

Roadside Cemeteries

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INTRODUCTION

The beliefs, customs and traditions associated with birth, death, wedding rituals and funeral practices of different peoples of the world have a rather similar origin. It has long been believed that when a person passes away, the soul continues its existence in some other form. The fact that stones are connected with burial mounds, cemeteries and places where a fatality has occurred is well known all over the world (cf. megaliths, pyramids, memorial stones, etc.). Similarly, people have regarded stones, trees and other natural objects as a residence of a soul – in a grave lies the body of the deceased, whereas the immortal soul resides in a stone or in a tree.

In modern society, we can distinguish between authorised and unauthorised monuments. The authorised monuments are memorials (statues, constructions, etc.) which have been erected by government order or by a public organisation, in accordance with the law, in honour of an important event or a person. In addition to fatalities or major catastrophes which receive wide media coverage, sites of death – mostly of road fatalities but also sites of violent death or accidents of the so-called ordinary people are unofficially commemorated all over the world.

In contemporary society, it is a common custom to mark the sites of catastrophes or violent deaths. Ever since Olaf Palme's murder in the 1970s, the media has covered the commemoration of death sites all over the world. Some locations of assault or terrorist attacks begin to resemble sites of pilgrimage. For example, people still bring flowers to the TV tower in Vilnius to remember and honour the casualties of January 13, 1991, or the

World Trade Center which was destroyed on September 11, 2001. A vast metal cross was installed at the site of the WTC.

In Estonia, the majority of the memorial stones and crosses dedicated to people killed in road or other types of accidents are **unauthorised** – they have been installed by individuals and most of these have not been authorised. The government of the Republic of Estonia does not have a common position on such monuments. The erecting of these memorials has been guided by people's conscience, the customs and the traditions. This has led to public discussions in the media regarding the issues of whether such behaviour is acceptable and how it reflects the problems, clashes and conflicts in a multicultural postmodern society.

Unlike in most post-communist countries where *the Italian syndrome*, i.e. the control by political powers over the media, both by direct interference as well as by economic manipulation, has been observed, in Estonia the media (the printed press in particular) rapidly became independent of the government, simultaneously growing dependent on the market and advertising. The relation between the media and the society underwent radical changes, shifting from an authoritarian model of the press working under strict ideological supervision to the other extreme, a model of the liberal American information market with almost no moral or ethical restrictions, based on satisfying a journalist's sales potential and consumer interests. Information is first and foremost a commodity. The model of social responsibility, characteristic of Nordic and European quality press, expects journalists to be informed about the media's impact on society and to exercise ethic stability. According to this model, journalists act according to a sense of mission and the citizens' need to comprehend and interfere. In both models the media functions as a watchdog of democracy (Lauristin 1999: 59–61).

In this article I am going to 1) describe the commemoration of sites of road fatalities from an ethnological point of view, and 2) make an attempt to analyse which model (either the authoritarian or liberal) has been used by Estonian journalists in their treatment of the same topic in 1998.

Ever since Estonia re-declared its independence in the 1990s, and due to a dramatic rise in the economic welfare of the population, the number of cars has considerably increased. At the

same time, drunk driving, speeding, total disregard of other motorists and pedestrians, and the bad state of roads are all indicators of a traffic culture that is extremely low. The percentage of fatal traffic accidents is relatively high in Estonia. For instance, in 1998, 1,302 traffic accidents were registered in the town of Tartu and its vicinity. Thirty people were killed, that is five more than in 1997. In 1998, a total of 281 people found themselves victims of road fatalities in the whole country, the number of serious accidents was 1,611 (Uustalu 1999: 6). In 2007, 196 people were killed in traffic accidents (Ekspress 2009).

Most of the fatalities were caused by drunken drivers, some without a driving licence, who misjudged their driving skills and killed themselves along with their fellow passengers.

On May 10, 1998, Ago Gashkov, a TV reporter from the Virumaa region, was the first to discuss the problem on the Estonian national television news program *Aktuaalne Kaamera* where he raised the issue whether permanent monuments should be allowed on the side of the road in places where people were killed in road accidents and, if so, then by whom and how should it be arranged. Ago Gashkov argued that the pompous memorial stones along Tallinn-Narva highway, commemorating people killed in accidents, violate the sense of decency. The roadsides look like cemeteries and have a gloomy effect on passers-by, including tourists. The reporter suggested that authorities should pass regulations to prevent the spread of this phenomenon and/or set restrictions on relatives who wish to raise conspicuous monuments to those killed in road accidents.

Ago Gashkov regarded people's need to mark the site of a death as a recent custom, foreign to our culture and most typical to the subculture of the Estonian *nouveaux riche*. To his mind, it has no connection with our ancient traditions and should be publicly condemned.

Let us consider the argument that the marking of a site where a person died is a recent phenomenon and foreign to Estonian culture. Erecting pompous individual memorial stones on death sites at roadsides is a relatively recent phenomenon indeed, typical of the 1990s. However, there is nothing recent about the custom of marking death sites with a memorial stone, the roots of the tradition lie in the past.

ETHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF COMMEMORATING DEATH SITES

The custom of marking death sites originates in ancient history, or to be more specific, in the pre-Christian animistic period. One of the characteristic features of animism is the belief that all things in nature have a soul. When a person died, the relatives had to care for both the soul and the body of the deceased.

Like everywhere else in the world, in Estonian folk tradition the deceased has been regarded from two points of view: the deceased had, in some mysterious and indistinct way, two different, yet closely connected forms of existence: a soulless body or a corpse on the one hand, and a more or less incorporeal form of the 'soul' or 'spirit' on the other. Both forms of existence represented, so to speak, the deceased as such: both the soul and the body were the deceased itself (Paulson 1997: 140).

