

LESZEK P. SŁUPECKI (Poland)

HOLY GROVES IN GERMANIC AND SLAVIC BELIEFS

Holy groves, like holy waters, hills, stones etc., belong to the category of so-called *natural* sanctuaries or *sanctuaries in the world of nature*. This seems to mean that the focal point of the rituals held there was an object belonging to the world of nature, and in the case of a holy grove this object was a tree (*Stupecki, 2009, 27; cf. Stupecki, 2000*).

The relationship between cult, culture and nature is, however, not so simple, and it is not so easy to divide sanctuaries simply into *natural* (e.g. holy groves) and *artificial* (e.g. temples). We can imagine a temple standing in the middle of the wild forest (and the Lutitian temple in Riedegost was most probably such a case: *Stupecki, 2008, 241–256*), or a *natural* sanctuary located in the very centre of a highly cultivated area, where the cult focussed on an object from the world of nature (some Catholic holy springs serving as quite good examples).

In a short paper it is impossible to analyse all aspects of holy groves, so I would like to focus on some selected important questions only. These will be the following:

1. The status of our sources.
2. What existed in holy groves according to our sources?
3. What did not exist there?
4. And what might this mean?

Let me start with the first point.

Sources

Written sources describing Germanic, Scandinavian and Slavic holy groves are rather scanty. Long descriptions are given by Tacitus in *Germania* in the case of Germans, and by Helmold in the case of the Slavs. Short texts are, of course, more frequent. Apart from texts, we have at our disposal place-names (e.g. numerous Scandinavian place-names including the substantive *lundr*, frequently connected to the name of one of the gods, e.g. Thorslunda in Sweden), ethno-

graphic material and archaeological finds. But in the case of archaeology it would be worth defining first, using written sources, what archaeologists may expect as the remains of a holy grove.

The *locus classicus* in the discussion about holy groves is, of course, Chapter 9 of *Germania* by Tacitus, who, after mentioning Mercury, Hercules and Mars as the most important gods, goes on to write about the Germans in general: *Ceterum nec cohibere parietibus deos neque in ullam humani oris speciem assimulare ac magnitudine celestium arbitrantur: lucos ac nemora consecrant deorumque nominibus appellant secretum illud, quod sola reverentia vident* (Tacitus, 1937, 120).

Following this information, Tacitus adds that in such groves white, sacred horses were bred and used for divination. In the second part of his *Germania*, describing particular Germanic tribes, Tacitus mentions the holy grove of Semnons, the grove (and lake) of the goddess Nerthus, and the grove of the Alci Twins worshipped by the Nahonarvali tribe.

Research on and around the holy groves described in Tacitus' *Germania* has a long history. Here it will suffice to say that the descriptions of holy groves by Tacitus are not always clear, and as already observed by Thede Palm many years ago, he *uttalat sig i dunkla vandningar, och flera ganger ligger det narmest till hands att forklara saken sa, att hann sjalv endast haft en dunkel forstallning om vad han beskrivit* (Palm, 1948, 25). Tacitus describes three particular groves, and in the case of two of these he knows and records the names of the deities worshipped there (the goddess Nerthus and the Alci Twins), whereas in the case of *Semnonenhein* he obviously has no idea of the name of the god worshipped there. Nevertheless, his description sounds in general quite reliable. (Of course, possible borrowings from his ancient predecessors, describing the holy groves of the Celts, Greeks etc., constitute a separate problem.) Some of the motifs he mentions (also those which sound strange) find some confirmation in independent Scandinavian and Slavic sources.

What was not present in the holy grove?

Tacitus says that the ancient Germans did not erect temples and effigies for gods, and instead consecrated to them only *lucos ac nemora*. This is not entirely correct. (Since Tacitus himself writes about the temple of Tamphana, the problem is: what does the substantive *templum* mean to him in that context.) Nevertheless, he seems to be describing the reality of that period quite reliably. Rudolf Simek (*Simek*, 1995, 169) observes that many Germanic names for temple

originally denote a grove or forest, such as AHG *alh*, or Old Anglo-Saxon *baero* (Simek, 1995, 169). Jacob Grimm was already arguing that in Teutonic religion groves come before temples (Grimm, 1878, 181).

Temples and idols should also not exist in groves. On idols Tacitus's description in Chapter 9 is not entirely clear. But beyond any doubt he mentions the lack of idols when describing the grove of Alcis (Germania, 43), saying clearly and briefly: *nulla simulacra* (Tacitus, 1937, 373).

