

**Lithuania's Kryžių kalnas [The Hill of Crosses]: Investigating the Layered Histories, Meanings, and Tensions that Chronicle a Nation's Life**

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**Abstract**

Lithuania's Kryžių kalnas [Hill of Crosses] is a hauntingly beautiful and chaotic site in the northern part of the country, attracting tourists and locals alike. With vague beginnings as a defensive mound in the ninth to fourteenth centuries, to a place of rebellion against the Soviet occupation, and finally, as an official national heritage site recognized by Pope John Paul II, the Hill of Crosses holds historical, religious, cultural, and aesthetic significance within the nation. Throughout its history, the Hill has suffered constant devastation due to abandonment and oppressive regimes, but since Lithuania's independence in 1990, crosses have accumulated continuously. Hundreds of thousands of crosses cover the site today, mainly thanks to a small market selling religious paraphernalia to visitors. A parking lot, tourism center, and market were constructed near the Hill to accommodate the increase in visitors since the pope's 1993 visit. These additions have been a topic of debate due to how they facilitate visits as well as concerns over mass-produced crosses overwhelming larger crosses of national cultural heritage significance. In this article, I examine the histories of the Hill and the tensions in maintaining it while also reflecting on the meaning of the chaotic beauty of the Hill as a spontaneous shrine and site of assemblage.

**Introduction**

Just twelve kilometers from the city of Šiauliai in the central-northern region of Lithuania, Kryžių kalnas [Hill of Crosses], stands proudly against the flat Baltic agricultural landscape. A small sign along the A12 highway, connecting Kaliningrad to Riga, points toward the curving country road that eventually leads to a large parking lot, tourism center, small market, and walkway leading to the Hill of Crosses. At the forefront of the Hill, a large crucifix gifted by Pope John Paul II after his visit in 1993 greets visitors. A few meters behind it, the Hill bleeds into the surrounding landscape with seemingly unlimited crosses (see fig. 1). Large wooden crosses protruding from the ground display Lithuania's reputed cross-making craft, inscribed in 2008 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and give the small hill a cathedral-like height. Approaching the Hill, what looks like vines climbing the large crosses reveals themselves to be tiny crosses, rosaries, and mementos hung by visitors looking to leave their mark (see fig. 2). Walking through the narrow pathways up

the Hill, messages from various languages and faiths become apparent, some praying for a lost loved one, others hoping for a happy marriage, and many just placed by tourists when on holiday.



*Figure 1: Visitors gathered around Pope John Paul II's crucifix at the forefront of the Hill of Crosses. The crucifix stands out because of its placement apart and its noticeably darker, treated brown wood. Photo taken by the author on 12 June 2015.*



*Figure 2: Religious memorabilia dangling from and overtaking a wooden cross, almost completely hiding the figure of Christ. Photo taken by the author on 12 June 2015.*

Whether it's "The Atlas Obscura Guide to Lithuania" [2024] or Lonely Planet's "12 things you can only do in Lithuania" [Kaminski 2024], the Hill is always listed among the ranks of top things to do when visiting the country. Additionally, there are countless videos on YouTube of visits to the Hill, showcasing its uniqueness, oddity, and sometimes creepiness to the world [e.g., Great Big Story 2016; Kara and Nate 2017; National Geographic 2018]. Personally, having visited the Hill in my youth, it always struck a sense of awe and wonder in me, which is why I later conducted research here as a folklorist and anthropologist.

The history [Dailidė 1993; Smilgys 1999; Šinkūnaitė 2000; Kazlauskaitė 2000; Miknevičienė and Nemunienė 2008; Valiulis and Žvirgždas 2008; Motuzas 2014; Rimkus 2014], archeology [Salatkienė 2000a, 2000b], and religious identity [Olson 2009] of the Hill has been studied thoroughly. The Hill has shifted

meanings and uses over the centuries: from a medieval defense ground to a place of mourning, to a site of rebellion, to a religious altar, to a national monument and a touristic hotspot. However, the Hill has not transitioned from one meaning to another, but rather transcends all these meanings at once, allowing visitors to choose the meanings to which they wish to cling. The Hill gives agency to its visitors to extract the meanings that suit them best, as the Hill continues to adapt and grow with every visit.

This article begins with an overview of three significant historical periods of the Hill's history. The first period draws mostly from archeological resources and local lore, spanning from the ninth and fourteenth centuries up until 1956, beginning with when the man-made mound was formed to when individuals began erecting crosses as part of local custom. The second period begins in 1956 when Lithuanians began returning to their homeland after Soviet-forced deportations to Siberia. Upon their return, Lithuanians from wider environs began using the mound to share painful suppression stories and express religious resistance to Soviet rule. The final period, spanning from 1990 until the present, begins with Lithuania's newly reinstated independence, an "official" recognition of the Hill by local Catholic institutions, and finally, as an important place to visit for both Lithuanians and tourists. These layers of histories have generated a mix of narratives about the Hill, which in turn have become "a sort of chronicle of the nation's life" [Rimkus 2014: 3]. The final section examines tensions with the Hill, namely due to its function as a spontaneous shrine and site of assemblage. The chaotic nature of the Hill makes it difficult to manage, as different figures and organizations disagree about whether they should or should not limit additions to the Hill and whether a distinction between pilgrim and tourist is meaningful.

