

## The Origin of the Hill of Crosses, Devotional Practises and Music of the Pilgrimages

There are countries all over the world where Christianity is much deeper rooted than in Lithuania and Poland. Nevertheless you will never meet such piety of folk and such expressions of spirituality that exist in the cult of the Hill of Crosses. It is a unique phenomenon all over the world. More than 160 years ago, this place was mentioned as a sacred one with its indulgence feast. It was visited by the pilgrims from different Lithuanian regions followed by ethnographic processions or separate individuals. During the years of Soviet occupation, they came at night time or under some non-religious pretext. After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, pilgrims from the USA, Israel, Japan, China, Canada, Germany, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Byelorussia and especially from Lithuania and Poland visited and are still visiting the Hill of Crosses. Pope John Paul II visited the Hill of Crosses on September 7, 1993 (See Picture 1).



Picture 1. The Hill of Crosses and Pope John Paul II

Nowadays the research of the pilgrimage to the Hill of Crosses is only at the initial stage because of the preceding Soviet occupation during which it was a taboo. The beginning of the pilgrimage to the Hill of Crosses is firstly related to the origin of the cult of the Hill of Crosses with its devotional practices, prayers and hymns together with the geography of pilgrims. The research is based on the assumption that the cult of the Hill of Crosses is firstly revealed by its unique historical origin together with a great number of pilgrimages showing different folk devotions, prayers, hymns and music.

The Hill of Crosses is in Lithuania – 12 km north from Šiauliai city, not far from the highway to Riga. Today it is under the subordination of Šiauliai diocese. People often call it the hill or cemetery of Jurgaičiai, the hill of the castle, the hill of crosses or simply a holy hill.

The hill is on the left bank of the Kulpė stream, surrounded by its small nameless affluent. It is 70 m long and 60 m wide, the height of a two-storied house. Geologically, it is the highest point of the area. The first data about the hill come from archeological excavations with the findings of many human skeletons, Swedish swords and medals<sup>1</sup>. Historical, ethnological and ethnomusical materials supplement these data.

<sup>1</sup> Rimkus V. Kryžių kalnas Lietuvos kultūros kontekste // Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos Suvažiavimo darbai. Vilnius, 1999. T. 17, p. 401–406.

### Ethnological origin

There are a lot of legends about the Hill of Crosses. One of them tells that in pre-Christian Lithuania, in the place of the Hill, there was a big fight of Ryga Crusaders against local pagans, during which a lot of monks and soldiers were killed. Local people mounded a hill in commemoration of this fight and lit a holy fire nursed by the priestesses. Livonian Chronicles mentioned there to be a castle Kule or Kulan that was burnt by Crusaders in 1348. The name of the castle could have originated from the nearby Kulpe stream. With the coming of Christianity, the pagan altar was ruined but Lithuanians kept worshipping the Hill<sup>2</sup>.

Another legend tells about the existence of the church in the place of the Hill<sup>3</sup>. About the appearance of the first cross on the Hill, there is also a legend about the standing chapel on the Hill from the times immemorial where the rebels came to pray in 1863. When the Cossacks learnt about it they kept the door closed and in three days time buried the rebels under the ground. In the course of time, the chapel collapsed and there appeared a pit on the Hill where people started building crosses in commemoration of buried alive rebels and built a chapel<sup>4</sup>.

There is another folk witness about the Apparition of the Blessed Virgin to the local children in this place in 1870. She promised to appear the other day at noon again and asked the children to take some adults together. The Blessed Virgin appeared again and asked to built there a cross as a sign of faith. She warned about hard times to come, asked to build crosses on the Hill and promised Her intercession<sup>5</sup>. After that, she disappeared. Later rich farmers built a chapel in the place of the Apparition.

### The origin of pilgrimages

According to the historical sources, in the 19th century Poland and Lithuania, being under the oppression of tsarist Russia, were fighting for their freedom. In 1830 Polish were the first to organize a revolt in order liberate the occupied territories from the Russian powers. On March 25, 1831 Lithuanians joined them. The biggest loss of rebels was near Šiauliai<sup>6</sup>. It is told that in 1831 the chapel was built by the relatives of the slain because the tsarist powers did not let them pay proper tribute to their dead; from 1850 indulgence feasts started on the Hill of Crosses. On the Hill there had been nearly 20 crosses built<sup>7</sup>. Strict tsarist regime further evoked Polish and Lithuanian religious and national manifestations. In 1863 a big revolt happened including all Lithuania and Poland but at the end of the year it was lost. There are stories telling about the executions of suppression of the revolt on the Hill of Crosses. It is thought that on the western downhill there were 4 rebels shot. Another story tells that after the suppression of the revolt, the tsarist general Muravjov the Hangman built something similar to a concentration camp. About one thousand of rebels died there out of famine and terrible weather conditions. Only 11 martyrs survived. They were put to death on the western slope. Their bodies were thrown to the pit on the Hill and the tsarist army trampled their grave in order not to leave any sign. Local people and pilgrims from the neighbouring parishes had built crosses but they were destroyed by the powers. In 1888 in the USA Lithuanian paper "Lithuanian Voice" wrote that the Stations of the Cross (14 of them) were put under the foot of the Hill in commemoration of the slain and all the dead<sup>8</sup>.