The main objective of death-related ceremonies is to join the deceased with the community of the dead and to reorganise the life of the living. The more archaic the funeral tradition, the more it adheres to the belief that a person's or his soul's life after death resembles his previous life (as suggested by grave objects, later also coffin objects). Thus, the last transition rites of human life combine two goals: to secure a comfortable future existence as befits to the person's position in life, and to protect the living from the presumed malevolence of the dead.

The emphasis of transition rites is not directly associated with the moment of death but with liminal rites and the rites of aggregation through which the deceased is assimilated into the community of the dead (Gennep 1909; Honko & Pentikäinen 1997: 83–87).

Similarly to a new-born baby, who did not yet belong to 'this world' and needed the help and care of its parents, godparents and other adults to obtain the necessary 'equipment' (power, name, etc.) for its future life in this world, the deceased needed the help of the living, too, to pass from terrestrial existence to the other world (Paulson 1997: 130).

The first and one of the foremost liminal rites of funeral traditions is keeping a vigil over the dying person, preparing for his death and opening the passage for the departing soul. Committing suicide, drowning, being killed or being run over while walking (pro: driving) on the road were considered an abnormal or an exceptional case of death. Some of the customary liminal rites could not be performed on them, some because the body was not always recovered. Such instances of death were the most frightening for the living. According to Livonian traditions, for example, those who had committed suicide or had been murdered or killed were known to appear to the living or haunt them until their God-appointed time of death. The living are also haunted by the deceased whose bodies have not been buried (Loorits 1998: 46).

This category also includes the murdered, abandoned, still-born, nameless and un-baptised children. The latter are the most unfortunate because they never belonged among the living and therefore can never make the transition to society of the dead but will forever remain inbetween (Pentikäinen 1989).

Typical to the animistic worldview, people from traditional cultures believed that the soul of the deceased passed on to some natural object (tree, stone, spring) which then acquired magical powers and was therefore considered sacred. The belief that the souls of dead ancestors live on in trees is cosmopolitan. According to the Korean belief system, for example, the souls of those who have died of plague or on a journey, but also the souls of women who have died at childbirth, will find their place permanently in trees (Frazer 1986: 115–116). The funeral custom of carving a cross in a tree, which was well-known in Finland, Estonia and North Latvia, is still adhered to in South Estonia. This custom has preserved the concept of trees as the home of souls (Kõivupuu 1996: 55–74; Kõivupuu 1997: 35–61).

According to Estonian folk belief, the souls of those who died under abnormal circumstances may find their place in a tree or some other natural object. If the living had failed to find the body, the missing person appeared in their dreams to reveal the new home of his body and soul.



A cross-tree in the Urvaste cross-forest. May 2009. Courtesy of Marju Kõivupuu.

There was a man who died of booze – in old times the landlord used to offer a drop of liquor after work and some had a lot of it. This man left the estate to go home and on the way he froze to death. Then he appeared in a dream and said: “I’m not in the grave where you left me, my soul is in that old white willow stump.” (There was a large white willow stump at the place where he died.) ERA II 24, 212 (86) < Türi parish.

The living may also dream of the deceased whose fate or rank was unknown:

The master said that I’m dead but there is no place for me. So I live on top of the pine tree at the other side of the field until my time comes. H II 58, 27/28 (17) < Jüri parish.

Among other things, the living may dream of the deceased if they have some unfinished business in this world: either the relatives have ignored their last wishes or they have been buried improperly or prematurely (cf. a myth of an apparently dead woman who gave birth to a child in the grave), etc. When the living have satisfied the wishes of the deceased, the portent dreams and haunting will stop. Oskar Loorits has observed the same in Livonian folk belief (Loorits 1998: 31). In any case, this extremely intriguing area of religious history is not very relevant to the subject, so we will return to the marking of death sites of the abnormally deceased.

Tatjana Minnijahmetova, who has studied the funeral rites of the Udmurts living across the Kama River, also describes beliefs and customs connected with fatalities. According to folk belief, the people who die an unnatural death wish that the living communicate with them both at the site of death and at their grave. Trees are planted at the death site and relatives go there to talk to the deceased, while food offerings are reserved for when visiting the grave (Minnijahmetova 2000: 222).

People mark death sites either because of their religious beliefs (the death site is where the soul lies) or for emotional reasons: to commemorate (marking the site where the life of a person came to an unexpected and premature end) or as a token of mourning. The reason for commemoration could be to protest against the injustice of fate or the inability of the society to protect its members, but also a warning that life is not eternal and that no one is safe from an unfair or an unexpected death. Each individual case might have different reasons.

Tatjana Eggeling has identified three practical motives for commemorating death sites in the 21st century:

- 1) to keep the memory of the deceased alive;
- 2) to warn other drivers and pedestrians;
- 3) to observe a period of grieving (Eggeling 2000: 4).

Stones, stone crosses and gravestones functioning as markers of death sites have been mythologized in Estonian folk belief over the course of centuries and numerous folk tales have become associated with them. Many people have experienced supernatural phenomena, seen ghosts, etc., in such places. Some stone crosses and sc. 'wedding stones' are associated with a myth about the crash of two wedding processions where the bride-

groom of one couple and the bride of the other were killed; some are remembered as death sites of historical persons where people took offerings to as recently as the 19th century (Eisen 1996: 98–103). Referring to Tallgren, M. J. Eisen has pointed out similarities in Finnish and Scandinavian traditions (Eisen 1998: 101). Carving a cross sign as a symbol of death and a sign of warding against evil into a tree is well known in Estonian folk tradition and funeral customs (Kõivupuu 1997: 45–46). Since the end of the 19th century, collectors have recorded accounts of it from all over Estonia.

