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SACRED PLACE-MAKING IN CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIAN NATIVE FAITH

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Abstract: This article examines how contemporary Native Faith sacred places are created in Lithuania. It argues that such places are not simply inherited from the pre-Christian past or rediscovered as naturally sacred, but are actively produced through material marking, repeated ritual use, landscape care, and symbolic association with reconstructed Baltic tradition. Drawing on participant observation, community materials, public communication, and relevant scholarship, the article discusses selected examples that illustrate different modes of sacred place-making, including hillforts, *alkakalniai*, stone altars (*aukurai*), roofed sanctuaries, sacralized stones, planted groves, archaeoastronomical complexes, and deliberately created mythological landscapes. Particular attention is given to the role of the *aukuras* as a visible, material center of ritual practice, through which contemporary communities mark sacred space and articulate claims to continuity with the pre-Christian past. The Lithuanian case shows that sacred place-making today involves both the reactivation of historically resonant locations and the deliberate creation of new sacred environments shaped by ritual practice, memory, and cultural imagination.

Keywords: Native Faith; sacred place-making; hillforts; altars; heritage; re-sacralization; Lithuania; Baltic religion

Introduction

Contemporary Native Faith communities in Lithuania seek out, establish, and maintain places suitable for ritual practice, communal gathering, and symbolic connection with the pre-Christian past. Yet such places are not simply 'found' as naturally sacred. They become sacred through acts of selection, naming, ritual use, material marking, and interpretation. Sacredness here is therefore not merely inherited but actively produced.

This article explores how contemporary sacred places are made in Lithuanian Native Faith practice. It does not aim to discuss all existing sacred places of this kind in Lithuania but rather focuses on selected examples that best illustrate different modes of sacred place-making. The aim is to show how historically meaningful places, natural objects, and newly created ritual environments are sacralized through repeated communal action and symbolic framing.

In the Lithuanian case, it is important to distinguish between *Romuva* and the broader field of contemporary Native Faith. *Romuva* specifically refers to the best-known organized religious community and its local groups. In contrast, the broader field also includes smaller groups, less formal circles of practitioners, and individual enthusiasts whose activities are related to reconstructed Baltic religion but are not necessarily institutionally part of Romuva. In this article, *Romuva* is used to discuss the activities of that specific organization or its local communities. In contrast, Native Faith is used more broadly to refer to the wider field of contemporary Baltic religious revival.

The article argues that contemporary Native Faith sacred places in Lithuania are created through the interplay of material interventions, ritual activation, landscape care, and narratives of continuity with the Baltic pre-Christian past. Particular attention is given to the *aukuras* as a material and symbolic center of ritual space. Even where sacred places take more complex forms, the altar often remains the key device through which sacredness is made visible and stabilized.

The article is structured as follows. First, it outlines the theoretical framework and discusses earlier research relevant to sacred place-making and Baltic sacred sites. It then presents the study's methodological basis. The main analytical part begins with ancient sacred places and their historiography, which serve as important sources of symbolic models for the present. It then discusses selected contemporary examples, including hillforts, *alkakalniai*, altars, roofed

sanctuaries, sacralized stones, planted groves, archaeoastronomical complexes, and deliberately created mythological landscapes.

Theoretical Framework and Previous research

The present article approaches sacred places not as fixed or self-evident entities, but as places that become sacred through social, material, and symbolic action. In this sense, the analysis assumes that sacredness is not simply inherited but produced. This perspective allows us to examine contemporary Native Faith sacred sites not as direct survivals of pre-Christian religion, but as places whose sacred status is established through ritual use, material marking, interpretation, and cultural memory.

One important concept for this analysis is that of the sacred landscape (Carmichael et al. 2005). In studies of religion and landscape, sacredness is understood not only as attached to a single object or shrine, but as distributed across a wider environment of meaningful places, natural features, and ritual centers. Such an approach is especially useful in the Lithuanian case, where sacred sites are often associated with hills, hillforts, stones, springs, groves, and fire, and where the meaning of a place depends not only on a single monument but also on its wider setting and the narratives attached to it. The concept of sacred landscape, therefore, allows us to see that contemporary Native Faith communities do not simply use isolated points in space, but work with broader symbolic environments.

A second important concept is place-making (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). Following approaches that stress the social production of place, this article treats sacred places as outcomes of repeated practices through which a site is selected, named, marked, interpreted, and ritually activated. In this perspective, a place becomes sacred not simply because of its presumed antiquity, but because people act upon it in ways that distinguish it from ordinary space. Such action may include building an altar, planting a grove, lighting ritual fire, holding seasonal festivals, or incorporating a site into a wider narrative of Baltic tradition. Place-making is therefore particularly relevant to contemporary Native Faith, where many sacred places are constituted through present-day communal work.

A third concept that is important here is invented cultural heritage (Lowenthal 1985, Bendix 1997, Smith 2006). Many of the places discussed in this article are not empty or neutral sites, but heritage objects: hillforts, mythological stones, historically known hills, or protected landscapes. Yet heritage status alone does not make a place sacred. Heritage provides a culturally legitimate framework within which contemporary communities may reinterpret and reactivate a site. In this sense, sacred place-making often takes place at the intersection of religious practice and heritage discourse. This is especially visible where archaeological monuments and places of worship overlap.

The article also draws on the idea of invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This concept is useful not because contemporary Native Faith practices should be dismissed as artificial, but because it helps explain how continuity with the past is materially and symbolically constructed. In the Lithuanian case, this is especially clear in the installation of stone altars, the naming of sacred places, the creation of ritual complexes, and the re-use of historically meaningful sites. Such practices do not amount to a simple continuation of ancient religion. Rather, they are modern forms of cultural and religious work that seek to establish continuity through selective use of historical motifs, scholarly reconstructions, and communal repetition.

