

ALFONSAS MOTUZAS

PILGRIMAGE TO THE HILL OF CROSSES: LATVIAN CATHOLIC TRADITIONS

Introduction

There are countries all over the world where Catholicism is much more deeply rooted than in Lithuania, but you cannot find such special devotions and spiritual expressions that are on the Hill of Crosses, not far from the city of Šiauliai. The Hill of Crosses is a unique phenomenon all over the world.

During the ten year research of the rituals, customs, prayers, hymns and music of the Hill of Crosses there were a lot of possibilities to meet and watch the pilgrims from all over the world who pray here and perform the rituals and music according to their customs and cultural traditions. Latvian pilgrim groups are also met among them with their built crosses and the prayers, following their rituals. The author of the article raises a question: what are these rituals like, where do they originate from, what are the reasons for their choice and existence, where these devotions come from in Latvia? Hence *the object of the research* – the rituals of Latvian pilgrims on the Hill of Crosses.

The aim is to investigate Latvian rituals performed by Latvian pilgrims on the Hill of Crosses. In order to reach this aim research has been done for more than ten years: a lot of materials from summer expeditions has been investigated, much of Latvian scientific (historical and cultural) literature has been explored [cf. 4; 7; 12].

Research tasks :

- 1) to analyse rituals of Latvian pilgrims;
- 2) to establish the origin of these rituals;
- 3) to reveal why Latvian pilgrims choose these rituals as their devotions on the Hill of Crosses.

The hypothesis of the research: the bonds of Latvian and Lithuanian Catholic culture that started from early Christianity, which today are expressed on the Hill of Crosses as a symbol of geopolitical and cultural unity.

Research methods: analytical, comparative and retrospective.

The materials describing the Hill of Crosses are very poor. The first to mention it was the Russian archaeologist S.V. Pokrovskij. He introduced it in the list of archaeological heritage in Kaunas gubernatorial map. On August 22, 1900 a more thorough investigation of the Hill was done by the Polish scientist L. Krzywicki. The historical analysis about the origin of the Hill was published by B. Kviklys in the encyclopaedic edition "Churches in Lithuania", vol. 3 [8].

The lack of materials and the fact that practically no researcher has tried to touch upon this topic show that the work is novel and original.

In order to reveal the Latvian ritual customs on the Hill of Crosses, firstly we have to make a brief overview of the origin of devotional practices there, then to get acquainted with the materials collected during the summer expeditions of 1992–2003, witnessing about the Latvian ritual customs, thirdly, to describe the origin of these rituals, and finally, to show their way to the Hill of Crosses.

A brief history of the origin of the Hill of Crosses

The Hill of Crosses is situated 12 km north of the town of Šiauliai, not far from the motorway to Riga. Nowadays it belongs to the Šiauliai diocese. People call the hill differently: the Hill of the Castle, the cemetery of Jurgaičiai.

The Hill itself is on the left bank of a small River Kulpė and it is surrounded by a small tributary which does not even have a name. It is about 70 m long, 60 m wide and it is as high as a two-storey house high. From the geological point of view it is the highest point of the area. The first data about the hill are from archaeological excavations: people's skeletons, swords and medals from Swedish times have been found [cf. 14, 401–406].

There are a lot of legends about the Hill of Crosses. One of them has it that in pre-Christian Lithuania, at the present place of the hill there was a big battle between Riga crusaders and the local pagans which ended in serious casualties. In remembrance of the battle the local people mounded a hill with a sacred fire, burning on it, kept by priestesses. Supposedly, there was a castle, in the Livonia Chronicles it was called "Kule, Kulan", which was burnt by the crusaders in 1348. After the introduction of Christianity the altar and the castle were demolished, and a chapel/church was built instead [cf. 8, 255].

At the beginning of the 19th century the peasants of these areas took a very active part in the revolt against tsarism. It is said that the first crosses were built there by the relatives of Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish lost rebels of the 1831 revolt, because the tsarist power had not allowed to pay tribute to their graves.

