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Mary, Saints, and Hills: Place-Based Sacredness in Lithuanian Folklore and Folk Piety

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Abstract: In Lithuanian traditional folklore, figures such as the Virgin Mary and various saints might be portrayed near the natural elements, including hills, stones, and, springs, which serve as representations of aspects of local mythology. This article examines the relationships among the Virgin Mary, saints, and landscape features such as hills, mounds, and hillforts in the context of Lithuanian folk piety and traditional folklore narratives. It draws upon frameworks from the spatial study of religion and sacred landscape research, viewing sacredness as a historically dynamic relationship between narrated meanings and material objects. The analysis combines interpretations of narrative motifs with place-based case studies of devotional sites, utilizing sources that include manuscript texts, published collections, and the author's field documentation of devotional practices. Initially, the article highlights the cultural significance of hills within Lithuania's lowland environment, where mythological, ritual, and memory functions intersect. It then presents the narratives in which the figure of Mary and other sacred personages appear in relation to hills. The findings show that hills and saints serve a dual role in Lithuanian folklore: they are both objects of belief and sacred spaces that facilitate religious experiences. Hills are recognized as significant sites marked by miraculous events, including saintly apparitions and extraordinary healings. These locations function as threshold spaces where folk piety is actualised through devotional practices and commemoration.

Keywords: folklore narratives; folk piety; healing springs and stones; hills and hillforts; Lourdes grottoes; sacred landscape; Virgin Mary.

Introduction

Studies of religion and space recognise that religion is inseparable from the material and social processes through which space is produced, as Henri Lefebvre puts it, "(Social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre 1991: 26). Chris Park (2004) points out that religion leaves its mark on the landscape through culture and lifestyle. Building on this premise, the spatial turn in the study of religion has encouraged scholars to analyse religion through the categories of space, place, and movement, linking "sacred space" with practice, gender, ritual, and the interactions between the religious and the secular (Knott 2010). This perspective enables understanding how sacrality becomes concentrated in particular locations, how rituals and movement structure religious experience, and how sacred sites organise collective representations and shared meanings.

Nature in religion is both an idea and a material reality. Accordingly, sacredness can be approached as something that is made and maintained through images, practices, and material objects, including prominent topographic forms such as mountains, caves, and gardens (della Dora 2016). In this sense, within the Christian tradition, mountains can be incorporated into the topography of piety. Material symbols, such as chapels and crosses, can concentrate religious meaning into visible landmarks and trajectories of devotion (Park 2004). At the same time, the geography of religion has provided an additional perspective for connecting devotional objects, routes, and the meanings of places.

This approach is particularly relevant to Lithuania, where the landscape, characterized by hills, mounds, hillforts, and Christian devotional sites, forms a network of sacred places. Darius Liutikas's mapping-based analysis of religious objects in Lithuania highlighted how religious markers function not only as practices of piety but also as means of structuring the landscape (Liutikas 2005; 2014). He also developed a geographical perspective on the cult of saints by examining saints' relic-related sites, place names and church names, monuments and small sacral structures dedicated to saints, and places visited to meet living persons regarded as spiritual authorities (Liutikas 2016). In the overview of sacred landscape research, the author proposed an "existential cycle" of sacred spaces – creation, affirmation, preservation, re-use, and destruc-

tion – emphasizing that sacred landscapes are historically dynamic rather than fixed (Liutikas 2025: 9). This model describes how sacred place meanings are maintained, reconfigured, or reactivated across different periods.

Research on the Lithuanian sacred landscape provides several points for analysing hills in Christian and pre-Christian contexts, and for analysing how the Virgin Mary and other saints are related to specific places. Veronika Lileikienė has developed studies of natural objects within Christian devotional culture. Her work on the Lourdes tradition in Lithuania offers detailed information on how Marian devotion practices are observed in grottoes and their surroundings (Lileikienė 2000; 2004; 2005; 2011). Alfonsas Motuzas examined saint-related ritual routes, including Samogitian Calvary Hills Prayers and Songs (Motuzas 2017a), Christian folk piety locations in Lithuania and Latvia (including The Hill of Angels in Trakai and The King's Hill of Christ in Latvia) (Motuzas 2017b); and the origin of the Hill of Crosses site and the formation of its devotional practices, pilgrimages, and music (Motuzas 2013). In parallel, the pre-Christian field has been mapped by the archaeologist Vykintas Vaitkevičius, whose catalogues and interpretative studies document old Lithuanian sacred sites across regions and describe the sacralisation of hills, stones, springs, and other natural objects (Vaitkevičius 1998; 2003; 2006; 2016).

