Changing Perceptions of Estonian Sacred Natural Sites

Ott Heinapuu

Abstract
This article considers the changes and variation in perceiving sacred natural sites and landscapes in Estonia that have been brought about by the processes of modernization and the shift from a mainly oral vernacular culture to a national culture with a written core. Sacred sites of the vernacular religion as well as narratives and customs associated with them have been documented in collections of folklore and some of the archived folklore texts have been given second lives in print; concurrently, Romantic literary notions about pre-Christian Estonian history and culture have become rooted in the collective cultural memory. The article presents an overview of the diversity of ways of conceptualizing sacred natural sites that are current in Estonian culture and how sacred natural sites are used at different levels of collective memory.

Keywords: Sacred natural sites, collective memory, placelore, oral tradition, Estonia

Estonian landscapes form a varied patchwork where some areas show conservative, almost premodern patterns, and are intermingled with spots that serve as examples of modern industrial and Soviet extensive farming landscapes as well as postmodern landscapes (Palang et al. 2004). To this day, the more conservative parts of this patchwork include remains of a previously wider network of sacred natural sites, most usually sacred trees, springs and sacrificial stones, with some spectacular sacred groves covering wider areas (Valk 2009; Viires 2000:57–72). Premodern oral tradition – recorded and archived since the nineteenth century and in some cases known even today by mostly older local people or enthusiasts willing to give it a second life – associates sacred natural sites with ta-

Ott Heinapuu, Ph.D. student, Tallinn, Estonia. Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4527-3859. ott@keeljakirjandus.ee

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boos restricting land use, healing or other magic as well as folktales with supernatural motifs. Since the rapid modernization of Estonian society in the nineteenth century, many traditional sacred natural sites in Estonia have likely been abandoned, forgotten or destroyed.

In discussing such sites, I prefer the inclusive concept of *sacred natural site*, or a "natural feature or an area of land or water having special spiritual significance to a community" (Wild & McLeod 2008:xi), as this broad definition, endorsed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and UNESCO, can encompass a number of diverse vernacular and scholarly concepts as well as a variety of natural features.

Since 2019, Estonia's Heritage Conservation Act specifies that a historical sacred natural site is a "thing or an area without significant human impact and characterized by folk tradition, which is associated with sacrifice, worship, healing or religious and ritual activity" while emphasizing that these sites "are the significant bearers of folk tradition and local identity" (MuKS 2019:§11 lg 6). In practice, what constitutes "significant human impact" or the absence thereof so that a site may merit protection as a "cultural monument" remains a matter of interpretation and discussion among experts advising the National Heritage Board (a spring of water once considered sacred that has well kerbs made of concrete installed on it will probably not qualify). In the end, the decisions are at the discretion of the Minister of Culture.

The Estonian legal definition of a historical sacred natural site has been narrowed down from the international IUCN definition, as it is intended to cover phenomena originating from the vernacular premodern tradition and to reflect the heritage of national academic research. This is also broadly the starting point of this study: I will proceed from the assumptions that Estonian vernacular sacred natural sites have traditionally been locations outside the built environment or on its edges; that there has been an association with supernatural creatures or forces there; and that this in turn has motivated a customary limitations of land use and other human activities at the site. I will also discuss modern notions, sites and practices that are in some way derived from the vernacular tradition just outlined or that are intrinsically connected to this tradition in order to understand changes in the perception of sacred natural sites.

The Estonian national identity is a modern phenomenon that originated in an emancipatory awakening led by nineteenth century literati whose works borrowed heavily from dominant German-language examples of Romantic literature (Jansen 2004; cf. Anderson 2006). The rhetorical foundations of Estonian nationhood in that era strongly emphasized history, including constructing a patriotic narrative of a golden pre-Christian era before the thirteenth-century Baltic crusades that led to the subjuga-

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tion and Christianization of the territory of today's Estonia. In this narrative, supposed ancient sacred natural sites such as sacred oak groves – mostly as imagined landscapes – were used as signifiers of national identity (Jonuks 2009:28–31; Heinapuu 2010, 2016:178–180).

In referring to modernity, I am in general agreement with Bruno Latour (1993) that the strict separation of human culture or society from the spheres of nature and the supernatural became possible only after the development of Western European modern and scientific schools of thought from the seventeenth century. For the purposes of this article, this separation of culture from nature as well as the compartmentalization and marginalization of the supernatural will be considered key features of modernity. In addition, the distinction between premodern and modern in this article will roughly correspond to the different subsystems of culture distinguished as orality *vs.* literacy or non-written *vs.* written culture (as conceptualized by Ong 2002 and Lotman 2019b).

The most crucial features of a modern worldview as opposed to a premodern one (besides its being literate) are the emergence of the concepts of *culture*, *nature* and the *supernatural* that implies that both the division of culture and nature and the division of the natural and the supernatural are to be viewed as distinctively different opposing domains or qualitatively contrasting worlds that follow different sets of laws and that have hard borders between them rather than being poles on continuous scales. Another modern innovation of note is the prominence of the division of the world into nations: being Estonian, German or Russian becomes a dominant layer of identity.

Modernization has always been an uneven process, with the first shoots of modernity appearing and then spreading in a premodern world at first and, subsequently, islands of premodernity surviving in a sea of modernity. This is in line with Juri Lotman's model of a semiosphere: any larger community has numerous internal boundaries and heterogeneous constituent parts that communicate with one another in makeshift pidgins and creoles if necessary (Lotman 1990:123–150). Points of communication between different subsystems of culture should be of particular interest due to the varied semiotic activity and innovation generated there. One such point in Estonian cultural history was the subculture of folklore collectors in the late nineteenth century who were "living in an environment where orality prevailed but aspired towards literary culture" and stood "quite consciously on the borderline between oral and literate, local and national" (Kikas 2021:196).

Against this background, premodern sacred natural sites as physical landscapes have also acquired new meanings in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In addition, new sacred natural sites have been created

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or chosen since the twentieth century, to give tangible form to conceptions of perceived "ancient Estonian" sacred sites. Concurrently, some memory of premodern meanings and functions of sacred natural sites has persisted in many localities, changing and intertwining with more modern notions.

