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AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF HOLY PLACES: CAN WE FIND 'FORGOTTEN' SACRED SITES?

Everywhere in the Baltic countries the opinion dominates that archaeology with its methods cannot answer questions concerning sacred places. Such an attitude is easily formed, since finds are rarely gathered and other features, such as cultural layers, post-holes etc. are even less common. This approach is even more understandable as the majority of sources and also the concept of holy places originate from the oral tradition of the recent past, while archaeology and its methods have been confined to a localising and descriptive role. Thus, the concept of holy places, derived from 19th and 20th century oral tradition, has been used in the context of all periods of the past. In recent years more interpretative studies have also been published concerning the hinterlands of holy places, different possible functions and dates (*Vaitkevičius*, 2004; *Jonuks*, 2007).

Here I will discuss the role of archaeology in the study of holy places, with special emphasis on finding forgotten holy places in Estonia. I will first focus on archaeological finds from holy places that are known from folklore, and discuss a certain landscape type that is considered sacred. In connection with these two aspects I will try to speculate on some putative holy places which have lost their folklore.

In Estonia, but also in many other areas, the main source about holy places has been folklore, which has been recorded relatively recently – in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century. Beside this, written descriptions from the Modern Era have also been used, but as latter are based on a formerly existing oral tradition, we may summarise by saying that all we know about sacred places comes from the context of living folk religion of the Modern Era. It is generally accepted that folklore is relatively conservative and retains memories about places whose meaning was originally assigned centuries or even millennia ago. As folk religion has been regarded in a similar light, the dating of different religious motives and sites has not been an important topic

and the historical religious context has often been ignored. Folk religion and sites associated with it have been approached phenomenologically, focussing only on folklore related to holiness, but not considering its wider historical and religious context. I believe that Estonian folklore related to *hiis*-places (*hiis* is generally understood and translated as 'holy grove', but concerning the etymology and different meanings of *hiis*, see *Jonuks,* 2009b). However, the customs and rituals conducted there should be studied in the context of the folk religion of the Modern Era and *vice versa*, since it is the religion of the Modern Era in particular which is reflected by the oral tradition. But this statement obviously does not mean that holy places have their beginning only in past couple of hundred years. Although folk religion primarily reflects the religion of the Modern Era, it was formed on the basis of earlier religion(s). It is obvious that holy places have also been used during earlier periods, and some of them have also been preserved in modern religion and folklore. At the same time many holy places have lost or changed their meaning over time and thus, as folklore is absent, we do not know of them. I believe that by using various holy places known from modern folklore as analogies, it is possible on the basis of archaeological material to find also those which were once important but are no longer known because they have lost their folklore for various reasons.

Archaeological finds

The Estonian holy places known from oral tradition have not been archaeologically investigated, and in most cases we do not have a methodology for studying them. The most numerous finds are coins from *hiis* or offering sites. Unfortunately such records are accidental and mostly come from amateur archaeologists, who are not too keen to share their knowledge with professionals. Only occasionally do such coins reach museums, as most of them end up in private collections and are not available for academic studies. The coin finds from offering sites that have reached museum collections so far date from the Early Modern Age (e.g. AI 2536:7, found beside the offering stone of Tõrva in Saarde parish, South-West Estonia) to the 18th–19th century (e.g. AI 4933, coins from the offering spring of Lümandu in Märjamaa Parish, Central Estonia). In some cases coins dating to the entire 20th century can be traced (e.g. *Silmaallikas* or 'Eye Spring' in Helme, South Estonia, TÜ 596).

The main problem with these single finds from sacred places is their documentation. The majority of finds have been discovered accidentally during

digging, or quarrying of sand or gravel, and thus no find context is available. It is also uncertain whether these items are 'offerings' or grave goods, as many earlier burial sites later obtained the significance of a holy site where sacrifices were brought. It is also difficult to say what kind of material remains we should expect from a sacrificial site, and therefore it is necessary to turn to contemporary folk customs for analogies. There are many stereotypic motifs, known already since the 18th century, that depict the offering of coins, bread etc. at holy places, which include not only groves and stones, but also church and chapel sites. The first photos and drawings of offering stones from the early 20th century depict shards of glass, old horse-shoes, pieces of cloth etc. that have been given as offerings and that combine well with the folklore recorded throughout the 20th century (see *Viidalepp*, 1940, 27; *Lõugas*, 1996, 80–81). A frequent characteristic is that the offerings are purely symbolic: they are economically worthless, often in secondary use, and the form or material is not connected with the purpose of the offering. A good example of this is the custom of tying ribbons on trees, the purpose of which is purely symbolic, in order to indicate a prayer for health and relief from disease. In a way, such an approach to offerings contradicts the traditional treatment of offerings in archaeological discourse, where offerings of valuable materials (*Hårdh*, 1996; *Hedeager*, 1992) or special items produced for the purpose of giving them as offerings (*Lekberg*, 2002) is often stressed. In some cases there has also been speculation on the basis of the form of amulets, for example, magical healing of foot pain (*Koktvedgaard Zeiten*, 1997, 11). Study of contemporary customs of making offerings suggests that purely symbolic and economically valueless items may have played a much bigger role. Their connection with the purpose of the offering only had significance in relation to the particular person making the offering. Therefore it is hardly possible to speculate on the purpose of the offering merely on the basis of the character of the offerings. This topic has only been studied on the basis of the oral tradition, and so it is difficult to find ethnographic descriptions that correspond to archaeological material. In order to offer a few examples of archaeological finds from holy places known from folklore, we should mention the nails and corroded iron (AI 2679) found under the sacrificial tree of Ülendi on the island of Hiiumaa (Fig. 1). The collections of potsherds found beside Raasiku sacred stone in North Estonia (AI 3506) and in Põltsamaa sacred grove in Central Estonia (AI 6520) represent similar sets of worthless items.

