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The Centre of Cultural History and Folkloristics in Estonia
Chair of Archaeology, University of Tartu

HOLY GROVES AROUND THE BALTIC SEA

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

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ABSTRACTS

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A Linguistic View on Lithuanian Gojus 'Grove'.

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Of all the proper names for sacred places - confirmed or supposed - in Lithuania the name Gojus and its derivations is the most common.

According to the general opinion, Lith. *gõjus* 'grove' is a loan from Slavic sources. The loan dates back to the 16th century. Thus, we have a peculiar situation, where a Christian society has borrowed a term from another Christian society to give a laudable name to a Pagan relic! The etymology of the arguably Slavic sources is not completely clear; next to the Slavic origin, the term's derivation from certain Iranian words is also discussed.

This study pays special attention on semantic development and word formation. While there is no doubt that gojus 'grove', Pol. gaj 'id.', Av. gaya- 'life (-time)', etc. are reflexes of the IE root $g^{\acute{U}}iH_3$ - 'to live' -, the question remains: was it derived or borrowed. A straightforward development of *gõjus*, Pol. Gaj, etc., without borrowing, is speculated. Other words of the same structure are being analyzed: Lith. bojus, Lojus, mojus, grojus, pavojus, švojus. Etymologically, gojus, Pol. Gaj, originally had the meaning 'a holy grove; the residence of ancestors in afterlife'.

Hiisi-Places on the Landscape of Eastern Finland in the Light of Archive Materials

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In this paper I will discuss the problem of specific sacred *hiisi*-places and their relation with folklore on the landscape of eastern Finland on the basis of archive materials. More specifically, I am concerned with the role of supernatural beings in the study of *hiisi* and relations between the *hiisi*-places and the culture of death from the point of view of comparative religions.

I will review previous studies on the topic of *hiisi* and discuss two main arguments concerning the topic. According to Veikko Anttonen and Mauno Koski, *hiisi* has been understood primarily as a place. Creatures inhabiting *hiisi* have been perceived as a result of the influence of Christianity. *Hiisi*-places have been associated with death and even more often with graveyards or have been regarded as a type of sacred groves.

Hiisi-creatures have so far been ignored in previous studies into the phenomenon of *hiisi*. I will explore the issue of creatures connected with *hiisi*-places. Specific hiisi-places located in Heinävesi, Suvasvesi and Riistavesi area will be analyzed relying on Kim Knott's spatial theory and methodology. My research material, which consists of folklore sources, place names, photographs, historical and archaeological materials, includes many supernatural beings connected with the *hiisi*-places. I will discuss the significance of the creatures in constructing a space. Relying on Kim Knott, I will draw attention to the corporal nature of a space. It offers an interesting viewpoint in the study of *hiisi*-places and their relation to the culture of death and the significance of the creatures.

The Sacred Groves of Central Courland in Diachronic Aspect

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There are seven villages (Konini, Kaleji, Pliki, Ziemeli, Viesalgi, Sausgali and Draguni) in central Courland that were inhabited by so-called Curonian Kings (kuršu konini) - the descendants of Curonian nobility, first mentioned in documents in 1320. They preserved special privileges during conquest by the Livonian Order (such as the right to hunt and exemption from taxes and military drafts), but lost these privileges in 1854. In the census of 1863 they were counted as a separate nation, with a total number of 405. While the Curonian tribe had transformed into Latvians, the Curonian Kings preserved a separate identity by not intermarrying with Latvian peasants.

Along with other pagan traditions, Curonian Kings also preserved traditions connected with sacred groves. Information about three sacred groves has been documented in folklore and historical documents since the end of the 15th century. There is a map preserved in the National Archives of Sweden depicting the sacred grove at Viesalgi and Draguni villages. The same grove (Elka valks) has been mentioned in a document in 1503. A very interesting description of rituals practised at one of the sacred groves has been left by a traveller Reinhold Lubenau who visited one of the Curonian King villages at Christmas in 1586. He has described the ritual hunt in the sacred grove saying that this is the only occasion for Curonian Kings to go to the grove and that even breaking off the twigs of the trees at other times of the year is prohibited. The game has been used for the ritual meal held together with the souls of the dead. Another traveller has mentioned the prohibition of breaking off the twigs and feeding the souls of the dead in the sacred groves in the 18th century.