### Methodology

In the summer of 2015, I conducted fieldwork at the Hill as part of my master's degree in social and cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. I was residing in the nearby town of Šiauliai with a family friend, Rita Šopienė, for about twelve weeks and taking intermittent time to visit family and other historical sites across Lithuania. About twice a week, I made the twelve-kilometer trip to the Hill, either by bus or bike. There, I would spend a few hours taking detailed fieldnotes on observations based on my surroundings, paying special attention to visitors frequenting the Hill and nearby shops, and wandering between the crosses while taking pictures. I attended Mass twice in the chapel in the Franciscan Friary nearby, and I took part in the yearly holy weekend of Šv. Ona [St. Anne], which consisted of a vigil on 25 July 2015 and a pilgrimage from Šiauliai to the Hill and Holy Mass, broadcast on national television on 26 July 2015. For background information, I spent time in the archives of P. Višinskio Public Library in Šiauliai, reading books, pamphlets, and newspaper articles that mentioned the Hill. I also visited the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania in Vilnius for additional materials on the topic.



For this article, I cite formal interviews that I conducted with five key informants: archeologist Birutė Salatkienė, architect Apoloniya Nistelienė, Šiauliai Bishop Eugenijus Bartilus, seniūnija [eldership] of Meškuičiai organizer Virginija Remutienė, and worker Audrone Bačiunienė. I reached out to these individuals for interviews because they were either recommended to me by Šiauliai residents when chatting informally about my research or because I had read about them during my tour of the libraries and archives. All these interviews were recorded with their consent and spanned approximately an hour, though some pleasantly extended for longer as conversations meandered over treats and tea.

#### First Period: Ninth to Fourteenth Centuries to 1956

Underneath the mass of crosses today, lies a mound dating back to sometime between the ninth and fourteenth centuries [Salatkienė 2000b]. Known as Kulen or Kula stemming from the name of the nearby Kulpė River, the mound was piled and adorned with a wooden castle used as fortification against the Livonian order until it was burnt down in the sixteenth century [Bučas 2000: 115; Salatkienė 2000b: 38]. Throughout this period, the Hill held many names: Hill of Prayers, Begging Castle, Holy Hill, Jurgaičiai Mount, Domantai Mound, Castle Hill, or simply the Castle. After being abandoned, archeological digs in the late twentieth century revealed an “old burial place at the mound” [Salatkienė 2000b: 30], dating back to the mid-1800s. The Russian Empire annexed Žemaitija, the northwestern region of Lithuania, after the Third Partition of 1795 and the final disintegration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Russian Empire imposed the Russian language, Russian culture, and the Orthodox religion within the region, but they were met with great resistance due to dominant Catholic belief, supported by the local Catholic institutions, and so conversion (both institutionally and religiously) was never successful. As noted in a brochure for the Hill, many believe that graves discovered at the Hill belong to anti-Tsarist rebels (e.g., Catholics) who were “secretly buried there and they began erecting crosses both for the perished and lost” [Kryžių kalnas, n.d.] sometime between 1831 and 1863. Circa 1850, an estimated twenty crosses were atop the Hill, perhaps for this commemoration. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, archeologists investigated and documented the site, proving that the Hill was well-known, well-used, and held historical significance among Lithuanians [Gimbutas 1958: 96; Smilgys 1999: 9]. In 1888, crosses depicting the fourteen Stations of the Cross were present. By 1900, there were 130 crosses, 155 by 1902, 200 by 1914, and finally over 400 by 1923 [Smilgys 1999: 9]. According to the Hill’s official website [Katalikų interneto tarnyba 2008], in the interwar period and during Lithuania’s independence from 1918 to 1940, the number of crosses on the Hill was staggering as people regularly gathered there for religious services. By 1928, an estimated 10,000 crosses occupied the Hill. A chapel was built atop the Hill in 1929, but it was destroyed in 1935. On 15 June 1949, the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, and on 22 June

1941 Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union and occupied Lithuania. Eventually, in July 1944 the Nazis were expelled from the country, and Lithuania was re-occupied by the Soviet Union. During this war-ridden period, the Hill was destroyed and forcibly abandoned, and it laid barren until a decade later.

Alongside this history constructed from archeological reports, written accounts, and photographs are legends that inform the significance of this place, namely its association with miracles: “even the most extraordinary legends prove, that they have been part of its history and the Hill of Crosses has always been the object of permanent concern for people” [Rimkus 2000: 185]. Some legends focus on the war-ridden history of the region, such as when Ričardas Dailidė writes that where the site lies today once “raged a great battle. Many a warrior died. Relatives buried the dead and, in their memory, built the hill in three days and nights” [1993: 18]. Other stories are more detailed but follow a more fairytale-like cadence in being situated in a distant past, yet still grounded in the Lithuanian landscape, such as a recounting by Lithuanian writer Bronius Kviklys:

Once upon a time, there lived a man whose beloved daughter was so seriously ill that nobody could help her. He sat by her bedside day and night, and once, when he was very tired, he fell asleep. The man dreamed of a woman clad in white, who told him: “If you want your daughter to get well again, you have to make a wooden cross and carry it on Castle Hill near Meškuičiai.” The poor man did what he had been told. The cross he made was very heavy and it took him 13 hours to carry it to the Hill. The man kissed the cross and mounted it on the top. He had made only half of his way back home when he was met by his recovered daughter, who told him that as soon as he had left for the Hill she started feeling better, and when he has reached it she rose from the bed. [Valiulis and Stanislovas 2008: 6]

This rendition of the Hill is timeless and mysterious, referring to a fantastical, indistinguishable history and providing an air of magic to the site.