Scholars in folklore and ethnology provide a broader perspective on how sacred meanings are narrated and localized. Research shows that mountains depicted in folk songs often highlight the ritually motivated symbolism of the landscape (Stundžienė 2014). The author of this article examined the relationship between stones and the Virgin Mary. Distinguishing between mythic narratives and apparition traditions, she noted that stones mark boundaries and centres, and they are frequently linked to healing practices, with similarities found in other Catholic countries (Kairaitytė 2008).

However, the symbolic connections between Christian saints, the Virgin Mary, and natural landscapes, such as hills, are often addressed only in fragments. There is a lack of comprehensive studies that explain how various layers of sacredness are expressed through the relationship between hills (including mounds and hillforts) and saints in Lithuanian culture and folklore. Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine how the connections between the Virgin Mary, saints, and hills are represented in folk piety and traditional folklore through narrative motifs and place-based religious practices.

The objectives include 1) defining the main functions of the hill through which the concept of the hill is perceived (including mythological, ritual, and memory functions), 2) demonstrate how saint-hill meanings are represented and reinterpreted in the contemporary landscape through selected case materials, and 3) analyse key folkloric motifs that connect saints with hills and related features, particularly focusing on saintly appearances, dream and vision instructions, and legends that sacralise the surrounding landscape.

Methods and source materials. The article uses an interpretative methodology that integrates folkloristic narrative analysis with a case study approach. The research is based on Lithuanian folklore narratives, ethnological sources, and studies on the dissemination of Christian devotional practices. The material includes: 1) narratives from printed sources in which the origins of hills are described or explained, 2) Lithuanian folklore manuscript texts (LTR) from the Archive in the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, including legends and belief narratives recorded mainly in the 20th century, selecting those plots and motifs in which saints are depicted on or near a hill or other elevation, and 3) materials from the author's personal archive collected since 2006: photographs, field observations, and expedition notes on springs, stones, grottoes, and other sites regarded as sacred and linked to the veneration of saints.

The article organizes scholarly works by various authors that examine the hill in the context of folklore, mythology, and religious practices. The author's own research adds to this collection of material. These sources are analysed through selected case studies and relevant research on the spread of Christian devotional forms in Lithuania.

First, the article defines the main functions of hills in Lithuanian tradition, distinguishing among mythological, ritual, and memory functions. Then, by analysing narratives, it highlights the connections between saints and hills.

The Concept of Hill in Lithuanian Culture

The mountain is one of the universal cultural and religious symbols across diverse traditions. From the perspective of the phenomenology of religion, the mountain is understood as the centre of sacred topography. As Mircea Eliade noted, "the sacred mountain is an axis mundi connecting earth with heaven" (Eliade 1959: 38). The mountain, as a symbol connecting heaven and

earth, can become a key source for shaping theological narratives and collective identity in specific contexts. A mountain (or a hill) can be treated as a semantic field in which vertical spatial oppositions (high/low, top/bottom) and sacrality intersect[1].

Although Lithuania's lowland relief means it has no high mountains[2] in the geomorphological sense, the cultural need for vertical symbols is fulfilled by minor elevations, such as hills, mounds, burial mounds (*pilkapiai*), and hillforts (*piliakalniai*), which function as local counterparts to mountains. Hills are treated as the highest points in the living environment and become preferred sites for sacral monuments and buildings.

In the context of folk memory, geographical objects could be associated with sacred space, where different layers of worldview intersect, ranging from pre-Christian sacred sites to Christian symbols and modern religious infrastructure. Christian religious symbols are often established in prominent locations, such as hills or at their bases, creating a process of mythologizing the natural environment. Therefore, the image of the hill emerges as a multi-layered structure that integrates mythological, ritual, and memory functions.

Mythical space. Lithuanian folklore narratives explain how natural landscape elevations came into being. Oral narratives reveal the mythical origins of hills. Legends and origin tales often depict giants as directly influencing landscape changes: it is said that giants shaking sand out of their shoes created hills and hillforts, lakes, and other earthly features. Girnikų Hill, located in the **Šiauliai** district, for example, is said to have been formed when a giant shook out his clogs or, in other versions of the story, his bast sandals (*vyžos*). Additionally, from his tears, a lake was formed (Kerbelytė 2019: 20, No. 2).