Research in the Baltic region has shown that contemporary sacred places are often created through reinterpretation, ritual activation, and symbolic marking rather than through direct continuity from the distant past. In Latvia, Rūta Muktupāvela has shown how modern sacred places may be established in post-Soviet conditions through local initiative and selective reference to ancestral religion (Muktupāvela 2013). Estonian scholars have likewise demonstrated how sacred place identity is formed through contemporary marking, ritual use, and negotiated meanings (Hiiemäe 2017; Jonuks and Äikäs 2019; Kõiva et al. 2020). These studies are important here because they show that the Lithuanian case fits into a broader regional pattern of re-sacralization and religious place-making.

In the Lithuanian context, the transformation of Lithuanian hillforts from mere archaeological sites into active sacred spaces was partly analyzed by a few Lithuanian scholars. As Vykintas Vaitkevičius (2009) notes, this creates a tension between the official archaeological protection of the site and its re-emerging sacral function, in which the installation of new altars serves as a physical manifestation of this re-sacralization. Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson (2013)

argues that by performing rituals and lighting fires on the hillforts, communities effectively 'reclaim' them as living sanctuaries rather than static monuments. According to Milda Ališauskienė (2022), contemporary Baltic pagans employ specific identity-construction strategies to navigate the official heritage landscape, seeking to legitimize their presence within state-sanctioned sites.

Methodology

The article is based on a combination of participant observation, textual sources, and analysis of public representations of contemporary Native Faith communities. The empirical material includes observations of rituals and sacred sites collected between 2015 and 2023, community reports and websites, public communication in digital media, and relevant scholarly literature on Baltic religion, sacred places, and cultural heritage.

The methodological aim is not to produce an exhaustive inventory of all existing contemporary sacred places in Lithuania. Instead, the article discusses selected cases that best illustrate different modes of sacred place-making. The examples were chosen because they reveal recurring patterns: the reinterpretation of historically meaningful places, the installation of altars, the ritual activation of landscape, the creation of enclosed sanctuaries, the sacralization of stones, the planting of groves, and the construction of broader mythological or cosmological complexes.

Community websites, reports, and public communication are treated here not simply as neutral sources of information, but also as forms of self-representation. They are therefore analyzed as part of the sacralization process itself, since they help define places as sacred, present them to wider audiences, and legitimize their use. In this sense, the study combines the analysis of ritual practice, landscape transformation, and narrative framing.

Romuva's annual reports are especially important for the present study because they do not merely record ritual events but also show how the community itself describes, organizes, and legitimates sacred places. In these reports, sacred sites appear not only as locations for festivals but also as a network of places regularly tended, ritually used, and linked to particular local Romuva groups. For this reason, the reports are treated here not simply as documentary sources, but also as forms of self-representation through which sacred place-

making is narrated and institutionalized. Romuva's reports repeatedly present sacred places as community-maintained sites: for instance, in 2019, 17 local Romuvas were said to care for fifty-four sacred places, hillforts, and *alkai*; in 2020, 16 Romuvas for forty-one such places; and in 2021, 14 Romuvas for thirty-seven sites (Romuva reports).

The analysis is therefore qualitative and interpretive rather than exhaustive. The examples discussed are not intended to represent the full scope of existing sites, but to highlight recurring patterns, practices, and forms through which sacred places are created and maintained.

Sacred Sites in Pre-Christian Lithuania

Ancient sacred places in Lithuania are known from a fragmentary body of historical, folkloric, linguistic, and archaeological evidence. Written sources, place-names, legends, and later ethnographic records indicate that hills, stones, groves, springs, and fire played a significant role in pre-Christian religious imagination and practice. At the same time, the surviving evidence is uneven and often indirect, making it difficult to reconstruct a single, stable model of an ancient sacred place.

The available evidence suggests that ancient sacred places in Lithuania were not limited to one single type. References in written sources, place-names, folklore, and archaeological interpretations point to a sacred landscape structured by various kinds of places: hills, *alkai*[1], stones, groves and forests, springs and other waters, and ritual fire. This diversity is important for the present article because contemporary Native Faith communities likewise work with a range of places rather than a single exclusive model of sacred site.

At the same time, these places cannot be treated as if their meanings were self-evident or historically transparent. In many cases, the available evidence does not allow us to determine with certainty how a given place functioned, how long its sacral status lasted, or whether its significance remained stable over time. Some places appear only in place-names or legends, others in written descriptions composed long after Christianization, and still others are known primarily through later scholarly interpretation. For this reason, ancient sacred geography should be understood not as a fixed system preserved intact into the present, but as a historically layered field of meanings.

Some places retained ritual or memorial importance over time; others were Christianized, transformed, or forgotten; and still others were later reinterpreted through scholarship, folklore, and cultural memory. What matters in this article is that this body of historical and cultural knowledge continues to provide a reservoir of signs, names, and associations through which contemporary Native Faith communities identify and interpret places as sacred. Contemporary sacralization, therefore, does not proceed by merely "recovering" a clearly known ancient system; the selective interpretation of fragmentary remains shapes it.

For this reason, the historical record is important not as a direct blueprint for contemporary practice, but as a reservoir of names, images, and associations through which sacred places can be identified, claimed, and reinterpreted in the present.

Academic research on ancient sacred places

While historical records, toponymy, folklore, and archaeological data provide the main basis for reconstructing ancient Baltic sacred places, modern understandings of these places have also been profoundly shaped by later scholarship. In the Lithuanian case, the image of pre-Christian sacred geography available today is not derived solely from the sources. Rather, it has emerged through a prolonged process of interpretation, classification, and synthesis conducted by scholars of mythology, folklore, archaeology, and religion. This historiographical layer is important for the present article because contemporary creators and users of sacred places do not rely only on inherited local tradition: they also draw on scholarly reconstructions of the ancient Baltic worldview.