In a short historical and photo book, Laima Šinkūnaitė includes a more concrete history, still paired with some magical spirit but with additional names and dates that seemingly provide more legitimacy, though still debatable:

Approximately in 1850, Maricijus Griškevičius, a treasurer of Šiauliai economy, wrote about a very unhealthy man from the Jurgaičiai village, who had made a promise to God in 1847 – in case he recovered, he will put up a cross. “It happened so that the man regained his health while erecting the cross.” The news immediately widespread and influenced the infinite process: crosses began springing one after another. [2000: 62]

Throughout these legends, religious symbolism is at the forefront, namely related to the Hill's ability to heal, save, and protect its visitors. Whichever origin legend one believes, the stories all mark that the man-made mound once known

as Kula entered local customs as a place to erect crosses in hopes for some sort of divine intervention. As Hubertas Smilgys writes, by the beginning of the twentieth century, “the Hill of Crosses was already a well-known place; in addition to visits from many people, it was also a site of masses and religious festivals” [1999: 9]. Even so, it was visited mostly by local Lithuanians and didn’t become well-known countrywide until the second half of the twentieth century. In a French tourism book from 1938, the authors write that “le plus impressionnant lieu de sépulture est la fameuse colline des croix” [the most impressive of the burial grounds is the famous Hill of Crosses] [Schmittlein 1938: 27], however it wasn’t until folks began returning to Lithuania from forced deportations that a wider range of Lithuanians made a point to visit this place.

#### Second Period: 1956 to 1990

Between 1941 and 1952, Lithuanians were deported to remote areas of the USSR by the Soviets, such as desolate areas of Siberia. Some were simply displaced and forced to leave their homes to live in extremely harsh and foreign conditions, whereas others were prisoners in labor camps and mainly forced to work in coal mines and forestry. After Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953, the Главное управление исправительно-трудовых лагерей [Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps], commonly known as the Gulag, began shutting down, and both displaced people and prisoners slowly started being released and allowed to return to Lithuania. Many Lithuanians did not have the finances or the paperwork to return to their homeland, and so some were left stranded or decided to remain in their newly made home.

Beginning in 1956, people began returning to their homes in Lithuania in the Jurgaičiai region and many placed crosses on the Hill (see fig. 3) in thanks for being back in their homeland as well as to commemorate those lost in Siberia [Dailidė 1993: 25; Šinkūnaitė 2000: 62; Rimkus 2014: 3]. Vytenis Rimkus, a local scholar and painter, explains that the Hill harbored narratives of struggle and suffering due to the Soviet occupation, and the “scopes and the content of the Hill of Crosses became openly adversarial to the Soviet ideology” [2014: 3]. Additionally, the obvious Christian symbolism was as a point of contention because “[f]rom the point of view of Soviet ideology, religious outlook on the world was anti-scientific and that is why of no value, still being an obstacle creating socialist society” [Streikus 2000: 71]. Crosses on the Hill were proof of Soviet mistreatment and criticisms of the Soviet regime.



*Figure 3: Photograph of the Hill of Crosses provided to me by Audronė Kiršnaitė, which she dates to circa 1960. A year later, the Hill of Crosses would have been bulldozed and destroyed by Soviet authorities. Photographer unknown.*

From 1961 until 1977, the Soviet authorities began to control all interactions with the Hill, and “t[ook] measure to ban visits and to isolate the hill” [Bučas 2000: 115]. The most notorious of these procedures was the “bulldozer atheism” or “tractor-type atheism,” when Soviet officials demolished the Hill with a bulldozer in 1961, 1973, 1974, and 1975. Other than physically destroying the area, there were also attempts at making the Hill less accessible, such as ditches being “dug across the roads leading to the mount, [and] bus-stops were closed” [Dailidė 1993: 27]. There were even plans made, but never fully carried out, to make the Hill more unreachable by expanding the nearby Kulpė river to create a pond in 1977 or to turn the Hill into an island in 1982 [Dailidė 1993: 26-28; Mačiulis 2000: 60; Šinkūnaitė 2000: 62; Kryžių kalnas 2002]. One of my informants, Birutė Salatkienė, an archaeologist who currently works for the Šiaulių “Aušros” muziejaus [Šiauliai’s “Aušros” Museum], explained to me in an interview that the Soviet authorities had to come up with new ways to ensure Lithuanians would not place crosses on the Hill because the restrictions were not deterring individuals from placing crosses sneakily overnight. One method was to turn the Hill into a historical, preservation site due to its medieval history as a defensive mound. In 1968, Jurgaičiai mound was added to the “Lithuanian Map

of Archaeology,” and in 1973 “Jurgaičiai mound was included into the list of state-protected monuments as an archaeological monument of state significance” [Salatkienė 2000b: 29]. By declaring these important historical titles, the government aimed to preserve the mound as a historical site and restore it to its original state as just a bare hill, before the tradition of erecting crosses began. Salatkienė writes that the “archaeological excavations may have concealed true motive—destruction of the Hill of Crosses” [2000b: 30]. Salatkienė was invited to lead the excavations due to her previous work at the base of the Hill, but she declined, knowing the project would involve removing the crosses. Fortunately, no one else agreed to take her place, and the excavations never took place.