According to the research of the Polish archeologist L. Krzywicki, done on the Hill of Crosses on August 22, 1900, there were 136 standing crosses; on July 2, 1902, there were 155 crosses and an old brick chapel on the peak of the Hill<sup>9</sup>. The chapel was ruined during the World War II. Only the foundation had left. Nowadays the statue of Our Lady is standing there.

The fifth execution was in the summer of 1976. All the Hill was destroyed, even the part of it had been dug.

In Soviet times, communists and atheists organized 5 destructions of the Hill. The first happened on April 5, 1961. 14 Stations of the Cross and about 5000 crosses had been destroyed. The second was on

<sup>2</sup> *Kviklys B.* Lietuvos bažnyčios. Kauno arkivyskupija. Chicago, Illinois, 1983. T. 3, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> *Skrinskas R. G.* Piligrimo vadovas po stebuklingas Marijos vietas. Kaunas, 1999, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Lietuvos istorija / red. A. Šapoka. Kaunas, 1936, p. 464.

<sup>7</sup> *Rimkus V.* Kryžių kalnas Lietuvos kultūros kontekste // Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos Suvažiavimo darbai. Vilnius, 1999. T. 17, p. 401–406.

<sup>8</sup> *Puronas V.* Kryžių kalnas. Šiauliai, 1993, p. 19–20.

<sup>9</sup> *Pukenis R.* Teesie. Vilnius, 1994, p. 36.



Picture 2. The pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II

April 26, 1973. About 400 crosses destroyed. The third – on November 23, 1974 and the fourth – at Christmas of the same year. Again about 400 crosses were destroyed. People were threatened to be caught and punished for building the crosses. But the believers kept praying at the place, and at night were building crosses<sup>10</sup>. During the period of 1980–1990 a lot of devotional processions were organized with a big part of young people. All of them were under persecution.

In 1990 Lithuania regained its independence. Pope John Paul II visited the country on September 4–8, 1993. During his visit, he was taken to the Hill of Crosses and offered the Holy Mass in a nearby chapel. This event made the Hill of Crosses popular all over the world. Common Lithuanian and Polish fights for national and religious freedom the Pope evaluated by his words on the Hill of Crosses: “Climb the Hill and remember all the sons and daughters of this country who were sentenced, put into prison, sent to concentration camps, exiled to Siberia or Kolyma, put to death. <...><sup>11</sup>. Saying this, the Pope also meant Polish rebels who died for the freedom of their country because the Hill of Crosses is a symbol of fighting for Polish and Lithuanian religious freedom.

On May 28, 1997 the Pope John Paul II established the diocese of iauliai, and on July 20 of the same year the first bishop of iauliai Eugenijus Bartulis revived the indulgence feast of the Hill of Crosses which is celebrated on the last Sunday of July. During his visit to Franciscan monastery on Al Verna mountain (Italy) in 1997, the Pope spoke about the spiritual bond between these two places. When in Vatican the Franciscans of Lithuanian and Italian Tuscany provinces had met, the Pope blessed the future project of building a new monastery for the vice-province of St. Casimir of Lithuanian Franciscan brothers. They bought a site near the Hill of Crosses in 1998 and built a monastery until July 8, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p 41.

<sup>11</sup> Vatikano radijas. Kryžių kalnas – tautos golgota // Tėviškės žiburiai. Mississauga, Canada, 1997. Nr. 42 (2485), Spalis-Oc-tober, p. 2.

In 2003 on the 10 anniversary of the Pope John Paul's II visit to Lithuania, there was a 68 km pilgrim march from the Hill of Crosses to another Lithuanian sanctuary iluva as if joining both shrines. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, 2004 more than four thousand young people from the Lithuanian youth days in Šiauliai marched to the Hill of Crosses. Every year bigger or smaller pilgrimages are organised to the Hill of Crosses.

With the coming of the 15th anniversary of the Pope's visit to Lithuania, the Episcopal Conference of Lithuania decided to join all the sanctuaries which were visited by the Pope during his visit, to the pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II. In 2007 the programme of the pilgrimage, where the Hill of Crosses was also included, was confirmed by the Lithuanian Government and it gained the status of national importance. (See Picture 2)

### Devotional practices and music of pilgrimages

According to the collected materials, the Hill of Crosses is visited in groups and individually with organized or private devotions. People build crosses or other signs (stakes, chapels, paintings, etc.), leave rosaries. All of them are either votive signs of gratitude or pleading for something (health, success, sobriety, happy marriage, etc.) or memorial signs (in remembrance of the dead, perished, exiles, sentenced, etc.) or of historical events, jubilees and so on. Some come with the promises; they pray or sing the Rosary in the Holy Name of Jesus or climb the Hill on their knees. Other pilgrims pray for their dead singing and playing different musical instruments following the Stations of the Cross<sup>12</sup>.

