Wayside Shrines and Crosses as the Spatial and Memorial Signs in the Cultural Landscape of Polish Rural Areas

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Abstract. This article concerns the issues of investigating the role of the wayside crosses and shrines in cultural landscape of Polish rural areas as well as its functioning as the spatial and memorial signs in the awareness of local communities. The article is based on the ethnographical field research and publications. In the investigation, there was used authorial method in the anthropology field, cognitive mapping method - mental maps, which enables the researchers to describe and knowledge many cultural landscape dimensions - sacral, historical, legendary- mythological, social and to identify significant elements that create the rural space. The thesis was that the wayside crosses and shrines are multi code and complex macro-signs that serve multipurpose function in the lives of the countryside residents. The aim of this paper is to show the possibilities of reading the encoded cultural meanings of these small sacral architecture forms created as a result of direct or earlier life experiences of the village inhabitants. The article points out the need of documentation to protect, preserve and maintain these archetypical elements that influence the clarity of cultural landscape and the identity of the local communities.

1. Introduction
This article is dedicated to the issues regarding the research on the role of small sacral architecture in the shaping of the cultural landscape of Polish rural areas, and their presence in the consciousness of local communities, as spatial and memorial signs. [1], [2], [3]

The aim of the research has been to systematically recognize the multidirectional relations and emotional, direct relations linking local communities with selected elements of the inhabited environment. Additionally, we were interested in pursuing the relations of dependence between the culturally determined perception and valuation of the crosses and shrines, by the community residents, and the shaping of a harmonious cultural landscape. With this aim, based on the information presented in the narratives, a reconstruction of the cultural overview of crosses and shrines in the residents’ consciousness has been conducted.

A hypothesis was proposed, that the wayside crosses and shrines are complex, multi-code macro-signs serving a multi-purpose function regarding the lives of the countryside residents.

Moreover, a necessity has been indicated, of documenting these historic objects in order to protect and preserve them within the cultural landscape. Furthermore, a number of conclusions were made, within the framework of the potential of applying the research results within the process of evaluating, revitalising and of shaping a sustainable countryside landscape.
From the anthropological perspective, the complete overview of the social-cultural role of the aforementioned sacral objects, regarding the lives of residents, is provided by analysing and interpreting the spoken testimonies of the residents, regarding their history, legends, founder’s motivations, the function of the objects and their location, which required conducting profound ethnographic interviews. [4], [5], [6]

The source material for the work is based on the ethnographic field research, conducted in the years 2014-2017 in 10 villages in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, as well as, on published works. A hundred interviews were analysed and interpreted.

2. Research method

The field research, as well as the analysis and interpretation of available material, employed the mental maps method, adapted to the needs of anthropological research on the inhabitants’ perception of their environment. This method allows us to externalise these perceptions in the form of mental maps constructed on the basis of ethnographic interviews. Additionally, this method let structure space, as well as identify, describe and interpret the archetypal places and objects highlighted by the interviewed respondents.

Structural studies dedicated to the image of the city, conducted by the American urban planner Kevin Lynch, played the essential role in the development of studies regarding spatial perceptions. Lynch assumed, that by organising, experiencing and evaluating the environment, the human being creates certain perception of this particular environment. This spatial image is an effect of the process of perception and place cognition, and assumes a form, which the author referred to as the mental map, or the cognitive map. The map may be defined as a fragmentary and simplified image of the environment, culturally determined, and constructed by the human mind on the basis of world-views, cultural memory, tradition, religion, history and education. Therefore, a mental map is a specific type of “tame” space, a place “of own”, and constitutes an assortment of representations containing information regarding the spatial organisation of phenomena, i.e. the imagined places and objects that create the structure of urban space.

The cognitive process consists of structuring the space by its users. Human divides a particular fragment of space into parts, defining the middle and the boundaries, evaluating, determining directions, naming all distinguished fragments and coming into relations with them, as well as, imparting sense and meaning on them. Therefore, human “tames” the fragments of “alien” space and creates places’ organising and ordering “own world”. As human experiences his environment spatially, his mental perception contains information regarding information on the spatial organisation of material and non-material phenomena, that may be presented in a form of simplified sketched-out village plans (mental maps) with the pinpointed locations of places and objects listed as the most significant to a given community, during the interviews with the rural area residents. The source of mental creation maps has been interviewed with countryside residents. The mental maps constructed as such are the maps of meanings. The creation of so many mental maps let us examine, analyse and interpret the mechanisms of functioning of the representations regarding highlighted places and objects, in the memories of the local communities, and to determine their role in shaping the rural cultural landscape and, in broader terms, the human environment.

