

PARK OF GRUNWALD BATTLE VICTORY, VISIONS AND REALITY

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Abstract: In Lithuania every year (since 1990) commemorations of the Battle of Grunwald are held in different areas. At this time mention is made of an important event in Europe, where on 15th July 1410 the alliance of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland decisively defeated the army of the Teutonic Knights near Grunwald (now in Poland). This victory became the pride of the Lithuanian nation. In 1990 an ambitious project – the creation of the park of the Grunwald Battle was launched in Kaunas district.

The article discusses the current situation of the park, also the main symbolic elements (monuments, symbols, records, etc.), as well as planned but not yet implemented ambitions. The question is why this project has not been fully implemented and why the park is floundering. The conclusion is that this park is not a place carrying a strong emotional significance, it is not an important historical site with cultural heritage, it has nothing to do with collective memory. For this reason the territory of the park is not meaningful and significant to the local inhabitants or wider society. This is the main reason why the park is doomed to flounder.

Keywords: Battle of Grunwald, symbolical monuments, memorial place, celebrations.

In Lithuania every year (since 1990) commemorations of the Battle of Grunwald are held in different areas. These commemorations mark an important event in Europe, where on the 15th of July 1410 the alliance of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland decisively defeated the army of the Teutonic Knights near Grunwald (now in Poland). This victory became a source of Lithuanian national pride.

In 1990 when commemorating the 580th anniversary of the victory of the Battle of Grunwald an ambitious project – the creation of the park of Grunwald Battle was launched in Kaunas district. The park is situated beside the Kaunas–Klaipėda highway, near the borough of Babtai. One may ask why this place was chosen. Does it have some connections with the Battle of Grunwald or maybe it preserves the memory of battle commanders, generals? Maybe it is significant for its historical or cultural heritage? The answer is – no, it has nothing to do with the Battle of Grunwald or its generals and commanders; it is not famous for cultural heritage either. This is only a huge empty field, which belongs to the state (that is why it was easy to get permission for creation of the park in this area) and it is situated near Kaunas city where the park's initiators have a club. The park has been built without any proper model and it has nothing to do with collective memory and cultural heritage. Already in the early 20th century French philosopher Maurice

Halbwachs noted that the landscape has embodied the tradition of the ancestors which gives support to the community identity and a “stable” material basis for collective memory. Memories of things past survive only if they adhere to the material milieu from which they originate.¹

Thus the project of the memorial park of the Grunwald Battle victory was launched in this empty field (empty in all senses of the word – empty in the material sense, empty in connection with heritage and memory). The park is 10 hectares in size and triangular in shape, imitating the Lithuanian Reform Movement’s² logo. In 1990 when the park was established, 580 oaks were planted – this number symbolizes the anniversary of the battle. The project’s authors want the park to be seen from the air as the emblem of the Lithuanian Reform Movement and also as the word “Žalgiris”³, made by planting trees. The initiator of this project was Grunwald victory club chairman Alfonsas Bajarskas, together with like-minded people.

Kaunas district municipality and the Grunwald victory club undertook a commitment to take care of the park. The club developed a design for the park, provided for sculptural accents and infrastructure. People supported the idea of this park. Significant funds were collected for the project realization. It has been argued that not everyone can go to the actual location of the Battle of Grunwald now in Poland, so it is very good that the most significant battle in the history of Lithuania is immortalized in Lithuania.⁴

So already in 1993 the funds collected were used to erect 11 sculptures of the Grunwald battle commanders here. They were carved by Lithuanian folk artists during a specially organized open-air camp in Babtai town. Over a thousand trees were also planted in memory of significant events in Lithuanian history and well-known personalities of Lithuania. Each of those trees has its own metrics and protectors.

This was the initial stage of the project. However, this ambitious project wished to achieve much more. The park’s initiators had visions of building other important monuments there, symbolizing Lithuanian statehood and history.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the current situation of the park, also the main symbolic elements (wooden sculptures immortalizing the famous heroes of the Battle of Grunwald, symbols, records, etc.), as well as other planned but not yet implemented ambitions. The question is why this ambitious project has not been fully implemented and the park is floundering? The article is based on field research in this area in 2011 as well as on information provided by the media.