Similar folklore motifs tell the story of the origin not only of hills, but also of hillforts. This is how the Petrešiūnai and Juodoniai hillforts came into being (Kerbelytė 2019: 20, No. 3, 4). Hills or regularly shaped mounds rising from plains are called Giants' hills (*Milžinų kalnai*) or Giants' graves (*Milžinkapiai*, *Milžino kapas)*. Some of these are burial mounds piled up by ancient people for burying the dead (Kerbelytė 2019: 10–11). Legends tell of hills being built not only by giants, but also by the devil, who falls in love with a *laumė* (the Lithuanian mythological creature) and builds a road or a hill on his way to see her (Laurinkienė 1996: 18), or who spits on the ground and creates a specific hill (Racėnaitė 2013: 116).

The hill can be considered a gathering place for mythical creatures. According to mythological tales, *laumė* sometimes settles on the hill (Laurinkienė 1996: 16). In Lithuania, the favourite gathering place of witches is Šatrijos Hill, located in Samogitia (Vėlius 1977: 231). On Midsummer's Night, witches would fly to their gatherings, which usually took place on hills. There, they would feast, dance, and sing (Vėlius 1977: 231–232). Thus, in folklore, hills could be perceived as borderline spaces between worlds, places where not only mythical creatures gather but also where the living and the dead meet. It is said that on the so-called Chapel Hill, "Once, a man fell asleep while keeping the horses out at night, and something came from the hill and began to rouse him, tugging at him," or "When the men were out with the horses at night, they were haunted there: they were not allowed to sleep and were driven away" (Piasecka et al. 2005: 239–240).

Folklore also treats hillforts as places of worship, where God could appear to people (Vaitkevičius 2003: 35). In this sense, the hill is not just a place, but a boundary that brings different things together. Boundary symbols in folklore not only mark the intersection of this world and the Otherworld, but also indicate "paths" to enter the Otherworld (Masiulionytė 2008). This mythic image of a conjunction between two worlds appears across most sacred sites as their most distinctive feature. Sacred hills are experienced as connectors not only to the height of the sky but also to the depth of the underground (Vaitkevičius 2016: 38). A hill can be understood as simultaneously orienting towards the divine and opening downward. That is why hills and hillforts are said to hide treasures or sunken sacred buildings. There are widespread stories about hidden treasures belonging to the Swedish army, sunken churches, or even whole cities. For instance, the legends surrounding Karmazinai Hillfort tell us that: "At noon, when the bells of Dūkštos Church rang, they also rang inside the hill" (Piasecka et al. 2005: 231). In this case, the Otherworld is not elsewhere; it is located beneath the surface. The hill becomes a vessel for concealed sacredness that can "answer back" through sound.

Moreover, the hill is not just a physical feature of the landscape or mythical space; it also has a semantic context that combines community rituals, cosmological order, and poetics. In traditional Lithuanian folk songs, hills can be presented as places for rituals and social gatherings, such as weddings and youth events. They are also used as poetic metaphors to represent height, status, boundaries, and transitions (Stundžienė 2014). In the context of Lithuanian cal-

endar songs, the hill assumes a mythic role, functioning as a structural element that organizes space. It functions as a mediator and, together with the middle of the field or the tree, marks the mythological "centre" (Laurinkienė 1990: 62).

Sacred place and ritual site. V. Vaitkevičius's study of Baltic sacred sites suggests that, following Lithuania's official Christianisation, older holy places were either destroyed or reinterpreted within a Christian framework. This reinterpretation included the placement of Christian signs within the spatial and symbolic fields of earlier *alkai* (sacred hills, groves, lakes, rivers, springs, ceremonial stones, fields, and ravines) and other sacralised natural objects, thus continuing, reinterpreting, or "rewriting" the meanings of the place (Vaitkevičius 2003). This process is visible in the landscape itself: crosses, chapels, Lourdes grottoes, and Calvary routes are often located on or near sites that once held sacred value. In this sense, the hill (including sacred hill, mound, hillfort) functions as a sacral locus rooted in rites and cult practices, and later reframed through Christian material forms and devotional practice (Vaitkevičius 2003; 2006).

