images originating from Romantic literature and texts or images that followed the same tradition. Imaginary sacred natural sites of this kind may exist without any corresponding geographical or topographical place or perceivable example from nature.

One example of such mostly imaginary, virtual sites is the set of supposed ancient Estonian oak groves sacred to the god Taara (*Taara tammikud*, see Heinapuu 2010). These are described in topographically vague terms in literary works such as the epic *Kalevipoeg* (Kreutzwald 2011[1862]) and various texts that draw on the epic, including other artistic texts, vehicles of political and ideological communication, as well as school textbooks from the 1930s. Such ancient oak shrines cannot be

proven to have existed outside fictional or ideological texts, although a few oak groves found on contemporary Estonian landscapes are sometimes putatively linked to the concept. As a matter of fact, Estonia lies at the northern limit of the area where the oak species *Quercus robur* occurs naturally. Groves with a majority of oaks are managed, semi-natural plant communities such as planted parks or wooded meadows used as pastures or maintained by other human activities that are usually prohibited by the locally common taboos of sacred sites (Leibak 2007: 174–176). Following Kati Lindström (2008a), this particular case can be termed a ‘phantom landscape’.

### 3. Sacred natural sites in Estonia

In the Estonian context, the concept of sacred natural site has been understood by a government-commissioned panel of experts as “sites associated with sacrifice, worship, healing, prayer or other religious or ritual activities according to folkloric, archaeological, historical, ethnological or other data”, further differentiating between “single monuments” (such as stones, individual trees, groups of trees, springs, rivers, lakes, hills, islands, valleys, holes, cliffs, caves or stone heaps) and “areas of land” (or “complexes of monuments”) that encompass “an area of land within which individual monuments of religious or ritual meaning (such as trees, springs, heaps or depressions in a grove area, to which lore or place names attribute special meaning) can be distinguished” (Development Plan 2008: 4–5), while limiting the scope of the concept to “individual monuments taken into active use before the 20th century” (Development Plan 2008: 1).

It is difficult to establish the total number of traditional sacred natural sites in Estonia that date back to the mainly agrarian oral society but some figures can be provided that give an idea of the orders of magnitude involved. According to researchers’ estimates, there are about 2,800 traditional sacred natural sites attested for in the archives. These include 800 complex sites – i.e. land areas such as holy groves with possibly several foci of ritual activity (Kütt *et al.* 2009; a complex site such as a grove with three sacred springs, a sacred stone and a tree for making offerings would show up as six entities on the list).

However, after thorough fieldwork in five parishes (Muhu, Juuru, Põlva, Võnnu, Kuusalu) that has revealed oral tradition about sites unknown in prior archive material, it has been estimated that over 4,000 sites could yet be described in detail (Ajalooste 2014: 3). A similar estimate concerns one category of sacred sites, namely sacred springs and wells. On the basis of archive data, Toomas Tamla lists 416 ‘cultic’ springs in Estonia (Tamla 1985: 128–129). Recent fieldwork by Jüri Metssalu has

identified nine sacred springs in addition to the four listed by Tamla in Juuru parish. According to Metssalu (2012: 33), similar results on the island of Muhu suggest that by means of similar fieldwork in all Estonian parishes it would be possible to collect traditions relating to a more than a thousand sacred springs in Estonia and even in that case, the total number of springs that have been considered sacred would be even bigger.

Nearly 500 sites have the status of a national monument: 447 sites have been officially declared cultural monuments subject to heritage protection, and 50 are protected as natural objects or monuments in the sense of § 4 of Nature Conservation Act (Kõivupuu 2009: 224). This would mean that roughly one in eight traditional sacred natural sites has the official status of a national monument. Protection for the rest of sacred natural sites can in principle be derived from fundamental rights like the freedom of religion (as provided for in the Estonian Constitution) but this is not specifically regulated in law.

All in all, the number of sacred natural sites that was actively known to all oral traditional communities in current Estonia was many times larger than the number known within the current sphere of literate Estonian culture. This is related to the different dominant roles and functions of such sites in the traditional oral culture (a category of known landscapes) as compared to the literate national culture (distant symbols of a common national past).