In some other place, a cross sign has been carved in the tree bark, often together with a date. Someone died or an accident happened there. A cross is a reminder of such accidents. E 80 14, 85 (247) < Rāpina parish.

Peasants started a revolt in Albu parish. The landlord sentenced them to death. Coachmen came from the village. The leaders of the revolt were driven onto the carriages. The men begged for mercy but it was too late for that. The carriages reached the Korba woods. All the men were killed. Their relatives picked up the bodies and buried them. And they carved as many cross signs in the fir tree as there were men killed. ERA II 220, 356/7 (6) < Järva-Jaani parish.

There's a pine with a cross near Sooniste estate. The cross was carved in the tree to commemorate a farm-boy who had tried to jump on a carriage but fell onto a scythe blade and died. ERA II 229, 189 (15) < Nissi parish.

The telegraph pole at Ahula road has some marks on it. (A man was shot there, so the place was avoided.) ERA II 219, 549 (24) < Järva-Jaani parish.

Funeral tradition and the shapes of gravestones reflect the concept of life continuing after death. Usually, grave stones and monuments are erected at the last resting site of the deceased. Epitaphs carved on them express the sentiments of mourners and outline the shape of the person's life.



A cross cut into trees to denote fatal accident sites.

In modern society, we can conditionally distinguish between authorised and unauthorised monuments. Authorised monuments are memorial plaques or statues erected in accordance with the law, by decree of the government or a public organisation in honour of an important event or a person.

Since Estonia declared its independence in 1918, and particularly after the War of Independence in 1920, the monuments erected in memory of the Estonian and foreign soldiers who died during the war, came to be considered as symbols of patriotism.

In 1945, after Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union, the monuments celebrating the Estonian fight for freedom were removed and replaced with ideologically more appropriate monuments honouring the Soviet soldiers who had been killed in World War II. Significant anniversaries of the Soviet ideology were celebrated at these monuments. People say that several of these monuments had been raised by orders "from above". The commemorated heroic deeds of some (most often Russians) were also fabricated (e.g., the monument commemorating the feats of Pavel Antsiborenko in Karula, South Estonia). The so-called common graves were sometimes created in a rather terrifying manner. On a 1990 expedition, informant Reinhold Riiga described to me how one of the common graves in Hargla was created. After the end of the war, the workers of the collective farm were forced to

dig up the graves of soldiers who were killed in the woods. Their remains were shovelled into a coffin lined with red fabric, and five kilos of human remains was assigned the value of one standard working day for a worker. A commemorative ceremony was held at the administrative building of the village and a monument was erected at the new burial site, the inscription of which read: The Unknown Soldier.



*Monument erected in memory of Soviet Soldiers by the road
between Pindi and Lasva villages (Võrumaa county).*

Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu, 1997

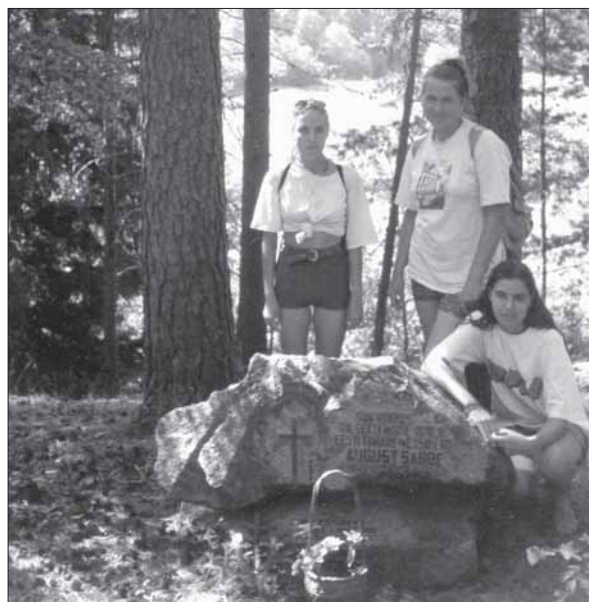
After World War II, it was not uncommon that tractor drivers sometimes got killed, e.g., run over by a tractor, etc., at melioration works. In the fields, one may find memorial stones marking such death sites.

After Estonia regained its independence, the monuments and memorials for soldiers killed in the War of Independence were restored or new monuments were erected in honour of the freedom fighters. One such monument is located on the bank of the Võhandu River marking the death site of the last Estonian partisan, the sc. 'forest brother' August Sabbe. The inscription on the granite stone reads: "The last Estonian forest brother August Sabbe was killed here on 28.08.1978."

On the night of September 28, 1994 the countries bordering the Baltic Sea were shocked at the news reporting the shipwreck



Monument in memory of meliorators killed during amelioration works. Viljandimaa county. October 2008. Courtesy of Marju Kõivupuu.



A monument in memory of the last Estonian partisan August Sabbe at the bank of the Võhandu river near Paidra village. Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu, 1997.