From the late nineteenth century onward, growing scholarly interest in Lithuanian mythology and pre-Christian religion encouraged a more systematic attention to sacred places, ritual practices, and landscape elements imbued with myth. Researchers increasingly treated hills, forests, stones, springs, and fire not as isolated fragments of folklore, but as parts of a broader religious system. In this way, scholarship helped transform scattered historical and folkloric references into a more coherent image of ancient Baltic religion. This image later became an important symbolic resource for modern Native Faith communities seeking to identify, interpret, and re-sacralize places in the contemporary landscape.

In Lithuania, research relevant to the present topic falls into two overlapping fields. The first is the study of ancient sacred places, Baltic religion, mythology, and sacred landscape. The second concerns the modern reception and reinterpretation of that knowledge in identity, heritage, and religious practice. Particularly important in shaping the modern image of Baltic pre-Christian religion were Marija Gimbutas, Norbertas Vėlius, and Gintaras Beresnevičius. M. Gimbutas placed Baltic religion in a wider prehistoric and comparative framework (Gimbutas 1963). N. Vėlius made a broad range of written sources accessible in 'Sources of Baltic religion and mythology' (Vėlius 1996, 2001, 2003). G. Beresnevičius offered influential synthetic interpretations of Lithuanian religion and mythology and former religious symbols (Beresnevičius 2004).

The study of ancient sacred places in Lithuania provides a more direct basis for the present article. Here, the work of Vykintas Vaitkevičius is central. His studies of *alkai*, sacred hills, stones, springs, and other sacred sites developed a broad interdisciplinary approach combining archaeological, folkloric, linguistic, and cartographic data (Vaitkevičius 2003; 2004; 2006; 2011). Earlier works by Petras Tarasenka and Vytautas Urbanavičius also remain important for the study of stones, sanctuaries, and mythological sites in the Lithuanian landscape (Tarasenka 1958; Urbanavičius 1969). Together, these works not only document possible ancient sacred places but also provide the interpretive language through which such places are recognized in the present.

The scholarly reconstruction of ancient sacred places did not remain confined to academic discourse. In the modern Lithuanian context, it also entered public culture, heritage interpretation, and symbolic landscape-making. For this reason, the study of ancient sacred places is important here not only as background knowledge, but also as part of the genealogy of contemporary sacralization. The present article, therefore, builds on this scholarship but shifts the main question: instead of asking only what sacred places may once have been, it asks how they are identified, created, and used today.

Sacred Places and National Memory in Interwar Lithuania

The interwar period forms an important intermediate stage between the historical memory of pre-Christian sacred places and their contemporary reinterpretation in Native Faith practice. Although it cannot be described as a direct

revival of ancient religion, this period did witness an intensified symbolic use of places, monuments, and fire rituals associated with Lithuania's pre-Christian past. In this sense, interwar Lithuania helped establish some of the cultural forms through which sacred places would later be reimagined.

Particularly significant was the growing tendency to connect landscape, national memory, and imagined antiquity. Hillforts and other symbolically charged places were increasingly landscaped, commemorated, and integrated into public ceremonies. In such contexts, references to pre-Christian Lithuania functioned less as attempts to reconstruct ancient religion than as a language of national depth, continuity, and cultural distinctiveness. The pre-Christian past was thus activated not primarily in a confessional sense, but as a symbolic resource for modern nation-building.

This is especially important for the later history of the altars (*aukurai*). Some of the earliest modern stone altars in Lithuania emerged not in explicitly Native Faith settings, but in interwar commemorative and patriotic contexts.

One of the earliest examples was the stone altar erected in 1925 on Gediminas' Grave Hill, that is, the Veliuona I hillfort, along with the site landscaping and the erection of a monument to Grand Duke Gediminas. The altar was dedicated to Birutė, represented as a *vaidilutė*[2], and thus linked the place not only to state history but also to an imagined sacred dimension of Lithuania's ancient past (Šneiderienė 2025).

A similarly important example is the altar built on Rambynas Hill in 1928 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Lithuanian independence. This initiative, led by Martynas Jankus, connected the site with public rituals of national celebration. Annual *Joninės* (St. John's Day) festivities held there included processions, choir and orchestra performances, theatrical productions, and speeches by prominent intellectuals. In this way, Rambynas Hill became not merely a commemorative site but a place where national memory, landscape symbolism, and ritualized public gathering were brought together. Although such practices were not yet part of contemporary Native Faith as we understand it today, they established a visual and performative model that later proved important in the sacralization of similar places.

The interwar period also shows that the symbolic use of fire and altar-like structures extended beyond explicitly religious settings. In 1934, a stone altar for the Eternal Flame was installed in Kaunas next to the monument to those who died for Lithuania's freedom and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Although this altar was not associated with the ancient religious practice, it further strengthened the connection between stone, fire, public ritual, and collective memory. Such forms contributed to the emergence of a modern visual language in which the altar could function as a marker of continuity, solemnity, and national-sacral significance.

The reactivation of sacred places in interwar Lithuania, therefore, did not simply preserve older traditions. Rather, it created new symbolic connections between heritage, landscape, public ritual, and national identity. These connections later became important for contemporary Native Faith communities, which drew not only on historical and folkloric material but also on modern cultural forms through which Lithuania's sacred past had already been imagined, materialized, and publicly performed.