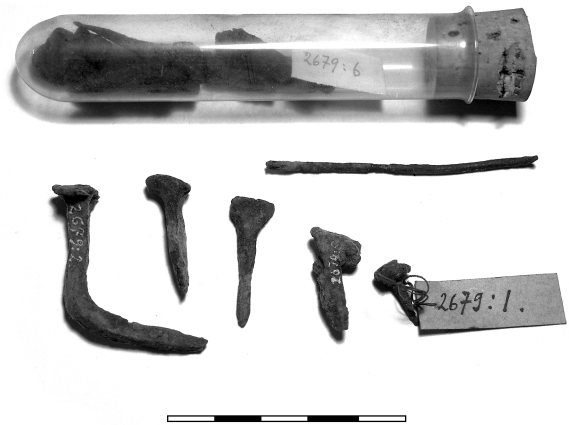

Fig. 1. Finds collected during archaeological excavation at the offering tree Ülendi Ebajumal (Idol) in Hiiumaa (AI 2679). Iron nails and pieces of corroded iron were found beneath the tree.

Fig. 2. Finds recovered beside the split boulder at Kumna (AI 5999).

It is known that all of the above-described objects have been found at holy places. By considering the characteristics of these collections and also the behavioural norms of folk religion, it is possible to speculate that certain other finds are also offerings. These include coins from the Modern Era, parts of a belt, half of a bronze vessel etc., collected beside a big boulder in the village of Kumna, North Estonia (AI 5999) (Fig. 2). In view of the choice of items in the collection, and considering also the splitted boulder, we might be dealing with a holy stone from the 17th–18th century, to which offerings have been brought, but which holiness has become lost in time and oral tradition as the usual source has not preserved either.

Another reason why we know only a small set of sites of this kind is the character of the possible offerings. As these are usually valueless items – and according to oral tradition pieces of glass, nails or old horse-shoes were offered as well – these could easily be considered as 'rubbish' by casual finders or even during an archaeological excavation. Thus, these finds do not receive the necessary attention. The lack of attention is partly justified, of course, since it is difficult to determine whether pieces of a glass bottle found beside a boulder are offerings or just the remains of some incidental party. But so far discussion of 'the archaeology of rubbish' is largely absent in this context, although it might be fruitful in future studies.

As such finds seem to be typical of modern folk religion and its sacrificial practice, it is important to note that so far we do not have evidence of analogical collections from prehistoric periods. Usually there are no older finds at the holy places known from folklore, and no prehistoric sets of artefacts (e.g. a collection of potsherds not relating to a known archaeological monument) have been connected with such a concept of symbolic offering (cf. *Stjernquist*, 1997). Still, there are a few examples of single finds of jewellery from holy places known from folklore, which belong to the last centuries of prehistory (11th–13th century). These single penannular brooches from the Late Iron Age can hardly be explained as offerings. Rather, they can be interpreted as items lost during some rituals or festivities. The penannular brooches from Utria *hiis* (AI 3644), Kunda *Hiis* Hill (AI 3831) or beside the Nõmme offering stone (AI 4228) should be mentioned as examples in this connection. Finds older than the Late Iron Age gathered at holy places known through folklore are associated only with stone graves from the Late Bronze or Early Iron Age.