A more concrete interaction between folklore, archaeology, and religious history can be seen in the legend about Migonys hillfort, recorded by Eduard Volter in 1888, which has been interpreted as possibly reflecting older burial practices. According to legend, the dead were cremated at the top of the hillfort, and their remains were scattered into a stream whose water was then drunk. Although archaeological evidence does not confirm cremation rituals at hillforts, the motif raises questions about the function of miniature hillforts and the location of cremation rituals (Vaitkevičius & Kurila 2011).

Places of memory and folk piety. Over time, some elevated sites acquire national symbolic status. Lithuanian hillforts and mounds take on the meaning of "places of memory" when they become cultural symbols that evoke collective associations and have the power to concentrate images of collective memory, which change across historical periods and acquire new meanings and significance (Vitkūnas 2016).

The most widely acknowledged site is the Hill of Crosses, located on the Jurgaičiai hillfort in the Šiauliai district. It is recognised as one of Lithuania's international sacred sites, and it has devotional, commemorative, and political meanings, thereby pilgrimage and religious practice also function as public memory and support religious-national identity. The origins of the Hill of Crosses date back to the mid-19th century, after the 1831 and 1863 uprisings,

when crosses began to be brought in memory of those who had perished. Over time, the Hill became a unique space of folk piety, articulated through devotional practices and saintly devotion. Every cross placed here carries a personal intention – prayers for health, for divine grace, or other connotations. In this tradition, the saints appear as mediators between humans and God. Religious processions and rituals continue to be practiced at the site. During the Soviet occupation, the Hill of Crosses also emerged as a symbol of resistance, memory, and hope, demonstrating how folk piety, through devotional practices, can extend into political and cultural spheres.

Other cross monuments on elevated sites share similar functions of sacrality and memory, but at different scales and in different settings. One example is the Nation's Resurrection Cross in Kaltinėnai, built in 1990 in the **Šilalė** district, which is said to be one of the tallest crosses in Lithuania, at approximately 19–20 metres, symbolizing restored independence, the commemoration of deportees, the continuity of statehood, and national identity. Another example is crosses in urban areas, such as the Hill of Three Crosses in Vilnius, which has become not only a place for religious processions but also a symbol of national memory (Motuzas 2008). In this context, the hill functions as both a devotional setting and an urban symbol, approached as a viewpoint, a memorial sign, and a site for public rituals and commemoration.





Figure 1. The Nation's Resurrection Cross, Kaltinėnai, Šilalės district, 2023 (on the left). Photo by the author.
Figure 2. Hill of Three Crosses in Vilnius, 2024 (on the right). Photo by the author

In recent decades, contemporary Neopagan movements have contributed to the renewal of pilgrimage and ritual practices focused on natural and geographical features[3]. In this context, mounds and sacred hills became destinations for rituals during festivals and social gatherings, extending the hills' "places of memory" functions beyond Christian sacral sites and monuments into new forms of collective practices.

In summary, it can be said that in the lowland landscape of Lithuania, hills function as cultural signs that carry mythological and sacral meanings. Through folklore narratives and local stories, hills and hillforts emerge as mythologised centres, spaces that connect this world with the Otherworld and may be sites of ritual. Over time, hills become "places of memory", where older layers of sacredness are marked and reinterpreted in the context of changing history. This outline provides a foundation for the analysis of a more specific phenomenon, namely the way in which religious personages become associated with

hills and are physically linked through the use of devotional objects, rituals, and healing practices.

Expressions of the Sacred

In Lithuanian religious culture, the connection between elevated natural landscape features, such as hills, mounds, and hillforts, and saints is evident in both narrative tradition and devotional practices, including grottoes, springs, crosses, chapels, and commemorative monuments. This section of the article focuses on expressions of the sacred in specific locations, examining how saintly figures, particularly the Virgin Mary, intersect with particular hill settings and are reinterpreted through commemoration, healing, visions, and dreams.

Mary's Lourdes at the foot of the hill. The image of hills and saints plays a particular role in Lithuanian culture, as seen in the contemporary landscape and environment through religious and devotional traditions. One example is the Lourdes grotto (*lurdas* or *grota*), a sacred structure that usually imitates the original Lourdes site by incorporating a statue of the Virgin Mary in a stone niche or artificial cave. In Lithuanian tradition, the Lourdes grotto is understood to be a broad, shallow cave, cavity, or opening in a hillside or rock, often with a vaulted form. In religious contexts, it denotes an artificial devotional structure.