In the following, I will try to make sense of the diversity of ways of conceptualizing sacred natural sites that are current in Estonian culture and what uses are made of different notions of sacred natural sites at different levels of collective memory. This could provide a possible framework for understanding how elements of different ideologies, religious and other schools of thought intermingle in the ways people represent and interact with symbolic landscapes. The analysis that formed the basis of this article is informed by the ecosemiotic notion that cultural symbolic representations of natural phenomena that stray too far from their point of origin and proliferate may ultimately cause unexpected and adverse consequences for the natural phenomena they originally represented (Maran 2020). This is coupled with the understanding, rooted in the premises of the Tartu–Moscow school of cultural semiotics, that cultural theory or any self-description of culture is a part of the more general processes of culture and contributes to these processes (see Lotman 2019a). As an attempt at a more general synthesis, this article will mainly draw on previous written and published sources, both scholarship and texts current in the cultural memory. Occasionally, the author's fieldwork experience and unpublished archive material will be directly and specifically utilized pertaining to specific case studies. The examples considered represent sacred and symbolic sites prominent nationally or locally, as "telling cases" that illustrate wider cultural processes.

The article will typologize different ways of conceptualizing sacred natural sites current in Estonian culture, with brief case studies accompanying each type. The analysis concentrates on whether and how current Estonian discourses and practices (stories and customs) pertaining to sacred natural sites are connected to actual tangible landscapes while considering the nature of these landscapes. As in the dominant discourses of the self-description of Estonian culture, sacred natural sites are generally considered ancient and pre-Christian, the concept of modernity was central: the discourses and practices were classified as (a) premodern, (b) modern or (c) hybrids of modern and premodern. Connections of the discourses and practices with landscapes were classified into three categories: (1) absent (landscapes referred to in texts are unknown to the reader; representations and discourses that do not refer to tangible landscapes; discourses on imagined landscapes); (2) discourses and practices involving premodern sacred natural sites; (3) discourses and practices pertaining to new sacred natural sites or symbolic landscapes emulating sacred

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natural sites (including patriotic landscaping). This analysis yielded eleven types of conceptualizing sacred natural sites in Estonia, discussed and illustrated with examples below.

I will use the concepts developed by Aleida Assmann (2016) to distinguish between different levels of *collective memory* in order to determine the groups to whom a certain site or landscape is relevant and to model the dynamic processes of change and continuity in remembering, forgetting and resurrecting old memories about sacred sites.

The simplest and most brittle form of collective memory is *social memory*, which extends the individual memory into the communication of a small social group; entities of social memory live in interaction between people and rely on immediate personal contact. In the material I will refer to oral heritage such as legends and other placelore as well as non-verbal practices and ways of knowing, such as the skill of navigating landscapes and taskscapes (cf. Ingold 2000).

In turn, the transmission of *cultural memory* relies on writing and other ways of recording heritage for retrieval across a distance in time or space. This comprises (1) *functional memory* that defines a current canon of heritage for a larger group, including the seminal texts and other entities of cultural importance, such as imagined landscapes that give substance to the imagined community of Estonians (cf. Anderson 2006) and (2) *storage memory* to allow for the recording of dormant heritage not current in functional memory. Entities of storage memory considered below include folklore recorded in archives that may come back into current use, as there is always some dynamic exchange between functional and storage memory (Assmann 2016:38).

Finally, *political memory* forges the identity of a political collective, including rituals that symbolically unite it. In the material considered, this includes patriotic landscaping, or the creation of new landscapes fit for national or local rituals of political significance, and the sustained performance of such rituals themselves. Relationships between these notional layers of collective memory are fluid and dynamic and the borders between the layers are porous: texts or motifs may pass from social memory into cultural memory and from there may be incorporated into political memory and vice versa: the oral social memory of a group may adopt features from cultural memory or political memory and use them in new, unexpected ways. In the Estonian context, significant overlap may be seen between what belongs to the cultural memory of the Estonian nation and the political memory of the nation-state, the Republic of Estonia whose main aim is often perceived to be protecting the Estonian culture. In the following, only phenomena co-opted into or originating from the practices or communication of official institutions or their representatives

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will be considered as instances of political memory.

Representations of Sacred Sites Divorced from Physical Landscapes

Perceptions of sacred natural sites that have become abstract by being divorced from physical landscapes include narratives, representations and discourses that serve as virtual sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*). The concept of the *lieu de mémoire* as defined by Pierre Nora may stand for "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora 1996:xvii). French *lieux de mémoire* listed by Nora include, in addition to physical sites, memory institutions (archives, museums, libraries), such mainly semiotic phenomena as commemorations and celebrations, the Dictionnaire Larousse and the tricolour flag (Nora 1989:12). For the latter examples, no single topographical location can be discerned. Similarly, Jaan Undusk (2011:2) has, among examples of Estonian sites of memory, enumerated real sites, as well as chronotopes like the ancient golden era, objects and works of prose.

According to Nora, "the moment of *lieux de mémoire*" occurs when an "immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history". This period marks both "a heritage consolidated" and "the decisive deepening of historical study" (Nora 1989:10–11). I believe that the passing of Estonian traditions connected with sacred natural sites from the local social memory of small groups and communities to the collective cultural memory of the nascent modern Estonian nation was just such a moment as a new heritage was being created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Premodern perceptions of sacred natural sites, known from direct experience in landscapes and associated with beliefs and customs, became the basis of abstract ideas as symbols of a glorious past (as parts of the ancient era of freedom) and thus pillars of the new national identity (Jonuks 2009:28–31) and were concurrently decontextualized into phantom landscapes (Heinapuu 2010; cf. Lindström 2008). In Aleida Assmann's terms, such sites of memory clearly belong to the layer of cultural memory but knowledge of these may become important in the orally transmitted social memory of smaller groups and may come to influence tangible landscapes.

In order to understand the nature of this decontextualization, I will distinguish between three ways of perceiving disembodied sacred natural

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sites: informed ethnographic nostalgia, Romantic nostalgia and, finally, a hybrid of these two.

Informed Ethnographic Nostalgia

Premodern oral tradition that concerns sacred natural sites may be displaced and estranged from its contexts and become mere narrative texts recorded in an archive where they are usually read by scholars and occasionally published in print if considered notable enough or having artistic value. This is an example of living oral social memory becoming cultural memory as dormant archive records that may or may not resurface in actual usage, and if such lore re-enters circulation it may be approached in the same way as narrative prose or fiction rather than knowledge about concrete landscapes.

The initiative, led by the National Heritage Board, to use recorded information from archives of folklore, archaeology and other possible sources to locate Estonian historic sacred natural sites to determine which of them merit protection as national monuments (see Kama 2022) has shown that determining what landscapes and sites are referred to in written records of legends, descriptions of places and customs and other oral placelore can be difficult or outright impossible, especially if the site was known – in the premodern vernacular tradition – to a narrow circle of people. However, the more fortunate pieces of placelore may receive a rich second life within the currents of cultural memory by being conveyed to a wider audience of readers through the pages of books or periodicals and, in more recent decades, via the internet.