These interwar developments also included some of the earliest attempts to create sacred places more consciously with reference to an imagined ancient religion. One of the first such figures was Domas Šidlauskas (1878–1944), also known as Visuomis, who developed the principles of the Aisčiai religion and sought to put them into practice. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, he tried to establish a community near Sartai Lake in the Zarasai district, naming the place Romuva and treating the nearby Atauga forest and Salos kalnas, that is, the Velikuškiai II hillfort, as a sacred environment of ancient faith. Summer camps, courses, and Midsummer celebrations were organized there, although the project did not develop into a widely recognized religious movement (Vaitkevičius 2023, 210–213). A related example is Jonas Beržanskis-Klausutis, who at his home in Kaunas built a sacrificial altar for Lithuanian gods and explicitly linked it with ancient Lithuanian religion. These interwar experiments did not yet establish a continuous institutional tradition. Still, they are important as early examples of consciously creating ritual places by drawing on an imagined pre-Christian past. In that sense, they anticipate later Native Faith place-making less as direct organizational ancestors than as symbolic precedents.

Contemporary Sacred Place-Making

Contemporary Native Faith sacred places in Lithuania are not simply inherited from the past or rediscovered as naturally sacred. Rather, they are actively made

through material marking, repeated ritual use, landscape care, and narrative association with an imagined or reconstructed pre-Christian tradition. Whether located at hillforts, stones, groves, or newly created ritual complexes, these places become sacred through sustained practices that bind together heritage, memory, community, and religious imagination.

The sacralization of hillforts

Hillforts (*piliakalniai*) are among the most widespread and visually prominent elements of the Lithuanian cultural landscape (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Šatrija forthill. 2021. Photo by the author.

More than one thousand such sites have been recorded across the country, forming a dense and unevenly distributed network that reflects patterns of settlement, defense, and regional historical development. Their distribution is not random: in some regions, hillforts form clusters that structure both the physical and cultural landscape. For this reason, their spatial distribution provides an important background for understanding contemporary patterns of sacred place-making. The Lithuanian List of Cultural Values currently includes entries for 1,305 hillforts (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The distribution of hillforts in the territory of Lithuania: https://kvr.kpd.lt/#/static-search-results//////////piliakalnis//////1305.

Despite their central role in contemporary Native Faith practice, hillforts were most likely not originally established as sacred places. Archaeological research indicates that they functioned primarily as fortified settlements and, in later periods, as defensive castles or strongholds (Lietuvos piliakalniai 2007, 2015). Their elevated positions, visibility, and strategic location made them suitable for habitation, territorial control, and protection. Although ritual activities may have taken place in or around them, there is no clear evidence that hillforts as such were uniformly conceived as sacred sites in the pre-Christian period (Zabiela 2003).

This distinction is important for the present article. The contemporary sacralization of hillforts does not represent a simple continuation of their original function. Rather, it involves a reinterpretation of historically significant places, in which their monumentality, visibility, and association with the ancient past make them especially suitable for being framed as sacred in the present. In this sense, hillforts exemplify how places that were not originally defined as sacred may become central to contemporary sacred landscapes through processes of reinterpretation, heritage framing, and repeated ritual use.

Romantic and antiquarian readings of the term *piliakalnis* also supported the later symbolic reinterpretation of hillforts[3]. Even though such sites were not originally defined as sacred places, the name and its historical resonance

made them especially suitable for being imagined as condensed expressions of ancient Lithuanian life. In this way, hillforts came to be associated not only with political or military history, but also with ideas of ancestral continuity, collective memory, and, eventually, sacredness. This does not mean that their original function was religious; rather, it shows how language and cultural imagination helped prepare these places for later symbolic and ritual reinterpretation.

Hillforts, therefore, occupy a principal place in contemporary Native Faith sacred geography. Their significance lies not only in their visible monumentality and elevated position in the landscape, but also in their strong association with Lithuania's pre-Christian past, heroic memory, and protected heritage. For contemporary practitioners, hillforts offer places that are simultaneously ancient, symbolically charged, and publicly recognizable. This makes them especially suitable for ritual gatherings and for the public articulation of Native Faith identity.

At the same time, hillforts are not simply 'old sacred places' that survive unchanged into the present. Their contemporary sacralization depends on renewed ritual use, material marking, and interpretive framing. In many cases, it is precisely through the installation of an altar, the lighting of fire, and the repetition of seasonal ceremonies that the hillfort is transformed into a living sacred place. Contemporary ritual use thus does not merely preserve the site's significance but actively redefines it. Hillforts thus function not merely as archaeological monuments, but as elements of a contemporary sacred landscape.

Hillforts also reveal an important tension between different regimes of meaning. They are archaeological monuments, protected heritage objects, tourist destinations, and, for Native Faith communities, places of worship. The contemporary installation of altars and the regular performance of rituals, therefore, create not only sacred space but also a claim to interpretive and practical rights over the landscape. In this sense, hillforts become contested sacred heritage.

Romuva's annual reports make it clear that contemporary sacred places should be understood not only as symbolically important locations, but also as parts of an organized ritual and communal infrastructure. The reports repeatedly emphasize the care, maintenance, and regular use of sacred sites by particular local Romuva groups. They show that sacred places are not activated only during major calendar festivals, but also through repeated ritual practice, including weekly ceremonies. For example, recent reports mention Thursday

rituals on Gediminas' Grave Hill in Vilnius and Kaunas regular rites at the local hillfort in Panevėžys and in other places. The same reports also assign particular places to specific local groups, showing that sacred sites function as stable centers of local religious life rather than as occasional ceremonial settings. In this sense, sacred place-making involves not only selecting or marking a place but also incorporating it into a sustained rhythm of communal care and ritual repetition.