In Lithuanian historiography proper attention has not yet been devoted to this park as a separate object. So far only two statues standing in the park

1 HALBWACHS 1971. 130; cited from HROBAT 2010. 42.

2 Lithuanian Reform Movement (Lith.: *Sąjūdis*) was the political organization which led the struggle for Lithuanian independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was established on June 3, 1988 and was led by Vytautas Landsbergis. Its goal was to seek the return of independent status for Lithuania.

3 Žalgiris (Lith.) means *Grunwald*.

4 ANDRIUŠKEVIČIUS 2001.

– Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas and the Polish King Jogaila, have been discussed in one article.⁵

Referring to the concept of “invented tradition”,⁶ I seek through this case study to demonstrate that an artificially created (or *invented*) memorial place, unrelated to the collective memory, the cultural and historical heritage, which according to David Lowenthal means a symbolic link between the imagined ancestors and modern man,⁷ is not significant to people and does not acquire functions intended for it, but just flounders.

Symbolic Objects in the Park

In 2001 a concrete platform was built in the middle of the park for the future monument of one of the symbols of Lithuanian statehood– Gediminas columns⁸ – as the central and one of the most important symbolic focuses of the park. Gediminas columns were selected as an important symbol of Lithuanian statehood and the ruler, used by Gediminas and the Jogaila dynasties. Therefore, it refers to the fact that regiments recruited by Grand Duke Vytautas marched with flags marked with this symbol in the Battle of Grunwald. In the designers’ visions the height of this Gediminas columns monument must correspond to the year of the Grunwald battle, i.e., it must be 14 meters 10 centimetres high. The monument must be made of concrete and painted white. At the monument an altar was built as well. A metal capsule with a letter for posterity has been bricked into the foundation of this monument. A second copy of this letter has been deposited at the Vytautas the Great War Museum.⁹ The architect of the monument, Stanislovas Kalinka, hoped to succeed in finding funds to complete works by 2010, the year of the 600th anniversary of the battle.¹⁰ Besides the main memorial it has been planned to construct a “Historical Memory Books” monument. Each “book” should recall important events for the Lithuanian State – from ancient times to the present day.¹¹ According to the plan, the avenue of struggle for independence – yet to be created in the park – would terminate in a tumulus with a sculpture of the pagan high priest – *Vaidila*. But unfortunately only rusting reinforcement rods stick out of the foundation instead of the huge Gediminas columns monument and other symbols...

Currently, 11 wooden monuments designed for the Battle of Grunwald generals stand in the park: Rumbaudas (Samogitia dean, Samogitian army

5 URBONIENĖ 2012. 403–426.

6 See HOBBSAWM AND RANGER 1983.

7 LOWENTHAL 1996. 44.

8 The Columns of Gediminas or Pillars of Gediminas (Lith.: *Gediminaičių stulpai*) are one of the earliest symbols of Lithuania and one of its historical coats of arms. They were used in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, initially as a rulers’ personal insignia, a state symbol, and later as a part of the heraldic signs of the leading aristocracy. During the period between World War I and World War II they were used by the Lithuanian Republic as a minor state symbol, e. g. on Litas coins and military equipment.

9 KALESINSKAS 2010.

10 ANDRIUŠKEVIČIUS 2001.

11 ANDRIUŠKEVIČIUS 2001.

commander), Kristinas Astikas (separate unit commander), Stanislovas Čiupurna (marshal), Jonas Nemyra (separate unit commander), Sungaila (Kaunas Dean), Jurgis Lengvinaitis (commander of the Smolensk and Mstislav regiments), Jonas Žadvydas (separate unit commander), Jurgis Gedgaudas (vicegerent of Kiev), Jonas Goštautas (separate unit commander), Mykolas Kešgaila (vicegerent of Ukmergė), Albertas Manvydas (vicegerent of Vilnius and the Lithuanian Armed Forces Commander). During preparation for the 600th anniversary celebration some funds were received and in 2010 two sculptures of the main battle commanders – the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas (1350–1430) and Polish King Jogaila¹² (1386–1434) were erected.