As an oral legend is written down in a fixed form that eliminates the context-dependent variability and flexibility characteristic of orality, a text of placelore becomes a text of the written culture. Unlike a living narrator, the fixed form of a text cannot, when encountering new audiences with different collective memories, explicate the hidden assumptions behind the text or provide contextual knowledge tailored to a new audience. At the same time, the text migrates by stealth from a genre that provides information about the lived environment of a community into a semi-literary fictional genre: a map becomes a work of art, so to say. There is also a bias for printing legends that are more artistic in expression, as opposed to legends that flow seamlessly in everyday, unmarked speech (see Valk 2015). References to landscape features that are assumed to be known to the original intended audience who share the social memory of the narrator can too easily be read as timeless and placeless fairytale expositions in the vein of "once upon a time in a faraway place".

An example of a piece of placelore that has successfully transitioned from the social memory to the cultural memory is a cluster of narratives

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about the Kassari sacred grove on the island of Hiiumaa: "In Tagaküla, there was a sacred grove [*hiiemets*]. It was so dense that it was impossible to pass through it. Maidens of the grove and dogs of the grove [*hiieneitsid ja hiiekoerad*] lived there. People who did not know the song of the grove [*hiielaul*], they were attacked by the dogs and killed; those who knew it, could pass easily" (Loorits 1941:165–166). The oak grove in question was cut down by the end of the nineteenth century. But the colourful stories about it (another, narrated by Leena Elmi (b. 1864) and Mare Niitim (b. 1870) in 1939, mentions the maidens dancing at night in red dresses), first published by the prominent Estonian folklorist Oskar Loorits in a closely curated selection of texts from the Estonian Folklore Archives, are occasionally printed in the local newspapers of the island of Hiiumaa and otherwise contribute to how the informed and interested public perceives historical Estonian sacred natural sites. As Ülo Valk has remarked: "When legends became ancient heritage and also fiction, they gained national significance" (Valk 2015:546). Descriptions of small communities' tangible home landscapes can thus become parts of the nation's sacred history or be absorbed in a corpus of "literature of identity" (cf. Kivari 2023) that affirms the readers' perception of the peculiarity of being Estonian, a phenomenon that could be viewed as a form of post-colonial self-exoticization.

Edited texts of oral provenance describing sacred natural sites have been printed in books since the time of Matthias Johann Eisen (1857–1934), who was both the initiator of one of the two largest Estonian folklore collections of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century and a prolific author of popular books on folk tradition and heritage. A number of narratives concerning or touching on sacred natural sites are represented in Eisen's *Esivanemate varandus* ("Treasury of Our Ancestors"), a popular selection of local legends that has been published in several editions since 1882 (for the latest edition, see Eisen 2000). The Estonian Folklore Archives as well as commercial publishing houses have kept publishing books that reproduce legends and folktales recorded in the folklore archives, making snippets of the dormant cultural memory available to larger audiences and thus giving them a chance to re-enter the active cultural memory. Many publications are also digital and available online free of charge. As a result, there is an Estonian-language corpus of published placelore largely shorn of its original context accessible to the interested reader. This also enables one to infer an "average Estonian" heritage and to read the corpus in a way that might be called *informed ethnographic nostalgia* with the goal of understanding the premodern mentality from which these texts originate. Such a tendency was characteristic of the philological method of twentieth-century Estonian

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folkloristics that aimed to filter out from the archival record anything that was of literary provenance in order to access the supposed original, pure heritage.

Romantic Nostalgia

In the opinion of twentieth-century professional folklorists, the layer of influence of Romantic-era nationalist discourse needed to be peeled off from the texts recorded by amateur correspondents. This Romantic discourse included some preconceptions about what the most important pre-Christian Estonian sacred sites had been. These preconceptions had been shaped by models from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western European literary sources whose tradition can, *in extremis*, be traced to the ancient Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus's remarks in Chapter 9 of *Germania*:

> The Germans, however, do not consider it consistent with the grandeur of celestial beings to confine the gods within walls, or to liken them to the form of any human countenance. They consecrate woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to the abstraction which they see only in spiritual worship (Tacitus 1942:713; see also Schama 1996:75–134).

Written records of pre-Christian and vernacular Estonian mythology were woefully lacking in the first half of the nineteenth century, but a native mythology and a glorious prehistory were perceived to be essential attributes for the existence of a full-fledged nation by the nascent Estonian intelligentsia. Therefore, a whole pantheon and canon of myths – nowadays usually called "pseudomythological" – was constructed by creatively combining the still relatively small collections of folklore, the scant available historical written resources, foreign (German, Finnish) models with assumptions and outright Ossianist inventions (see Viires 1991).

A key element of this pseudomythology has been the motif of the oak as the sacred tree of the ancient Estonians and of the existence of oak groves sacred to Taara, the god of thunder and war (Heinapuu 2010, 2019). Such a representation of ancient oak groves has more in common with the nineteenth century scholarly view of oak as the tree sacred to the Indo-European thunder gods Zeus, Jupiter, Donar, Perkunas and Perun than with vernacular Estonian mythology: the Estonian language belongs to the Uralic language family and despite a long period of contact with Baltic, Germanic and Slavic peoples, oral tradition has not adopted the central myths of these peoples (cf. Siikala 2002). Among the hundreds woodland areas documented as sacred natural sites in the vernacular tradition, one may find only a few oak groves, such as those in the villages of Sõõrike and Mihkli in Pärnu county (Kaasik 2017:28–34), Koumardi

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oak grove in Pärna village in Lääne-Viru county (Estonian cultural monument no. 10681) and Lehmja oak grove in the borough of Jüri near Tallinn (Ramst 2007; Kaasik 2017:316–318).

In the single most influential text of the pseudomythology, the epic poem *Kalevipoeg* by Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (first published from 1857–1861), most of the references to the oak groves sacred to Taara are vague references to an ancient golden age with no concrete spatial references, sometimes appearing in the lyrical expositions by the narrator, the nameless old bard, e.g.: "Heavenly candle, star of dusk, / […] Softly gazed your silent eye / Changes brought throughout the ages, / Gazed on Taara's oak tree groves, / On the sacred trees so handsome / In their verdant leaves arrayed" (Kreutzwald 2011:183, VIII:1, 7–11; see also Heinapuu 2019:269–270). The implication, widely accepted in the Estonian cultural memory, is that such ancient oak groves were destroyed and replaced by churches after the imposition or adoption of Christianity in the Middle Ages.

