

## LITHUANIAN CROSSES AND THE SPIRIT OF PLACE

*Transmitting the spirit of place*

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**Abstract.** Various types of crosses, roofed pillar-type crosses, miniature chapels have been built in Lithuania since the ancient times. They used to be erected in cemeteries, churchyards, at crossroads, by the way sides, near farmsteads, on river banks, etc. In Lithuania cross crafting evolved into specific type of folk art.

Little hills of the rural cemeteries with tall wooden crosses greatly contributed to the formation of the Lithuanian scenery. Single crosses, located all over the country, used to give peculiar spirit to the places. The Hill of Crosses near Siauliai is a phenomenal relict of this tradition. Everyone who visits the place, confirm that they really can feel a genuinely strong, mystical spirit there.

During the years of the Soviet occupation, cross crafting was suppressed and prohibited. At that time, in order to keep up with the tradition, folk artists used to make carved pillars. However, the mystical spirit of the place was lost.

Having declared the Independence, the tradition of cross crafting in Lithuania was let out like a genie from the bottle. The Lithuanian scenery is once again decorated with marvelous sacral works by Lithuanian folk artists, giving a special spirit of suffering, struggles and survival of the nation.

Crosses are an inseparable part of the Lithuanian scenery. Wooden memorial monuments of various shapes were erected in the places of cult and burial-grounds: pillar sculptures, roofed pillar-type crosses, pillar-type chapels, crosses and small chapels. In the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. beautiful fancy wooden roofed pillars and crosses were spread all across the Lithuanian landscape with their symbols radiating sunshine. Roofed pillars and crosses were not only built as tomb monuments but also on various occasions and in various locations. They were erected on weddings, hoping for good harvest, in memory of various events and persons, in cases of serious diseases, commemorating unexpected death, in case of epidemic. They stood not only in cemeteries but also at crossroads, near farmsteads, in town and village squares, in the

fields and forests, by “sacred” springs etc. The whole landscape was filled with religious spirit.

The earliest prototypes of such monuments are wooden crosses. Places of pillars are found near pagan places of cult and offering and near burial-grounds. They date back to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD. These monuments were supposedly linked to magic and mythology at first and later could have become a sign of the commemoration and respect for the dead or their souls.

The ancient Lithuanian place of cult and (later) burial-ground was called *alka*, meaning a protected, invulnerable, sacred place. *Alkas* usually were small ellipse-shaped hills, small islands in rivers or lakes and peninsulas overgrown with trees and bushes. Every family, and later every territorial community, had their own *alka* (a wood, little hill or meadow) where they would burn the Eternal Flame, pray, offer animals and bury the dead (Dunduliene, 1990). During archaeological excavations in 1969, a unique wooden pillar sculpture of a human head dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC was found in Sventoji town (Rimantiene, 1995). As there was no cult of trees and the dead in the culture of the time, the so-called Narva culture, R. Rimantiene links the pillar sculpture to a god of waters. According to R. Rimantiene, pillars with a human head were erected in the fishiest areas by the lakes. Analogical pillar sculptures were found in Latvia and Finland (3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC)

Ritual pillars gradually became more sophisticated and decorated: going from a pointed top for the souls to dwell at the beginning to two-pitched and multi-pitched roofs and additional decorative elements. The roofs were not only a refuge for the souls of the dead but they also protected the pillars from the meteorological impact. Crosses arrived together with Christianity in the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> cent. They preserved numerous ancient pre-Christian symbols that were only partially replaced by the Christian ones and the place of the sculptures of the ancestors was taken over by Christian saints. The construction of the wooden monuments varied. According to the construction, K. Seselgis divided wooden memorial monuments into the following typological groups: roofed pillars (a pillar with a roof), pillar-type chapels (a pillar with a box open on one or several sides, a chapel), crosses (a pillar with one or several posts cross), little chapels and tomb-boards called *krikstai*. The typologization is rather relative as every typological group contains a number of variants, two repeating items are hard to find. Every region in Lithuania has particular cross making traditions, different style and ornamentation (Seselgis, 1990).

TABLE 1. Examples of wooden memorial monuments  
(Buracas, 1998)



Cross



Double-cross crest



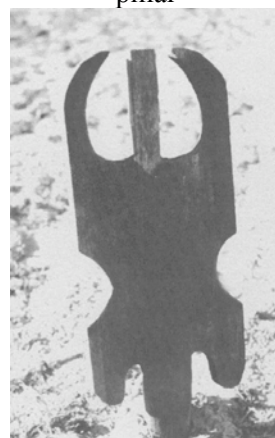
Double-tiered roofed pillar



Pillar-type chapel



Chapel



Curonian cross board

The first broader study of Lithuanian crosses, “Samogitian Crosses and Chapels” was written by an explorer of Polish and Lithuanian ethnography, M. Brensztejn, in 1906. He indicated that samogitian crosses are difficult to typologize due to their varying size and decoration. These folk monuments of small architecture were quite immensely decorated with ornaments created by flat open cutting, outline cutting, relief carving and turning techniques. The little chapels were decorated with moderate decorative elements whereas the decoration on roofed pillars and pillar-type chapels, on the contrary, was abundant. Abstract geometrical ornaments, stylized images of animals (birds, whip snakes and horses), plants