Through bulldozing, banning, and threatening, crosses continued to be placed on the Hill, many of which had to be placed under the veil of night, while strategically avoiding Soviet authorities along the way (see fig. 4). This peaceful resistance was a way in which Lithuanians could express an element of their Lithuanian identity and their Christian beliefs, all the while identifying themselves as distinctively anti-Soviet. After 1986, there were no longer any attempts to stop Lithuanians from placing crosses, and in 1990 Lithuania was the first republic to declare independence from the Soviet Union. By 1990, an estimated fifty-five thousand crosses of various sizes stood on top of the Hill.



*Figure 4: The slow rebuilding of the Hill after Soviet bulldozer atheism. Photo taken by Dania Abromavičienė in August 1976. Permission granted by the photographer.*

## Third Period: 1990 to Present Day

On 7 September 1993, Pope John Paul II visited the Hill and held Mass at the small outdoor chapel that was built near the Hill to accommodate the Pope's arrival. His appearance was greeted by about a hundred thousand Lithuanians and Christian pilgrims and is today seen as the climactic moment that introduced the site and Lithuania to the rest of the Christian world [Liutikas 2009: 180]. (1) The Pope wrote in a letter in 2000, "during the most difficult period of Lithuanian history, Šiauliai's crosses proved that faith in Christ and fidelity to the Church is an inexhaustible source of strength and stronghold" [2000]. It is especially important to highlight that the church, as an institution, began becoming involved with this site only during the 1990s, the time of the Pope's visit. Dangiras Mačiulis expands on this subject in a report made at a community conference about how to best preserve the Hill for the future:

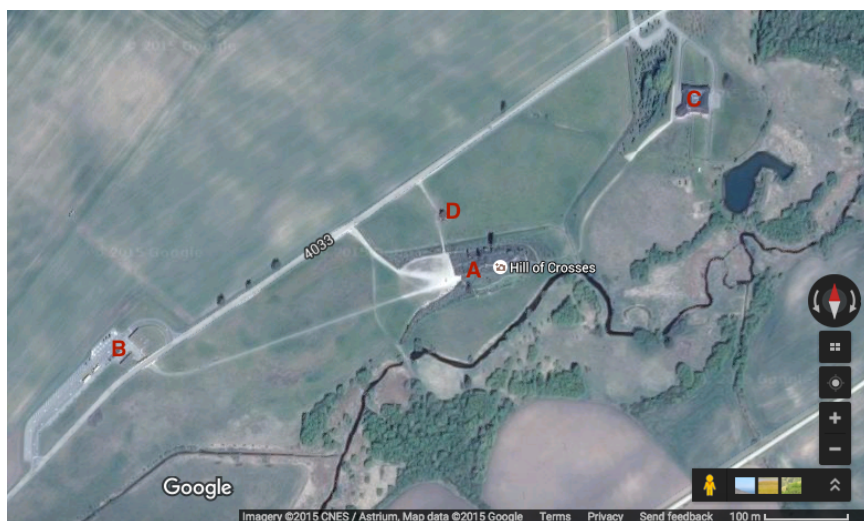
During the Soviet era spontaneous (with a few exceptions) religious life continued on the Hill of Crosses. It was the place for self-expression of unrestricted individual religious beliefs. The reason of live functioning of the Hill of Crosses was that the place became important for individual expression of faith, fearing no publicity in a totalitarian state. The Church did not make attempts to "institutionalize" it in any way or to hold official Church festivals as in Šiluva or Žemaičių Kalvarija. In some way this policy somehow protected the site, the Hill of Crosses did not become problematic for official institutions (from annual informational reports to LCP CC Political Bureau). [2000: 60]

Though the church still does not own or regulate the Hill, it is now very important to the church, especially to the nearby cathedral in Šiauliai's Šventa apaštalo Petro ir Pauliaus Katedra [Cathedral of the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul]. The regional diocese was built nearby in 1997. A yearly pilgrimage is held from this cathedral to the Hill, all of which is organized by the diocese, specifically by the bishop Eugenijus Bartilus who is originally from Kaunas. There are links on the website of the cathedral and the diocese to the Hill's website, which is regulated by the Katalikų interneto tarnyba [Catholic Internet Service].

There is a saying that Salatkienė told me during an informal conversation that questions whether Šiauliai is near the Hill or if the Hill is near Šiauliai. Indeed, it is a widespread belief in the area that the Hill has increased tourism and perhaps boosted the economy of the nearby city, which includes the cathedral and local diocese. The Hill is proof of what a strong Christian faith can do, making it a useful resource to promote Catholic belief. The church does support the Hill by directing pilgrims towards it, but its management is under the supervision of the district municipality of Šiauliai and maintained specifically by the Meškuičių seniūnija [eldership of Meškuičiai]. (2)



The Hill has undergone the most physical changes during this third period, namely in adapting to the increased tourism in the area. On 24-25 February 2000, the “Historical Roots of the Hill of Crosses and its Preservation Problems” conference was held in Šiauliai. The goal of the conference was to “draw attention to rapid changes of the Hill of Crosses and its environment” [Salatkienė 2000a: 7], held under the PHARE CREDO Program of the European Union. The main point of discussion was “The Reconstruction of the Territory of the Hill of Crosses and Means to Popularize It” project, which implemented the construction of the visitor center and parking lot that were built just a few hundred meters from the Hill. In 2000, a Franciscan monastery was also built three hundred meters away at the encouragement of Pope John Paul II (see fig. 5). Within the monastery, there is a small chapel, where, instead of an altarpiece, is a large, floor-to-ceiling window that showcases the Hill. Though there aren't any other developments yet, there are also rumors of goals to build a church near the Hill [Šinkūnaitė 2000; Delfi 2011; Petrulienė and Bradauskas 2011].