Due to the influence of *Kalevipoeg* and other Romantic-era texts, the oak grove of Taara – despite its lack of a physical presence – has become an important Estonian site of memory as a prototypical image of an ancient sacred natural site. Kreutzwald's view of the future of the Estonian people was pessimistic, envisaging an extinction of the vernacular language and the assimilation of the ethnic group into Germans, and thus his nostalgia for ancient oak groves stood for a longing for a glorious age that was never to return. But later generations have produced more hopeful dispositions and thus a longing to bring back the golden age in a new guise and the possibility to return to the oak groves of yore. This has resulted in initiatives for planting new oak groves in the spirit of patriotic landscaping (see below).

Hybrid Notions Based on Both Folklore and National Myth

In practice, the disembodied notions described in the two previous sections tend to hybridize in the collective memory, as most people considering such matters do not constantly practise rigorous source criticism and accept authoritative segments of cultural memory at face value. Therefore, it is common to assume that sacred oak groves have existed or may still exist and simultaneously to know that it is customary to offer coins to sacred stones or sacred springs of water. Such abstract knowledge may exist and be passed on within the active cultural memory even in the absence of personal experiences of any concrete sacred sites.

Hybrid notions that combine the prestigious literary tradition that emphasized the role of oak groves and more vernacular motifs appear in the Estonian written cultural memory. Correspondents sending their material

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to central folklore collections represented a vernacular literacy and, while recording oral tradition, often blended it with pseudomythological ideas derived from the nascent literary sphere that included texts like *Kalevipoeg* and derived works (cf. Kikas 2024). This development can be understood as an attempt to translate the oral social memory into the written cultural memory. Even Matthias Johann Eisen, while writing about general concepts, tends to honour the literary tradition to supplement the empirical data sent to him by correspondents while formulating a consensus opinion in his treatise on Estonian mythology: "Our ancestors' sacrificial customs and their veneration of deity were mainly concentrated in sacred sites [*hiis*]. The sacred site was an oak grove or some other coppice. More rarely, a woodland was venerated as a sacred forest" (Eisen 1919:239).

Premodern Sacred Natural Sites

The network of Estonian historical sacred natural sites has been assumed to include a very archaic layer, as it can be assumed that sacred sites near villages that existed in Late Iron Age have been in use since before the thirteenth century (Valk 2017:139–143). Similarly, a group of common mythological legend motifs that are associated with such sites – such as tales of giants hurling stones or the supernatural punishment befalling the one who fells a sacred tree or fouls a sacred site – are quite archaic so that their age can be measured "not in centuries, but in millennia", as Mari-Ann Remmel and Heiki Valk note (2014:311). As is usual in the spread of folklore, motifs that have prominent local (or even national) significance tend to be known internationally, narrative pillars of a local identity may, *mutatis mutandis*, be of global spread if viewed as typological units. As the patterns of settlement change, new sacred sites can be assumed to be associated with narratives similar to those current in conjunction with earlier ones.

From a semiotic point of view, sacred natural sites and supernatural creatures have allowed for a premodern possibility to model the semiotically active and mutually intertwined complex comprising humans and their environment and to interpret the environment to make practical choices (cf. Maran 2020). Such premodern concepts facilitate attributing agency to non-human entities and communities or clusters of them as well as to symbolically form relationships and to make commitments to non-humans. In this way, it is possible to translate orally transmitted ways of making sense of landscapes into the language of more modern ecology, such as considering sacred natural sites as the oldest protected areas of the planet (see Wild & McLeod 2008).

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Abandoned and Forgotten Premodern Sacred Natural Sites

The number of Estonian sacred natural sites known in archive records has been estimated to be approximately 3,000 (Eesti looduslikud pühapaigad 2015:8). Before the process of modernization intensified in Estonia in the nineteenth century, the number of sacred natural sites in active use must have exceeded this number, as information about a great number of more transient sites known in the social memory of some small group, such as a single family or a group of families, is unlikely to have been recorded.

It is possible to distinguish sites that are *abandoned,* i.e. where the local community has retained some (peripheral) social memory without the active use of the site in ritual or custom, and those that are *forgotten* so that no knowledge about them remains, even if a site (e.g., a stone, a body of water) may still be physically at the same spot. Information about some of the sites that have fallen into oblivion on the level of living social memory may lie dormant in some repository of cultural memory, such as the folklore archives or on an early modern map of a manorial holding. Such dormant cultural memory (or some interpretation of it) can theoretically re-enter local social memory if it happens to reach a community concerned.

However, as Lauri Honko (2013) has argued, giving a "second life" to folklore by resurrecting recorded traditions into active cultural usage from archives very seldom results in its return to its roots or the collective it originated from; and when it does happen, it is often through media that are new to the folklore process in the traditional sense and in genres that follow other norms than that of the oral tradition: such as the written word, sound recordings, or film. In comparison, resurrecting entertainment genres such as folktales, songs, folk tunes played on an instrument or even folk games is easier than that of the placelore surrounding sacred natural sites, as placelore is connected to its environment more intricately.

Conservative Premodern Vernacular Tradition

If a premodern sacred natural site is mainly known within the social memory of a local community or some other small group and it is used in a traditional way, it is a case of premodern practices persisting in a traditional site. In a traditional society, sacred natural sites form a part of a pattern of relationships that people of the community have with other people (including the dead remembered in the community) but also with creatures or entities other than human: animals, plants and supernatural entities. Eduardo Kohn (2013) has shown that this network of relationships can be modelled by following semiotic activity in the communication between representatives of official authority, influential figures within the commu-

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nity and other human communities, domestic and wild animals as well as supernatural creatures who all form an interconnected network.

A persistent premodern tradition is represented by the use of the so-called cross-signed trees (*ristipuu* 'cross tree') in funerary rites in the traditional counties of Võromaa and Tartumaa in the southeast of Estonia (Kõivupuu 2007; Torp-Kõivupuu 2004; Valk 2009:54–55). The focus of this tradition is formed by trees whose bark is marked with a cross to commemorate a deceased person. The mark is cut into the bark of a tree, often a pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), during the procession of the relatives and community of the deceased accompanying the coffin to the cemetery. The locations and identities of the trees used in such a way are traditional and have been passed on in families. In addition to single trees that are marked with crosses, there are groups, coppices or "woods" (*ristimõts* "cross-wood") with numerous cross-signed trees. The vernacular interdictions concerning cross-signed trees are similar to those applied to other premodern sacred trees: it is perceived to be forbidden to fell them or to break the branches of these trees; the violators of these interdictions have traditionally been known to be struck by accident, disease or death (Torp-Kõivupuu 2004:117). In the Baltic region, similar traditions have been known in neighbouring Setomaa (*lautsipuu*), the islands of western Estonia and northern Estonia (Valk 2009:55) and in Finland (*karsikko*) (Vilkuna 1992) but the southeastern Estonian tradition seems to be the only one persisting in vernacular use.