The prominence of hillforts in contemporary Native Faith practice is evident in the range of sites drawn into ritual use across different parts of Lithuania. Among the better-known examples are Gediminas' Grave Hill in Veliuona, the Aukštieji Šančiai and Veršvai hillforts in Kaunas, and other hillforts associated with local Romuva groups and seasonal celebrations. Taken together, such cases show that hillforts do not form a single sacred center, but a distributed ritual network embedded in the wider Lithuanian landscape. In 2017, the 'Romuva' community recognized several hillforts as their sacred sites. These included Gedimino kapo kalnas [Gediminas' Tomb Hill], also known as Vilnius castle hillfort, as well as the Pūčkoriai and Rokantiškiai hillforts in Vilnius, Maisiejūnai and Lašiniai hillforts in the Kaišiadorys district, the Aukštieji Šančiai hillfort in Kaunas, and Upytė hillfort, also known as Čičinskas hill in the Panevėžys district. The list also included Akvieriškės hillfort and Perkūnkalnis, also known as Cirkliškis hillfort, in the Švenčionys district, among others (Romuva Reports).

Alongside hillforts, other elevated places, especially hills identified or interpreted as *alkakalniai*, whose names indicate an ancient sanctuary, may also be selected for ritual use. In such cases, the sacral significance of the place depends less on monumentality and more on the semantic weight of the name *alkas,* local tradition, and the perception that the site may once have been associated with worship or offerings. However, compared to hillforts, such sites appear to be less publicly prominent and less frequently used in contemporary Native Faith practice. This contrast is important because it shows that contemporary sacred place-making in Lithuania draws on both highly visible heritage monuments and less monumental yet symbolically charged places identified through toponymy, memory, and interpretation.

Symbolic centers of worship – *Aukurai* (altars)

The most significant and widespread material markers of contemporary Native Faith sacred places are stone altars known as *aukurai*. In most cases, these altars are installed on hillforts, where they serve as visible, durable centers of ritual space. In this way, the *aukuras* and the hillfort form a closely connected pair: the hillfort provides the historically and symbolically charged location, while the altar materializes and stabilizes its contemporary sacred use.

As a ritual object, the *aukuras* serves as the focal point of ceremonies. It is the place where fire is lit, offerings are made, and communal attention is gathered. Through its presence, a site is explicitly marked as set apart for worship. In this sense, installing an *aukuras* is one of the clearest acts of place-making, transforming a location into a functioning sacred place.

In form, these altars range from simple stone pavements resembling hearths to more monumental masonry constructions deliberately designed to evoke antiquity and continuity. Their exact historical prototype remains uncertain since empirical evidence for the form of pre-Christian stone altars in Lithuania is limited. For this reason, the contemporary *aukuras* should be understood not as a straightforward survival of ancient material culture, but as a modern ritual object assembled from selected historical motifs, commemorative practices, and later visual models.

The emergence of such altars in Lithuania has a layered genealogy. As discussed in the previous section, some of the earliest modern examples appeared in the interwar period in commemorative and public contexts. These included altars associated with national memory, public gatherings, and symbolic representations of the past. However, these early forms were not yet part of a continuous religious practice. Rather than repeating these cases in detail, it is important here to note that they established visual and cultural precedents that later made the *aukuras* a recognizable and acceptable form.

During the Soviet period, structures resembling altars also appeared in civic and cultural contexts, often without explicit religious meaning. At the same time, informal practices, such as those associated with the *žygeiviai* (hikers) and folk movement, began to reintroduce fire rituals and symbolic uses of such places, particularly on hillforts. These practices formed an important transitional layer between commemorative uses and explicitly religious reinterpretations.

A new phase began in the late 20th and especially the early 21st century when followers of the Native Faith began to adopt and reinterpret these forms as explicitly sacred. In many cases, altars that had previously served civic or symbolic functions were incorporated into religious practice, while new *aukurai* were constructed through communal effort. These altars are most often established on hillforts, but also appear in other types of sacred sites, including private sanctuaries and newly created ritual spaces.

One notable example of an adapted site is the altar at the confluence of the Nemunas and Neris rivers in Kaunas, known as the *Santakos aukuras*, where followers of the Baltic faith have gathered since around 2010 to light sacred fire every Thursday evening. Similarly, in 2011, practitioners began performing rituals on the Veliuona hillfort, where an altar was established, and the site was associated with the goddess *Veliona*, thus linking the landscape directly with the pagan pantheon.

The *Lizdeika* sanctuary in Verkiai Regional Park, Vilnius, exemplifies the transition from clandestine Soviet-era activity to more institutionalized practice. Although the site had long been important to the underground hikers' movement, a formal altar was established there in 1993 as part of a project by the architect Sigitas Lasavickas, who sought to materialize Baltic spiritual heritage in architectural form. Since approximately 2000, the site has evolved into one of the main centers of urban pagan ritual led by Vilniaus Šventaragis Romuva.

Another prominent site is the Aukštieji Šančiai hillfort in Kaunas, where the local Romuva community erected an altar in the early 2010s. This site serves as an important space for communal rituals and demonstrates the re-sacralization of urban archaeological heritage. The altar on the Veršvai hillfort in Kaunas also entered ritual practice approximately between 2014 and 2015 (see Figure 3). In 2017, an altar dedicated to the goddess *Medeinė* was consecrated in the Panevėžys district through a community initiative to create a spiritual center for local Romuva followers. New significant altars were also established around 2012 in Altoniškis and Zapyškis in the Kaunas district, as well as on other hillforts.



Figure 3. *Aukuras* on Veršvai forthfill. 2022. Photo by the author.

Some pagan altars resemble simple fire pits, while others are more monumental and architecturally elaborated. Taken together, these structures show that Native Faith sacred space is created not only through the re-appropriation of hillforts but also through the stabilization of ritual places in urban settings, on private land, and in symbolically reinterpreted landscapes. The construction of altars thus exemplifies the invention of tradition by granting contemporary sacred sites a tangible sense of antiquity, continuity, and authenticity.