The preferred method among scholars doing research into Estonian sacred natural sites is first to find all relevant recorded information from archives concerning the area studied, and then conduct interviews with people who have traditional landscape knowledge of the area. It is crucial to use vernacular knowledge to find and map the sacred sites – both those known from previously recorded information as well as sites previously unknown and indicated by informants during fieldwork. Material collected from informants, both current and archived, needs to be approached critically in order to distinguish between different cultural layers in it: today, most informants are in some way influenced by the standard textbook approaches to Estonian history. In order to assess the sites' value as natural objects, the ecosystems of these places should be described with the help of botanists and other natural scientists.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 19th century, local research has used the concept of 'sacrificial site' to speak about what I refer to as Estonian sacred natural sites. The most monumental and systematic work in this tradition so far, Matthias Johann Eisen's *Esivanemate*

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<sup>1</sup> A salutary example of an approach embracing the natural sciences is a volume edited by Uve Ramst (Ramst 2007) that includes studies on the landforms, trees, herbaceous plants, bryophytes, lichens, fungi, entomofauna, and birds of the sacred oak grove of Lehmja in the parish of Jüri not far from Tallinn.

*ohverdamised* (*The Offerings of Our Ancestors*, Eisen 1996[1920]) is arranged by animals and substances sacrificed as well as the types of sacrificial sites. The term 'sacrificial site' emphasizes the single practice of making offerings (this practice was doubtless of concern as contrary to Christian teachings of Lutheran clergymen, the foremost literates and experts in religious matters documenting local lore), whereas the concept of sacred natural site focuses on the vernacular beliefs and landscape traditions in understanding and framing these sites.

The research tradition started in the 19th century by antiquarians, archaeologists and folklorists has considered the customs related to the sites and therefore the sites themselves as relics of pre-Christian culture that offer a possibility to study the Estonian pre-Christian ethnic religion. This approach was common in 19th-century European research: Saami vernacular religion was studied in the same vein with the aim of gaining information about pre-Christian Germanic mythology through phenomena that had supposedly been adopted by the Saami as cultural loans from Scandinavian peoples who themselves had abandoned heathen beliefs and customs after Christianization.

The assumption of pre-Christian heritage hidden in vernacular religion has still some traction among Estonian researchers and intellectuals. Paradoxically, the researchers' focus of interest on things that preceded the Baltic Crusade in the 13th century, has, in the Estonian written culture at large, given way to misleading conceptions that some practices related to sacred natural sites that are known from 19th-century agrarian vernacular religion were pre-Christian and ceased in the 13th century. This is part of the general stereotyping tendency to project everything "authentically Estonian" into the era before the Baltic Crusade.

For the bulk of sacred natural sites in Estonia, it is nearly impossible to know for certain which sites have been used in worship or considered sacred before the introduction of Christianity and which sites have been taken into use later, after the Catholic network of churches and chapels had been built in Estonia. Sites used and taken into use after the imposition of Catholicism will have functioned within the religious environment involving the politically dominant Catholic faith. This may have been a form of resistance or just a continuation of earlier customs. Perhaps, within the Catholic institutional frame, such practices were tolerated or adapted, with statues or altars to saints, particularly Mary or St Anthony, erected in previous sites of vernacular worship. Since the adoption of Lutheranism as the established religion in Livonia, the chapels, monasteries and convents lost institutional support; as a result, a group of former Catholic sites of worship has become nearly indistinguishable from sacred natural sites.

The information archaeological findings can present us with is limited and can tell us little about how landscapes have been conceptualized by people dwelling in



the vicinity because traces of offerings may vanish over time and it can be tricky to distinguish sacred landscapes from other landscapes. Thus the sacredness and use in worship of such sites can usually be ascertained on the basis of records of oral traditions that have been systematically collected in the Estonian Folklore Archives since 1888, after the seminal call for contributions by the Lutheran pastor Jakob Hurt. Prior written records about Estonian sacred natural sites are rare (see Jonuks *et al.* 2014). However, there are a few notable exceptions, of which two stand out.