Across Lithuania, around 50 Lourdes grottoes can be found, with the largest number located in the Samogitia (Žemaitija) region. About one-third of them are situated at the foot of a hill. The others, as V. Lileikienė (2004) noticed, are usually placed in churches, churchyards, cemeteries, estates, and various other locations, such as near lakes or natural springs, homesteads, parks, small woods, or public squares[4].

The distribution of the Lourdes grottoes supports three interrelated explanations for the placement of the Lourdes grottoes at the foot of the hill. First, from a pragmatic standpoint, the slope provides a natural foundation for stability. Hills often contain natural springs, which later became associated with the water of Lourdes. Placing grottoes at the foot of the hill also ensures safer access for older people and makes the collection and maintenance of spring water more practical (Lileikienė 2004).

Second, the religious aspect of building Lourdes grottoes at the foot of the hills is connected with their symbolic and sacral function, which can be

understood in terms of thresholds and mediation. We can assume that placing the grotto at the foot of the hill is not accidental. If the hill itself is symbolically understood as a sacral elevation – an orientation point that suggests ascent, proximity to the divine, and a movement upwards – then the grotto at its base can be interpreted as the space of arrival and access. In this position, Mary's grotto represents her as a mediator between God and humans, providing a place where the transition from everyday space to sacred prominence is organised and recognised socially. Believers come here to pay their respects and ask for Mary's grace. They stop, light candles, and leave votives such as coins, flowers, or other small offerings. In this configuration, the grotto at the foot of the hill serves as a mediating threshold where practical devotional activities, such as arrival, veneration, and offerings, take place. This sequence can be interpreted as a spatial practice that creates a sacred space through movement and repeated actions (cf. Lefebvre 1991; Knott 2010).

Finally, the aspect of religious tradition and continuity is important. As it is known, the grottoes in Lithuania replicate the original model of Lourdes in France. In 1858, Mary appeared to a young girl named Bernadette Soubirous at a grotto situated at the base of a hill in Lourdes. This sacred event was commemorated by placing a statue of Mary in the grotto. The replication of this setting in other countries, including Lithuania, reflects the continuity of tradition and respect for the original topography of the holy site. The Lourdes grotto of the Virgin Mary at the foot of Birutė Hill in Palanga was the first artificial Lourdes grotto in Lithuania, built between 1898 and 1901 on the northern slope of the hill, which rises 21 meters above sea level. Its construction, inspired by the French Lourdes, was initiated by Count Feliksas Tiškevičius. The original statue of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was later destroyed. Today, the niche contains a traditional statue of Mary, alongside a statue of St. Bernadette nearby.



Figure 3. Palanga Lourdes Grotto at the foot of Birutė Hill (Palanga, Lithuania), 2012. Photo by the author

During the interwar period, the Palanga Lourdes grotto became an important space for religious ceremonies and public gatherings, particularly during the rise of the cult of Vytautas the Great and his mother, Birutė, at that time. During the Soviet era, after the removal of the Virgin Mary statue, poetry evenings were held there. With the national revival, sculptor Vilius Orvydas donated a stone statue of the Virgin Mary to Palanga, which was later replaced by the current traditional figure.

It is also worth mentioning that the location of Birutė Hill in Palanga is associated with other religious meanings. Scholars have discussed the possibility that this site held sacral significance, a view often attributed to it until the 19th–20th centuries. It was described as *alkakalnis* (sacred place on a hill) (Vaitkevičius 2003: 48). Eventually, the place was reframed in Christian forms: at the top of Birutė Hill stands St. George's Chapel. The current chapel was built in 1869 to a design by architect K. Majeris.

Thus, the surrounding location and the Palanga Lourdes grotto combine multiple layers of meaning: possibly a place for rituals in pre-Christian times, a place of religious devotion nowadays, a place of folklore memory, a site of cultural adaptation during the Soviet period, and a place of national identity, illustrating the history of resacralisation and reuse.