In 2006, fieldwork was carried out in Turlava parish in order to gather folklore materials about the sacred grove next to the Ķoņini village (Ķoņinciems). It was unexpectedly surprising that almost every informant kept to several taboos in connection to Elka and could tell tragic stories about what happened to those who had not respected these taboos. There are straight parallels to be drawn between the contemporary taboos and those recorded by the travellers in previous centuries.

A Grave Symbol in North-West Belarus

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A group of medieval sepulchral tombstones with incuse single signs of a pole with a semicircle at its top is known to locate in Northwest Belarus. By now the tombstones with such signs have been discovered in Vilejka, Pruzhany and Lukoml' regions.

On some occasions, the sign of a pole with a semicircle is a part of compound compositions. For example, similar signs of a pole with a semicircle as part of a composition were found on several stones nearby the Stiberaki village (Vilejka region). Presumably, it is possible to look for an astronomical code in it. Some stones with such compound compositions have been collected and are held at the Museum of Boulders of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

The symbolism of a wooden column on a tomb is well known in funeral rituals in the areas inhabited by Slavic and Baltic tribes as well.

The tradition of installing a wooden column was particularly well-described in written sources and ethnographic descriptions of Lithuanian tribes. It is possible to speak about three semantic meanings:

- ⌘ A clear cosmological meaning of an installed wooden column with celestial symbols is especially evident in calendar rituals in Lithuania such as Kupole.
- ⌘ A common Lithuanian tradition is to set up columns with celestial symbols on the occasion of exclusive events, such as a marriage, illness, epidemics, or to secure a good harvest.
- ⌘ The tradition to erect a column is very closely connected with funeral rituals, such as in annalistic descriptions about the installation of columns on the tombs of Lithuanian Dukes.

Thus, the mental idea of a pole hints at the cosmological meaning. It concerns the creation of a sacral connection with the Universe during a ritual moment.

It seems that the sign of a pole with a semicircle on the stones is the best graphic image-projection of a celestial sphere, which is

inspired by a movement of starry sky at night, creating the impression of the "dome of heavens".

Then a pole of the sign represents itself a mythological axis which connects the terrestrial surface with the North Star. The name of the North Star is often connected with the concept «pole, pillar, column» and this holds true in our region, too. Belarusians named North Star "the Big pillar". «Pole, pillar, column» is its name in some regions of Russia and among other Slavic peoples, and also among Estonians, Mongols, Turks.

The installed column on a tomb conveys the meaning of the axis of the Universe which connects all worlds. The replacement of a real column by an incuse image of a pole has kept the same meaning. An important evidence of such an interpretation could be a sign of a pole with two consistently located semicircles-hemispheres. As the sign of a pole with a semicircle is ideal for the celestial sphere, wheras, a semicircle is the best projection of a barrow mound-hemisphere as a model of the Universe. The barrow is represented as another sphere, another world, though already beyond the grave existence.

Speaking of possible mythological sense of a sign, it is necessary to point at a well-known mention of Stryjkowski about a funeral ceremony of Grand Duke Kejstut in 1382 when the claws of predatory animals were thrown into a pile to help the deceased to scramble up a glass mountain.

In front of the region of tombstone signs with a pole and a semicircle in modern Belarus, there are nearby barrows with a stone facing. But detailed archaeological research is needed for exact information.

Burials in the barrows with a stone facing is a very old tradition in the Baltic region. Such barrows on the modern Belarusian territory are analogous to those of Sudovians (Jatwingians). The tradition to set up stones to face barrows corresponds with the conception of "the stone heavens" among Indo-Europeans and Balts, in particular.