According to the *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*, missionaries felled the images and statues of gods on a hill in a “most beautiful forest” in the province of Vironia (Virumaa) in the year 1220 when baptizing local villagers. The locals are said to have wondered at the fact that the statues did not bleed, which increased their belief in the priests’ sermons. The locals are also said to believe that the “great god” called Tharapita who was especially revered by another tribe, the Oeselians of the island of Saaremaa, had been born on the same hill and had flown to Saaremaa from there. Although it is the most elaborate depiction of Estonian vernacular religion in the chronicle, the original Latin passage is brief enough to be quoted in full:

*Quo audito sacerdotes modicum subridentes et excusso pulvere pedum in eos ad alias villas festinantes in confinio Vironie tres villas baptizaverunt, 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)*

The translation of the passage by James A. Brundage reads as follows:

When the priests heard this, they smiled a bit and, shaking the dust from their feet at them, they hurried to the other villages. They baptized three villages within Wierland. 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 the more in the priest’s sermons. (Henricus 2003: 193–104)

As chronicles were the most important source material in the 19th century, this passage became one of the most fascinating bits of material to analyse. In 1836, Georg Magnus Knüppfer, the Lutheran pastor of the Kadrina parish in Virumaa, published a paper entitled “*Der Berg des Thorapilla: Ein historischer Besuch*” [“The hill of Thorapilla: A historical visit”] in the Tartu weekly *Das Inland* (Knüppfer 1836). He supposed that the hill and forest described in the passage is the hill of Ebavere in

the vicinity of Väike-Maarja in Virumaa (see Jonuks 2007 for more detail). Today, Knüppfer's hypothesis is usually taken as a fact that does not need any scrutiny, although the text of the chronicle is vague enough and the sacred landscapes in the area it might have referred to are numerous enough in order to offer plenty of alternative interpretations.

The other celebrated instance is an account of a peasant uprising and a ritual in South Estonia near the River Vöhandu in the 17th century, as presented by the pastor and literary figure Johann Gutslaff in his work *Kurtzer Bericht und Unterricht von der Falsch-heilig genandten Bäche in Lieflland Wöhhandu* ["A short account of the holy brook (falsely so called) Wöhhandu in Lieflland", 1644]. He records an incantation to the thunder god Pikne, presented by local peasants while offering him an ox to ask for relief in a drought the peasants believed to have been caused by the building of a mill on the sacred river.

Both the Ebavere and Vöhandu cases have become well-known and celebrated examples of Estonian cultural heritage within the literate Estonian culture since the 19th century, implying that drawing on German-language literary tradition has been easier than drawing on vernacular oral traditions. This suggests that the two written traditions share a greater semiotic affinity and are more easily translated into each other than an oral tradition and a literate tradition that share a common natural language as their fundamental system of signs.

Such an incompatibility between literate and oral landscape traditions may also explain the lack of contemporary knowledge of and interest in traditional sacred natural sites in Western Europe where there is no extensive pre-Christian written tradition about such sites such as the works of Pausanias that documented Ancient Greek sacred natural sites. This point has been argued by Heiki Valk (2007: 201) who notes, that, in "the core areas of Europe [...] due to the long reign of Christianity, holy natural places and objects have become forgotten by oral tradition. Their former existence can be observed mainly in written sources, toponyms or occasional finds (e.g., Scandinavian weapon deposits or other finds in bogs). In just a few Catholic and Orthodox cultural environments they remain in use after being furnished with a Christian meaning".

Valk also notes that sacred natural sites are known in the oral traditions of the Saami culture and those of the Finno-Ugric minorities in the Volga region and in Northern Eurasia as well as the Baltic countries (Valk 2007: 201–202). This may be due to the current or fairly recent dominance of oral culture in all these instances as compared to the fairly long-standing dominance of literate education among Western societies.

However, as a counterweight, one of the premises of Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* was bridging the perceived gap between the landscape traditions of

Western Europeans and indigenous peoples outside Europe by concentrating on phenomena in the Western European written tradition that demonstrate practices similar to those found in native cultures: “notwithstanding the assumption, [...] that Western culture has evolved by sloughing off its nature myths, they have, in fact, never gone away. [...] The cults which we are told to seek in other native cultures – of the primitive forest, of the river of life, or the sacred mountain – are in fact alive and well and all about us if only we know where to look for them” (Schama 1995: 14).