The tradition of cross-signed trees is knit tightly to the oral social memory of the families that practise the customs, funeral rites being usually among the most conservative part of family traditions (Kõivupuu 1997:58). Therefore, such customs are slow to change or to adopt new features from the newer layers of collective memory. The highly localized and context-dependent nature of the tradition and its connection with one's own family members would make it difficult to elevate cross-signed trees into a cultural or national symbol of an imagined community. Thus, it is natural that the tradition has not played a prominent role in the wider Estonian cultural memory. However, the known cross-signed trees have been mapped in the twenty-first century in order to protect them from felling by unknowing representatives of the forest industry; the Võro regional movement has also emphasized this complex of traditions as a characteristic trait of the regional culture (Torp-Kõivupuu 2004:114). The customs related to cross-signed trees persist in a geographically bounded area and adoption by outsiders has been limited to people settling into the area where these customs are practised (Kõivupuu 1997:59).

A similar conservative but continuing tradition within the social memory of a local community is the knowledge of stones called *moaljakiv-*

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id on the western Estonian island of Muhu, as attested by the results of fieldwork in 2005 and 2006 (see Kaasik 2007:45–46). Etymologically and mythologically, the appellation is a reference to underground supernatural creatures (*moaljad*) who have been known to cause skin and other diseases; accordingly, the practices associated with the stones have been those of magical healing. Often, the stones are not remarkably large and they may be located near houses; such a stone is typically known to a few families. In the largely conservative settlement pattern of the island, the stones may function as significant markers in the known landscape and remain to be known by name due to their role in delineating the space that people inhabit; this may also be a factor for preserving at least a part of the repertoire of supernatural legends associated with the stones. Before the twenty-first century, knowledge about such stones had not spread beyond the bounds of oral social memory.

Former Sacred Natural Sites Redefined as Profane Landmarks

As the premodern conceptions of the functioning of the world recede, a traditional sacred natural site may retain the significance of a landmark or an important landscape but lose the association with the sacred or supernatural sphere so that it is no longer seen as a sacred site. In such a case, the new meaning of the site in the active cultural memory has overshadowed its earlier meaning in the local social memory. The landscape as the signifier may be the same (although inevitably more or less changed in time) but the signified or the meaning of the symbolic landscape may have shifted beyond recognition.

A process approximately like this can be discerned at the site of a small hill called Kalmemägi ("Burial Site Hill") close to the major Tallinn–Tartu road near the borough of Adavere in central Estonia. The hill was mentioned as a sacred site (*hiiease*) already by the pioneer of Estonian archaeology Jaan Jung (1898:205, no. 36) and, deemed to be a burial site, it has been protected as an archaeological monument since 1964 (national monument no. 9343, see Kaasik 2017:142–144). In addition to that, a sacrificial stone on the hill is protected separately (as national monument no. 9345). However, for most people who pass the site in a car or a bus on the busy road next to it, the site has been better known as the "centre point of continental Estonia" (*Mandri-Eesti keskpunkt*) since the Soviet age. This appellation can be read on a dark-red road sign informing of a site of cultural interest; it has also been carved into a stone on the hill that can be seen from a car or bus window.

As an additional layer of explicit signmaking, the spot – as the supposed centre of continental Estonia – was chosen with the support of the local authority of Põltsamaa to be one of the 21 attractions of southern

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Estonia that merited the installation of a physical yellow rectangle sponsored by National Geographic aimed at the place so that the framed view resembles the cover of the magazine. (Kohler 2014; Reinpõld 2015) The rectangle, or "window", as it is commonly known, is focused on the inscribed stone. In contrast, the sacrificial stone is shrouded by the trees and is not as accessible.

Contemporary Living and Transforming Traditions in Premodern Sites

There is a subset of Estonian premodern sacred natural sites where premodern practices persist to a degree while adopting new features or being supplemented by new practices grounded in more modern ideas. This usually also means that the site's traditional significance in the social memory is supplemented by some connection with elements from the cultural memory of a larger group. The site may attract significance in the eyes of people as something of a national importance and/or new meanings for new small groups that are not as territorial or descent-based in nature as the premodern communities for whom vernacular sacred natural sites have been significant.

This group of sites includes the most visible and best known Estonian sacred natural sites that are local tourist attractions in their own right, such as the Tamme-Lauri oak (*Tamme-Lauri tamm*) in Urvaste in the south of Estonia that both has a role in the common celebrations of the community of the local school and is also known for being displayed on the reverse side of the Estonian 10-kroon banknote from 1992 to 2010. In such places, one can observe a living and changing tradition that perpetuates some premodern narratives and customs in some fashion while adding new ones.

Already when the late nineteenth-century collection of folklore was in full swing, correspondents attached literary motifs originating from Romantic or historical writings to narratives about sacred natural sites (e.g. Metssalu 2008), thus creating a hybrid heritage incorporating both premodern and modern material. Such a sedimentation of new layers into placelore has been noted by Mall Hiiemäe and Mari-Ann Remmel (2020:390) who observe that sacred natural sites that have remained intact in the landscape but have been rediscovered since the late 1980s have in several cases become ritual sites for followers of the Estonian ethnic religion *maausk* (see Servan-Schreiber 2022, 2024; Ringvee 2024), whereas the interpretation of vernacular customs was partly guided by the way the pre-Christian era is depicted in nationalist imaginings of an ancient golden age (cf. below). An example of how notions from the stock of motifs I have dubbed as Romantic nostalgia above have come to influence premodern sacred natural sites was the planting of oaks in the

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sacred grove of the Samma village in Virumaa in 1988 (see Heinapuu 2010:127–129). In the past few decades, oaks have also been planted on the sacred hill in the village of Purtse in the same area. According to Hiiemäe and Remmel, sacred natural sites have become "an embodiment of the old worldview, a litmus test of community identity, the calling card of Estonians as an indigenous people and a carrier of the idea of protecting nature" (2020:390).