(marguerites, flower pots, leaves, blossoms and buds of various shapes), celestial bodies (the sun, the moon, the stars) and Christian symbols and attributes (cups, monstrances, lances, ladders) were used for the decoration. Geometrical open cut ornament was the most popular. Decorative elements aimed at drawing one's attention to the essential parts of the monument: the place of the intersection of a pillar and the post in crosses where a little chapel or a sculpture of the crucifix would be attached or to the opening through which the statues of saints could be seen in chapels. Sculptures on the crosses and in the chapels are expressive and different as they also are masterpieces of folk art.

The beginnings of the Lithuanian folk memorial monuments and their ornamental and sculptural decoration are obviously to be linked to various religions and cults as well as their symbols; however, this field is still waiting for more thorough investigation. The works of M. Gimbutiene, P. Dundulienė, R. Rimantiene and N. Velius are the most prominent ones. In her work "Trees as a Dwelling of Souls and Gods" P. Dundulienė elaborates on the origin of chapels with wooden sculptures. According to the author, as the cult of the ancestors spread, sculptures of the ancestors were put next to farmsteads, in the trees and on the posts, so that the souls residing there would look after the wellbeing of their descendants.

A prominent Lithuanian scientist of archaeology and the beginner of archeomythology, M. Gimbutiene, based her analysis of symbols in Lithuanian folk art mostly on the examples of memorial monuments. She grouped the symbols found in their ornamentation into celestial and divine symbols (a circle, the sun, the moon, an axe, reptiles, a horse, an ox, a goat) and the symbols of the ground as goddess and the idea of the tree of life (plants, celestial symbols). According to M. Gimbutiene, "both the ancient and the overall meaning of a roofed pillar and a cross are to protect the power of life. The power of life is expressed by all round-shape elements as well as the symbols of animals and plants as their purpose is to fight and defeat death and every kind of evil."(Gimbutiene, 1958)

Memorial monuments have been made solely of wood for ages. Tomb monuments were even made of specially selected kind of wood: oak and ash for men and linden or fir for women. In the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. nondurable wooden tops of memorial monuments were replaced by "suns" and ornamented crosses made of iron by the smiths. Thanks to the refined proportions of different parts and stylized motives of ornaments, wooden and iron parts of monuments would merge into a

harmonious whole. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. iron was used more widely for memorial monuments, and metal crosses spread in cemeteries.

Lithuanian folk memorial monuments are one of the most peculiar phenomena in Europe, they are masterpieces created by Lithuanian folk artists following the traditions of cross making and god making for centuries, reflecting the character and spirit of the nation (Sirmulis, 1999).

Crosses, chapels, roofed pillars inundated the Lithuanian scenery providing it with exceptional spirituality and lifting people up from casual everyday routine. They could be seen everywhere: in cemeteries and churchyards, walking or going down a country road at a crossroad, next to a farmstead on the roadside, at the entrance to a village, in the fields or in forest glades as chapels were often hung on trees. Many famous Lithuanian artists got their creative inspiration from the landscape filled with crosses, their symbols and artistry (M. K. Ciurlionis, K. Simonis, A. Gudaitis, J. Vienozinskis, A. Galdikas). The impressive symbolism and mystery of the memorial monuments is particularly emphasized in the works of M. K. Ciurlionis (Gaizutis, 1998).

It was small village cemeteries that were the most picturesque in the landscape. Since cemeteries were usually arranged on sandy hills and planted with trees, they would emerge immediately in the scenery. Tall (3-4 m.) crosses would finish their silhouette with openwork tops as if with laces, reminding every passer-by the impermanence of the earthly existence and spiritual values.

Roadside crosses, which one would come across on most of the roads and rather often, would preserve the spiritual tension of the landscape.

Crosses standing next to farmsteads would provide the farmstead ensemble with spiritual mood and beauty as if a final chord.

In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. the Lithuanian scenery was still rich in roofed pillars and crosses. Unfortunately, wood is a nondurable putrescent material, even though most of the crosses are made of oak. Luckily, still before the World War I. part of the roofed pillars and crosses were registered and recorded. This was done by those who understood their value: a painter Prof. Adomas Varnas took photographs of over 2000 roofed pillars and crosses, a painter Antanas Jarosevicius drew 200 of them, Prof. Ignas Koncius compiled a catalogue of the roofed pillars, crosses and chapels of the western Lithuania in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> cent., where he registered 3000 monuments and took photographs of 1111 of them. There is statistical data that in the year 1912-1932 about 43% of these

memorial monuments vanished. Many of them were lost due to the changing historical and political reality. When Lithuania lost its independence (in 1940), crosses were consciously destroyed because of their national and religious nature.