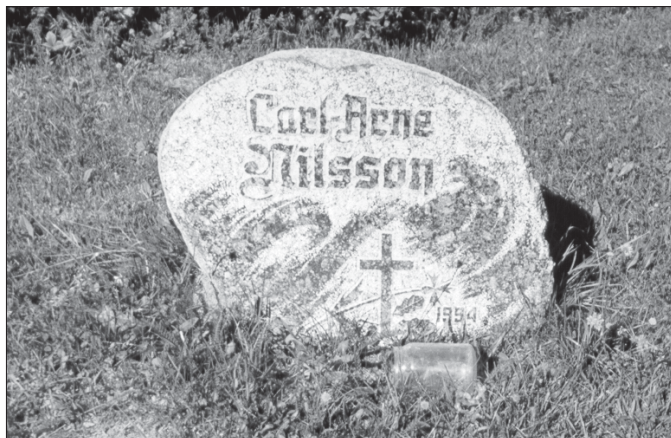
of m/s *Estonia*. Only a few people were rescued and even fewer bodies were later recovered. Most of the dead did not receive a proper burial. Trips to the site of the shipwreck and funeral ceremonies were organised enabling the relatives of the deceased cast flowers and wreaths with burning candles into the water. Monuments in honour of the deceased were erected in Tallinn, the island of Hiiumaa and the coast of Pärnu. Next to St. Catherine's church in Võru, there is a white wooden cross and a monument with the names of the 17 inhabitants of Võru who lie in their sea grave.



A monument in Võru in memory of its people that sank with the "Estonia." Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu 1998.

In the graveyards of coastal villages (in Käsmu, for example) there are many gravestones in memory of seamen who were lost at sea. After the sinking of m/s *Estonia* people placed plaques in cemeteries in memory of their relatives who found their last resting place at the bottom of the sea. Memorial plaques commemorate not just relatives. For example, at the yard of Pikäkannu Basic School in Võrumaa, there is a memorial plaque in honour of Carl Arne Nilsson, a Swedish sponsor of the school who was also killed in the accident.

In the Alps, (wooden) crosses mark the sites where alpinists and winter sportsmen were tragically killed. There are plaques, crosses and memorial stones for policemen and fire fighters. In Germany, in the towns and villages along the Elbe River, there are memorial tablets for those who were killed in floods



*A memorial plaque in honour of Carl Arne Nilsson,
a sponsor of the Pikäkannu school, who was also on "Estonia."
Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu 1997.*

In myths, memorates and belief reports it is often the deceased who appear to the living and reveal where to search for his body in order to give it a proper burial to put its soul to rest. This has become intermingled with Christian folk belief concepts: the person killed will not leave the living in peace (appearing in a dream to tell them where he died, haunting) until he is properly buried. His soul cannot rest until a prayer has been held on behalf of him and the missing person has been declared officially dead.

An ancient tradition of seamen regards the site of a shipwreck as a sea grave which is sacred and inviolable. This idea was also supported by Lennart Meri, president of the Republic of Estonia and Andres Paeorg, the chairman of *Memento Estonia*, in the column of *Postimees*, an Estonian daily newspaper, on November 17.

Lennart Meri said:

As president of the republic I cannot pronounce my opinion. The subject is too painful. As an individual, who has taken interest in our sea tradition, I can grant that for centuries the sea has been the sacred grave of those who have lost

their life there. The place where a person has lost his life is as sacred as any churchyard at any church (Putting 1998: 2).

The rapid progress of modern civilisation and technology has diminished people's sense of safety both on land as well as at sea. Passangers of large cruise ships want to reach their destination safe and sound, they do not identify themselves with seamen nor are they familiar with the traditions, superstitions, customs and habits of sailors. Being familiar with the folkloric background of dealing with the drowned, it is not surprising that the relatives of those who died in the shipwreck on both sides of the Baltic sea have voiced their demand over the media to raise the ship and/or bring up the bodies so that their relatives can give them proper burials in local cemeteries and perform the necessary funeral rituals for those who have left this world.

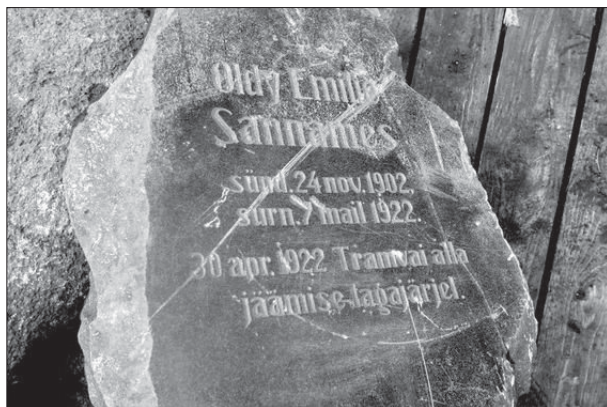
One of the main functions of funeral tradition is to put the mind of the living at peace and help members of the community during the crisis which is inevitable at the loss of close relatives.

According to the records found in the Estonian Folklore Archives, the Setus, for instance, kept a black ribbon, a scarf or a belonging of the drowned person in the icon corner for three months (70 days): the soul of the deceased was believed to visit the icon corner for exactly that long. After that period the soul found its peace. The Setus also regarded death by drowning as an offering to the god of water who chose his victims himself. People had ambivalent feelings towards such accidents: in essence, the tragic event gained a sacred meaning. This approach helped relatives to cope with their loss, to accept it as inevitable.

Folkloric material concerning drowning exists in a number of genres, ranging from myths and memorates to popular jokes and humorous euphemistic sayings: *He went to try out how it feels like living under water.*

A morbid popular joke *An epitaph to a drowned man* refers to the need to determine the location of the deceased's soul rather than his body:

In old times there was an epitaph on a cross at the graveyard of M. church. "Here breathes Nurga Jaan, a peasant who drowned in a river and whose body was never found." E 39383 < Kadrina.



Hit by the "tramvai" (tram) – cenotaph from Kalamaja Cemetary, Tallinn. June 2009. Courtesy of Marju Kõivupuu.