A telling example of a case where a clearly premodern vernacular tradition has merged with modern layers of heritage is the hill called Jumalamägi ('God's Hill') in the village of Kolossova in Setomaa. The hill has been a focus of essentially premodern oral tradition (according to a legend, it is the site where God takes the souls of people destined for heaven on to his carriage and each tree on the hill stands for such a soul) and practice (people visiting the site on the Friday before 2 August, the feast of St Paraskeva celebrated in the nearby Saatse Orthodox church). The hill, however, has no official protection either as a natural object or as cultural heritage and has started to accrue new functions only after the local community, led by the village elder Silver Hüdsi, decided to take the hill into more active use in 2007 (Kaasik 2017:50–52). A significant addition to the hill has been the statue of the Seto fertility god Peko by the local artist and antiquarian Renaldo Veeber (on Peko, see Valk 2019). The statue has become a new focus of practices at the site, as knowledge of the hill's significance as a sacred site has spread from the local social memory to the nascent common cultural memory of the Seto people, an ethnic group whose belonging to the Estonian people has been ambiguous, as the Seto remained a part of the Eastern Orthodox religious sphere and were governed by the Russian Empire when the bulk of Estonians became Lutherans and were governed by a German-speaking aristocracy. In the modern Seto cultural memory, the agrarian fertility god Peko whose statues were kept in secret, has been reimagined as the sleeping king of the Seto Kingdom, a celebration of the local identity held on the first Saturday of each year in various places of Setomaa. Thus, we can see an intertwinement between the social memory and the cultural memory of the wider Seto group whose collective identity has been supported by this innovation; and in turn the Seto cultural memory has supported the practices on the hill. In addition to this, according to Silver Hüdsi, Jumalamägi has attracted the attention of adherents to new religious movements who have conducted rituals there.

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Sacred Natural Sites of the Modern Era

When compared to premodern sacred natural sites, the meanings of similar sites taken into use or founded during the reign of modernity are more connected to cultural symbols from the national canon and thus their associations with the supernatural are more indirect and rarer (if such a site is associated with the supernatural at all). The modern distinction between the natural and the supernatural encourages one to doubt the existence of all supernatural creatures and forces and this doubt has become more and more mainstream during the twentieth century. Therefore, it is conceptually more difficult to justify the inclusion of a symbolic landscape in the cultural or political memory due to its association with the supernatural. However, this may be done in a more roundabout way: one may refer to "ancient Estonians" for whom the oak was supposed to be a sacred tree (see Heinapuu 2010, 2016). Thus, the symbolic landscape becomes rooted in the common history of the nation and the share of literary or (pseudo)historical motifs stored in the collective cultural and political memory becomes more predominant in the placelore of modern-era symbolic sites. This tendency does not apply to the same extent to sacred sites that have been recognized or founded by followers of new religious or spiritual movements that are based on modern precepts (cf. Kivari 2018; Hiiemäe 2017).

Abandoned Modern Sacred Natural Sites

The twentieth century allowed for new opportunities for the spread of new ways of discerning the sacred in nature or in landscapes by means of teachings relying on modern-era preconceptions. Thus, new sacred natural sites were found or founded by small groups. In this section, I want to highlight the transience of the social memory of such small groups: many of such sites sacred to some group or another have fallen into disuse, been forgotten or abandoned for various reasons, thus yielding modern-era sacred sites with no associated active tradition or practice.

During the period of the Russian Empire, it was compulsory for each citizen to belong to an established church and participate in its upkeep. This principle was abandoned by the First Church Congress of the Estonian Lutheran church in 1917 and, as proposed by Johan Kõpp who was later to become both the rector of the University of Tartu and the bishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the new church was defined as "a free people's church" so that people in the congregations gained the right to cease to be a member of the church at will (Rohtmets 2012:38–39, 477). Previously, the only formally accepted means of exiting the church and exercising a modicum of religious freedom was to be-

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come a member of the Russian Orthodox Church. In Estonian nationalist terms, leaving the Lutheran church could be motivated by a perception that it was an instrument of Baltic German domination over the Estonian peasantry, as the majority of the clergy hailed from the German-speaking upper classes.

Although the majority of Estonians remained within the fold of the Lutheran church throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, the possibility to quit the church was promoted by the movement of *taarausk* (Taaraism), an initiative to create a religion fit for the Estonian nation from the 1920s onward. Most of the writings by leaders of the movement show an approach that seems top-down and deductive in nature, proceeding from the general to the particular: religion as the highest form of the culture of a nation; as the political independence of Estonia has been established, it is necessary to continue the struggle for independence of the Estonian mind or spirit (*vaim*) and culture from overbearing German and Russian cultural domination, including religious domination, thus a vehement rejection of Christianity as a foreign phenomenon. The ideology drew heavily on the canon of established Estonian cultural memory (rather than vernacular oral tradition) and was saturated with Romantic nostalgia as described above. Practices and customs were usually spoken of as if these needed to be created rather than perpetuated from living memory. Therefore, it is safe to say that *taarausk* was a predominantly modern school of thought dependent on written cultural memory.

Before the suppression of the movement by the Soviet authorities in the 1940s, the number of true adherents to *taarausk* remained in the low thousands (Vakker 2012:188–189). However, the circle of sympathizers and people influenced by its ideas seems to have been larger, even if it is impossible to measure, as the *damnatio memoriae* by the Soviet authorities hit this group particularly severely.

One practice adopted and promoted by adherents of *taarausk* was the founding of private sacred groves (*koduhiis* "home sacred grove") to be used by a single family. The author has heard a few references to the existence such sites in conversations with some descendants of the adherents of *taarausk*, but a more complete contemporary perception of a *koduhiis* is made explicit in a column-wide appeal in the daily newspaper *Postimees* in May 1944:

> There are few home groves in Estonia. […] Every farmstead and the surroundings of every home has a free piece of land where one may plant trees and bushes, place benches between these and walk or sit there in one's hours of leisure. […] when a baby brother or sister is born, we will plant an ash, a maple tree or a bird cherry for their luck. When someone of the family dies, we will plant a fir tree. […] Let us, young friends, surely take up establishing home groves this spring. Let us give every tree its own name and

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> meaning. And afterwards we shall plant ever new trees. Thus we will get a beautiful home grove to be an example for the neighbourhood (Saar 1944).

The suppression of the *taarausk* movement that included the imprisonment, deportation and/or execution of many of its leaders by the Soviet authorities, made the ordinary members or sympathizers of the movement wary even of speaking about it for decades. This has led to a diminishing trace of the 1930s *taarausk* within Estonian cultural memory and has cut off many possible avenues for transmitting information about it in living social memory.