*Figure 5: The Hill today: a) Kryžių kalnas, b) information center and parking lot, c) Franciscan monastery, and d) Pope's outdoor chapel. [Google: n.d.]*

Attempts to increase visits to the Hill have been successful. In 2014, there were four times the number of foreign visitors as Lithuanian ones [Šiaulių rajono turizmo ir verslo informacijos centras 2014]. When visiting the Hill during my fieldwork in 2015, I observed visitors to the Hill who were writing fieldnotes of the process of their visit and taking photographs. Many tourists hop off of a tour bus or personal vehicle at the tourism center, which was built in 2008, to buy a

cross from one of the vendors at the little market, mark the cross, take pictures of the Hill, sometimes have a tour guide provide a history of the place, and then, while venturing through the pathways of the Hill, finally, plant their cross. With improved infrastructure for visitors and the ease of adding crosses to the Hill, it has become inundated with crosses, without any lingering fears of oppressive destruction. Wandering through the site, I read and took pictures of many crosses, many of which commemorate a deceased loved one, hope for a happy marriage, pray to God, or express thanks and wonder as a visiting tourist.

### Changes and Tensions at the Hill

The three periods that I have discussed mark considerable changes in meanings for the Hill and the Lithuanian people. The creation of the Hill dates to as early as the ninth century before the King of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania initiated the Christianization of Lithuania in 1387, which only reached the region of Samogitia decades later. As such, Christian beliefs would have slowly permeated the area, adjusting to the pre-Christian beliefs of the time and never fully replacing them. Lithuanian archeologist and anthropologist Marija Gimbutas writes in *Ancient Symbolism in Lithuanian Folk Art*, that cross-crafting and cross-erection are pre-Christian traditions [1958: 3, 91-92]:

Roofed poles and crosses were encountered not only in places such as cemeteries or crossroads, but practically anywhere in front of a homestead, at the edge of the village, amid fields, by “holy” springs, or in the forest. They were erected on the occasion of a person’s marriage or serious illness, in commemoration of an untimely death, during epidemics among men or animals, or for the purpose of ensuring good crops. They rose from the earth, as the folksong had risen, as various customs had risen, out of religious beliefs that challenged definition through artistic creation. [1958: 1]

In this sense, the crosses on the Hill are not unique within Lithuania but rather are unique for the longevity of their livelihood and scale. Additionally, Gimbutas adds that “all outgrowing elevations are popularly endowed with peculiar powers rising from this great source [earth]” [93], and so mounds, even if manmade, strengthen the holiness of the crosses laid upon it, “as if pointing up the power emanating from the earth” [93]. Further emphasizing this connection to the earth and pre-Christian ideologies are the symbols used in the art of cross-crafting, such as astrological and plant (see fig. 6) and animal depictions (see fig. 7), alongside familiar Christian iconography (see fig. 7). Finally, the many large crosses of untreated wood on the Hill also mark a connection to the earth, conveying a sense of temporality because they will eventually weather and decay in harmony with the natural life cycle. Rūta Saliklis writes about contemporary Lithuanian wood art:

Most contemporary sculptures are monochromatic, made of untreated wood, so that an outdoor sculpture will weather and crack. This emphasis on natural raw material can be seen as an expression of national consciousness as well. Leaving the wood bare makes it a more authentic cultural expression because nothing is hidden under the paint. [1998: 17-18]



*Figure 6: These two crosses feature sun motifs, centering on the intersections of the crosses. The cross on the right also contains a circle and three flowers. Photograph taken by the author on 12 June 2015.*



*Figure7: Rūpintojėlis [Pensive Christ] figure surrounded by two birds.  
Photograph taken by the author on 26 June 2015.*

The exhibited temporality of the untreated wood crosses resonates with the history of destruction by Tsarist and Soviet rule, both of which also threatened, but ultimately failed, to assimilate and destroy Lithuanian culture. During Tsarist and Soviet rule, the Hill was a spontaneous shrine, which Jack Santino defines as “temporary memorials that people construct, on their own initiative, to mark the site of untimely deaths” [2011, 98]. The term “spontaneous” in this case means “the self-motivation of the actors involved” [98], and “shrine,” although it does have a religious connotation, Santino specifies as “a portal to the otherworld, a place where two-way communication can occur” [99]. During the 1950s when Lithuanians were returning from Siberia, they placed the crosses in memory of those lost. It was only later with bulldozer atheism that it became evident that these crosses were temporary. Santino notes that spontaneous shrines have two important qualities: commemoration and performativity [2006: 1]. Commemoration can be observed as visitors place crosses, rosaries, and objects on the Hill in memory of someone or something. Performativity, Santino writes, “draw[s] attention to a social issue and convince a broad public of the accuracy of their position on it” [2006: 2]. Graves are meant to commemorate the death of individuals, and so spontaneous shrines also have an ulterior motive: social commentary. At the Hill, the spontaneous erection of crosses communicated the injustices Lithuanians experienced at the hands of the Soviet regime.