Let us return to the marking of death sites of victims of road fatalities. In her earlier research, Zorica Rajković has referred to commemorating the sites of road fatalities as a "specifically Yugoslavian phenomenon" unknown in Western Europe (Rajković 1988: 173). This statement, obviously, is not valid. Around the same time, post-socialist Estonia saw a campaign against traffic victim memorials. For example, the Czechs are proud to present their famous stone crosses to tourists (see: <http://smircikrize.euweb.cz>; 30.11.2009) and have also done some research on them (e.g., Preclík 1992). The tradition of marking death sites with flowers, candles, a temporary cross or a permanent memorial is not a new phenomenon at all – at present this practice is being followed all over the world, hence, memorial stones to road victims can be found at roadsides and along highways in Europe and in Australia, not to mention the United States. Sites of accidents are also marked in the South and Central American countries, e.g., in Chile, Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina. Crosses for traffic victims have been studied more thoroughly in Germany where the custom of installing memorial crosses at sites of fatal accidents is widely spread in all states. The marking of accident sites has also been researched in Poland, on the Balkan Peninsula, in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Austria. In Finland, there are some references to commemorating the sites of

victims of drowning but no further research has been carried out (Eggeling 2000, Aka 2007, etc.).

As regards rail crashes, in Russia the sites of train accidents are marked similarly to the sites of road fatalities. People go there to celebrate the birth and death anniversaries of the deceased with a drop of liquor and some snacks (an anonymous male source to K. Saarso < Tallinn 2009).

In one of his travel stories, Urmas Vaino, a journalist, describes the situation on the roads of Kazakhstan as follows:

We drive out of the city and an accident has just happened. There are two wrecked cars and three corpses by the side of the road. A distressing sight. It is a local custom to erect columns by the side of road to commemorate those who have lost their lives. Sometimes there are more memorial stones decorated with wreaths and flowers than milestones (Vaino 2006).

According to Estonian legislation, it is forbidden to arbitrarily place anything within the road safety zone, i.e., 50 metres from the central line on both sides of the road. The records of the Estonian Road Administration reveal that a total of 83 memorials have been erected on the sides of roads in Estonia. Only five memorial stones have been erected in conformity with the Road Administration. Four of the seven memorial stones in Järvamaa, one of the two memorial stones in the Põlva region and one of the six memorials in Läänemaa have been authorised by the Road Administration. Thus, the majority of the monuments erected in memory of the people killed in road accidents are unauthorised: they have been erected either by groups of relatives or individual persons and usually they are not in concordance with the Road Administration. The government does not have a common position on unauthorised memorials. Such situation results from arbitrary and subjective decisions, partly due to tradition.

In Estonia, the earliest known stone cross still found in its original location is in Marta Street, in Tondi, Tallinn. It is believed that on September 11, 1560 a gentleman named Blasius

Hochgreve was killed there by the Russians. The inscription on the cross reads: May God have mercy on him and give him forgiveness for his sins on the day of judgement. A similar stone cross from the 16th century is found beside the Tallinn-Narva road, on the border of the present day Ida-Virumaa and Lääne-Virumaa regions, and was erected in memory of a killed Russian boyar Wassili Rossladini.

The earliest known memorial stone erected in honour of a victim of a road accident is located on the outskirts of Rakvere and it was put up in 1928 to commemorate Hans Winnal. He was one of the richest men of his times, the honorary consul of the Republic of Chile in Estonia, fanatically interested in cars and the sole representative of General Motors in Estonia. He was killed in an accident which he himself caused. On Saturday evening of July 14, 1928, he was driving from Tallinn to Narva-Jõesuu, accompanied by a Dane, Harald Sigetty, the representative of General Motors International, and his wife Helene Winnal. At the outset, the La Salle Convertible was driven by Valter Einmann, Winnal's driver but in a little while Hans Winnal himself took the wheel. Some twenty kilometres after Rakvere, the car skidded off the road, crashed into a rock at high speed and rolled over. The passengers fell out of the car; Hans Winnal hit a rock and died approximately ten minutes after the crash. It was thought that Hans Winnal mixed up the accelerator and the brake and accelerated instead of slowing down at the bend.

The epitaph on the stone reads:

Siin hetkekski rändaja seisata

ja pilgukski paljasta pea:

Sest sinu kivi veel teadmata,

kus lõpetada murede ea.

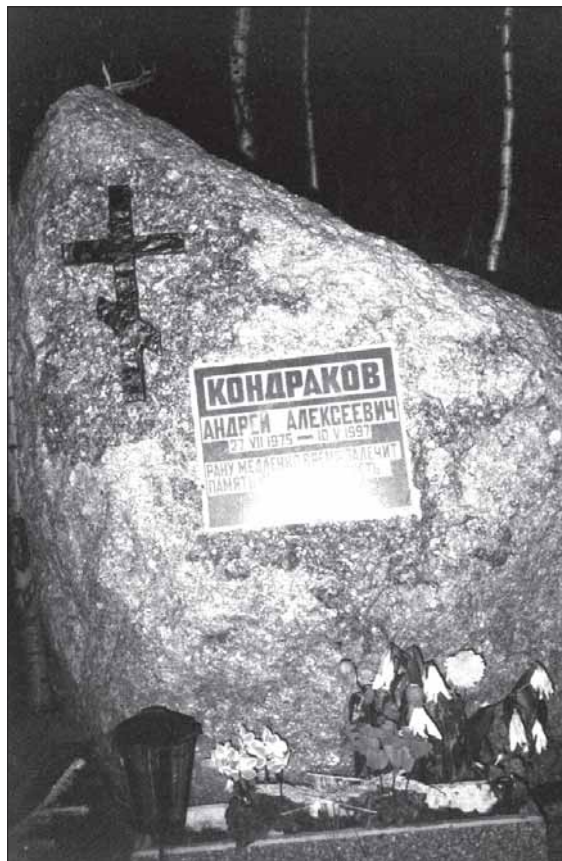
Traveller, stand still
here for a moment

And uncover your head:
For your grave stone is
not yet known,

Where your troubles
finally end.