These seemingly contradictory positions of Simon Schama and Heiki Valk may be reconciled by focusing one’s research interest towards sacred natural sites in vernacular religion rather than in pre-Christian religion. Sacred natural sites found in forms of vernacular religion dominated by the Catholic and Orthodox traditions become legitimate objects of research and this also applies to cultural contexts dominated by vernacular Islam or vernacular Buddhism. Thus, more sacred natural sites could be found in records of 19th-century Western European rural folklore following the lines drawn by Simon Schama’s approach to nature-culture interactions in this part of the world. Tõnno Jonuks and his colleagues have pointed out that the scarcity of Western European scholarship may be due to the lack of interest or a relevant research tradition (Jonuks *et al.* 2014: 102–103). The Estonian tradition of sacred natural sites may after all fit into a wider European context and offer valuable perspectives because of its peculiarities and the fact that a large body of recorded Estonian local folklore is available in a central archive and thus accessible to researchers.

## **4. Transformations of semiotic mechanisms involving sacred natural sites**

In the following, four strategies of signification that pertain to sacred natural sites in Estonia will be observed. The first is the vernacular mode of relating to sacred natural sites described on the basis of the recorded oral tradition, with the remaining three – the missionary, the Enlightened and the Romantic – hailing from different layers and traditions of literate culture that have come to supplement or replace the first.

### **4.1. Abodes of supernatural entities**

In the vernacular tradition, sacred natural sites as landscape signs signify the abodes of supernatural entities or forces where certain taboos and restrictions on activities and behaviour are observed.

Sacred natural sites usually form a part of the traditional patterns of land use among indigenous peoples, reflecting the vernacular understanding of nature and

the supernatural forces at work therein. These sites often form a part of a system of resource management in the community, regulated with a patchwork of specific prohibitions and customs. Some areas are delineated as belonging to the non-human community, with rules – often with a high degree of semiotic sophistication – governing mutual relationships. The existence of a supernatural site may be explained in local legends by a past supernatural event, such as people who have broken a taboo being transformed into stones or trees (e.g. the lindens known by the names of Kai, Mai and Riinu in Pärnu-Jaagupi parish, Relve 2003: 168–170).

Rituals performed at sacred natural sites are means of communicating with supernatural creatures; taboos and other rules of behaviour represent demarcation lines between the human community and supernatural creatures. Violating the boundary will bring consequences for the violator, such as disease, death, or other misfortune, for example the death of cattle (common in Western Estonia, see Rimmel 2007). The customs and rituals could be roughly categorized as regular (seasonal, repeated) and irregular (crisis) customs.

Regularly recurring customs include rituals to give thanks for a good harvest and thus guarantee continued good luck. For this purpose, “the first” of a harvest or other vital produce is given to supernatural entities (*‘uudse andmine’, ‘värskse andmine’*); legends of crop failures and other misfortunes warn against neglecting to do so. Regular worship also includes annual village festivals that may be held at a sacred hill or in a sacred grove with a traditionally designated place for a bonfire. For example, annual village festivals marking Midsummer or St John’s Eve have been held with a bonfire (*‘jaanituli’, ‘John’s fire’*) on the sacred hill of Paluküla in Rapla parish at a traditionally designated place for the fire. In Kuusalu parish, the bonfire has been made on top of a sacred stone called Nuppukivi (Kütt *et al.* 2009). Such customs emphasize and reinforce local social cohesion. Timewise, the festivals tend to follow feast dates from the Catholic calendar adopted after Christianization. In the north and West of Estonia, there are numerous reports of dancing and rituals in sacred groves on Thursday evenings in the summer season that are speculated to reflect pre-Christian heritage.

In turn, crisis rites are held in order to seek redemption from bad luck or disease by means of reconciliation with the supernatural creatures (such as the rite of sacrificing an ox near the River Võhandu described by Gutsloff, see above). In the same vein, healing rituals at sacred natural sites have typically involved communication with supernatural entities as well. In contrast to open communal festivals, healing rituals have often been secret and private – no one but the person conducting them should know about conducting them to guarantee their efficacy (see Loorits 1935).

Some of the agrarian-era tradition around sacred natural sites remains alive or has been revived in Estonia, including offerings to the sites. Even if the rituals are not

observed, the sites – in principle or in particular – are often considered important. Traditional sacred sites are nowadays often also linked to the newer invented traditions surrounding the Estonian national identity, taking on patriotic elements. These may originate from Romantic motifs or from the patriotic rituals of the 1930s in Estonia.