Mental maps have become an essential instrument for studying human perception and emotions, as they allow to present how subjective our perception and spatial memory are, but additionally, how well entrenched they are in the social and cultural frameworks. Moreover, mental maps present the

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1 The first phase of research regarding the spatial notions of the Kielce rural area inhabitants was conducted in 2014-2017. The results were processed and presented in a work [7].
2 In a work from 1960, [8] the author presented the ways of structuring urban space, as well as, the method of mental mapping.
3 The issues of spatial perception and evaluation and the ways of creating places in various cultures, have received a broad examination by Y. F. Tuan in his work [9]; [10].
emotional dimension of space, allowing us to recreate both the contemporary relations of people to the cultural landscape they create, as well as their past experiences existing in the memories.

3. Cultural landscape as a record of the collective cultural memory

Within the anthropological perspective, the village appears as a “living organism” and a self-navigating structure, an integrated system, which consists of mutually intertwined elements (places and objects), and each of them has its own place, and fulfils a particular function.

Therefore, the cultural landscape is primarily a unique spatial structure, with its content specifically generated by a particular community. It contains the memory of events and the history of people in the form of varied places and objects, rendered as signs and symbols by local communities. Particular elements of these structures are meaningful, comprehensible and recognisable by the participants of the community, as well as constitute a consistent image. Therefore, the objects of small sacral architecture exist within the context of other places and objects and enter into relations with them, constituting cultural texts. Therefore, one can say, that the rural cultural landscape is a specific text of culture written on the basis of the community’s memory, as it constitutes a record of historical processes, symbols, cultural meanings and geographic relations. Along with its material, symbolic and legendary-mythological dimension, it is a system and a carrier of cultural memory of local societies, taken as a representation of the community regarding its own past. The harmonious cultural landscape encodes the events of the past, serves group communication and builds the identity of the inhabitants. The record of meanings within the landscape is concealed, it is often based on genetic determinants, archetypes, topoi or faded cultural codes.

The wayside crosses and shrines constitute one of many possibilities of creating meaningful places and forms within the landscape. The analysis of mental maps revealed a surprisingly substantial amount of the aforementioned in the examined villages - from few to over a dozen objects. On top, the analysis of the interviews demonstrated that the shrines and the crosses belong to one of the most durable elements of the spatial structure, and that their presence in villages is perceived as necessary by the interlocutors. The aforementioned play essential roles, they are carriers of strongly structured social bonds, they determine the specific, unique character of a place, and define the intensity and the forms of participation of people within the process of communication.

4. Shrines as spatial and memorial signs within the rural cultural landscape

4.1 Location and motivation behind erecting wayside crosses and shrines, and their functions

As shown by the research, the location of crosses and shrines within the rural space was significant. The choice of location was strictly related to the motivation of the founders, which often resulted from traditional cultural models and world-views. However, the latter functions, that the residents conferred upon the aforementioned objects, were related both to their previous locations, as well as, to the motivation of the founders. The interlocutors highlighted, that the crosses and the shrines at their villages are necessary and “perennial”, which let’s assume, that they constitute landscape elements heavily rooted in the cultural world imagery and in the Polish tradition. Their exceptional status results primarily from the fact, that for the Catholic residents of the examined villages, they symbolise the presence of God. Therefore, the primary motivation behind erecting crosses and shrines resulted from the belief, that man must remain in close contact with the afterlife, with the Highest Beings, spirits of the ancestors, in order to be able to ask for their protection. According to the statements by the

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4 The issue of cultural collective memory is broadly examined by J. Assman. In his work [4], the author highlights that the cultural memory encompasses a very distant time perspective and is based on institutionalised memory carriers: [4], pp. 66-71; [12], [13].

5 Regarding the semiotic aspect of the cultural landscape and culture cf. [14], [15].
interlocutors, the underlying cause, was the necessity to tame, organise and secure the unknown, demonic space, by sacralisation, i.e. by organising and “taming”\(^6\).