Roofed sanctuaries and enclosed ritual spaces

A distinctive development in contemporary Baltic religious architecture is the emergence of sanctuaries in which the *aukuras* is installed not in an open landscape but within a more clearly delimited, roofed ritual setting. In such cases, the altar remains the symbolic center of worship, yet the surrounding spatial form differs from that of the open-air hillfort model discussed above. These sites show that contemporary Native Faith communities not only sacralize archaeologically or topographically significant places but also create sheltered, institutionally recognizable environments for ritual practice.

A notable example is the Dvarciškiai sanctuary in the Švenčionys district, established on a private homestead that serves as the central permanent base of the Lithuanian Romuva community. Unlike most outdoor altars on hillforts, Dvarciškiai includes a sanctuary built under a roof, providing a protected space for the ritual flame and communal rituals. This case is significant because it demonstrates that the *aukuras* may function not only as an open-air ritual cen-

ter, but also as the focal point of a more permanent sacred complex maintained by a religious community.

A comparable example of the adaptation of built space for ritual use is the *Šventaragis* Temple in Vilnius, located in a historic tower on the banks of the Vilnelė River. Since 2012, the *Šventaragis* Romuva community has used this structure, which forms part of the heritage landscape of the Vilnius Castles Reserve, for regular ceremonies. Here too, ritual life is organized around an *aukuras*, but one situated within an enclosed, historically layered urban environment. The site demonstrates that Native Faith practice may also be inserted into already protected and symbolically charged heritage settings, where religious use develops through repeated occupation and communal recognition rather than through new construction alone.

Another notable example is the Eternal Fire sanctuary, *Šatrijos ugnumas*, on Raudonkalnis near Šatrija Hill in the Telšiai district, established in 2017 by a group of enthusiasts (see Figure 2). This case is distinct because its origins lie not in a broader institutional framework, but in the personal mythology and ritual initiative of its founder, Adolfas Gedvilas, also known as King Ringaudas of Samogitia. Through his initiative, fire was rekindled on Šatrija Hill and later maintained at his home, where his followers designated the hearth as the *alkas* of the fire goddess Gabija. In this case, a small-scale sanctuary emerged through a personal religious vision later stabilized by communal effort. What makes Raudonkalnis especially distinctive in the Lithuanian context is that, since 2017, the eternal fire there has been continuously maintained by followers of the old faith, who keep it burning without interruption by taking turns in its care. This gives the site a unique status among contemporary Native Faith sanctuaries in Lithuania. At the same time, the stone altar on Šatrija Hill and the annual return of fire there symbolically reconnect the enclosed sanctuary with the wider sacred landscape.



Figure 4. *Šatrijos ugnumas* on Raudonkalnis. 2021. Photo by the author.

Taken together, these examples show that the contemporary *aukuras* is not limited to open-air sites such as hillforts. It may also become the center of more enclosed, architecturally framed, or privately maintained ritual environments. Such spaces extend the geography of Native Faith worship beyond the monumental landscape and reveal a movement toward more stable and differentiated forms of sacred place-making.

Sacralized stones and ritual places around them

Another type of contemporary sacred place is formed around stones that are treated as mythologically significant, ritually suitable, or symbolically powerful. In such cases, sacrality is attached not primarily to an altar as a constructed center, but to the stone itself as a natural or heritage object. Where fireplaces or altars are added nearby, these function as supporting ritual elements rather than as the primary basis of the site's sacred status.

One example is the stone known as the Lady's Bed (*Marijos lova* or *Dievo motinos lova*) in the Kretinga district near Vaitkaičiai. Officially recognized as a mythological monument, this large boulder contains a natural hollow that folk tradition has long associated with the Virgin Mary. In the context of contemporary Baltic faith, however, the site has also been reinterpreted through a pre-Christian lens, and the stone may be treated as a natural altar or as the

remnant of an ancient goddess sanctuary (Vaitkevičius 2006). This layered status, as a Catholic folk monument, a protected heritage object, and a site of contemporary pagan interpretation, illustrates especially clearly the overlapping and contested meanings that sacred places may acquire in the Lithuanian landscape. These cases show how cultural heritage may be reinterpreted as ritual heritage through repeated contemporary use.

A different but equally revealing case is the *Ragutis* stone or altar in Vilnius Old Town. Located in a central urban setting and protected as part of the archaeological complex of the historic city (Lithuanian Register of Cultural Property (Unique Code: 25504)), this stone has been actively re-sacralized by members of the Native Faith community. Since the late twentieth century, it has been used for rituals dedicated to the god *Ragutis*. Regardless of the historical problems surrounding this attribution, the site is important as an example of urban sacralization, in which a publicly accessible heritage object is transformed into a functional ritual place through recurring ceremonial use. Here, the sacredness of the site does not derive from uncontested historical continuity, but from present-day performative practice and communal recognition.

These examples show that stones are treated not simply as survivals of ancient cult, but as heritage objects whose ritual potential is reactivated through repeated use, naming, and communal interpretation. In contrast to the *aukuras*, which visibly mark a center of ritual action, the sacralized stone often functions as the primary object of attention. At the same time, any nearby fireplace or altar remains secondary to its already meaningful presence.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that contemporary Native Faith sacred places are created not only through the installation of altars, but also through the reinterpretation of natural and historical objects as ritually potent presences in the landscape.

Planting sacred groves as a form of sacred place-making

Another important way to create contemporary sacred places is to plant sacred groves. In such cases, sacrality is established not primarily through the reappropriation of an already recognized heritage site, but through the deliberate transformation of land by planting trees, naming the place, and attaching it to commemoration and ritual use. The act of planting itself becomes a religious

and symbolic gesture through which a new sacred environment is gradually brought into being.