#### 4.2. Confrontation between Christian and pagan values

In the mediaeval and early modern missionary tradition which advocated the destruction or abandonment of sacred natural sites, references to sacred natural sites are used to represent the heathen and sacrilegious ways of the people of the land as opposed to those of good Christians. An early example of this is provided in Henry's Chronicle of Livonia in the description of a siege in 1227 where Christian soldiers called on God and Jesus and the besieged pagan soldiers on the god Tarapitha and the sacred grove ("*Gaudet exercitus christianorum, exclamant, Deum exorant. Clamant et illi, gaudentes in Tarapitha suo. Illi nemus, isti Iesum invocant*", HCL XXX 4) in a decisive battle for a hill fort. In such a context, the sacred grove represents paganism; worship of things created by God instead of Creator Himself. Such a confrontational attitude also resurfaces in Pietist or other Protestant teachings that have been openly hostile to vernacular religious and cultural practices. Hence there is a repertoire of common stories about destroying sacred stones and felling sacred trees that represent a reality of the 18th and 19th centuries. Such legends are best exemplified by the controversial figure of Johann Christian Quandt who served as the Lutheran pastor of the parish of Urvastõ in South Estonia from 1732–1750. According to contemporary sources, he discovered 80 sacrificial sites and holy groves in the area and destroyed 24 of these with his own hands in two weeks (Viires 2000: 60). In archived folklore collections from the 19th and 20th centuries, Quandt remained the second most talked about person in the local folklore of the parish, with 30 recorded narratives about him, including tales of destroying sacred sites (Valper 2010: 26–27). These legends strike a similar chord as the legend of Saint Boniface felling the *robur Jovis* or the 'oak of Jupiter' that was revered by the heathen Hessians in Germany in the 8th century.

#### 4.3. The noble savage as the nemesis of the industrial revolution

The existence of sacred natural sites in a vernacular tradition, when transposed into a literate European tradition in an industrializing age, can be taken to represent the sanctity of nature in general and thus taken to be characteristic of a better, nobler preindustrial past worldview. An Enlightened literary tradition shows reverence to some sacred trees and other objects of nature to indicate that indigenous natives or noble savages lived in harmony with nature in general and considered all of nature as sacred.

Such conceptions are common in contemporary Estonian culture. In a survey of 303 secondary school students in 16 Estonian urban schools conducted from 1994 to 1995, 80 per cent of students polled agreed to the proposition that nature is sacred. Those agreeing to the proposition reasoned that nature is sacred because “due to it there is life”; “it is alive”; “it is ancient and natural and its influence on people is good”; “it was already sacred to our ancestors and some places are connected to historical events” (Altnurme 2001: 121).

This may mean that the traditional prohibition of felling some trees is taken to imply that felling any trees is sinful in perceptions of traditional or ancient religion. Such a frame – substituting the whole of nature or trees in general for concrete sacred trees – may be given to vernacular sacred natural sites when the vernacular tradition is represented by brief isolated written reports of vernacular religious practices and the writer lacks more profound or detailed knowledge about the context of these customs within the traditional land and timber use tradition. Brief reports on customs of venerating holy trees or springs (usually drawn from mediaeval texts such as chronicles or more contemporary ethnographic works on the life of peasants written by other enlightened men of letters) can be assumed to be culturally quite distant for the patriotically-minded educated man of letters so that the context of concrete local landscape knowledge is lost. Such snippets of local lore have then been placed into the context of the Western European enlightened literary tradition of noble savages.

This entails some common fallacies: the view that trees have souls and that every forest or wood has its own guardian spirit or deity (common in Estonian lore) does not preclude felling any trees or taking as much as a branch from a tree. Instead, one living in such a vernacular tradition might be compelled to ask the tree and/or the guardian spirit of the forest for permission to fell a tree or take a branch when needed. There might be other communicative customs to reconcile the tree or the forest deities for using timber and ensure that no harm or ill will towards people ensues from them. In addition, there might be specific taboos, such as the prohibition against eating new green spruce shoots with an associated story in which a forest guardian appeared in the guise of a very tall man from the woods to reprimand boys who ate the shoots:

Herdboys eagerly picked shoots of fir trees and eat them so that their teeth squeaked. Suddenly, the boys saw an immensely tall man coming out of the woods and stride towards them while looking at the boys. The boys were frightened stiff as they had never seen a man so tall that his head was reached a bit higher than the tops of the fir trees. Reaching the boys, he snapped angrily: “How dare you mar young fir trees by cutting off their shoots! Don’t you know that breaking birds’ nests and marring young trees is the greatest sin? If you

violate young fir trees once more, I will punish you for it for I am a spirit of the woods (*metshallijas*). (narrated by Reet Suurkask from the Viljandi parish to Anton Suurkask in 1897, Loorits 1941: 22–23; also quoted in Viires 2000: 43)

The sanctity of some trees or groves does not necessarily mean the sanctity of all the trees and forests. The sanctity of a site may radiate from a central spot with the sense of sanctity, taboo and prohibition gradually relaxed with distance from the core. The periphery of a sacred forest may thus also be gradually utilized or felled as human settlement in the vicinity enlarges. There are examples from India where a larger sacred forest has been reduced to a grove (Ramakrishnan 2003: 33) and also in the Estonian vernacular tradition stories are common about a single holy tree remaining from a previous larger grove.

The development of such a literary tradition happened against the backdrop of the advent of the industrial age when the exploitation of natural resources rapidly intensified and brought about a break with earlier agrarian land use traditions (see Kļaviņš 2011 for examples by Latvian and Baltic German writers emphasizing some aspects of Baltic vernacular tree cult traditions to invoke an earlier Arcadia).

An associated cluster of motifs that belongs to this signification strategy is the literary tradition of considering sacred groves as something lost and gone (e.g. destroyed by crusaders in the 13th century), something that can be remembered and seen in the mind's eye but not experienced directly. Such motifs entered Estonian literature during the Romantic age and are often echoed in current public discussions about sacred natural sites.

#### 4.4. The ancient sacred oak grove as a sign of an advanced culture

Modern Estonian national identity was founded on myths created within a Romantic literary culture in the 19th century and is based on the ethnic “imagined community” (cf. Anderson 2006). In the Estonian context, this often involves an emphasis on shared history. The current general public debate habitually considers sacred natural sites to be pre-Christian monuments of “ancient Estonians” from before the conquest of Estonia by German crusaders in the 13th-century Baltic Crusade. Visiting or honouring these sites advances communion between ancient and modern Estonians. In the Romantic tradition, what is represented by the sacred natural sites is the ancient independence of Estonians that also legitimizes the existence of the modern Estonian state (cf. Jonuks 2012).

In this sense, the messages involving sacred natural sites are no longer directed at fellow members of a small rural community who are conscious of their nearest environment but rather to other subjects in the larger community of the nation, a

heterogeneous group that needs confirmation about its cohesion in order to maintain the image of the nation as a whole.

The central signifier in this discourse is the phantom landscape of sacred oak grove. In a nutshell, the common features of this imaginary sacred oak grove have been summarized by the biologist and journalist Peeter Ernits, in an article critical of a government-sponsored plan to plant new oak groves to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia:

After all, oaks are sacred trees for Estonians and a symbol of perpetuity, resistance and power. Oak tree was dedicated also to Taara, the ancient Estonian god. Folk stories talk about magical oak groves of Taara that symbolize the golden era of freedom for the Estonian nation. Sacred oak groves were gathering points before going to a war, places of local sacrificial stones, where Estonians celebrated their festivities adorning the oak trees with brightly coloured ribbons. (Ernits 2013: 63)

The oak grove as an Arcadian landscape of the Estonian Romantic era has also acquired distinct militaristic overtones as a gathering place of warriors. In this image of military democracy, all fit men are about to set out on defending their country. Depicting sacred groves as rallying sites for ancient Estonian armies gives supposed ancient oak groves a role in the military history of the 13th-century Baltic crusade. For example, in the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*, the hero Kalevipoeg “[r]ode on the back of his war-horse/ Swift t’wards Taara’s sacred grove,/ Where his troops were being gathered” (Kp XX: 233–235) after he was brought “tidings of a war” (“One lad sped from Pihkva’s borders,/ From the Lettish plains another,/ From beyond old Taara’s oak grove”, Kp XIX: 755–757).