Folk artist sculptor Adolfas Teresius created the statue of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas. The sculptor portrayed the duke dressed in ruler's robes with a ducal crown. The coat of arms – *Vytis*¹³ – is carved at the bottom of the monument. Vytautas' figure is framed by spears, behind his head a large shield is carved and at the top of the roof covering the sculpture – is the royal crown, which Vytautas was prepared to receive, but was never crowned. In this sculpture the artist treated Vytautas not only as the victor of the Battle of Grunwald, but as the ruler who aimed to become a king. This desire is symbolized by the royal crown at the top of the monument, but not on Vytautas' head.

Another folk artist sculptor Ričardas Gaška carved the statue of the Polish King Jogaila (Polish: *Jagiello*). The artist emphasized the ruler's signs – the royal crown, which is even depicted twice: one on the crowned head of Jogaila, the second raised high above the roof. King Jogaila holds royal regalia – the orb topped with a cross (*globus cruciger* in Latin). Meanwhile, only the grip of the sword is seen. So, consciously or not, here Jogaila is not represented as a military leader.

Following research by historians, the initiators wanted to enhance the underrated role of Jogaila in the battle. Sculptors have been given the task to create two main generals to stand at either side of the future Gediminas columns monument as equally important leaders in the battle of Grunwald. As stated by the director of the Vytautas the Great War Museum, Juozapas Jurevičius: “Jogaila was an important persona of this battle. After all, we cannot escape from history”.¹⁴ Sculptor Gaška, perhaps unintentionally, as we have seen, created an image of Jogaila, showing him not as an important commander, but only as a ruler. Meanwhile sculptor Teresius stressed the images of warrior and ruler in Vytautas' sculpture, and this was the most important aspect in the development of the Grunwald Park. Besides, these two monuments standing in one line are different in proportions. The statue of Vytautas is much more monumental, more majestic and even from a distance it can be seen that it depicts a soldier with a sword. Meanwhile, the image of Jogaila is not as majestic as that of Vytautas and from a distance it is difficult to tell what is really depicted over there. The monument itself looks

12 Jogaila in the period 1377–1401 was also a grand duke of Lithuania.

13 The coat of arms – *Vytis* (in Lith.) – the armored knight with sword and shield.

14 ANDRIUŠKEVIČIUS 2001.

smaller, even though the second crown at the top makes this monument visually higher.

So these two sculptures depicting rulers and especially their composition reflect certain stereotypes entrenched in Lithuanian society. It should be noted that in the minds of Lithuanians Vytautas is the main character who led the victory in the Battle of Grunwald. Vytautas in the public opinion is a symbol of the greatness of the Lithuanian state and its "golden age", he remains a permanently relevant symbol of Lithuanian identity.¹⁵ Ignorance of Jogaila is still fed by a negative opinion of him which was formed in the 19th to the early 20th century. According to Lithuanian historian A. Nikžentaitis, even today many Lithuanians regard Jogaila as a traitor of the Lithuanian nation, who "sold" Lithuania to Poland and destroyed the old pagan Lithuanian culture.¹⁶

In the process of creating the images of commanders, the main goal was to link the sculptures with the symbols of the battle of Grunwald. Self-taught sculptors sought to find certain traits, attributes, symbols for each military leader, and used the records from which the persons can be identified. Characterizing signs are found for almost all images; in most cases, this is their family coat of arms or weapons of that period. Almost every monument is crowned with the iron peak with the date 1410 (Fig. 3). A sign of Gediminas columns, a sword, and a battle axe are also integrated in the tops of the monuments. However, the key element for the identification of these persons remains inscriptions – the engraved name of the military commander.

Monuments of generals are arranged in a semicircle, and two shrines on pillars stand at the sides of this semicircular line of monuments. One of them has the sculpture of the Pensive Christ and the inscription "Lord, bless those seeking light, honesty and justice". It was the idea of the park's creators that this monument with the figure of the Pensive Christ symbolizes the sufferings of the Lithuanian nation and the difficult path leading to the independent state. The second monument has a small statue of the Sorrowful Mother of God and the inscription: "Holy Virgin Mary, protect us from violence, greed and strife". As we have seen earlier, various symbols associated with the Battle of Grunwald and with the idea of an independent Lithuanian state and Lithuanian history and culture were very important for the founders of the park. According to this vision the images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, the most significant in their historical meaning were chosen for these shrines. Images of the Pensive Christ and the Sorrowful Mother of God were traditionally part of monuments symbolizing the pain and sufferings of the Lithuanian nation, or tragic events in the history of the State.