One example is the Sienakalnis Community in the Prienai district, established in 2014, where several enthusiasts acquired a homestead plot to create a communal space based on sharing and trust. A significant act of sacralizing this landscape took place in 2021, when a sacred grove of oak trees was planted near the Geruliai II hillfort in memory of Romaldas Kusas, a luminary, teacher, and artist. A commemorative plaque identifying the site as a *šventoji giraitė* (sacred grove) gave the newly planted grove both memorial and sacred significance. In this case, sacredness emerges not from the antiquity of the place itself, but from the intentional planting of trees and the community's decision to recognize the grove as sacred.

A similar process can be observed at the Beržytė homestead near Seredžius in the Jurbarkas district. In 2022, a grove of oak trees was planted there to commemorate the 160th anniversary of the birth of Jonas Gediminas Beržanskis-Klausutis, regarded by followers as a representative of the old Lithuanian faith. The planting of the grove formed the core of a broader sacralizing initiative through which the site is being developed into the Beržytė Romuva sanctuary. An altar has also been established there, and a Romuvian *guotas* is being created. Still, the planting of the grove itself is especially significant because it marks the beginning of a sacred landscape shaped through living vegetation rather than through the reinterpretation of an already monumental site.

These examples show that contemporary Native Faith sacred places may be created not only by adapting hillforts, stones, or other inherited sites, but also by planting groves as new sacred environments. In such cases, trees are not merely decorative additions to ritual space. Rather, the grove itself becomes the sacred place: a living, growing, and collectively maintained landscape of memory, commemoration, and religious meaning.

Archaeoastronomy and expanded sacred complexes.

A distinct mode of contemporary sacred place-making in Lithuania involves the identification, interpretation, and construction of sites presented as ancient observatories or palaeoastronomical calendars. Rather than representing a wholly separate category, these places may be understood as expanded sacred complexes in which the *aukuras* remains central, embedded in a broader ritual

and interpretive landscape. In many cases, such complexes also include a hillfort or another historically significant location, while additional elements, such as stone alignments, wooden pillars, calendar markers, or mythological narratives, broaden the site's symbolic scope. In this sense, they do not replace the altar-centered model of sacralization discussed above but extend it into more elaborate cosmological and spatial compositions.

Information about proto-observatories in other countries inspired Lithuanian enthusiasts to search for possible ancient observatories and, in some cases, to create new sacred sites based on imagined or reconstructed celestial models. One of the earliest and most influential examples is the Ancient Celestial Observatory established in 1996 at a homestead in Kulionys by Jonas Vaiškūnas. The site consists of a circle of ten wooden pillars marked with calendar signs surrounding a central stone altar dedicated to the Sun and Fire. Nearby stands a pagan Thunder Temple, where, since 2000, visitors have been encouraged to bring stones from various parts of Lithuania. The sanctuary is situated close to the Molėtai Astronomical Observatory and the Lithuanian Museum of Ethnocosmology. In this context, the Kulionys complex may be understood not simply as a ritual site, but also as a pedagogical and symbolic environment linking ethnographic heritage, cosmological imagination, and modern astronomy.

A key reference point for such projects is Birutė Hill in Palanga. Investigations there suggested that the site may have included a structure used to observe celestial movement and mark calendar dates, an idea later popularized by Libertas Klimka (Klimka 1985). Birutė Hill thus became one of the most important archaeological and symbolic models for later attempts to reconstruct ancient Baltic observatories. At the same time, the site exemplifies the multilayered nature of sacred places in Lithuania, as a Christian chapel was later built there, and the hill remained associated with later popular devotion.

A more explicit materialization of this archaeoastronomical imagination is found in *Žemaičių Alka* in Šventoji, built in 1998. This pagan temple includes carved wooden pillars representing Baltic deities. These pillars are arranged so that the setting sun over the sea can mark different calendar festivals. Here, the sacred site is not merely identified in an existing landscape but deliberately constructed as a functioning cosmological model, in which ritual, mythological symbolism, and calendrical calculation are brought together in a single architectural composition. As in other examples discussed in this article, the site is

organized around an altar, but its ritual meaning is expanded through a more explicit celestial and calendrical framework.

Similar tendencies are evident in sites designated as stone calendars or as sites of astronomical alignments. One notable example is the group of stones near the village of Jonioniai in the Merkinė municipality, often referred to as the Lithuanian Stonehenge. The site has been interpreted as a palaeoastronomical observatory used by ancient ritual specialists. The stones are arranged in circles, with the outer ring thought to reflect lunar azimuths and the inner structure functioning as a solar calendar. Since 2001, St John's Day and other festivals have been celebrated there, showing how cosmological interpretation may gradually lead to recurring ritual activation.

A related but more recent example is the sanctuary established near the Aukštieji Šančiai hillfort in Kaunas in 2013. An altar was built, and a boulder calendar known as the Thunder Oak Calendar was installed. The Ancestral Trail connects the hillfort, the altar, and the calendar into a single ritual and interpretive complex. Seasonal festivals are celebrated in this newly created sanctuary. This case clearly demonstrates the form of expanded sacred complex discussed here: a hillfort, an *aukuras*, and cosmological markers are brought together into one deliberately shaped ritual landscape.

The landscape of Lopaičiai near Tverai offers a somewhat different but related example. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Lopaičiai hillfort and its surroundings were promoted as a site reflecting pre-Christian Samogitian history and culture. The hillfort began to be associated with the castle of the Samogitian prince Vykintas, while stone accumulations on a nearby hill were presented as the remains of an ancient sanctuary, observatory, or even megalithic dolmen (Daugirdaitė 2014a; 2014b). These interpretations gained visibility through the mass media, folklore, and cultural events, attracting both local interest and wider attention. In this way, Lopaičiai developed into a contested sacred landscape in which archaeological data, local imagination, alternative spirituality, tourism, and public heritage discourse all intersect. The spring, the stones, the supposed observatory, and the fertility stone together form a complex whose sacrality is sustained less by institutional consensus than by repeated narration, visitation, and symbolic investment. Here too, the logic is one of expansion: the hillfort is not treated as an isolated monument, but as part of a broader sacred environment composed of multiple mutually reinforcing elements.