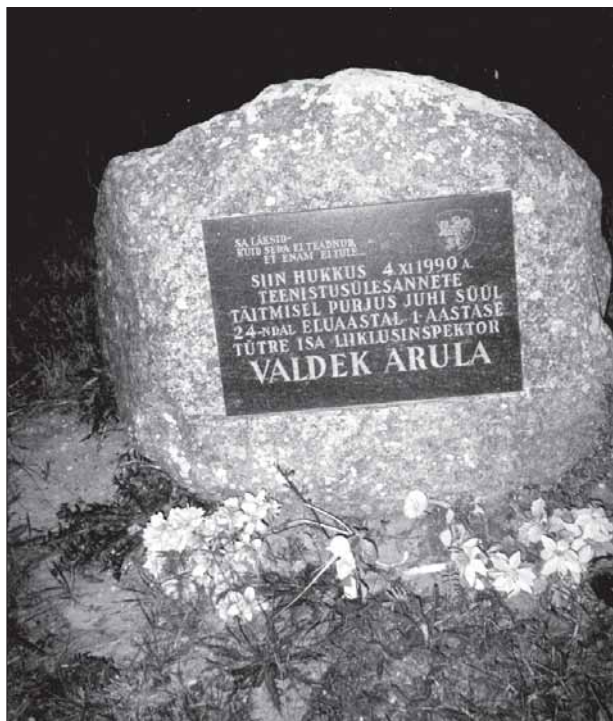
The largest known memorial was erected in honour of Andrei Kondrakov who died in 1997, and is located in the Ida-Virumaa region beside the Tallinn-Narva highway.

At the crossroads at Mäo, there is an authorised monument to the policemen who were killed in an outnumbered battle with



The largest known memorial was erected in honour of Andrei Kondrakov who died in 1997 and is located in the Ida-Virumaa region along Tallinn-Narva highway. Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu, 1998.

criminals. One of the unauthorised monuments along Tallinn-Narva highway was erected in honour of Valdek Arula, a traffic inspector who was killed in the autumn of 1990 while on duty. The father of a one-year-old daughter was murdered by drunkards who had stolen a lorry in Kohtla-Järve and rammed the inspector while the latter was investigating the cause of a car crash. Every year on the afternoon of November 4, Valdek Arula's brother and mother visit the stone with Valdek's former colleagues to relive the memory of the tragic event.



Monument to Valdek Arula. Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu, 1998.

The verse and text on the epitaph read:

*Sa läksid –
kuid ei teadnud,
et enam ei tule*

You went –
And never knew
You won't be coming back

Road inspector VALDEK ARULA was killed here while on duty by a drunken driver on 4.11.1990. He was 24 years old and the father of a one-year-old daughter.

Use of the symbol of the police (set in heraldic frame, a lion holding in its front paws the national coat of arms of Estonia) suggests that the monument was authorised.

By the Tartu-Võru road, approximately a kilometre after Maaritsa, there is a modest granite memorial stone in memory of forester Kaider Kütt. On the stone there are symbols typical to Estonian gravestones, a cross and a tree (birch) and also an engraved gnome: *Here stranded a ship of life*.



Here stranded a ship of life. Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu, 1998.

It is rare that a death site becomes also the burial place of the departed as, for example, is the case by the Rõuge-Sännä road in Võrumaa where a schoolchild's life came to an end.

Beside the Tartu-Tallinn and Tartu-Viljandi roads people have planted around the memorials decorative grade pygmy trees which grow in a “mourning” shape.

The memory of crash victims has also been honoured with items directly symbolising the casualty. Such items are most often tyres on which the names of those killed in the accident may be written, or which serve as flower beds for annual plants. The tragic event is also demarked by license plates or parts of a car (steering wheel, etc.) to which people take flowers and lighted candles. Candles are lit and flowers are taken to the death site on the birthdays and death anniversaries of the victim; obituaries and notices announcing the anniversary of the death are published in newspapers.



*Different tokens of mourning mark the sites of road accidents.
Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu, 1998.*



REFERENCES TO THE MONUMENTS IN ESTONIAN NEWSPAPERS

The printed press plays a rather significant role in exerting influence on people's conscience and opinions: through manipulation, pressure groups can shepherd human behaviour (see also Hennoste 1999: 62–65).

Rein Sikk, one of the journalists who brought up the subject of roadside monuments, wrote in *Eesti Päevaleht*:



By the Rõuge-Sännä road, right at the Sännä caves, the life of a pupil came to an end. Rõuge parish. Courtesy of M. Kõivupuu, 1995.

Even though people have erected unauthorised monuments on the roadsides in Estonia for the last few decades, the Road Administration began to count them only this year due media pressure. The Road Administration registered 92 monuments. Three of them commemorate soldiers killed in war; six of the monuments are reminders of historic events. 83 stones have been erected in memory of the people killed in road accidents. The Road Administration has authorised the instalment of five stones, four of which are located in Järvamaa. Several monuments in the Ida-Viru region, constructed of car tyres, have not been registered (Sikk 1998).

The campaign to remove such monuments most likely originates from a hidden conflict between administrative officials and Andrei Kondrakov, the businessman who erected a conspicuous roadside monument, the largest in Estonia, to his son and then refused to remove it.