Sacred sites and dream narratives. Narratives about dreams and visions of divine will, documented in 20th-century Lithuania, inspired the creation of some holy places, including Lourdes grottoes and chapels. Stories, recorded by V. Lileikienė, tell that in the Telšiai diocese, several Lourdes grottoes originated from people's dreams. In the village called Abakai, a man had three dreams in a row about Christ and Mary on a hill. These dreams made him want to build a chapel. In Gardame, a religious leader had a dream in which Mary told him to build a grotto. Another woman saw Mary in a vision behind the church. In the village of Užluobė, a man had a dream where he was told where to find the missing horses. In the dream, he promised the Holy Virgin that he would build a grotto (Lileikienė 2011: 197–198).

A closely related motif, in which Mary appears as a human and requests the construction of a sacral object, also features in other folklore legends. For example, a legend tells of a young man who was sleeping in a barn. He suddenly sees a light and realizes that it is probably the Blessed Virgin Mary. She asks for a cross to be put on the hillfort. The farmhand tells his family about his experience, but they laugh at him. Then Mary comes a third time and tells the young man off for not putting up the cross, pointing out in detail the place where the cross should stand:

> 'Why don't you listen to me and put it up? 'But [the young man] says: 'I don't know where to put the cross. 'Well, I'll break some branches from your garden tree and bring them to you tomorrow morning. Where it's inserted, that's where you should build the cross. He went, and sure enough, there was a bare branch from his garden. So the farmhand made the cross. It was unplanned and branchy. He put up the cross at night (LTR 4475/165).

Taken together, these examples show a consistent structural pattern in dream-related narratives: a dream provides a message (sometimes through an apparition); a precise location is indicated; the message is fulfilled through action; and the act is materially confirmed by building a physical reminder in the landscape – most often through a grotto, cross, chapel, or another sacral

object. This pattern illustrates how private experience becomes a recognisable element of the social landscape, and how sacred places are created through stories and real-life evidence.

It is important to note that the dream motif does not always require a direct apparition of Mary, God, or another saint. In certain narratives, the dream functions solely as a source of instruction, indicating a location, such as a hill or hillfort, where miraculous healing becomes possible. For example, one account tells of a woman who was completely blind. She dreamt that she should go to the hillfort, and asked her daughters to lead her there. When they brought her there, she began to see while standing on the hill (LTR CABR F12-811). The narrative logic is predicated on instruction and destination: the hillfort becomes the healing place, even in the absence of an explicit Marian appearance in the dream. This "instruction-only" variant also anticipates the healing functions discussed in the following section.

Dreams serve as a means that integrates personal religious experience with the sacralisation of the natural environment – hills, stones, springs, and other landscape features. This pattern is visible in the origins of the Lourdes grottoes, but it also appears in other Marian and saint-related narratives. The phenomenon of seeing Mary in dreams was commonly interpreted as an expression of divine will. Such visions created a strong obligation to carry out the requested action and to mark the indicated place with a sacred structure as proof of faith. In this way, dreams functioned as a link between individual religious experience and a religious act that established a new sacral site.

In the Lithuanian tradition, dreams therefore function as signs that encourage the sacralisation of the natural landscape. Visions of Mary or other saints were seen as divine instructors, guiding the construction of sanctuaries at the foot of hills or by springs, thereby transforming natural sites into sacred places. Such places became important in the community's memories and folk piety. Finally, the dream motif gains meaning at the intersection of Christian and pre-Christian worldviews, where the hill becomes a sacred space, and the saint serves as a patron or mediator between the divine and human spheres.

Healing stones and springs. A related layer of expressions of the sacred emerges not only in narratives about dreams, but also in devotional practices, where Marian naming and local memory "attach" sacrality to specific stones and water springs. From a mythological perspective, the meaning of the stone is similar to that of the hill. Gintaras Beresnevičius suggests an interpretation

of the stone as a "small mountain", or alternatively, the core from which the mountain emerges. In practice, the stone acts as a mediator of cult: people offered food and burned it at sacred stones, asking for fertility. Such customs are widespread in many traditions (Beresnevičius 2008: 80, 152). In the Lithuanian case, V. Vaitkevičius emphasises the respect shown to stones, noting that sacred stones mark and sometimes connect the worlds of the living and the dead, the underground and the sky, reducing the distance between gods and humans. Stones were sacralised through their visible features, such as their size and shape, and were named after divine beings (Vaitkevičius 1998; 2006).