Taken together, these cases show a more expansive and interpretive mode of sacralization than the examples discussed earlier in the article. Sacredness is created not only by ritual continuity or the installation of an altar in a historically meaningful place, but also by the addition of cosmological, calendrical, and mythological elements that broaden the site's symbolic scope. Yet these places remain closely connected to the article's main argument, because even in their more elaborate form they continue to rely on the same core principles: the material marking of place, the centrality of the *aukuras*, the ritual activation of landscape, and, in many cases, the incorporation of a hillfort or another historically resonant location into a broader sacred complex.

Deliberately created mythological landscapes

The site created in Naisiai provides a particularly clear example of a deliberately created Baltic mythological landscape. Unlike hillforts, sacralized stones, or other historically layered places discussed above, this site was not reinterpreted from an already existing sacred or heritage object, but intentionally designed as a new symbolic environment drawing on Baltic mythology, reconstructed cosmology, and contemporary cultural imagination. In this sense, it may be understood as an especially explicit case of invented heritage and deliberate sacred landscape construction.

In 2012, the Baltic Gods Park was established on Alka Hill, an artificial mound formed during the excavation of a nearby pond. At the center of this site stands an open-air Ancient Baltic Temple (alkas), featuring oak sculptures of major Baltic deities. Nearby is the Museum of Baltic Gods, which integrates more than fifty oak sculptures into the surrounding landscape in order to represent a broad pantheon of divine figures. The site's symbolic geography also includes Sun Square, Fire Square, the Moon's Eye, and the Baltic Arena, a large amphitheater intended for communal gatherings. Fire Square features a stacked-stone altar and a statue of the goddess Gabija, thus preserving the significant role of the *aukuras* even in this more monumental and pedagogical setting (naisiai.lt).

The museum and its conceptual landscape were inaugurated in 2012 through the collaboration of ethnologist Libertas Klimka, archaeologist Vykintas Vaitkevičius, and designer Vilius Puzeras. The project includes fifty-three oak sculptures created by folk artists from Northern Lithuania, thirty-eight of which

are arranged along an educational trail. This makes Naisiai not only a site of possible ritual use but also a place of public instruction, cultural display, and mythological visualization. The site is therefore explicitly framed as a museum landscape, in which Baltic mythology is presented through a curated and didactic spatial composition (naisiai.lt)

Unlike most of the other sacred places discussed in this article, Naisiai was not created by Native Faith communities themselves, but through a top-down initiative led by a prominent public and political figure. For this reason, it cannot be understood solely as a product of religious practice. Rather, it should also be interpreted as part of a broader project of cultural representation, value formation, and public influence, in which Baltic religious imagery is mobilized in a wider social and symbolic context.

Naisiai remains relevant to the broader argument of this article because it shows that even where sacred space is newly created rather than inherited, it is still organized through familiar elements such as the *alkas*, the altar, named symbolic zones, and a structured ritual geography. In this respect, it demonstrates the furthest extension of the sacralizing processes discussed in this study: not the reinterpretation of an old place, but the deliberate construction of an entirely new mythological landscape.

Naisiai should also be viewed in the broader context of deliberately created mythological environments in contemporary Lithuania. Other examples include the Šventa mythological trail in the Švenčionys district, the Baltic Mythology Park in Darbėnai, the Hill of Witches in Neringa, and the Balsiai Mythological Park in Vilnius, among others. Although these sites differ in scale and function, they likewise demonstrate how Baltic mythological imagery shapes contemporary cultural landscapes.

Conclusion

The examples discussed in this article show that contemporary Native Faith sacred places in Lithuania are produced rather than inherited. Their sacredness emerges through the interplay of material interventions, recurring ritual action, landscape care, and narratives of continuity with the pre-Christian past. In this sense, sacred place-making is not merely a matter of belief, but of sustained work performed on and through the landscape.

Hillforts remain the most prominent and symbolically powerful sites in this process because they combine visible monumentality, heritage authority, and strong associations with Baltic antiquity. Yet the article has shown that contemporary sacred place-making extends beyond hillforts alone. Altars, roofed sanctuaries, sacralized stones, planted groves, archaeoastronomical complexes, and entirely constructed mythological landscapes all demonstrate different ways in which places are marked, activated, and interpreted as sacred.

The *aukuras* occupies a particularly important position within this process. As a material center of ritual space, it makes sacredness visible, gathers communal attention, and stabilizes religious practice in the landscape. Even in more expansive complexes that include hillforts, calendar markers, stones, or mythological narratives, the altar often remains the central ritual focus. In this respect, the contemporary *aukuras* is not simply a survival of ancient material culture, but a modern ritual object through which claims to antiquity, continuity, and sacred legitimacy are materially expressed.

At the same time, these sacred places are not neutral or uncontested. Many of them are also archaeological monuments, protected heritage objects, tourist destinations, or sites of alternative spiritual use. Contemporary Native Faith communities, therefore, do not merely inherit sacred places; they negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes create them anew. The Lithuanian case thus demonstrates that sacred place-making today involves both the reactivation of historically resonant landscapes and the deliberate production of new sacred environments shaped by ritual practice, memory, and cultural imagination.

Notes

[1] The term 'alkai' traditionally refers to ancient sacred sites (primarily forests and hills, as well as others).

[2] *Vaidilutės* - the so-called priestesses of the ancient cult, who tended the eternal flame.

[3] The etymology of the term 'hillfort' in Lithuanian relates to two words: 1) castle and 2) *pilti / supilti* [to pour]. The latter suggests that the castle mound was 'piled

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