Such interpretation of a funeral ceremony in connection with cosmological ideas and conceptions enables to explain the sign of a pole with a semicircle as a replacement instead of the installation of a wooden column with a cosmological meaning by the tombstone.

From Groves to Cemeteries. Burial Places of the Periphery

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Cemeteries have always been seen as sacred or holy places. Old habits and customs of burying deceased were well preserved especially in the peripheral areas. In the inner parts of Finland there are hundreds of places with stories or toponyms as well as bone finds which reveal burials or cemeteries. These sites are usually connected to war times but actually no systematic study has been done before.

At the end of the Iron Age, inner parts of Finland were sparsely settled. Only a few burial grounds of small villages are known. During the Middle Ages, settlement gradually spread into the inner parts and more north- and eastward. Because of the vast area and scarce settlement without a working network of churches, the old pre-Christian habits were mixed together with Catholic ceremonies. However, just a few burial sites are known outside the churches and churchyards.

From the reformation (c. 1550) onward, the theological content of burial ceremony changed. In the periphery people still wanted to continue practicing their customs as before. Because of the lack of funds and other resources, Lutheran church was not able to organize itself in the periphery.

It is not until the end of the 17th century when the church started to pay more attention to the local burial customs. Mentions of illegal cemeteries and burials in the area increased rapidly. Especially popular burial sites were small islands near villages. The use of these local burial sites finally ended at the beginning of the 18th century.

During the same time in the invaded Eastern Orthodox area, Greek Catholic village cemeteries as well as chapels were seen from the Lutheran viewpoint as a pagan phenomenon. It is also known that offerings were brought to these cemeteries. Even newly-settled Lutherans started to bury their people in these village cemeteries after Orthodox inhabitants fled to Russia.

Finnish *Hiisi*-Sites and their Connection to Iron Age Cremation Cemeteries under Level Ground

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This paper will focus on the similarities between Finnish cremation cemeteries under level ground and *Hiisi*-sites. It seems that the cemeteries' mixed nature, long-term use and the place on top of small moraine hills remind very much of the Swedish sacred groves or the Finnish and Estonian *Hiisi*-sites. Many cult places can also be connected to Late Iron Age cemeteries, especially in western Finland.

Traces of rituals in Finnish Iron Age cemeteries show that ancestors were celebrated and remembered in different ways. Burned clay and daub, iron slag, unburned bones and teeth from animals, single post holes, offering pits and traces of smaller bonfires imply that ancestor cult was practiced at these sites. Cup-marked stones or rock outcrops are also quite often found in the cemeteries. One third of the known Finnish cup-marked stones are found either in Iron Age cemeteries or in their immediate vicinity. Many of these finds have traditionally been explained in functionalistic terms: such as older settlement sites, smithy sites or as remains from the funeral pyre. Lately, additional explanations have become to be considered and accepted. These remains could thus be from commemoration rituals, ancestor cult and even from cult houses.

The traces of ritual activity suggest that the cemeteries were used for different purposes round-the-year. The cremation cemeteries under level ground could, in my opinion, actually have been small-scaled communal ritual centres. The cemeteries functioned as meeting places, where the whole community could perform their cult also between the funerals.

The Balts' Sacred Groves: Lost History and Modern Research

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Sources on the sacred groves of the Balts differ in character, amount, and significance for examination. Linguistics presents some principal facts on the mutual link between Lithuanian words alka(-s) 'sacred grove' and auka 'sacrifice'. Archaeological material let us imply that sandy barrow mounds were arranged in woods during the Iron Age. Mythological connection between burial sites and woods/trees might have been essentially developed in the same period.

Towards the very end of prehistoric times we are able to examine a particular case of what role sacred groves have played in pagan Lithuania State religion (up to its change to Christianity in 1387) - those are known in the surroundings of residences of the then Grand Dukes.

For further knowledge on the development of the concept of sacred groves/trees in the Christian world, the manuscript *Deliciae Prussicae*, written by Pastor Matthaeus Praetorius (c. 1635-1704), is of particular importance. And finally, three centuries later we are able to refer to both verbal and visual ethnographic materials collected by local and foreign scholars.