In turn, a connected hypothesis that is often cited in this context proposes that sacred groves served as community assembly sites (hypothesized on the basis of the historical Scandinavian *ting* institution or the governing assembly made up of the free people of the community). This gives sacred natural sites a role in Estonian parliamentary prehistory. In the 1930s, the prominent Estonian law professor and politician Jüri Uluots puts this supposed democratic Arcadia into the context of 13th-century Estonian law in his publications and lectures as a Professor of Law at the University of Tartu. Quoting numerous passages from Henry’s *Chronicle of Livonia* (HCL), he concludes that democratic gatherings of free war-fit men were the supreme power in ancient Estonia (the ability to carry arms being synonymous with voting rights). According to hypotheses presented by Uluots, such assemblies of people (*‘kogu’, ‘kära’, ‘nõu’*) had the sole right to conclude treaties with foreign powers and declare war; such gatherings were supposedly held in sacred sites (Uluots 1937b).

This conception has helped create a mirror image of the Estonian early-20th-century War for Independence (as represented in official history and ideology) in



a more distant past. The implicit prototext of Uluots's history is the story how an Estonian democratically elected provincial assembly declared independence from Russia in 1918 and the nation attained freedom in a war that was fought mainly by volunteered and conscripted peasants rallied under the leadership of ethnic Estonian officers. The same pattern is visible in Uluots's construction of pre-conquest Estonian assemblies. The difference is that the 13th-century war, the Baltic Crusade, ended in Estonian defeat and the loss of independence. Contrariwise, the War for Independence restored this lost independence.

Uluots's work constitutes an attempt to invent a tradition for the Estonian democracy by alluding to the Germanic *ting* tradition that, in the Icelandic case, has most famously been hailed as a democratic parliamentary tradition. Annual assemblies in Iceland were also held in a natural sacred site, Þingvellir that was declared a national park and a "national shrine" in 1928 by the Icelandic parliament and a World Heritage Site in 2004. Also, the Tynwald assembly on the Isle of Man is claimed to be over a thousand years old and thus the oldest parliament in the world. However, there is scarce and doubtful documented proof of similar recurring assemblies in Estonia (proof has mainly been found in interpretations of passages from the HCL, cited meticulously by Uluots). Claims that an Estonian assembly with delegations from all the constituent lands of the contemporary Republic of Estonia met at the village of Raikküla in Northern Estonia (Rapla parish) have been used to extend the Estonian democratic parliamentary tradition back to the 13th century (cf. Metssalu 2008). This implies that the Estonian state existed in an embryonic form in the sense of international law already before the year 1227. Thus, the declaration of independence in 1918 and the War for Independence from 1918 to 1920 could merely restore it (cf. Uluots 1935, 1937a). Supporting these claims with the established Romantic motif "sacred oak groves of Taara" as the supposed focal points of ancient Estonian culture makes them rhetorically more convincing.

The image of ancient Estonian war-fit men gathering in a sacred oak grove either for the deliberations of a democratic assembly or in preparation for battle is used to represent and prove the existence of an advanced Estonian pre-Christian society before the conquest of Livonia in the Baltic Crusade. This image was used in the polemic against the colonial notion – prevalent in the earlier German-language historiography of the Baltic provinces – that the indigenous people of the lands that came to constitute feudal Livonia were barbarians who had to be subdued by crusade in order to be introduced to more advanced European-style culture and society. The existence of such social institutions like the sacred grove (in the absence of elaborate temples and similarly to Ancient Greek, Roman and Germanic oak groves), popular democratic assemblies and an organised military force can be interpreted as signs that ranked Estonians on a par with other European established nations already in the 13th century.

## 5. Conclusion

Since the inception of the modern Estonian national identity in the 19th century, patterns of land use and settlement have dramatically changed in the course of several property reforms and rapid urbanization in the 19th and 20th centuries, bringing about sudden upheavals that cannot be matched with anything in the few preceding centuries. This has led to the physical destruction of numerous sacred natural sites as well as less severe breaks in the tradition – younger people are more likely to live in cities and thus not know the landscapes their grandparents were familiar with.

As the current Estonian discourse on sacred natural sites shows, dialogue between different literary traditions has been easier than translation across the divide between oral and literary Estonian culture. The dominant motifs involving sacred natural sites that circulate in contemporary Estonian culture are literary in origin, hailing mainly from the European Enlightenment and Romantic traditions that in turn make use of Greek and Roman motifs from the classical antiquity.