A similar picture appears when we analyse finds made at offering springs known from folklore. During dredging work a breast pin was found at the

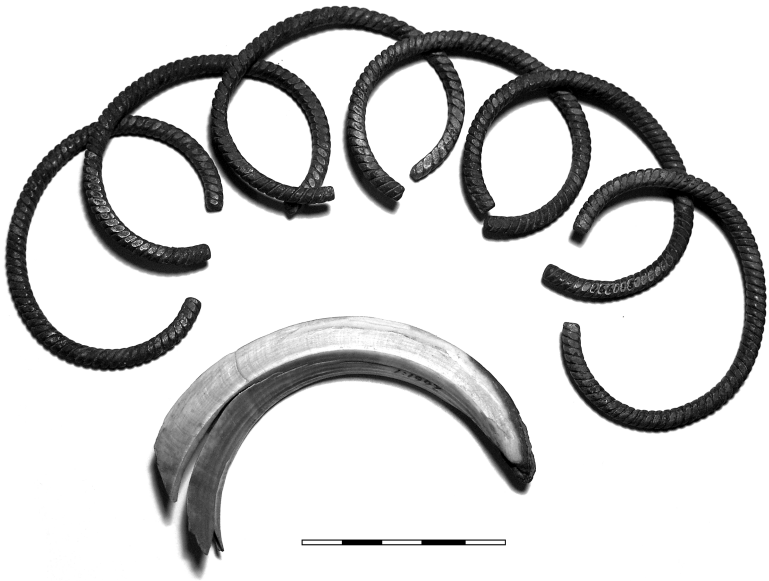

Fig. 3. Finds from Tõrma offering spring (AI 2661).

spring of Kunda (AI 4002: 1), and a tooth of wild boar and six bronze rings were collected from Tõrma Spring (AI 2661: 1–8) (Fig. 3). In addition there are finds from several springs, including silver jewellery (see *Tamla*, 1985). In addition to springs, the River Jägala has been considered holy. Here, offerings may have been thrown into the water from the high riverbank (*Vedru*, 2004, 190). Also, two bracelets and potsherds from the swampy bank of the River Olju (AI 4151) could have been given as offerings to the river or buried on the meadow. All of these artefacts are from the Late Iron Age, the 9th–11th century, and correspond well with finds from Latvian springs in terms of their dates and the character of the collections (*Уртанс*, 1988, 11). Artefacts were deposited in springs during earlier periods as well, since the 1st century AD, but at that time weapons predominated, for example, spearheads and an axe from Koorküla (*Tamla*, 1985) or the famous weapon collection from the bog of Alulinna (*Tamla*, 1995; see more *Oras*, 2010). The character of deposits clearly changed in the Viking Age and, in contrast to the weapons collections of

earlier periods, only jewellery was deposited in the water bodies during the Late Iron Age.

Offerings have probably been made at springs situated in the centre of former villages, which most likely were also places where water was taken for daily needs. A breast pin from Kunda and a set of items from Tõrma, both in the middle of Iron Age settlements, should be mentioned as examples. A similar connection has been stressed with regard to Swedish offering springs (see *Stjernquist*, 1997, 59). In addition, animal bones and potsherds have often been found at springs in Sweden and Finland, thus also indicating the offering of organic material, which does not preserve easily. Unfortunately we do not yet know such material from Estonia, but offerings of organic material (food in particular) should definitely receive more attention in interpretations of springs and offering practices connected to these. The purpose of these offerings remains speculative. Juris Urtāns has suggested for Latvian offering springs, which date to the same period as the ones in Estonia, that the reason for bringing offerings to springs was originally fertility, and later healing (*Urtāns*, 2008, 80).

Characteristic of all archaeological finds from holy places is the lack of medieval material: the Late Iron Age jewellery is followed by late medieval and the early modern coins and symbolic offerings, associated with behavioural norms we also know from oral tradition. Such a difference can partly be accounted for in terms of our different level of knowledge about the material, and currently we are not able to identify the kinds of symbolic offerings that could be compared with the above-described pieces of iron, shards of glass, horse-shoes etc. from a period earlier than the Early Modern Era. On the other hand, the change from Late Iron Age jewellery to potsherds and pieces of iron from the Modern Era and the contemporary period most likely indicate changes in religion, customs and rituals concerning holy places. We can probably also suggest differences between various kinds of holy places and rituals conducted there. As all of the Late Iron Age jewellery associated with those *hiis* sites where wider communal festivities would have been possible are used and in some cases deformed, we could suggest that these have been lost during celebrations of some kind. Thus, we do not necessarily have to interpret finds from holy places solely as 'offerings'. The finds from the Modern Era and contemporary finds as symbolic offerings concentrate almost entirely around more local offering stones and trees, where 'offering' could be the most plausible interpretation.

Holy landscapes

Of the range of themes concerning sacred sites, the geographic features indicating holy places have probably been treated the most. Although no certain and final motive has been proposed as to why some places have been considered holy, there has been speculation on various possible reasons, from special places in the landscape to biological or energetic anomalies (see *Koski*, 1967; *Jonuks*, 2007; *Valk*, 2007; see references therein). Probably it has never been the case that only one aspect was considered important when choosing a holy place, and certain criteria may have been favoured in different periods or different regions. Still, it can be observed that holiness has been ascribed to sites that differ within this particular landscape: a conspicuous hill, a special tree etc. At the same time there are also numerous sites that are not visually eye-catching and where other criteria may have been used in choosing them.