In Lithuanian folklore narratives, the stone can, on occasion, be understood as a sacral object, serving as a tangible symbol of the Gods or Mary's presence, believed to be associated with a particular object within the landscape. The appearance of Mary has been documented on a stone in Šiluva (1608), which is also the only Marian apparition in Lithuania officially recognised by the Lithuanian Church authorities and the Vatican. Meanwhile, folklore tradition documents many other apparitions of Mary or God on the stone. For example, legends say that in the Tauragė district, a child God appears on a stone, a cross is erected at that place, and people who give alms to Jesus are healed (LTR 3148/214). In this instance, the location where the phenomenon of holiness is evident is associated with healings of people who gave alms to Jesus.

In practice, the sacrality of stones is manifested in the belief that particular stones can heal people's illnesses and protect them from misfortune by touching the stone, carrying its fragments, or taking small pieces home. At Rambynas Hill (Pagėgiai Municipality, Tauragė County), stone chippings from what was once a sacrificial stone were believed to have healing and protective powers. Petras Tarasenka notes that believers collected fragments from the stone altar during visits to Rambynas and kept them at home, convinced that they brought happiness and protected the household from illnesses and misfortunes (Tarasenka 1958: 38). A similar logic appears in a Christianised pilgrimage setting in Žemaitija: in the Telšiai County Calvary "Way of the Cross", pilgrims climbing Žvirgždai Hill would gather small stones and take them home, believing in their healing powers (Motuzas 2003: 261–262). Moreover, in Lithuanian folklore narratives, the small stones from St. John's Creek are collected, believing they would help with a toothache (LTR 6241/130).

Similar beliefs relate to water accumulated in stone hollows[4], which are believed to have miraculous healing powers, too. In this context, stones may also

be linked to the Marian presence. The legend recorded in the Prienai district recounts the tale of a child who saw Mary on a stone, and that water from this stone can heal eyes (LTR 4551/124).

The logic of healing water is not necessarily confined to stone cavities; analogous narratives also locate miraculous springs on elevated ground, where the hill itself frames the water's perceived power and guides people's use of it: "When you're heading down towards Pakalnė, there's a spring up on a high hill. And the water there boils. People go there to treat their eyes, their hands, and their legs. That Šilėlis stream runs down towards Lake Vištytis" (LTR 3517/8).

In certain instances, folklore narratives also explain the mythological origin of miraculous water on a hill, emphasizing the uniqueness of the hill and other incredible things that make people believe in the sacredness of the place:

> A long time ago, there used to be a little church on Daujėnai Hill. One night, at midnight, it sank into the ground, and a pool of water was left in its place. Even though it's right up on the top of the hill, it never dries up. About twenty years ago, they dug a well next to that puddle, twelve fathoms deep, but there was no water in the well. After a few years, the well caved in, and now there's just a small hollow left. People started to treat that puddle as holy: they come to wash in its water, and it heals even the worst illnesses. That's why they call it Šventabala (Holy Puddle) (LTR 888c/762), Biržai district.

In Lithuanian narratives about healing springs, Marian naming, devotional practice, local memory and contextualization are often combined. A notable example is the spring known as Mary's Tears, also called the Ariogala Spring, which is popularly believed to have healing properties. People say that "There's a hill there with water springing out of it that heals all wounds" and that it also helps with eye diseases (LTR 4274/91). It is worth noting that the significance of this site is preserved and given meaning by the community. During the Soviet occupation in 1972, Vytautas Lažinskas erected a metal cross near the spring. However, it was demolished on the government's orders, along with other crosses that had been secretly placed there. In 1989, he erected another cross in the same place, which has remained standing ever since. V. Lažinskas attached a plaque to the cross inscribed with his personal interpretation. According to it, the Ariogala spring symbolizes Mary's tears. In this instance, the practice integrates three distinct components: the collection of water, belief

in its miraculous powers, and the use of Marian naming, which collectively form a devotional itinerary. The spring thus becomes a site of folk piety, while the cross serves as a sign that gives the site its religious and political meaning across historical periods.





Figure 4. Holy Spring of Mary's Tears or Ariogala Spring (Ariogala, Lithuania), 2008 (on the left).
Figure 5. Metal cross on a hill by Vytautas Lažinskas (Ariogala, Lithuania), 2008 (on the right).