The number of crosses increased after the revolt of 1863. During 1863–1864 the gendarmes killed 11 Lithuanian and Polish rebels and put them together in a pit on the hill. Since then the local people used to build crosses in commemoration of the slain, but the tsarist power destroyed them. During the Soviet times, communists and atheists organised five attempts to destroy the hill, and all the built crosses were knocked down. It happened on April 5, 1961; April 26, 1973; November 23, 1974; at Christmas, 1974 and in summer 1976. Then the hill was totally cleared, part of it was even bulldozed, however, believers went on praying there and building crosses at night. And thus the Hill of Crosses survived.

On September 7, 1993 when the Pope John Paul II was celebrated the Holy Mass in the newly built chapel opposite the Hill, it became famous all over the world [cf. 17, 2].

After a brief historical survey of the origin of the Hill, we see that it is an obelisk to the fighters for religious and national freedom who were buried there.

The rituals used by Latvian pilgrims on the Hill of Crosses and their origin

Using the materials of the 1992–2004 summer expeditions, let us analyse what the rituals of Latvian pilgrims were during their stay on the Hill of Crosses. The materials of the 1992–2004 summer expeditions reveal, that pilgrims and tourists from Latvia arrive at the Hill of Crosses: pilgrims from Rēzekne, Daugavpils, Riga and Jelgava Catholic parishes and tourists from different places in Latvia. Lots of pilgrims are of a venerable age and are led by a priest or a catechist [cf. 1].

The materials show that Latvian pilgrims start their stations of the cross by kneeling down with the sign of the cross, they go round the central cross, say silent prayers: “Lord’s Prayer”, “Hail Mary” and “Requiem”. Having said their prayers at the foot of the central cross, Latvian pilgrims climb the hill, singing the psalms of mourning. On the hill they come to one of the statues standing there (either Christ’s or St. Mary’s), they pray silently, paying tribute to their dead and to those buried here on the hill [ibid.].

The question is – what is the origin of these rituals?

Kneeling down or genuflection as an expression of cult came into use in the 4th century in Rome with the devotional practice of Christ’s Passion. Making the sign of the cross is a liturgical act which goes back to the beginning of the 3rd

century in Rome as the sign of public confession of the belief in Christ and Holy Trinity [cf. 6, 34–35].

The ritual to kneel at the stations of the cross in commemoration of Christ's passion and death came from Jerusalem, when in the Basilica of Holy Sepulchre, starting with the 15th century, the pilgrims together with local Franciscan monks stood round the Stone of Anointment which is in the centre [cf. 11, 99]. The beginning of the rituals when prayers are said and the psalms are sung while walking goes back to 380 AD when the first Christians visited the sacred places for Catholics in Jerusalem on the night of Palm Thursday to Good Friday had been, reading different chapters from the Bible, saying the prayers, singing the psalms and other hymns, but starting with the 15th century, they were led by Franciscans [cf. 5, 215]. Nowadays according to Latvian musicologists, the ritual of singing mourning psalms *Officium Defunctorum* (Office of the Dead) during the funeral, was introduced at the end of the 17th century. In 1820 the Jesuit action in tsarist Russia was suppressed but the ritual of *Officium Defunctorum* survived as a devotional folk tradition [cf. 3, 12–14].

Thus we may say that the singing of psalms during the funeral in Latvia enabled them to use the same ritual on the Hill of Crosses and to venerate the Cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified and died. The ritual of paying tribute to the cemetery and the dead goes back to the first Christian age [cf. 9, 92, 93].

Another ritual – the silent prayer – is also known since the early Christian period, which later became a tradition in Roman liturgy – to concentrate before a prayer. It was exceptionally practiced by Jesuits in the 16th century [cf. 6, 97].

So we have to admit that the tradition of silent prayer in Latvian folk devotions comes from the Jesuit heritage, which is still fairly vivid in recent Latvian religious culture. To make a more thorough research, the table is included.

