

INTRODUCTION

In May 2007 the international conference 'Holy Groves around the Baltic Sea' took place in Tartu, Estonia, followed a year later, in May 2008, by the conference 'Natural Holy Places in Archaeology and Folklore in the Baltic Sea Region', in Kernavė, Lithuania. Turning this interdisciplinary academic discussion on ancient sacred sites in the Baltic Sea region and neighbouring countries into a traditional event, on 7–9 May 2009 the conference 'Natural Holy Places or Holy Places in Nature. Identification, Discovering and Classification' was held at Turaida Museum Reserve, organised jointly by the Scientific Research Centre of the Latvian Academy of Culture and Turaida Museum Reserve. Participating in the conference itself were specialists from nine countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Norway and the United Kingdom), presenting a total of 16 papers. The abstracts of the papers have been prepared and published (*International conference Natural Holy Places or Holy Places in Nature. Identification, Discovering and Classification. May, 7–9, 2009 Turaida, Latvia. Abstracts*. Compiled by J. Urtāns. Latvian Academy of Culture, 2009).

The Turaida conference was devoted to ancient sacred sites – both natural and artificially created – which constitute a widespread phenomenon in the sacred landscape across the whole of the Baltic Sea area. The number and density of sacred sites is higher here than in other parts of Europe, which can be explained in terms of the special course of development of this region. In recent years, particular attention has been given to ancient sacred sites, recognising that such sites can only be studied using a comprehensive approach, applying evidence from archaeology, folkloristics, history, landscape architecture and other disciplines.

The conference was devoted to the problems of identification, discovery and classification of ancient holy places. The following aspects were discussed in detail:

WHAT are we looking for? The terminology used in research on ancient holy places (ancient cult places, natural cult places, sanctuaries, mythological



Participants of the conference in Turaida.

places, sacrificial places, holy places, etc.); the development of the understanding of these terms from the early studies up to the present day.

HOW are we looking for holy places? Identification, available sources (written sources, archaeological evidence, folklore and place-names); critical evaluation of these sources; methods and techniques for discovering holy places.

HOW is classification done? Ancient holy places and various academic disciplines – differences in point of view; classification according to function, date, territory, hierarchy, etc.

The papers presented at the conference encompass a wide spectrum of issues and questions relating to the identification, characterisation and classification of ancient cult sites in the Baltic region and beyond.

In order to acquaint a wider audience with the ideas discussed at the conference, the majority of the papers at the Turaida conference have been prepared in written form and published as a book. This publication, Volume V of the *Kultūras krustpunkti* ('Crosspoints of Culture') series of collections of academic papers, presents the proceedings of the Turaida conference.

Juris Urtāns

**ADDRESS BY ANNA JURKĀNE,
DIRECTOR OF TURAIDA MUSEUM RESERVE,
TO THE CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS**

Dear participants of the conference!

Dear organizers of the conference!

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you in the historical centre of Turaida, which tells a story covering a whole millennium of Latvia's history and cultural environment.

Nature, cultural environment, monuments and collections are the basis for the 'Specially Protected Cultural Monument – Turaida Museum Reserve'.

We are working and living in an environment that, in the view of our staff and visitors, is also a holy place, created by nature and people. It includes Dainu (Folk-Song) Hill and the commencement of the Singing Revolution in the 1980s, Turaida Church Hill and the tomb of the Rose of Turaida, along with more than 80 springs, stones and planted trees.

There are so many stories, legends and myths about this place and events in former times and at the present day.

The Livs, who built their wooden stronghold in this area, also honoured Turaida and the ancient Gauja Valley as the 'Garden of God' – which is how we translate this name nowadays.

A long time ago I was inspired by the work of the outstanding researcher Marija Gimbutienė about the Balts in the 13th century. She writes: "Trees, forests, groves, stones, hillocks and hills were filled with the miraculous force of the earth and water."

These forces hallowed, healed, protected from disasters and provided fertility. Written sources of the 11th–13th century repeatedly speak of respect towards forests, trees and springs.

Nobody was allowed to cut trees in the holy groves or to fish in the holy rivers or lakes. These were primeval natural reserves, sacrosanct and protected places.

What characterizes this wonderful attitude and respect towards animate and inanimate nature? Certainly, these are feelings, imagination, hopes, fears, longing for security and a desire to make the world understandable and explicable.

May this conference on 'Natural Holy Places or Holy Places in Nature' succeed not only in identification and classification, but also in finding answers to the question: why did people in the past need holy places in nature, and still need them today?

I wish all the participants of the conference a fruitful and enjoyable event. May the spirit of Turaida provide you with new ideas and broaden the circle of researchers, helping to explain our history, our identity and the surrounding world.