I have suggested previously (*Jonuks*, 2007; *Jonuks*, 2009a) that ancestors and their connection with living societies had a crucial role in religion during the 1st millennium BC and the first centuries AD. As landmarks of this religion, above-ground stone graves were built, which in North Estonia were erected on the *klint* or on a hill, and which are oriented towards the villages, which were situated on lower ground. As it was not only the graves themselves that were important, but also the larger areas where they stood, we may suggest that such places have been considered holy and their meaning has in a few cases been preserved until the present day. A good example is Kunda *Hiis* Hill, North Estonia, where a row of four stone graves was built on the top of a moraine hill in the Late Bronze Age – Pre-Roman Iron Age. All these graves were oriented towards the former village on the other side of a lake, now dried up. Testifying to human activity in later periods is a Late Iron Age brooch, found during gravel quarrying, and there is also a rich body of folklore about the hill. A similar site with a long history is Purtse *Hiis* Hill, at the foot of which six stone graves were built at around the change of era and which has attracted numerous folk-tales. Such examples could be seen as holy places which have been important throughout different periods and where one and the same site has preserved its holiness in the context of different past religions. In addition, more sites with a similar landscape and archaeological remains are known, including sites without folklore.

One example can be seen in Karula village in North Estonia, where a grave field with numerous stone-graves is situated at the top of a *klint* headland.

Although these graves have not been studied yet, it can be suggested, in view of the character of the superstructures, that they date from the 1st millennium BC. The whole set strongly resembles the complexes of Kunda and Purtse, with the only difference that there is no *hiis* lore known about it. Still, there is a *hiis* known from folklore a few kilometres away on a flat coastal plain, where there is a small hillock only a meter high. It is probable that here we are dealing with a former holy place on top of the *klint* headland, where a burial site was created, but whose importance and meaning have changed. Thus a new holy place was chosen, this time in a different landscape and with no connection to graves.

An even better example comes from Tõugu village, North Estonia, situated on a *klint* headland, where there is also a burial site, one of the graves being dated to the Late Bronze Age (*Lang*, 2000, 123). In addition to landscape similarities, there is also a settlement site known from the Early Iron Age at the foot of the *klint* (*Lang*, 2000, fig. 25). So, in this case too we may apply the interpretation of graves built on a higher location than the village, so that the dead ancestors were looking down towards the living society (cf. *Sjögren*, 2004, 173). There is hardly any known folklore relating to the holiness of this site, but instead there is a flat field together with an offering stone a few kilometres away that is referred to in folklore, called *Hiievälja* (*Hiis* Field). Similarly here we can interpret it as a former holy place on a *klint* cape, where stone graves were built and whose meaning was closely associated with dead generations. Later on the meaning of holiness was lost for some reason, which is also confirmed by the fact that the area of the burial site was turned into an agricultural field in the Viking Age (*Lang*, 2000, 226). The disappearance or relocation of some holy places was probably brought about by changes in religion during the middle of the 1st millennium AD (see *Jonuks*, 2009a), and in the course of these processes a new holy place with a new landscape type appeared, where the graves are not directly connected with the culture of death.

Certainly, the putative relocation of some holy places from hills to flat fields, which we can observe since the middle of the 1st millennium AD, does not mean that the concept of a visually impressive landscape had lost its importance. Also in case of 'new' holy places we can observe something, such as an elevation, a special collection of plants and trees, a natural stony area etc., that makes this place somewhat different in this particular landscape. But the most important difference between 'old' and 'new' sites is that later holy sites are not

directly associated with graves, and since the second half of the 1st millennium holy places have probably not been used for burial (see *Valk*, 1995, 461).

In conclusion

By using archaeological material and comparing it with analogies from oral tradition we can putatively identify some holy places which have been important in past religions, but which have lost their holiness over the course of time and due to changes in past religions. In doing this, it would be important to distinguish two categories of holy sites. First, there are classic holy places, the knowledge of which predominantly derives from the living religion and living folk tradition, and which relate primarily to the folk religion of the recent past. But in addition there are also sites that may have had significance as holy places in different periods of the past, but which have lost this meaning and together with it also the folklore as the main source material. Thus it is important to consider other sources, such as archaeological sites, finds etc., in order to recognize places which may have had an importance in the context of some past religion. It is clear that we cannot see the whole of the holy landscape of the past, but such an approach still permits us to observe holy places in a more dynamic way, where the meaning of places has changed together with the rest of religion, society and the settlement pattern, and where holy places may have been abandoned or new places brought into use.

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