Table. *The rituals of Latvian pilgrims on the Hill of Crosses*

No	Rituals	Origin
1.	Kneeling down	Liturgical – in Jerusalem
2.	The Sign of the Cross	Liturgical – in Rome
3.	Stations of the Cross on knees	Franciscan – in Jerusalem
4.	Praying and singing while walking	Franciscan – in Jerusalem

5.	Singing of mournful psalms at the funeral	Jesuit – in Rome
6.	Paying tribute to the graves and the dead	in Jerusalem
7.	Silent prayer	Jesuit – in Rome

The research of the rituals of Latvian pilgrims on the Hill of Crosses show that there seven of them. They originate firstly from the Holy Land and its Franciscan cultural impact, then from Rome and its Jesuit culture together with the liturgical tradition.

Attention should also be paid to the unique devotions to the cross of Latvian Catholics in Latgale, which, according to Latvian researchers, are not found among the other nations of the world. This usually happens during the devotions of the month of May, when the crosses are visited every evening in different places, by the roadsides or at the cemetery, and the hymns, litanies and psalms are sung for the priests, relatives and all the deceased. This folk devotional practice and tradition in Latgale is called “Lobō nakts”, which goes back to the beginning of the 17th century [cf. 12, 32–83].

The cultural history of the Catholic Church tells us that the initiators of May devotions were Spanish and Italian Jesuits who announced May as the month of Our Lady and asked people to perform prayers and hymns in her honour facing her sacred images and paintings [cf. 15, 123]. The Latgale Catholics joined these kind of devotions to the devotions of the cross, and that made these devotions very unique and closely related to the cult of the Hill of Crosses.

The question is: Why do Latvians choose these rituals for the devotions of the Hill of Crosses? We are going to answer this question on the basis of historical data of the Latvian and Lithuanian Church history.

As it was mentioned above, nowadays you can also meet Latvian pilgrims on the Hill of Crosses together with pilgrims from all over the world. It may seem a very natural thing, because there are only 80 km to the Latvian border from the Hill of Crosses. But the dominating denomination is the Lutheran Church in Latvia today. Only the inhabitants of the Latgale Region are Catholics. Catholics are only a minority in Vidzeme and Kurzeme. Kurzeme borders on Lithuanian ethnic region of Samogitia, where there is the Hill of Crosses.

Christianity was introduced in Latvia at the end of the 12th century. The name of the first apostle was Meinhardus, a monk from Bremen. In 1212 the Lateran Council named Livonia *Terra Mariana* (the present Latvian–Estonian territories), and Our Lady was chosen as the patroness of the town of Riga [cf. 16, 227]. In 1219–1583 Catholic bishops and Franciscan monks resided in Kurzeme (Courland). Their missions reached the neighbouring Samogitia and Zemgale (Semigallia), where they took part in the battles with pagans in baptizing them. In 1236 during the Battle of the Saule, which took place happened not far from the Hill of Crosses, a lot of German clergy and monks were killed; most of them were from Riga. As Franciscan monks resided in Riga at that time, they are supposed to be the first missionaries, who died as religious martyrs in this pagan country. Legends are created about them (as it was mentioned at the beginning of the article). That is a witness of Catholic ties between Latvia and the neighbouring Lithuania. These briefs historical facts show that Latvia became Catholic very early, in comparison with Lithuania (1387).

During the Reformation (1541) along the borders of the Samogitian diocese, in some places of Kurzeme (Ilūkste region) small Catholic islands – diasporas [cf. 14, 413]. According to the special document of the Liublin Union of August 3, 1569, Kurzeme (Courland or Couronia) and Latgale (Lettigallia) became subordinated to Catholic Poland [cf. 16, 230].

In the post-reformational period in 1582 the Jesuits established a new college in Riga and started tridentinal – counterreformational missions in Latvia. On April 1, 1656 the Lithuanian–Polish king Jan Kazimier in Lvov immolated the kingdom of Poland, the duchies of Livonia, Lithuania, Samogitia, Prussia, Russia, Mozuria and Czernigov to Our Lady, as a result a new duchy of Livonia was established together with Lettigallia [cf. 15, 150].