Overall, the incorporation of additional geographical elements, such as stones and springs, into the hilly landscape further enhances the visual and devotional complexity. The stone may be handled, chipped, carried, and stored. The water may be consumed and taken home. It is widely accepted that specific stones and springs can have healing properties, and this tradition continues to be practised by local communities. Linking natural objects to Mary, God, and other saints adds a layer of meaning, strengthens the sense of sacrality, and supports devotional practice.

Conclusions

This article argues that the hills serve as a culturally significant vertical natural feature in the Lithuanian lowland landscape, performing the symbolic functions

typically attributed to mountains. In oral tradition, the mythological origins of the hills are emphasized, and particular functions are assigned to them. Hills function as symbols connecting the divine and human spheres, where mythical or divine characters gather and where treasures and sunken sacred buildings are hidden. Over time, specific hills or mounds acquire the status of national "places of memory", where religious practices, rituals, and expressions of collective identity converge. In this sense, the hill becomes not only a physical element of the surrounding relief, but also a semantic and social structure.

Connections between Mary, saints and hills are represented through the expressions of the sacred. Analysis shows that the sacredness attributed to hills manifests in tangible forms and religious practices. Christian symbols on hills, such as crosses, chapels, grottoes, and other monuments, have a dual impact. On the one hand, it serves to change and create the natural surroundings. On the other hand, assigns new meanings. In this sense, hills become places of worship where people make offerings and pray, as well as places of folk beliefs where people collect healing water or stone chippings, believing in their healing powers.

Meanwhile, folklore narratives about dreams illustrate the connection between everyday life and the idea that natural objects have religious meaning and significance. Personal dreams function as narratives that transform private experiences into public obligations, resulting in the creation of sacred objects in the surrounding natural environment and demonstrating human commitment, devotion, piety, and faith in divine power.

Taken together, these findings support the broader conclusion that elevations such as hills and stones in Lithuanian culture are not merely natural objects. In the community, as folklore narratives demonstrate, hills take on multiple meanings: mythological, religious, commemorative, and, in some cases, political. Hills and mounds are also associated with a variety of religious practices that existed in different cultural periods. Therefore, hills do not have a single meaning; instead, they are semantic and social structures to which meanings are ascribed by various historical layers and community memory.

Notes

[1] For example, two independent semiotic interpretations of these oppositions were developed through analyses of the myth of Vilnius city foundation, discussed in the

tradition of A. J. Greimas and V. Toporov. The result of this analysis demonstrates that these two approaches are complementary rather than competitive (see Nastopka 2002).

[2] Lithuania is often characterised as a predominantly lowland country, lacking high mountains. Its highest point, Aukštojas Hill, rises to about 293–294 metres above sea level. Therefore, for accuracy in this article, the term "hill" is preferred instead of "mountain" when discussing the Lithuanian context. The term "mountain" is used only as a broader analytical and symbolic category.

[3] This article does not examine these practices in detail; they are mentioned here only to note that mounds and sacred hills may also be reactivated as collective ritual destinations beyond Christian monuments and pilgrimage settings.

[4] According to data collected by V. Lileikienė (who studied 43 Lourdes), a total of 12 grottoes were documented at the foot of hills. The following locations were identified: Abakų village (Kretinga district), Ablinga, Gardamas (near the road and next to the churchyard), Inkakliai (near the road), Kaltinėnai, Kretinga, Pamūšis (behind the churchyard), Plokščiai, Plungė, Užluobė village (Skuodas district), Užvėnai village (Klaipėda district) (next to the road), and Veiviržėnai (behind the cemetery) (Lileikienė 2004: 124–125). This data indicates that 29% of the Lourdes grottoes are at the foot of hills, 40% are in churchyards, 10% are in cemeteries, and 12% are in other locations. While churchyards are the most common location for Lourdes, the second most common location is at the foot of the hills.

[5] Sacred or miraculous healing water may accumulate not only in stone hollows but also in a tree: "Back in the day, there was an oak and a linden growing on Medžiokalnis. There was a hollow in the tree, and water would stand there in winter and summer. People thought it was holy – they would pray and draw water from it. There was a little chapel by the trees. Later on, people put up three crosses as a vow" (LTR 4791/198). In this case, the tree – like the hill or the stone – can perform a similar mediating function, serving as a point through which holiness and sacral power are understood to manifest.

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