A minority of traditional agrarian sacred natural sites that were considered the abodes of supernatural creatures and were the loci of vernacular religious ritual have been transformed into national monuments that are considered either historical sites and mainly associated with the popular concept of Estonia's pre-Christian past (a depiction that mainly draws on the 19th-century Romantic image) or have the status of natural monuments that are assessed on the merits of scientific biological value.

However, the majority of traditional sacred natural sites do not conform to the Romantic images of sacred oak groves or other such spectacular landscapes and thus may not be recognized as culturally valuable by the local community or the municipal local planning authority. This means that such sites are at risk when real estate planning and development decisions are made.

As most such sites do not experientially function in the same way that would conform to the 19th-century agrarian tradition of sacred natural sites, the discussion is open as to which planning and conservation practices can or should be applied in each such site – in case anyone deems these particular landscapes valuable enough to be significant.

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### **Ритуалы аграрного общества и романтические мотивы в описании эстонских священных природных объектов**

Семиотические механизмы, включающие священные природные объекты – участки земли или воды с особым духовным смыслом – играли центральную роль в народной религии аграрного общества, но в современной эстонской культуре трансформировались. Некоторые места имеют новое значение как национальные памятники или туристические достопримечательности, также изменился сам способ осмысления этих мест.

Было бы неверно предположить, что священные природные объекты представляют собой нетронутую природу. Скорее они являются продуктами сложных взаимодействий человеческой культуры и природы, поскольку были сформированы в ходе традиционного землеустройства, а также разных семиотических практик, в том числе ритуалов и сохранения природы. Само существование природных священных объектов стирает жесткую грань между природой и культурой.

Отдельные священные природные объекты и категории таких мест могут действовать как означающие для множества различных означаемых одновременно, действуя как соединения между различными знаковыми системами. Важно отметить креолизацию этих систем, а также гибридизацию различных ландшафтных традиций в определенных местах.

Мотивы и рассказы, определяющие священные природные объекты, эстонская литература с большей готовностью восприняла из других литературных традиций, нежели из эстонской народной традиции. С другой стороны, народная традиция также приняла и ассимилировала мотивы из литературы романтической традиции.

### **Agraarühiskonna kombetalitused ja romantilised motiivid Eesti looduslike pühapaikade pärimuses**

Looduslikel pühapaikadel – maa- või veealadel, millel on rahvastele ja kogukondadele eriline usuline tähendus – on olnud Eestis peamiselt põllumajandusest elatist hankivate kogukondade omaususe keskne roll. Neid paiku puudutavad semiootilised mehhanismid on uuemas Eesti kultuuris muutunud: mõned paigad on omandanud uusi tähendusi rahvuslikult oluliste mälestiste või turismiobjektidena ja samas on laiemalt muutunud valdav vanade pühapaikade mõtestamise viis.

Ei tohiks eeldada, et looduslikud pühapaigad kujutavad endast täiesti puutumatut loodust. Pigem on tegu keerukas inimkultuuri ja looduse vastastikuse dialoogi väljasündinud paikadega, mis on omandanud oma ilme ja tähenduse pärimusliku maakasutuse ning semiootiliste praktikate mõjul. Pühapaiku kujundanud semiootiliste praktikate hulka kuuluvad omausu kombetalitused ja loodushoiu praktikad. Looduslike pühapaikade hulka arvatavate paikade olemasolu iseenesest trotsib ja ähmastab looduse ja kultuuri ranget eristust teineteisest.

Üksikud pühapaigad ja nende hulgad võivad toimida tähistajatena ühtaegu paljude erinevate tähistatavate jaoks, toimides nii sõlmpunktidena eri märgisüsteemide vahel. Nii on näha selliste märgisüsteemide omavahelist kreoliseerumist ja eri maastikutraditsioonide hübriidiseerumist konkreetsetes paikades.

Eesti kirjakultuur on looduslike pühapaiku määratlevaid motiive ja lugusid lihtsamini omaks võtnud teiste kirjakultuuride traditsioonidest kui kohalikust omausu pärimusest. Teisalt on ka omausu pärimus pühapaikade mõtestamisel omaks võtnud romantismiaja kirjandusest pärit motiive.