The latter half of the 1980s saw a brief but intensive blossoming of interest and media coverage in all things religious, alternative and spiritual in Estonia (see Hiiemäe 2019; Kõiva 2007a:86–94, 2007b; Kivari 2018). This enthusiasm, at its height before and after the implosion of the Soviet power, generally petered out in the 1990s as new and increasingly sober institutions took hold. When one considers the numerous twentieth-century teachings founded on modern precepts that have found sanctity in nature but have not been inclined to do in-depth archival research into premodern traditions, one has but to conclude that there are bound to have been modern sacred natural sites – or landscapes of special spiritual importance – identified or taken into use during that period and abandoned later (cf. Kõiva et al. 2020). This is an area that would merit further research but will remain outside the bounds of this article.

Premodern Practices Localized in New Sacred Natural Sites

Offering coins to stones or springs of water and tying ribbons of cloth to the branches of trees are premodern customs widely known even today (Kõiva et al. 2020). In addition to premodern sacred natural sites, these practices can nowadays be observed at sites that have been taken into use following more modern considerations.

In Estonia, about 1,800 so-called cup-marked stones have been found, each with a number of artificial round depressions with circumferences of 4 to 7 centimetres and depths of 0.5 to 2 centimetres. The earlier archaeological research tradition has deemed these to be sacrificial or cult stones (Tvauri 1999a:113) although in the nineteenth century only a few of these have been known to be used as sacrificial stones (Tvauri 1999a:140–141; Tvauri 1999b) and there is no recorded consistent pattern of known oral tradition connected to these stones. This is to be expected, as the Bronze Age and Iron Age custom of making cup-marks on stones seems to have fallen into oblivion by the end of the Early Roman Iron Age (50–200 AD) at the latest (Tvauri 1999a:156).

However, a large number of cup-marked stones were given the protec-

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tion and status of archaeological monuments during the Soviet era (and these remain protected under the Estonian Heritage Protection Act). Due to this, such heritagized stones were marked with adjacent signposts proclaiming them to be "cult stones" (*kultusekivid*) for decades, although later scholarship has taken a step back and the consensus of researchers does not consider this group of prehistoric monuments to have been unambiguously religious in character.

Although the mechanism of recognizing these monuments as religious was modern by its nature (a scholar identifies a stone as a member of a predefined set associated with a hypothesis), the signposts have at least in some cases attracted people to make offerings of coins to these stones. This has certainly been the case with the so-called Nõiakivi ("Witch Stone") in Assaku near Tallinn, a stone that was unearthed during the construction of a road in the 1960s (Lõugas 1971) and with Rehe cup-marked stone in the village of Hõreda in the northern Estonian parish of Juuru (Heinapuu 2018:93).

Additionally, the practice of offering coins and ribbons has been observed in the holy grove of Kassinurme near Jõgeva that was taken into use as such a few decades ago (Hiiemäe 2017:230). This site is dominated by what I referred to as the Romantic nostalgia for the ancient golden age above due to its being a site of a prehistoric wooden stronghold.

These can be considered cases of authorized heritage discourse (see Smith 2006) and its associated notions of cultural memory meshing with lingering vernacular notions of sacred sites. In a living vernacular tradition, it is not uncommon to have a traditional method of identifying previously unknown sacred natural sites that could receive a treatment similar to those known previously (cf. Valk 2007; Haavio 1951:252; Goody 1977:29–30) but in the examples cited above, the decisive features that have led to the recognition of a sacred site have been derived from the collective cultural memory of a predominantly written modern tradition and relate to its views about the ancient (pre)history of the nation.

Modern Sites, Modern Traditions: Civil Religion and New Religious Movements

On the basis of modern ideas or ideologies, new sites or landscapes with natural features are being created or taken into use, and some of these resemble sacred natural sites or are explicitly inspired by notions of earlier sacred sites. In addition to sites of power or sanctity chosen or founded by new religious or spiritual movements (see Kõiva et al. 2020; Kivari 2018), this category should include sanctuaries of Estonian civil religion, such as parks of oaks planted in imitation of imagined ancient sacred oak groves and other similar forms of patriotic landscaping.

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One of the most ambitious pioneering projects of this kind was the "sacred grove" at the hill of Sõjamäe near Tallinn (*Sõjamäe hiis*), developed on the initiative of adherents of *taarausk* (see the section "Abandoned Modern Sacred Natural Sites" above) from 1927. The objective of the project was to create "a powerful copse (sacred grove) of remembrance that would correspond to the nation's current and future religious-festive gatherings, such as the commemoration of the heroes of the St George's Night Uprising, celebrating the opening of the national day etc.", as stated in the founding documents of the committee dedicated to the development of the five-hectare site in 1933. In addition to planting oaks, a large area for 12,000 people with a sacrificial stone was planned at the centre of the hill. The plan included building a structure around the sacrificial stone (*urila*, a neologism signifying "a place for making offerings") as well as a beacon tower (*tulila*, a neologism for "place for a fire") (Vakker 2012: 190–191; Sõjamäe hiis 1933).

The site, left unfinished before World War II and heavily damaged in the war but restored in stages first as a public park since the 1950s and as a site for official ceremonies after the restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991, is now named Jüriöö park ('Park of St. George's Night') to commemorate the Estonian uprising of 1343 against the feudal lords who included the King of Denmark and the Livonian branch of the chivalric Teutonic Order. As the city has grown to embrace the park with industrial, residential and other urban landscapes, the venue now serves as the site where elected officials of the City of Tallinn – the mayor, a vice mayor or the chairman of the city council – light a ceremonial bonfire on Victory Day (23 June) and attend the city's official celebration of Independence Day (24 February). Conscripts of the Guard Battalion of the Estonian Defence Forces give their military oath of allegiance at the site upon the completion of their basic training.

In the cases of new sacred sites of civil religion, symbolic representations from the current active level of cultural memory can be seen to induce changes in landscapes: the concept of the sacred oak grove, bereft of any concrete topographical references, has become symbolic of the history and identity of the Estonian nation and has inspired the creation of new landscapes modelled on the symbolic notional oak grove. These new landscapes, as venues for different celebrations, support rituals belonging to the sphere of political memory that provide symbolic support for the cohesion of the nation. In an example of the intertwining between different levels of collective memory, this in turn creates new islands of social memory for people participating in rituals and celebrations.

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Intermingled Premodern and Modern Traditions at Modern Sacred Natural Sites

Finally, both premodern and modern practices may become attached to sites that have been recognized as sacred within the modern worldview. Whereas this could be simply interpreted as continuity within the vernacular tradition, I will consider a prominent example that exemplifies how disembodied notions of sacred sites (as discussed above) have found new focus and have become attached to a purportedly ancient sacrificial stone on Toomemägi in Tartu (see Heinapuu 2024). This case is interesting due to the dynamic relationships between different layers of cultural memory and social memory that become apparent in the analysis.