Very similar is the description of Slavic (Polabian, to be precise) groves given by Helmold in his *Chronica Slavorum* (Helmold, *Chronica Slavorum*, I, 84), written about one thousand years later. It is almost certain that Helmold did not know Tacitus's work, as it did not circulate in the Middle Ages (Modzelewski, 2004, xxx). But his text seems to be more balanced than that of Tacitus. The chronicler underlines the variety of Slavic ritual, saying: *est autem Slavis multiplex ydolatriae modus*. He first mentions the cult of idols in temples: *hii enim simulachrorum ymaginarias formas pretendunt de templis*, but adds: *alii* (Helmold speaks of gods imagined as idols) *silvas et lucos inhabitant*. But similarly to Tacitus, he stresses that also in the case of Slavic groves there were no idols of gods: *quibus nullae sunt effigies expressae* (Helmold, *Chronica Slavorum*, I, 84 (Helmold, 1963, 288)).

Everything seems to be clear. Unfortunately, Tacitus (Germania, 40) also describes a grove (*nemus*) where the goddess Nerthus was worshipped. The main ritual was in this case the procession of the goddess, sitting in a carriage, around the country populated by seven Germanic tribes. The best interpretation of the word 'goddess', as used here by Tacitus, is, of course, as an idol. (Another possible explanation might be a priestess playing the role of the goddess.) The ritual journey starts and ends in the holy grove. The end was very special. The carriage was washed in the holy lake, together with the goddess itself (and here Tacitus marks his distance from the story). The slaves who serve in this work vanish immediately afterwards into the lake: *quos statim idem lacus haurit*. This story also alludes to an idol and suggests that the sanctuary had buildings to house the holy carriage (and we may assume that the sacred horses used for divination, mentioned above, must have had stables). Such buildings are part of a sanctuary, but are not necessarily the same as a temple. However, at the end of the story Tacitus also mentions the temple: the goddess, having had enough contact with humans, the priest drives her back to the temple and *templum reddeat* (Tacitus, 1937, 344). The question is whether

templum means in this case a temple (*aes*) or a sacrosanct area (*temenos*). The first explanation is more probable.

The area of the sanctuary was obviously sacrosanct: Tacitus concludes his account by saying: *arcanus hinc terror sanctanque ignorantia quid sit illud, quod tantum perituri vident*. I will return to this key motif in the conclusion.

What did exist in a holy grove?

If there were no temple buildings or idols in the grove, what was there?

a) As a holy or even sacrosanct place guarded by taboos, the grove should have had well-defined, fenced boundaries. The etymologies of both German the *Hein* and the Slavic *gaj* derive from the notion of a fenced place (Trier, 1981, xxx; Brückner, 1985, 132). The etymology of the Scandinavian *lundr* is unclear, but according to Jan de Vries (after Trier) the most likely possibility also involves the idea of a fenced place (*de Vries*, 1962, 345, 368). Tacitus's description of the grove of Semnons shows beyond any doubt that the holy place had a clear boundary (Germania, 39: Tacitus, 1937, 337). As for the Slavs, Helmold (Helmold, *Chronica Slavorum*, I, 84) mentions a fence with two gates around the grove of the Wagrian god Prove. The mention of two gates and an atrium as part of the sanctuary suggests that the holy place was divided into two parts: the grove of oak trees itself and a yard (*atrium*) where the people gathered in front of the holy trees (Helmold, 1963, 288). Helmold also mentions that the Prove grove was situated on a hill, which he seems to repeat in the case of other sanctuaries, and possibly the Polish so-called *holy mounts* (such as Sleza) could equally well qualify as holy groves (Stupecki, *Valor*, 2007, 266–297).

b) The grove was usually a sacrificial place. In the grove of Semnons they *cesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia* (Tacitus, 1937, 337). The slaves serving the goddess Nerthus by washing her were most probably drowned in the sacred lake. Both forms of sacrifice appear in Adam of Bremen's (Adam of Bremen, IV, 27, schol. 138) description of Uppsala, where the men, horses and dogs sacrificed in the grove were hung after decapitation: *corpora autem suspenduntur in lucum, qui proximus est templo (...), ibi (...) canes et equii pendent cum hominibus* (Adam of Bremen, IV, 27, schol. 138: *Adami Bremensis*, 1961, 472). This means that the grove must have included a sacrificial place. The question is whether such a sacrificial place (including altars) was a part of the sacrosanct grove or rather part of the sanctuary's infrastructure built around the holy grove.

c) The grove was a place for tribal assemblies and for oracles to perform divination. (On the assemblies in the Prove grove, as described in Helmold I, 84, see: *Modzelewski*, 1996, 83–88.) All such activities also need their own infrastructure.

d) Quite frequently holy groves appear as important parts of major ritual centres. In the case of Uppsala and Riedegost, holy groves and waters supplemented the temples.