The popularity of erecting wayside crosses and shrines in Polish villages is probably a result of the motivations such as, e.g. the need to commemorate important places and events, belief in their protective power against cataclysms, epidemics, diseases and all types of evil. This is confirmed by the analyses of locations, inscriptions and of the interlocutor’s testimonies, which also reveal that they were often placed on burial grounds, places of tragic death, asking for an increase in birth rate, as supplicatory offerings, for fortune, protection of the home, of the family, the deceased, the belongings, crops; to undo misfortunes and protect from disease. Additionally, they were erected as thanksgiving offerings for grace, birth of children, regaining health, protection from demons and calamities, or as a propitiatory offering for committing an offence, most often a crime.

Regardless of the founder’s motivations, since ages they have played various roles in the local community, denoting significant places in space. Moreover, they function as important carriers of memory regarding important events of the past. One can say that these numerous functions of sacral objects have usually syncretic character\(^7\).

### 4.2 Crosses and shrines as spatial signs

Crosses and shrines in the examined villages, appeared with significant frequency, in particular, meaningful locations and configurations with such archetypical elements of space as water, a tree, stone (a mountain), a temple, a house, a border, a road. The analysis of their locations, function and configuration, revealed a presence and abundance of variants of the basic organisation and space evaluation categories such as the symbols of the “means” of organising landscape vertically and horizontally, that establishes a hierarchy of divisions and of values essential to rural communities.

Crosses and shrines repeat the use of the symbol of the sacred “means” and of the cosmic temple axis symbol, as the former determine the centre and directions, similar to the latter. By “opening up” the space upwards, they provide people with a connection to the afterlife. Their mediatory character revealing particularly during rites and rituals, allowed the residents to contact the sacrum and the spirits of the deceased ancestors. The location of these objects near the village border, at crossroads, in places of demonic activity, as well as magical-religious practices, exercised by the people in front of the crosses and saint figures, indicate, that within the religious-cosmogonic map, these objects encode the primaeval agrarian and pastoral beliefs. The research results allow to risk a statement, that the aforementioned continue the elder, archetypical cosmic symbol of a mountain (the Cosmic Mountain) and that of a tree (the Cosmic Tree, the Tree of Life, the Pillar of Heavens).

One could also conclude, that their location within the rural space was intentional, meaningful and that it resulted from tradition, from a folk world-view, beliefs and fears most often associated with cataclysms, tragic death, belief in demons and in the spirits of the “foul deceased”, particularly, of suicides. Therefore, they were most often erected as protective marks for the people, and the village and home space. Regarding such a purpose, they are most often present at the entrance, in the middle and at the end of the village, at crossroads, beside roads, and near the borders, in order to protect wayfarers and village residents from a broadly perceived Evil\(^8\). In the examined villages, these objects also remain to act as important orientation points, which still serve as reference points for the residents to describe the location of the remaining essential places in the area. They also function as signposts and border signs. Their meaningful location organises the village plan, introduces order and harmony to the landscape. The research demonstrated the paradigmatic nature of the means of experiencing and organising the inhabited rural environment.

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\(^{6}\) More about the sacralisation of space and its role in traditional cultures, cf. [16], [17], [18], [19], [20].

\(^{7}\) J. Adamowski, The motivations behind erecting wayside crosses and shrines, in [21], pp. 17- 41.

\(^{8}\) “The cross - apotropaion since long time ago has accompanied the believers, protecting them and their surrounding space from evil. Its apotropaic effect was related both to the living and to the deceased. Regarding the latter, the cross not only established the sacralisation of death, but additionally, by closing off the passage of return for the souls, allowed for an unimpeded passage to the afterlife.” [22], pp 106.
4.3. Crosses and shrines as memorial signs

As the human experiences the environment spatially, the memory regarding events and the history of men is inscribed in the landscape in the form of varied memorials. Therefore, one can assume, that space is a “lasting memory” of the society, inscribed in places\(^9\). Thus, the cultural memory of a community requires places and various forms serving the purpose of memory carriers, e.g. crosses and shrines. Serving the purpose of the signs, commemorating the historical, religious and private events, sacral objects were erected in many of the examined villages, as memorials of the war’s end, abolishing socage, jubilees, epidemic’s end, and of numerous other past events.

Shrines and crosses often located near roads and at crossroads remind of former eschatological beliefs. In the examined villages, to this day the population have been commemorating people, who died tragic deaths, e.g. in a road accident, or murder, by hanging little cabinet shrines on trees. The small sacral architecture objects are particularly related to the memory regarding the dramatic events from the period of World War II during German occupation and the genocide of Polish village residents. Mass graves, monuments and numerous places of memory in surrounding forests, marshes, marked with crosses and shrines, serve as memorials of these events, traumatic for the interlocutors. In each village examined, numerous crosses and shrines stand as witnesses to war tragedy, as guardians of memory, as sacred signs commemorating numerous victims of village pacification, of war crime, and stand as landmarks of the place of their eternal rest. Inscriptions “Oh Lord, free [protect] us from air [epidemics], famine, war and fire”, placed on numerous shrines, commemorate numerous tragedies that affected the local communities in Poland.