After Ago Gashkov's public appearance on national television on May 10, 1998 where he attacked those responsible for erecting these monuments, *Eesti Päevaleht* published an article on May 28, 1998 by Rein Sikk, Urmet Kook and Anu Saar under the headline *Hundreds of roadside cenotaphs warn drivers* which initiated a heated debate in the Estonian media.

The Estonian media has been accused of being inaccurate, biased and blowing things out of proportion:

If the events or issues covered by the news do not personally concern the journalist, the news is generally objective and well balanced, whereas if the journalist has to broadcast something that concerns him/her personally, s/he cannot maintain these qualities. And while s/he cannot openly pronounce his opinion, s/he does it subtly. The most common trick is to ignore the sources when telling some unpleasant truth. Another such dirty trick is to give direct misinformation in the headlines (Hennoste 1999: 63).

As regards the abovementioned subject, the negative attitude of journalists is first expressed in the headlines where the truth is distorted. *The road to the cemetery* (Kaalep 1998); *Roadside monuments must go* (Päärt 1998); *Crosses without graves. Road*

administration calls for removal of roadside monuments (Väljaots 1998c); *Cenotaph placers take law into their hands* (Subtitle: *Road Service Worker from Ida-Virumaa Fears the Revenge of Stone Owners*. (Sikk 1998); *Memorials Unauthorised* (Tänavsuu 1998). The inclination of the reporters is also revealed in such subtitles as e.g., *Arbitrariness at Roadsides*; *Ditches Are Not for the Dead*. Often the subtitle actually contradicts the ideas expressed in the passage that follows.

The newspaper articles emphasise the illegality of people's actions: if it is not allowed, it must be prohibited. The article *Hundreds of roadside cenotaphs warn drivers* (Sikk et al 1998) lacks official statistics about the number of memorial stones at roadsides and fails to differentiate between temporary and permanent markings of accident sites; instead of presenting accurate figures, the reporters tend to use emotional proclamations: *No-one knows how many death site markers there are on Estonian roads* (*Eesti Päevaleht*, May 25, 1998).

Another aspect of the issue, i.e., the question of why so many innocent victims die in road accidents, has found much less coverage (e.g., Agnes Tali in her 1998 article *Drivers disturbed by roadside trees not monuments*).

The employees of Road Administration tend to regard the monuments with respect. According to Harri Kuusk, the deputy director general of the Road Administration, most of the stones are unauthorised. He fears that a monument erected in honour of one accident might become the cause of another (*Eesti Päevaleht*, May 25, 1998).

Even though there are no dead buried under the roadside monuments, the disposal of the monuments is an act of desecration.

During a campaign, the Estonian Road Administration decided that the memorial stones and plaques put up in honour of the victims of road accidents should be removed by October 1, 1998. Aare Pain, the head of the traffic department of the Road Administration stated three reasons why the monuments should be removed from the roadsides: 1) foreign tourists might regard the roadside monuments as tombstones; 2) the stones hinder the maintenance of roads or roadsides; 3) the monuments present a danger to drivers by distracting their attention (Pain 1998). Of

the three reasons, the second one appears rational while the other two are rather emotional.

The articles are generally dominated by an emotional point of view. The most emotional of all were the arguments by Tiina Kaalep:

Estonia is a strange country. Driving along the major roads you feel as if your car is on a pathway winding between graves in a cemetery. I'm not just speaking of the war memorials and graveyards so close to the road that a banana peel thrown out the car window might land on someone's grave. I would like to turn people's attention to the memorial stones marking someone's death site where people bring flowers to and light candles. I truly don't like these cemeteries at roadsides (Kaalep 1998).

The author argues further that our traffic culture is very low indeed and that nobody erects monuments in honour of the animals killed by cars – nobody even bothers to dispose of the corpses.

Strangely enough, tabloids seems to take the most neutral view of the subject of marking the death sites of the victims of road accidents. Jaan Våljaots argues that the opinion of the mourners which should primarily be considered, has never been asked for, and takes their side.

As to the argument that foreigners might feel awkward about the roadside monuments, a mother whose sons were killed in a road accident has a completely different story to tell:

A car passed us at the monument but then slowed down and backed up to us. First we thought that they were relatives of the other victim of the accident but they turned out to be Norwegians. They asked us about the stone, looked at it and said that it was a nice tradition. One of them was with some kind of a magazine; he photographed the stone and told us he would write about it in Norway. [---]

“Not everyone places a memorial stone anyway. Those which have already been placed could remain there”, reckons the brother of a talented neurologist who was killed in an accident. “If they are a danger to anyone, they should be shifted just a little further from the road but taking them

away is almost the same as going and vandalizing the cemetery. The people who knew the deceased person and the relatives need these stones to light a candle at”.

The deceased doctor's brother, a librarian, admits that a monument might capture drivers' attention for a moment but he does not believe anyone would be able to read the inscriptions on the stones while driving. [...] And like others who visit the stones, he argues that these roadside monuments might make the drivers contemplate death lurking at the road and ease up on the accelerator (Väljaots 1998).

In the same article, Jaan Väljaots has given his photos a common caption:

Do the stones irritate officials because they distract drivers' attention or because they draw the attention of passers-by to their own failure in securing road safety?

Aleksei Kondrakov who erected a two-metre high monument in memory of his lost 20- year-old son and takes there flowers every Saturday describes the situation as follows:

It is not just stealing the flowers but they took the vase as well. In South Estonia people are civilised, nobody would even steal a crystal vase from the cemetery. [...] In the Caucasus, where I come from, such roadside monuments are sacred (Tali 1998).