The Sacred Tree as a Visual Symbol and a Measure of Moral Values

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Quite a few sacred trees have become famous in their country and within the limits of the system of symbols, and are more widely known than by the members of a single village. Their popularity largely owes to a favourable location: the conspicuous tree is most often situated so that it is easily noticed by the passersby, either alongside or near the path to the church. Estonian dendrologist Hendrik Relve instigated the search for the most "famous" Estonian trees of the millennium: this list includes several sacred trees, such as Rannamõisa oak tree (also called the Thousand-Year-Old oak tree), Tamme-Lauri oak tree, trees of the Lehmja oak grove, Ülendi linden tree, and others.

A favourable location, however, is not enough to make tree famous; it also has to have a cultural significance. The symbolic value is mostly bestowed upon it by oral lore (e.g., a tree planted by the Swedish King, wedding guests who were turned into trees, etc.), which is further enhanced and shaped by the written press and the media. A single large tree stands out on the landscape and is like a target that attracts folk tales throughout generations (Hiiemäe 2000).

Other important parameters for making "hit lists" of trees are their diameter and age. Tamme-Lauri oak tree in South Estonia, the oldest and with the largest diameter in Estonia, is also the most famous tree (with the most numerous media covering online) and is highly popular in the entire Estonia - owing to nature protector Jaan Eilart's idea to use the image of the tree on the Estonian 10-kroon note, it has become a symbol of national importance. The magnificent appearance of the Tamme-Lauri oak tree has been perpetuated already in 1968 by Estonian artist Günther Reindorff. Single tall (sacred) trees have been drawn and painted also by other professional or amateur artists in Estonia. Eduart Viiralt has perpetuated the Tamme-Koorti oak tree in the Viljandi County, which also plays a special role in the Estonian national identity. In modern times, the sacred trees have also been photographed.

An old tree, as such, is the symbol of longevity and vivacity, and is of emotional significance for many Estonians. A tree lasts much longer than a generation. This explains why the image of a tree that is felt

as one's own is chosen to symbolically represent one's country, parish, village, or is used as a visual symbol on various documents and papers (e.g., Kernu juniper on the symbols of the Kernu parish, oak trees of the Lehmja oak grove on the complimentary pass of the Rae parish, etc.).

A well-known natural monument is valued and protected as long as possible. The majority of the more widely known sacred trees are under nature conservation and the protection of national heritage (which often does not provide a full protection). The land on which the Tamme-Lauri oak tree grows together with the tree was recently purchased by the state. Deputy Secretary-General of the Ministry of the Environment noted on the occasion, "It is really a representative symbol of Estonia, and has even been perpetuated on a banknote. With this piece of land belonging to the state we can ensure the best possible protection for the oak tree and the landscape surrounding it." The popularity of the sacred tree protects it and motivates the authorities to take action. The greater a tree's popularity, the better care is taken for it: its branches are supported and hollows filled with concrete to prolong the life of the old tree. Of course, there is a limit to such activities, since trees do not last forever. The life of centuries-old sacred trees has often been shortened by negligent human activities (making a fire in the hollow, for example, which was practiced on Rannamõisa oak tree already during the feudal period). Recently, the increasingly growing traffic on major roads and the resulting pollution poses a new threat. This was the cause for the dying of one of the trees in the Lehmja sacred oak grove; also, the Kernu juniper, with a single tuft of green on the top, is facing its end.

The death of a tree which has become a symbol may disclose the general tendencies and moral values in the community at the time. In a newspaper article, for example, it was promised that the Kernu juniper, which has also given a name to the local football club, will be left on its place even after it has dried and a monument would be set up to its memory. The fate of the oak tree in Lehmja grove was determined in the public online discussion, instigated by the head of parish, in which the argument voiced by a folklorist saved the tree from being hacked into a sculpture or a tacky piece of consumer art. The key to the attitude was being familiar with intangible culture and alienation from it. The death of a tree that unites generations may result in grief, comparable to the loss of a relative, by a local inhabitant knowledgeable in the tradition.