Spontaneous shrines are makeshift and are not built to last. So, eventually, as the social issues that they commemorate either get resolved or are forgotten, such sites are typically abandoned [Santino 2011: 98]. However, as bulldozer atheism and other Soviet strategies to reduce the number of visits to the Hill waned and Lithuania reclaimed independence in 1990, the Hill's temporality and social commentary were no more, distancing it from the spontaneous shrine it once was. After Lithuania's reestablishment of independence, crosses no longer represented symbols of hope and opposition to the current sovereign. After Pope John Paul II visited the site, the conference in 2000, and the development of the surrounding area, the discourse previously used to identify the Hill as a spontaneous shrine is now part of the official narrative, marked on plaques, tourist guides, and online. One plaque, just a few steps from the Hill, reads:

The Hill of Crosses is a unique place in terms of both its scale and its history. At present some 200,000 crosses of various sizes adorn the hill. By continually putting up crosses there, people express their devotion to Christ, pray for his help and mercy, and identify Lithuania as a Christian land. The Hill of Crosses gains immense significance in the lives of Lithuanian believers during the Soviet era as a sign of resistance to the totalitarian regime. After the re-establishment of independence new life has been breathed into the Hill of Crosses and it has become a symbol of the entire nation's unshakeable faith, its past suffering and hope. The Hill of Crosses gains fame throughout the world on 7 September 1993 when Pope John Paul II visited it and celebrated the Holy Mass for 100,000 people who gathered there. In 1994 a cross was put up on the site using the crucifix that John Paul II gave to Lithuania. The cross blessed by Pope Benedict XVI was added in 2006. At the foot of the Hill of Crosses stands a Franciscan monastery built with encouragement of Pope John Paul II and consecrated in 2000. The Feast of the Hill of Crosses, reinstated in 1997, draws large crowds each year on the last Sunday of July.

This plaque was produced by Jono Pauliaus II Pilgrimu Kelias [Pilgrim Route of John Paul II], a website ([www.pilgrimukelias.lt](http://www.pilgrimukelias.lt)) that provides information about John Paul II's routes in Lithuania in 1993 and current pilgrimage news. The Hill as an official site is now buried in crosses, making it difficult to distinguish what crosses are official. Indeed, it even seems as though a spontaneous shrine has sprung up on top of the now official monument, a phenomenon Santino defines as an assemblage.

Santino calls an assemblage "a category of art, a genre of sculpture done with found objects, a kind of three-dimensional collage" [1992: 158]. Paulette G. Curtis's [2010] article "Stewarding a Living Collection: The National Parks Service and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection" describes how the National Park Service (NPS) sorts and organizes the ever-growing Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection (VVMC). The curators have sorted, documented,

and kept every object in a facility in Maryland since 1984. All objects make it into the collection, no matter how mundane they might seem because “the rationale for collecting the Memorial objects lay in what they uniquely preserved and reflected of contemporary life... The VVMC, by contrast, consisted of objects left by the visiting public and was not the product of any collector’s choice” [2010: 55-56]. However pure the intentions, it became known that these objects were being collected in storage, and so people were no longer spontaneously leaving objects, but instead donating objects to be part of the collection. Some objects have nothing to do with the memorial itself or the Vietnam War [57].

A similar situation has been occurring at the Hill. The official narrative, as found on the plaque, represents an idyllic reality that Lithuanians and Christians travel across the globe to come to this very spot to place a cross. However, in 2014, there have been four times more foreign visitors than Lithuanians to the Hill, and so it is fair to assume that most crosses are not placed by Lithuanians. The Hill suffers a similar issue as the VVMC because the management of the Hill must decide whether they have the right to perform the impossible task of sorting through which materials belong and which do not.

And so, the Hill continues to grow. Though some crosses are placed on the Hill in a prayer of continued freedom for Lithuanians (see fig. 8), many take on new messages from a wider variety of people than ever before. In such, comes two new struggles with the Hill: its management and regulation. In a 2015 interview, Eugenijus Bartulis, Šiauliai district's first bishop, explained to me that the visit of the Pope in 1993 had come as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, awareness of this unique, small local place of worship spread across Lithuania and the world, when it was acknowledged as a place of power by the highest figure in Roman Catholicism; on the other, an influx of individuals from around the world now flocked to the Hill to be a part of its glory, regardless of their intent. As shops were built near the tourism center selling small crosses, parking was also installed and bus routes expanded. It became easy to add to the Hill, when previously it was strenuous and, at times, hazardous. Bartulis expressed concerns about the degradation of the site, recalling one German tourist complaining to him that the Hill was a *šiūkšlynės* [garbage dump].



*Figure 8: Plaque with caption, “Almighty and omnipresent God, protect our country’s territory and people from alcoholism, vandals, thieves, fascists, communists, murderers. Let honesty and true democracy thrive. Adolfina and Adomas Ganusauskai Lithuania year 2002.” Photograph taken by the author.*

Indeed, mass-produced crosses and rosaries climb up and pile up intricately carved crosses, sometimes making them indecipherable (see fig. 2). Walkways are tight and often display broken crosses along the tall grass. Though there are signs that deter visitors from lighting candles, it does seem as though on particularly hot and dry days the Hill could go up in flames. Bartulis suggested the potential construction of a separate structure for tourists to place their crosses to avoid the šiukšlė [trash] that accumulates and make the Hill easier to upkeep, but he expressed, exasperated:

Jie sako, turi būti chaotiškas Kryžių kalnas, kaip žmonės nori, kad čia būtų toks, kaip jau žmonių sudėta, tegul taip ir būna. O ne tai, kad būtų tvarkinga labai viskas. Tai įvairių tų nuomonių yra ir labai žmonės nenori, kad ten kištus, kad ten tvarkytų per daug.

[They say that the Hill of Crosses should be chaotic, as people want it to be, as people have already arranged it, so let it be. And not that



everything should be very tidy. There are various opinions and people really don't want to interfere there, to have too much organized there.]