The most obvious piece of evidence here is the fate of a unique Hill of Crosses, located near the Jūliai town. The Hill of Crosses is an ancient Lithuanian mound called Jurgaičiai mound. It is assumed that earlier there was a castle that was burnt down by the Livonian order in 1348. It is estimated that people began erecting crosses on the hill after the rebellions against the rule of the Russian tsar in 1831 and 1863 when the rebels were treated with cruel summary dispatch. Their relatives, whom the tsar government did not allow to pay their last respect to the perished rebels properly, build crosses in their memory. In 1850 a history researcher L. Krzywickis claimed to have found 130 crosses and a chapel there. In the 20<sup>th</sup> c. the Hill of Crosses became a well-known sacred-holy place attracting hordes of visitors. People would erect crosses on the Hill hoping for the divine grace. There were thousands of crosses of the Hill.

The crosses, speaking of the religiosity and spirituality of the Lithuanian nation, contradicted the Soviet ideology; therefore, in 1961 the destruction of the Hill of Crosses began: crosses were swept away by bulldozers, the wooden ones were burnt and the stone and iron ones were buried. During the Soviet period, the Hill of Crosses became a symbol of anonymous resistance of the Lithuanian nation. Even though the army and the KGB watched the Hill, in the morning new crosses would emerge in the place of the demolished ones. There were four organized cross demolition waves but the Hill of Crosses would constantly revive. The fight for the survival of the Hill of Crosses lasted for about 20 years.

Presently, over 50000 crosses, pillar chapels, statues of the saints and paintings with rosaries hung on them are counted on the mound. The openwork silhouette of the Hill of Crosses emerges spectacularly in the surrounding flat landscape. Each cross has its own meaning, testifying the history of the nation's suffering and stamina. Everyone who has been to the Hill of Crosses has felt the simply mystical spirit of the place. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of September, 1993, the Pope John Paul II visited the Hill of Crosses, the so-called Lithuanian Golgotha, as well. Hundreds of thousands of people from Lithuania and the neighbouring countries attended the service. The Pope John Paul II spoke on the Hill of Crosses, "A nation that goes to the Hill to erect a new cross with such stamina and piety, believes in life and in resurrection." A year later, the Pope's gift to Lithuania, a crucifix, reached the Hill of

Crosses. Nowadays the Hill of Crosses is well-attended by various people looking for peace, concentration and connection with the Almighty.

Although physically all the crosses have been replaced several times, the value of the Hill of Crosses as a cultural monument remained, as did its particular spirit. The spirit has been carried from the past by several generations of Lithuanians who followed the traditions and preserved the continuity of both the ideological spiritual meaning and the aesthetical form. The Hill of Crosses is a synthesis of the material and spiritual cultural heritage.



*Figure 1. Hill of Crosses(Buracas, 1998)*



*Figure 2. Hill of Crosses*

The fate of the crosses spread in the roadsides and across the entire landscape of Lithuania was slightly different. Rotten or destroyed, they had disappeared from the Lithuanian scenery for a number of Soviet decades. Folk artists, banned from erecting crosses, attempted to continue the tradition creating sculptural pillars and groups of such pillars. A number of such sculptural ensembles appeared as a result of the plenairs of carvers, folk artists. Random carved pillars, incapable of being attributed neither to professional sculpture nor to folk art, emerged in the Lithuanian landscape instead of crosses and roofed pillars taking the forms refined by several generations of carvers during centuries. Though visually resembling the traditional memorial monuments, they, unfortunately, did not recreate the spiritual impact of the destroyed monuments on people; the traditional spirit of the landscape was lost.

During the years of independence, the long suppressed tradition of cross making escaped like a genie from a bottle. First, crosses in the memory of the victims and the fighters for freedom, and later those in other intentions were built. One can come across the traditional memorial monuments in the Lithuanian landscape again. They remind



of the painful history of the country and the former hardships, “Caring Jesus” in the little chapels “look after” the everyday lives of the people again, the spirit of the landscape is returning. It was not in vain that Lithuania used to be called “the Lithuania of crosses” - both for the numerous crosses and for a number of hard challenges.

During the Soviet times, the ban on building crosses was applied in cemeteries as well. In a number of cemeteries the height of tomb monuments was strictly regulated (up to 1.2 m). The city-style stone tomb monuments – stelae – became popular in country cemeteries too. In some country cemeteries attempts were made to replace the traditional memorial monuments (crosses and roofed pillars) by “sculpturized” pillars. Carrying no sacred meaning and the aesthetics refined in centuries, they were as if a caricatural substitute for folk memorial monuments. The subtle character of the country cemeteries harmoniously entering the nature was lost. As the burial traditions are the slowest to alter, the years of independence did not bring any major changes to cemeteries: cosmopolitan tomb monuments still prevail here. It is as yet the only place to which the old spirit of the place is not returning.

### **Conclusions**

1. Lithuanian memorial monuments are a unique tradition of cross making, refined in centuries.
2. Lithuanian memorial monuments used to provide the place of their location with a particular sacred mystical spirit.
3. Memorial monuments reconstructed or newly built following the sacred traditions have recreated the spirit of the place as well.

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