Conclusions

But what seems to be characteristic of the groves is fear: such places strike terror into the hearts of native worshippers (and even foreigners), a kind of *mysterium tremendum*, as described by Rudolf Otto. According to Tacitus (*Germania*, 39), the grove of Semnons was *silva (...) prisca formidine sacra*. In the grove of Nerthus there was *arcanus hinc terror sanctanque ignorantia quid sit illud, quod tantum perituri vident* (*Germania*, 40). Adam of Bremen (Adam of Bremen, IV, 27) describes the grove in Uppsala in the following way: *Is enim lucus tam sacer est gentilibus, ut singule arbores eius ex morte vel tabo immolatorum divine credantur*.

The holy grove appears frequently in written sources as existing since time immemorial and never touched by human hands. The Nerthus grove was *castum nemus* (*Germania*, 40). The temple in Riedegost *undique silva ab incolis intacta et venerabilis circumdat magna* (Thietmar, VI, 23: *Kronika Thietmara*, 1953, 245). The holy grove Zutibure, which at the end of the 10th century was cut down by Wigbert, predecessor of Thietmar of Merseburg on the episcopal seat, is described in his Chronicle as *ab accolis ut Deum in omnibus honoratum et ab evo antique nunquam violatum* (Thietmar, VI, 38: *Kronika Thietmara*, 1953, 369).

Thus, Zutibure had existed *ab evo antiquo*, Semnonenhein was so holy because of *augura patrum* and *prisca formido*, and the grove of Alcis was a place of *antiquae religionis*.

A grove is also a place of ritual lasting from time immemorial and giving rise to great fear. The gods are, of course, present in groves. However, they appear there in a terrifying form, different from the domesticated anthropomorphic form as supernatural companions of humans that they have in temples located in the middle of human settlements. In groves they really are supernatural.

As Tacitus says, the Germans *deorum nominibus appellunt secretum illud quo sola reverentia videt*.

Bibliography

- Adami Bremensis*, 1961. *Adami Bremensis Gesta Hammabrugensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*. Ed. Trillmich W. Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches. Darmstadt, 1961.
- de Vries*, 1962. de Vries J. *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Leiden 1962.
- Brückner*, 1985. Brückner A. *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*. Warszawa, 1985.
- Grimm*, 1878. Grimm J. *Deutsche Mythologie*. Vol. 1. Berlin, 1878.
- Helmold*, 1963. *Helmoldi Presbyteri Bosoviensis Chronica Slavorum*. Ed. H. Stoob. Berlin, 1963.
- Kronika Thietmara*, 1953. *Kronika Thietmara*. Ed. Jedlicki M. Z. Poznań, 1953.
- Modzelewski*, 1996. Modzelewski K. *Omni secunda feria. Księżycowe roki i nieporozumienia wokół Helmolda. Słowiańszczyzna w Europie średniowiecznej*. Vol. 1. Ed. Kurnatowska Z. Wrocław, 1996. 83–88.
- Modzelewski*, 2004. Modzelewski K. *Barbarzyńska Europa*. Warszawa, 2004.
- Palm*, 1948. Palm T. *Trädkult. Studier i germansk religionshistoria*. Lund, 1948.
- Simek*, 1995. Simek R. *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*. Stuttgart, 1995.
- Stupecki*, 2000. Stupecki L. P. Sanktuaria w świetle natury u Słowian i Germanów. Święte gaje i ich bogowie. *Człowiek, Sacrum, Środowisko. Miejsca kultu we wczesnym średniowieczu*. Ed. Moździoch S. Wrocław, 2000. 39–47.
- Stupecki*, 2008. Stupecki L. P. *Per sortes ac per equum. Wyrocznia w Radogoszczy. Europa barbaria, Europa Christiana. Studia medievalia Carolo Modzelewski dedicata*. Warszawa, 2008. 241–256.
- Stupecki*, 2009. Stupecki L. P. Pagan Temple – Christian Church. The Problem of Old Norse Temples. *Between Paganism and Christianity*. Eds. Stupecki L. P., Morawiec J. Rzeszów, 2009.
- Stupecki, Valor*, 2007. Stupecki L. P., Valor M. Religion. *The Archaeology of Medieval Europe*. Vol. 1. Eds. Graham-Campbell J., Valor M. Aarhus, 2007. 366–397.
- Tacitus*, 1937. *Die Germania des Tacitus*. Erläutert von Much R. Heidelberg, 1937.
- Trier*, 1981. Trier J. *Wege der Etymologie*. Berlin, 1981.