The tourist-pilgrim dichotomy becomes apparent here, as Christian travelers are deemed as more worthy to add to the Hill than secular tourists by Bartulis and the local diocese. Regina Bendix describes pilgrimage as a predecessor to modern day tourism, as the "path to absolutism, pacing the way to the afterlife in heaven, travel was the enlightened road to knowledge" [2018: 17]. Travel among the elite, such as scholars looking to expand their worldview in the late medieval ages, held similarly high esteem for pilgrimage as their travel wasn't for their own personal pleasure or satisfaction, but rather was for the pursuit of knowledge and, presumably, the betterment of mankind. As travel became more affordable to lower classes of people due to improved mobility and infrastructure, a dichotomy between traveler and tourist blossomed. As Bendix writes, "The dichotomy between individualistic travelers and mass tourists is maintained as a lucrative construct, as it provides individuals desirous of distinction with a means to perceive themselves as successors of enlightened or romantic revelers in search of inner betterment" [2018: 18]. Bartulis' suggestion that having a separate zone for tourist contributions exacerbates the belief that pilgrims have more intent behind their visit and therefore should be held at a higher esteem than the everyday tourist. Separating tourists from pilgrims at the Hill has proved an impossible feat because the two are not so easily discernible. In an article by Marion Bowman and Tiina Sepp, they write about Caminoization as "the process whereby various aspects and assumptions of the contemporary Camino [de Santiago], particularly as encountered by non-traditional pilgrims, are transplanted and translated to other pilgrimage sites, routes and contexts" [2018: 75]. The Camino de Santiago is a network of pilgrimage routes in northern Spain that lead to the shrine of the apostle St. James in the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral in Galicia, Spain. As the Camino gained recognition from cultural institutions, such as a Cultural Route by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, it increased in popularity beyond its historical, religious pilgrims, as well as its developed access and infrastructure. On the one hand, this increased accessibility, but on the other it popularized it, ruining the site because it is no longer an isolated, difficult, quiet, and pensive retreat, but instead a now overcrowded route.

In the eyes of the local diocese, the visit of the Pope in 1993 had validated the holiness of the Hill, but for others, namely locals who had frequented the Hill during Soviet occupation, this visit led to infrastructure that catered to tourists rather than locals. Apolonija Nisteliienė, a retired architect, was adamant in an interview with me in 2015 in her Kaunas home that these tourism facilities were created to generate a profit:

Kam jis reikalingas dabar? Aš nesuprantu prie ko tas turistinis centras ir prie ko čia piligrimai. Sakau čia pasidarė ir ten pasidarė biznesas. Todėl kad yra tursimo centras čia yra biški susiryšę su bažnyčia. Čia nesuprasi, nu vykupiija, ten jie turbūt gauna kiek pinigėlių. Žinai čia yra biznesas labai.

[Why is it needed now? I don't understand what the tourism center is for and what the pilgrims are for. I'm saying that it has become a business here and there. Because it is a center of wealth, there are people here who are closely connected with the Church. You don't understand here, well, the diocese, they probably get a lot of money there. You know, there is a lot of business here.]

Nistelienė added that in addition to it being proof of greed, that the landscape was no longer complementary to the Hill—as it used to be a miracle in a desolate place, one that needed to be sought out to visit. Just as people debate “is Šiauliai near the Hill of Crosses, or the Hill of Crosses near Šiauliai,” many criticize the local diocese for attempting to build a church near the Hill, as they view the Hill as holier than any possible church. Archeologist Salatkienė explained to me:

Mano nuomone tas Kryžių kalnas turėtų likti pats savimi ir bažnyčios globos jam kokios nors ypatingos nereikia. Valstybės globos, visuomenės globos, vietinių žmonių talkinimo, šito butinai reikia, be to jis tiesiog neišgyvens. Bet bažnyčia jam nieko negali duoti. Tuo kad jis Kryžių kalnas, o ne šventovių, ne koplyčių ir ne stabukų, o Kryžių kalnas, jis jau tą savo - nu sakykime - duoklę...jau atiduoda tuo kad jau reiškia yra krikščioniškas.

[In my opinion, the Hill of Crosses should stay as is and doesn't need any help from the Church. It definitely needs state patronage, public patronage, support from local people, without which it would simply not survive. But the Church cannot give it anything it doesn't already have. Just because it is the Hill of Crosses, not a place of shrines, no chapels, and no idols, but the Hill of Crosses, it already gives its—let's say—tribute... it already gives it, in that it already is Christian.]

The rumors about building a church near the Hill, mentioned to me by Bartulis, don't seem to make sense to Salatkienė because she, as well as Kiršnaitė and Nistelienė, view the Hill as a church without a roof. They believe that this place is holy because of its organic and natural development and that the planned building of the church is unnatural and would impede on the existing holiness of the site. The tourism center was built to accommodate increased tourism due to the visit of the Pope, and so these women consider it ironic that Bartulis would complain about the state of the Hill, when the church played a key part in popularizing and commodifying it. As for Bartulis' suggestion to create a separate structure for tourists to add to, my informants shared anxieties about restrictions because they could jeopardize the spirit of the Hill. Audronė Kiršnaitė, an employee at the Šiaulių rajono savivaldybės viešoji biblioteka [Šiauliai District Municipal Public Library], has lived in Šiauliai her whole life and states that trying to regulate the Hill based purely on aesthetics misses the true beauty of the Hill:

Koks jisai yra, toks, koks susiformavo, toks jisai yra. Tada mes turim uždraust priekybininkus, tada turim kažko leisti arba neleisti... O jeigu žmogui tai yra gražu? Juk ir kapinėse. Mes matom vienam kažkokia ten žvakė, tam stiklinė, jinai yra tokia—jinai yra man graži. Kitam yra graži kokia nors Marija, kurios viduje dega parafinas.