The small sacral architecture objects also serve as carriers of non-material values of the national heritage, inscribed in the mythological-legendary rural landscape. The local population entwined a number of not only historical but also legendary events, in the history of these historic objects. They were related to the motifs of popular legends regarding hidden treasures, Świętokrzyskie province brigands, witches, run-down villages, churches, taverns and on the healing properties of spring water. Therefore, they are often the last memorial carriers within the village space, reminding of former beliefs and events, that survived inscribed in places as legends and folk tales.

Such objects have fulfilled various social-cultural needs for ages. Their permanent presence in the landscape constitutes a testimony of the continuity of tradition, they serve as specific monuments of memory. Numerous interlocutors would highlight, that these objects within villages, are perceived not only as cultural relics, but also as a part of history marked by patriotism, a memorial of the struggle for freedom, a reminder of the effort and difficulties of everyday lives and the faith of many generations. One can say, that within the rural landscape, these objects serve as a sort of a looking-glass, reflecting history, the tradition of the community, and functioning as a significant element of a folk world-view, constructing the identity of the residents.

The research demonstrated, that the small sacral architecture objects to this day remains an essential testament to the continuity of history of places and people. Crosses and shrines in the examined villages, often stand in the landscape accompanied by other archetypical signs and carriers of memory, such as springs, rivers, trees, hills, family household, temples, roads, borders, stones, with which, these objects create meaningful configurations and macro-signs.

5. Conclusion and summary

In the light of the analysed sources, the Kielce rural area is still perceived by its residents as a harmonious unity (a cosmos) of the human and the afterlife realms, which was also expressed in the division and the evaluation of its space. The specifics of the folk spatial perception are strictly related to the evaluation of the environment via the aspect of tradition and a folk world-view based on cultural archetypes and stereotypes.

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\(^9\) More regarding the subject of urban spaces as carriers and records of collective memory, see [23] pp. 132; [24], [25], [26].
The research regarding mental perception of the Kielce rural area revealed a syncretism of the function of crosses and shrines, and a strict relation of dependence between its culturally determined perception, evaluation, location, and the shaping of a harmonious human environment. The full picture both of the crosses and the shrines, their locations in the consciousness of the interlocutors, as well as their high status, were revealed only through the analysis of the residents' ritual behaviour at these places, in particular situations and at a particular time. Shrines as spatial and memorial signs serve numerous significant purposes in the life of the residents of the examined villages. They are the places of integration of the community, they build its identity, and their presence within the landscape guarantees its harmony and legibility. Their meanings and senses, rendered by previous generations, remain active, as they are to this day used in intercultural communication of the examined communities, and serve numerous essential purposes. Therefore, one could say that they retain the status of macro-signs and symbols.

A harmonious cultural landscape is a civilisation value, as it constitutes a record of the community’s memory and of the cultural code. Moreover, it serves group communication, building the identity of the residents, and creating socially useful narratives. In addition, it is also the basis for individual development and building harmonious relations with the environment. Therefore, the cultural landscape should be under protection along with its constitutive elements.

The rural landscape and the historically shaped traditional spatial structures are often subject to faster and more profound processes of change. The transformation encompasses both the structure, as well as, form and contents. Currently, the order of inhabited space constituted till recently by folk architecture, traditional crop field arrangement, communication pathways, green areas and waters, was demolished.

The article is a voice in an ongoing discussion between representatives of various scientific disciplines, held in order to find solutions regarding the protection, revitalisation and shaping of the harmonious cultural landscape of the rural areas, while keeping its regional and agrarian character. The discussion should not be closed to opinions by the very users of the space, i.e. the residents of villages, as without knowing and considering their opinions it is impossible to recognise, determine and understand the value of the cultural landscape. The specifics of “peasant” thinking and evaluating of the environment, the presence of archetypical elements, the basic categories of space and the traditional systems of reference should be considered in the process of designing and shaping the cultural landscape of both urban and rural areas. I think, that the conclusions included in the paper will also prove helpful for conservation services, urban planners, architects and officials in designing project concepts within rural areas.

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