According to the different sources, in the middle of summer processions of pilgrims were organised during which a cross was carried, the Rosary in the Holy Name of Jesus and the Stations of the Cross were sung<sup>13</sup>. Nowadays during the indulgence feast after the Holy Mass in the chapel of Pope John Paul II, the pilgrims move to the Hill with their prayers and hymns of the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross. The tourists visiting the Hill also join the procession.

Here is the table of devotional practices, prayers and hymns:

Table: *Devotional practices, prayers and hymns of the Hill of Crosses*

	DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES	PRAYERS HYMNS
1.	Celebration of indulgence feast	1. Rosary in the Holy Name of Jesus 2. Station of the Cross
2.	Processions and individual practices	
3.	Commemoration of the dead	
4.	Praying	
5.	Singing of hymns	
6.	Playing with musical instruments	
7.	Climbing the Hill on knees	1. Rosary in the Holy Name of Jesus
8.	Building of the crosses	No

The table shows eight devotional practices performed on the Hill. Only one of them is done in silence. That is building of the crosses.

### Conclusions

Following the collected materials we can make such conclusions:

1. The pilgrimage on the mound of Jurgaičiai (the Hill of Crosses) started as a result of the 1831 and 1863 Polish and Lithuanian revolts against the tsarist Russia and the 1940–1990 Soviet occupation with the national and religious oppression, going back to 1850 when the indulgence feast on the Hill had started.
2. The number of pilgrimages increased after the Pope John Paul's II to Lithuania on September 7, 1993 when the news about the Hill of Crosses had been spread all over the world; and in 1997 the celebration of indulgence feast was renewed together with the foundation of the monastery of Franciscan

<sup>12</sup> *Strielčiukas*. Pilių kalnas // Viltis. Šiauliai, 1914. Nr. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Kviklys B.* Lietuvos bažnyčios. Kauno arkivyskupija. Chicago, Illinois, 1983. T. 3, p 260, 263.

Minor brothers Lithuanian St. Casimir's province in 2000 and the pilgrim programme of Pope John Paul II was created on August 8, 2007 with the status of national importance.

3. The Hill of Crosses is a sacred location for veneration of the Cross, religious unity, burial place of the heroes and of religious cult.

The Hill of Crosses is not only a religious object but also a symbol of national and religious freedom. This symbolism started as a result of historical, religious and political events and that proves an initial premise about the identity of the Hill of Crosses with its unique historical origin and still lasting pilgrimages with different folk devotional practices, prayers, hymns and music.

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### Santrauka

#### Kryžių kalno kilmė, piligrimų kelionių pamaldumo praktikos ir muzika

Pasaulyje yra kraštų, kur katalikybė įleidusi žymiai gilesnes šaknis nei Lietuvoje, bet tokios liaudies pamaldumo praktikos, tokios dvasiškumo išraiškos, kokia yra Kryžių kalne, niekur nerasi. Kryžių kalnas yra vienintelis toks pasaulyje.

Šiandien piligrimystę į Kryžių kalną tik pradeda tyrinėti, nes daugiau kaip penkiasdešimt sovietinio ateizmo metų tai buvo tabu. Norint iširti piligrimystės į Kryžių kalną ištakas, pirmiausia reikėtų pažvelgti į Kryžių kalno kulto ištakas; po to pristatyti piligriminių kelionių geografiją ir jose atliekamas pamaldumo praktikas, maldas ir giesmes.

Atliktas tyrimas parodė, kad piligrimystė į šią šventovę ant Jurgaičių piliakalnio (Šiaulių raj.) prasidėjo po 1831 ir 1863 metų lietuvių ir lenkų sukilimo prieš carinę Rusiją, suaktyvėjo per 1940–1990 metų sovietų valdžios okupaciją, priklausė nuo geopolitinių įvykių ir nuo 1850 metų čia švenčiamų atlaidų. Piligriminių kelionių gausą paskatino 1993 m. rugsėjo 7 d. įvykęs popiežiaus Jono Pauliaus II vizitas į Lietuvą ir malda Kryžių kalne (nuo tada jis tapo žinomas visame pasaulyje). Nuo 1997 m. buvo atgaivintas atlaidų šventimas, 2000 m. prie Kryžių kalno įsteigtas Šv. Pranciškaus mažesniųjų brolių ordino Lietuvos Šv. Kazimiero viceprovincijos vienuolynas, nuo 2007 m. rugpjūčio 8 d. prasidėjo popiežiaus Jono Pauliaus II piligrimų kelio programa, į kurią įtrauktas Kryžių kalno lankymas, o Lietuvos Vyriausybė suteikė jam nacionalinės svarbos statusą. Piligrimai Kryžių kalne meldžiasi giedodami Švč. Jėzaus vardo rožinį bei 14 stočių Kryžiaus kelio maldas ir giesmes. Joms pritariama akademiniais ir liaudies muzikos instrumentais. Kryžių kalnas gerbiamas ne tik kaip religinis objektas, bet ir kaip tautiškumo bei laisvės simbolis.