15 NIKŽENTAITIS 2002. 25–40.

16 NIKŽENTAITIS 2002. 68.

Celebrations in the Park of the Grunwald Battle Victory

In the first years after the establishment of the park annual anniversaries of the Battle of Grunwald were observed here quite solemnly. The 585th, 590th, 595th anniversaries of the battle were celebrated with special ceremony. But euphoria gradually diminished, and the lack of funds meant that the vision has not been implemented. In 2007 during the preparation for commemoration of this date the initiator of the park, Alfonsas Bajarskas, complained that the celebration would be much more modest than in the previous year.¹⁷

Usually the ceremony was organized as a purposefully formed ritual of such celebrations: the participants listen to solemn speeches, soldiers stand in a guard of honour, a military band plays and cannons are fired, candles are lit at the shrines, flowers are placed, finally folk music groups give a concert. But already in 2007 soldiers, military band and cannon were absent. The few participants of the celebration were welcomed by Kaunas district authorities, candles were lit, flowers were placed at the shrines, and a folk music ensemble performed.

However, thanks to the Grunwald park enthusiasts club, in 2010 when commemorating the 600th anniversary of the battle a truly grand celebration was held. During the fieldwork respondents interviewed remembered this event very well. They argued that despite the heat (July), many people had gathered in the park – not only from Kaunas city and district, but also from other neighbouring districts and even distant locations. People claimed that there have never been so many people in the park and hardly ever will be.

The event was attended by the mayor of Kaunas district, municipal officials, Kaunas city administrative director, and many others. The celebrations scenario was slightly expanded. The festival began by solemnly lighting a flame on the altar with fire brought from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (in Kaunas). After that the Lithuanian national anthem was sung and the Lithuanian army brass band played. All the guests were greeted by the mayor of Kaunas district municipality. The most impressive part of this festival was the Lithuanian Air Force fly-past. At the end of this event as usual a concert was held and people were treated to military porridge.¹⁸

In 2011 the (601st) anniversary of the battle, according to the respondents, did not resemble the event of 2010. Some respondents did not remember this event; they even claimed that in 2011 no commemoration of the battle was organized in this park.

17 TVIRBUTAS 2007.

18 ŽULYS 2010.

Concluding Remarks: the Future of the Park

This memorial park has been cherished for a long time only due to a small group of enthusiasts. They have not lost hope of achieving their vision, they also welcome any initiative taken or support provided. According to the park's club members, the crucial obstacle to the implementation of the park idea is lack of resources, particularly exacerbated by the economic crisis.

Yet seen from today's perspective, it is evident that this ambitious project is collapsing. Why? Probably there is no unambiguous answer. It is clear that without the initiative of local people, without local government support and sufficient funding the idea of the park cannot be implemented.

But the most important reason for non-viability of the park, apparently, is not the finances, lack of initiative, and so on. The reason is the place itself, a place which is not related to the Battle of Grunwald, a place which has no memory of this great event. This park is not a place carrying a strong emotional significance or it is not an important historical site with cultural heritage for the local inhabitants or wider society. One could say a place without "aura" of battle victory. According to researchers, a landscape not related to the collective memory of the community and its past will not be meaningful for the local community.¹⁹ So the artificially memorialized space without connection to the real event and with the culture of memory, notwithstanding all the symbols important to the nation and state history placed in the territory, is doomed to flounder as this case study has shown.

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¹⁹ HROBAT 2010. 41.

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Fig. 1. Grand duke of Lithuania Vytautas.
Photo: S. Urbonienė, 2011.



Fig. 2. King of Poland Jogaila.
Photo: S. Urbonienė, 2011.



Fig. 3. Vicegerent of Ukmergė Mykolas Kešgaila. Photo: S. Urbonienė, 2011.