The argument of the Estonian Road Administration officials claiming that the roadside monuments are a danger to drivers is not based on a proper analysis of the matter but on the subjective opinion of the officials (Väljaots 1998).

Aare Pain, the head of the traffic department, admits that he has not heard of cases where the memorial stones have been the cause of new road accidents and argues that showy roadside advertisements are equally dangerous for drivers. Pain says that people can apply for permits to erect new monuments, provided the stones are not too conspicuous or block road maintenance crews, but his personal opinion is that if

the stone is not very showy and disturbs nobody, then let them be there even though they belong in the cemetery, the last resting place of the deceased (Väljaots 1998).

SUMMARY

Memorial stones and crosses on roadsides are a gloomy reminder of the fragility and the temporality of worldly life. The monuments to traffic victims symbolise the dangers of modern civilisation and the inability of individuals to avoid them. Furthermore, death no longer touches just a small social group – a family or a community. Various tragic events and catastrophes characteristic of modern civilisation (road accidents, shipwrecks and plane crashes) affect the entire humankind via the media news (newspapers, radio, and television).

Marking the death sites of road fatalities is a global practice which became more widespread in Estonia in the 1990s. In Estonia, this is a marginal convention of death culture which derives from the archaic belief that a man's soul is linked to his death site. The Estonian Road Administration has suggested that memorial stones may distract drivers and this opinion has also been supported by the press. Although, the Road Administration has no data on accidents involving memorial stones, the erecting of memorials on the roadsides is not considered appropriate. Still, memorial stones are not completely harmless. At the end of the 1990s, heated debates on memorial stones were held. The issue became topical once again when a car lost control and hit the memorial stone in Ussisoo – a section of Tartu road which is generally considered dangerous and where accidents happen often – as a result of which the accident had more severe consequences. The memorial stone which had been in Ussisoo for a decade was never returned to the roadside.

In Central Europe, marking a death site is a common practice motivated by the need to draw attention to the tragedy, the wish to warn other drivers and pedestrians of danger, and to mark the death site for commemoration.

A memorial cross or stone does not normally mark the last resting place but the place where a person's biological life came to its end. Such memorials are more significant to those who

have personal a connection with the accident. People visit these places to remember and to mourn their loved ones.

The shape, size, material and form of the memorial depend on the aesthetic faculties and the financial resources of those who erect it. Marking a death site, the relatively materialistic and urbanised people of today often choose to ignore the religious aspects of the custom, and the belief that the soul of the deceased will permanently stay at the death site.

The monuments are erected in memory of the victims of car crashes, not those who are responsible for the accident. Records of earlier folk tradition also contain references to the same type of behaviour describing the marking of the death (or murder) sites of innocent victims.

The author of this paper finds it significant that in 1998, when there was a campaign in the press against memorials for victims of road accidents, Henn Mikelsaar won a literary prize for his novel "Ristiratast" (1998) which talks about commemorating the sites of road fatalities, and the main issue raised and deliberated throughout the novel is a philosophical and ethical one of which place is more sacred – the one where a person's soul leaves his body or the grave where his body lies.

The press (newspapers *Postimees*, *Eesti Päevaleht*, *Eesti Ekspress*) has covered the issue subjectively, from the standpoint of officials rather than the relatives of the deceased, disregarding the possible effect such articles might have on the people who erected the stones. The reporters fail to analyse the cause of the accidents or the negligence of the road police, emphasising that the marking of death sites is unofficial and, therefore, inappropriate. To further emphasise the negative aspects of roadside monuments, the press came up with colourful headings, set Estonian customs against the non-Estonian ones (Kondrakov example) and emotionally played on the self-confidence of the Estonians (what foreign tourists might think of us).

The tabloids (*Sõnumileht*, *Kuller*) succeeded in adhering to the model of social responsibility by also presenting the opinion of those who erected the stones, the relatives of the deceased, and by producing the corresponding official statistics (Tänavsuu 1998). They connected the increase in the number of fatal road accidents accompanied by the raise in the number of roadside monuments with the shortcomings in the work of the traffic police.

“We visit that place on the fifth day of every month”, says a mother. Early on the morning of October 5, last year, her sons, former university students who had helped her in farm-work, drove in their Opel loaded with pig carcasses for a restaurant towards Tallinn. In the curves after Anna, a Subaru coming from Tallinn raced towards them. Even though the police initially said that the Subaru’s driver was drunken, the records later stated that a sober driver had nodded off for a second. How it actually happened will remain unknown since all three young men were killed in the accident. (Väljaots 1998).

The marking of tragic events at roadsides adds, in turn, to oral narrative tradition.

Seven years ago there was a tragedy where four people got killed. People have begun talking about an incident involving an ambulance from Tartu. In fact, there were two doctors from Tartu on their way to Tallinn in a car belonging to someone they knew. They all were all killed when they crashed into a car full of drunken people. Also a 16 year old girl from the other car, whose birthday had been celebrated, was killed. The monument bears no inscription in her memory (Väljaots 1998).

I have been keeping an eye on what journalists write on the topic in online media publications. Since about 2000, I have been doing the same with not only Estonian but also international press, leading me to conclude that European journalists do not condemn the marking of death sites; they express worry concerning traffic accidents and the rising number young people involved and killed in such accidents. Journalists take the view that public marking of death sites helps to prevent new accidents. The style of Central European journalists is often also emotional but with the emphasis on vandalising death sites or the reasons for car crashes (alcohol, drugs) or the young age of people killed in road accidents. Journalists do not compare roadsides with cemeteries and avoid presenting their subjective opinions.

1998 – 2009 Tartu-Tallinn

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