During the hard times of the Russian oppression civil power introduced censorship on sermons under the rule of Tsar Nikolay I in 1832, but the national spirit was alive. The Latvian scientist F. Kemps mentions in his book “Latgales likteņi” that during the rule of Tsar Alexander III (1881–1896) it was forbidden to built crosses and restore or visit the old ones [cf. 7, 88–89]. During these hard times pilgrims attended the sanctuaries, including the Hill of Crosses [cf. 2, 254, 255]. That is indicated in the archaeological documents, presented by the Polish researchers who investigated the Hill of Crosses: “On August 22, 1900 the number of crosses was 136, and on July 2, 1902 there were already 155 crosses” [cf. 13, 36].

The renewed devotions on the Hill of Crosses started on April 4, 1926, when according to the project of the bishop George Matulaitis, Pope Pius XI proclaimed the apostolic constitution "Lituanorum gente" which reorganised all the Catholic Church in Lithuania and restored the old Riga diocese [cf. 16, 228]. The Soviet regime only partly destroyed Latvian devotions of visiting the Hill of Crosses. Today they are alive again, representing the country's culture and history.

Conclusions

According to the materials of the research we may conclude: 1) Latvian rituals used on the Hill of Crosses come from the Holy Land and the Church liturgy; 2) the rituals go back to Franciscan and Jesuit spiritual heritage in Latvian culture; 3) Latvian and Lithuanian Catholic cultural ties, which originated in the period of early Christianity, are still a symbol of geopolitical and cultural unity, which is the main thesis of the article.

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Alfonss Motuzs

Svētceļojums uz Krustu kalnu: latviešu katoļu tradīcijas

Kopsavilkums

Pasaulē ir vietas, kur katolicisms ir iesakņojies daudz dziļāk nekā Lietuvā, taču tādas tautas dievbijības prakses, tādas garīguma izpausmes, kāda ir Krustu kalnā (netālu no Šauļiem, Lietuvā), nekur citur nesastapsim. Krustu kalns ir unikāls, vienīgais pasaulē.

Vairāk nekā desmit gadus pētot Krustu kalna rituālus, ieražas, lūgšanas, garīgās dziesmas un mūziku, autoram vairākkārt ir nācies vērot ceļotāju grupas no visas pasaules, kas kalnā lūdz Dievu un izpilda katra savai kultūrai atbilstošas rituālieražas un mūziku. Dievlūdžēju starpā gadījies satikt arī svētceļotāju grupas no Latvijas, kas kalnā ceļ krustus un lūdz Dievu, izpildot attiecīgus rituālus. Ekspedīciju materiāls liecina, ka latviešu dievlūdžēji Krustu kalna apstaigāšanu sāk, metoties ceļos pie Centrālā krusta, pārmetot krustu un uz ceļiem apstaigājot krustam apkārt. Šajā laikā klusībā tiek skaitīta tēvreize "Mūsu tēvs", "Sveicināta, Jaunava Marija", "Mūžīgo atdusu dod mirušajiem, Kungs". Pēc lūgšanām pie Centrālā krusta latviešu svētceļotāji dzied Sēru psalmus un kāpj kalnā. Tur viņi apstājas pie vienas no skulptūrām (Kristus vai Svētās Jaunavas Marijas) un, klusi lūdzot, godina savus aizgājējus un kalnā apglabātos.

Veiktais pētījums parādīja: pirmkārt, rituālu ieražas, kuras latvieši izpilda Krustu kalnā, ir nākušas no Svētās zemes un atbilst baznīcas liturģijai; otrkārt,

novērotās ieražas ir franciskāņu mūku un jezuītu biedrības garīgais/kultūras mantojums Latvijā; treškārt, latviešu un lietuviešu katoliskās kultūras saites, kas veidojušās kristianizācijas sākumposmā, arī šodien, kā redzam Krustu kalnā, ir katoliskās ģeopolitikas un kultūras vienotības simbols.