Although the stone in question is universally known and often used as the "sacrificial stone" and is protected as a national monument, it was most probably unearthed in the latter half of the nineteenth century when sand and gravel were mined from a pit in an area called Kassitoome near the eastern portion of early the modern fortification zone of the city of Tartu. The stone was subsequently hypothesized to be a sacrificial stone by the scholars at the University of Tartu, as it had characteristic depressions in its otherwise smooth texture (Tvauri 2001:74–75). This way of recognizing a sacred site was by its nature a modern procedure that contrasts with traditional means of choosing or finding sacred sites in vernacular religion (cf. Valk 2007), as the purpose of identifying the sacred stone was not to communicate with supernatural powers but rather to understand and describe an ancient and different culture (an Other) that was separated from the present by a temporal and ethnic distance, as historical and archaeological scholarship was the province of the German-speaking elite.

The stone, now placed in a prominent spot next to the ruins of the city's medieval cathedral on the hill of Toomemägi (German *Domberg* "cathedral hill") has blended into the landscape and transformed from an antiquarian curio into something that has seemingly always been there. The stone has attracted, in addition to offerings of coins and ribbons, new kinds of traditions such as the ritual burning of lecture notes by students at the end of the term or playing a role in wedding ceremonies, thus being involved in the social memory of various groups (Kõivupuu 2011:174–175). In general, stones that have offerings to divine or otherworldly forces placed on them are a staple of Estonian landscapes. There are 400 sacred stones recognized as national monuments and many are both logistically and culturally accessible (Tvauri 1999b), retaining a role in the collective memory: it is common to see recent coin offerings on known sacrificial stones. This can be seen as the persistence of a premodern practice that has been also localized on Toomemägi.

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Due to its accessible location close to the university grounds where most Estonian archaeologists and historians were taught in the twentieth century, the stone on Toomemägi became a yardstick against which all other sacrificial stones in Estonia were measured (Tvauri 2001:74). The sacrificial stone is generally perceived within the framework of the myth of the Estonians' golden age of pre-Christian freedom before the thirteenth-century Baltic Crusade. This is partly due to fact that the hill of Toomemägi, a central location of the university city of Tartu, has been inscribed into the Estonian cultural memory as a supposedly central sacred site of the ancient Estonians. This assertion originates from Romantic-era Estonian nationalist writings, amplified after its first appearance in the fictional legend *Wannemunne's Sang* by Friedrich Robert Faehlmann: "Da kam nun Alles zusammen, was Leben und Odem hatte, um unsern Domberg herum, auf dem ein heiliger Hain stand" (Faehlmann 1840:43). Due to the prominence of Romantic-era fiction in the Estonian cultural memory, this assertion has often been uncritically accepted as a fact even by historians and archaeologists.

In this case, the different levels of collective memory support each other, and as both the sole tangible monument of the pre-Christian era in central Tartu and as a landmark in the lives of the people who live or study in city, the sacrificial stone remains relevant in both cultural and social memory while acquiring new functions and meanings for different people.

Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of the diversity of ways in which sacred natural sites are conceptualized in Estonian culture and how this is relevant at different levels of collective memory. This may help provide a framework for understanding how elements of different ideologies, religious and other schools of thought intermingle in the ways people make sense of such symbolic sites and landscapes. One can observe that notions about both physical and imagined sacred natural sites and practices connected to them are current and relevant at all the three levels of collective memory: for small social groups, the predominantly written culture as well as the Estonian political collective. There has also been lively traffic of ideas and perceptions about sacred natural sites between the social memory of small groups and the cultural memory, and to a lesser extent, between these two levels of collective memory and political memory.

Abstract national myths of an ancient golden age as expressed in the image of supposed pre-Christian sacred oak groves tend to support

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community members' interest in their local premodern tradition so that narratives from the modern national canon may come to be associated with premodern sacred sites. This is reflected in literary motifs surfacing in local placelore and displacing earlier narratives of more mythological content that have been previously associated with traditional sacred landscapes. These two layers of tradition may also intertwine. Contrarily, some recorded oral legends about sacred sites have been divorced from their landscapes of origin and, given circulation as written texts, have become parts of the cultural memory about the nature of premodern sanctuaries – even if the sites described have been destroyed or transformed beyond recognition. Oral narratives about premodern sacred natural sites and archaic practices originating in (mainly agrarian) folk religion that have been recorded in writing and made accessible either in print or online sometimes gain a "second life". But the restoration of placelore to its point of origin is more problematic and is prone to more distortions than recycling entertainment genres like folksongs or folktales that do not require a detailed knowledge of physical landscapes. A traditional sacred natural site may also retain the significance of a landmark or an important landscape but lose the association with the sacred or supernatural sphere so that it is no longer regarded as a sacred site.

Official rituals that have a political dimension tend to select new sites as their venues, such as newly planted oak groves, rather than historic sacred natural sites. These usually draw on nineteenth-century Romantic literary notions from the canon of cultural memory about what pre-Christian Estonian sacred sites were like, thus the emphasis on oaks and the association with military themes. Therefore, a site may become a narrative – a lost site living on as a text – and, conversely, a narrative can become a site when an image from a literary work inspires patriotic landscaping and, thereby, is given physical form.

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[1] For a more general discussion of how "natural" should be considered with regard to "sacred natural sites", see Heinapuu 2016:166–169.
[2] Placelore (Estonian kohapärimus) is a concept that has developed in Estonian folkloristics since the 1990s. It is usually seen as encompassing mainly narrative lore bound to a toponym, site or other landscape object and including local legends, place-bound beliefs, descriptions of practices, historical lore as well as personal memories (Remmel 2014:67). In a wider sense, placelore refers to a symbiotic relationship between tradition communities and their environment, the tangible reality and the world of narrative; it can be considered as a set of traditions that focus on a community's natural and cultural surroundings, such as hills, trees and forests, bodies of water, fields, pieces of built environment, roads, and terrain (Hiiemäe 2007:364, 370; Valk, Sävborg 2018:9; see also Hiiemäe & Remmel 2020).
[3] Narrated by 80-year-old Villem Vahe from the neighbouring village of Esiküla in 1924.
[4] For the provenance of Taara as a deity, see Sutrop 2004, Viires 1991:138.
[5] The religious organization Hiis was formally registered in 1932, see Ringvee 2024:43–48; Vakker 2012.
[6] All translations by the author unless otherwise stated.

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