[What it is, the way it was formed, that's what it is. We would have to ban vendors. We would have to allow some and restrict others... But what if it is beautiful to that person? After all, even in cemeteries, for one person we see some candle, for another a glass—to me, that is beautiful. For another, a Mary is beautiful, inside which paraffin is burning.]

And as Kiršnaitė explained to me, because some people might tie two twigs together for a loved one who is recovering from a deadly disease and cannot afford a seven-foot beautifully carved cross, that small cross might hold more meaning than the tall ones—you cannot tell intent by the aesthetics of an object. While examining the Caminoization of English Anglican Cathedrals, Bowman and Sepp explain that visitors with no religious affiliations were actively participating in pilgrim-like behaviors: “not only taking guided tours of the Cathedral or reading guidebooks, but also lighting candles, praying, meditating, thinking about deceased loved ones” [2018: 84]. Similarly, regardless of identity or faith, many tourists are noticeably and actively engaging with the spirit of the Hill in meaningful ways by going out of their way to visit, learning its history, and adding crosses (see fig. 9). To restrict access and additions to the Hill would go against the spirit of the Hill as a spontaneous place of visitation. Even so, Kiršnaitė, Nistelienė, and Salatkienė all nostalgically looked back at a time when the Hill was a little-known place of prayer that was more peaceful and serene than chaotic, like in figures 3 and 4.



*Figure 9: Pile of crosses, most of which were purchased at the market near the tourism center, at the base of a large, wooden cross. Photograph taken by author on 26 June 2015.*

## Conclusion

Vytenis Rimkus explained at the conference in 2000 that the Hill's surrounding area had to be developed to "satisfy the needs of visitors" [2000: 189]. The conference saw that the surroundings of the Hill, which at the time was just a poorly paved road, did not satisfy the existing needs of visitors. Additionally, there was a desire to increase tourism to the place by non-locals. By improving the facilities near the Hill, the Hill could be compared to other tourism sites across Europe, and as Rimkus writes, it was a "matter of image-building not

only for the Hill of Crosses, but Šiauliai and Lithuania” [2000: 189]. Image-building across the country facilitated Lithuania's membership in the European Union in 2004 and has increased tourism since. Bartulis' anxieties over the cleanliness of the Hill comes from a similar desire to accommodate visitors' expectations, as well as Lithuanians putting forth images of the way they want to be seen as a nation. I would argue, however, that the Hill is more honest than most touristic sites, as it unabashedly showcases the reality of a place rather than a sanitized version of what a nation wishes to be. And it is not as though the place is left in ruin: every summer, a group of people from the Meškiuičių seniūnija is hired to clean and upkeep the Hill. The primary goal is to rid of any broken crosses and move any objects that are obstructing paths, but otherwise the caretakers do not think it is their place to choose what deserves and doesn't deserve to be placed on the Hill, and thus preserve its natural, even if chaotic, integrity.

When visiting the Hill as a child and then as an adult, the melancholic environment felt exacerbated by the historical instability of the country. Since its creation over a millennium ago, the Hill has survived oppression, destruction, and abandonment, rising from the ground as a spontaneous shrine to criticize oppressive rule. Even today, as Lithuanians fear globalization and tourism overtaking their culture, current debates surrounding the Hill express these same anxieties: that the Hill will become so overpopulated by outsiders that it will lose its Lithuanian individuality and originality.

Even in these concerns over trash, there is power in the unkept beauty of the Hill, a beauty in its chaos. Gimbutas writes in *Ancient Symbolism*:

The old cemeteries of Lithuania held trees that had never been touched by a pruner's hand, for the folk adage says that to cut a cemetery tree is to do evil to the deceased. In no case may a live cemetery tree be cut and consumed for fuel. Only the fallen dead branches may be collected for this purpose by the poor. Neither is it permissible to mow the grass: “From cemetery grass our blood flows,” says the old proverb. [1958: 57]

Reading this passage, I can't help but think about the discussions I had with my informants about the natural life of the Hill and my perceptions of the Hill as alive and continuously growing. Ēglutė Trinkauskaitė compares the clustered appearance of the Hill to a forest, stating “Crosses, shrines, and wooden sculptures of saints also seem to be alive, as if growing out of the landscape” [2019: 49]. The eldership only takes what has broken and left the Hill natural. Tall grass thrives between the crosses. To remove what is already there means to remove some of the life it breathes. Just as it had survived abandonment and bulldozing, the Hill will survive tourism. By allowing the Hill to grow and be cherished by all those who visit, it will continue to be a “chronicle of the nation's life” [Rimkus 2014: 3] rather than an artifact of the past.

## NOTES

Research for this article was conducted during a MSc in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in 2015-2016. Translations were completed by the author with the help of her mother, Regina Kibirkstis.

- 1 For more on the pilgrim-tourist dichotomy, see Bendix [2018, 17-18].
- 2 Lithuania is divided into ten counties, sixty municipalities, and 537 elderships. An eldership is the smallest administrative division of Lithuania that consists of a very small region and usually administers small-scale, local matters. See [Lietuvos savivaldybių seniūnų asociacija 2020] for more information.

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