Holy Natural Places of Estonia: Regional Aspects

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In spite of Estonia's rather small territory (ca. 45 000 sq. km), definite regional peculiarities can be observed here in the character of holy natural places. The basic cultural watershed runs from north-east to south-west, dividing, on the one hand, areas oriented towards the Baltic Sea, and, on the other hand, continental districts which have been historically oriented towards south and south-east.

Western and northern Estonia is the distribution area of the word *hiis*, which signifies various natural objects (groves, hills, stones, trees, springs) and refers to their sacredness. In addition, in western and north-western Estonia we can notice a large proportion of single trees and stones, the functions of which are limited to healing practices and related gift-giving. Differences of this area and its contacts to the Scandinavian world can be observed in the distribution of cup-marked stones already in the 1st millennium BC.

In southern Estonia the word *hiis* is missing in the authentic tradition (there is a transition zone between the south and the north). Also, holy groves are rare in the south: the concept of sacredness is mainly related to single trees there. In Mulgimaa, south-western Estonia, offering places (trees, stones, "offering gardens") were connected to certain farmsteads. A specific feature of the south-easternmost corner of Lutheran Estonia (especially Võru County) is cutting crosses in the trees during the funeral procession. Through this activity these trees also obtain a sacral meaning.

Healing at springs was practiced in the whole country but here also some regional features can be observed. In the relations between sacred natural places/objects and deities there are also regional differences.

A area is the south-easternmost corner of Estonia - the Setomaa district which has been Orthodox since the Christianization. Setomaa is the only area in Estonia where a syncretic combination of Christian and pre-Christian rites and meanings at natural sanctuaries can be observed. In this area, a specific group of sacred trees related to funeral practices (lautsipuu) is known to have existed.

Regional differences in holy natural places are a result and reflection of certain historical contacts, interactions and circumstances. The study of their formation will be the task for future research.

Contradiction and Symbiosis of Different Times in Estonian Historical Sacred Groves

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The natural sacred places of Estonia are natural-looking places (such as hills, forests, springs, etc.) to which folkloric material refers to as "sacred" or with which sacral behaviour (e.g., praying, sacrificing, healing or other religious or ritual behaviour) can be associated. The concept embraces places and objects that came into active use before the 20th century. Traditionally, human influence on sacred places has been kept to a minimum. The places are used for sacral purposes only - people go there, pray, gather to celebrate certain holidays. Oblations, such as food, coins and jewellery have been left there; in several areas little ribbons have been tied to sacred trees. Fires have been built there; at times, certain areas of these places have been used for burials.

Sacred space is isolated from the profane - it is not used for agricultural activity. Traditionally it is forbidden to cut down a tree, break a twig, herd cattle, even to mow hay, plough or dig in a sacred place. Breaking these rules has been associated with several supernatural punishments such as accidents with cattle, illness, accident or death of the rule-breaker or misfortune in their own and their descendants' life. (A typical example: a man who cuts down a sacred tree hurts himself, falls ill and dies later on; a woman who abandons the custom of sacrifice gives birth to a mute child).

The status of natural sacred places in the contemporary Estonian culture is ambiguous. Most of them are influenced by extraneous human activity. Many of them are not explicitly used. But fieldwork in several areas of Estonia has shown that people remember the places and continue using them, though they might not instantly admit it to everyone.

There are two cases that have attracted wide public attention and that are now being discussed in court.

Paluküla hiiemägi (Sacred grove hill of Paluküla) is located in northern Estonia, in the southern end of the Harju County. It is

part of the Landscape Reserve of Kõnnumaa. It is the highest hill in mid-western Estonia, reaching 106 m above sea level. However, from the foot it is only about 25 m high. There are quite a lot of texts associated with Pauküla grove hill - at least 14 reports can be found in the archives, which is a lot, for most of the places are represented by one or two reports only.

Today, the rural municipality of Kehtna wishes to establish a skiing and sports centre on the grove hill. The plan has generated controversies and angry discussions between the representatives and the sympathizers of the two sides. In general, the speakers on this issue can be divided into two - the ones who defend the hill and its sacredness, and those who prefer the sports centre. Both sides have arguments, but a compromise cannot be reached. The two sides represent two different worldviews. The case has been discussed in court for a couple of years now.

Kunda hiiemägi (Sacred grove hill of Kunda) is located in northwestern Estonia, in the county of Lääne-Virumaa, on the territory of the town of Kunda and the rural municipality of Viru-Nigula. It is a foreland, 1.7 km long, up to 400 m wide and with a height of about 15 m. It is a rather well-known sacred place. At least seven references to it can be found in the archives; traditional tales of it as a burial place have been preserved till nowadays.

During the manor period, the sacred forest was cut down and the hill was cultivated. During the 1930s and later, a part of the hill was used as a gravel-pit that has ruined two and probably destroyed even more stone graves. There are at least five graves extant on the hill. One of them was excavated by archaeologists in 2004 and 2005, for it was about to crumble. Analysis has been shown it to be 2500-2700 years old. Iron artefacts discovered in the mound are the oldest or among the oldest iron artefacts to be found in Estonia ever.

Today, the municipality of Kunda supports the construction of wind turbines on the sacred hill, hoping that the town will have a “green” reputation. On the opposite side, the Estonian House of Taara and Native Religions (Maavalla Koda) claims the hill to be considered as an object of cultural and sacred values.

Holy Groves from Virumaa: some dating possibilities

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In my presentation I focus on *hiis* [holy grove] sites in Estonia and Virumaa in particular. Until now the main sources for studying the groves have been folkloristic texts that have formed a comparatively static and uniform picture of the groves. At the same time there are a number of differences concerning the groves that rather represent different ideologies behind them, excluding a constant tradition that has remained unchanged for a long time.

In my presentation I observe different groves known in folk tradition, on the basis of the toponym *hiis*, analyse their location on the landscape and connection with archaeological sites. Special emphasis is set on the outstanding grove hills of Kunda, Purtse and Tõrma in northern Estonia, burial grounds around them, and the possibilities to date them probably to Late Bronze Age and Pre-Roman Iron Age. In contrast to these eye-catching landscape elements I also observe a few grove sites that are not distinguished on the landscape at all. I demonstrate that the latter, modest groves that ordinarily belonged to every village, are probably younger, dating to the period starting from the 7th-8th century. I argue that earlier grove sites that are located in more prominent places on the landscape and are associated with graves, carry an entirely different ideology than the later groves that are situated in more unpretentious places and are connected with the village and the living society rather than the conspicuous stone graves and dramatic landscape.

10.00 - 11.30 Estonian Literary Museum, 4th May 2007

Anna Wickholm. *The Finnish Hiisi-sites and their connections to Iron Age cremation cemetries*

Juha Ruohonen. *From groves to cemeteries. Burial places as sacred sites*

Andrei Prokhorov. *One grave symbol from North-West Belarus*

11.30 - 11.45 Coffee

11.45 - 13.45

Vykintas Vaitkevičius. *Balt's sacred groves: lost history and modern research*

Sandis Laime. *The sacred groves of the central Courland in diachronic aspect*

Heiki Valk. *Holy natural places of Estonia: regional pecularities*

Tõnno Jonuks. *Holy groves from Virumaa: some dating possibilities*

13.45 - 15.00 Lunch

15.00 - 16.30

Bernd Gliwa. *A linguistic view on Lithuanian gojus 'grove'*

Anne Hyvärinen. *Hiisi Places in the Landscape of Easter Finland in Light of Archive Materials*

Auli Kütt/Ahto Kaasik. *Sacred sites of indigenous Estonians / Contradiction and symbiosis of different times in Estonian historical sacred groves*

Poster presentations

Mari-Ann Remmel. *Holy groves and their reception nowadays*

Elo Liiv. *Researcher of natural holy places versus their user*

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