

## The Pirita Convent in Estonian Historical Memory: Not Just in the Forest behind the Convent

Linda Kaljundi

Summary

**Abstract:** The Pirita convent is one of the best known symbolic and visual signs of the Middle Ages in Estonia. At the same time, its role in our historical memory has been both remarkable and unusually diverse, uniting a number of different narratives, and also visual and performative layers. This article examines the shaping of Pirita as an Estonian 'realm of memory', paying special attention to the contrast between its alienation and domestication.

**Keywords:** Pirita convent, medievalism, realms of memory, Estonian historical memory

The Pirita convent is one of the best known symbolic and visual signs of the Middle Ages in Estonia. Destroyed by Russian troops in the Livonian War in 1575 and standing in ruins since the Great Northern War (1700–1721), the convent managed to survive until the 19th century, which was characterised by a fascination with ruins, and the convent was still standing at the start of the first archaeological excavations and restoration work at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, everybody living in Estonia recognises Pirita by its name and its soaring triangular western gable.

The current article examines the place of Pirita in Estonian historical memory, and claims that the role Pirita has played, and still plays, in national historical self-consciousness is remarkable and unusually multi-layered. As a 'realm of memory', Pirita unites numerous layers: narratives and metaphors, spectacular ruins and a number of visual signs,

especially its triangular western gable, which has been endlessly reproduced in picture albums, postcards and school textbooks; it is known from the songs and quotations in the film *The Last Relic*, memories of performances and concerts taking place in the convent, etc. However, the shaping of Pirita as an Estonian realm of memory has been characterised, since the emergence of local national historical self-awareness, by the constant opposition between the alienation and domestication of the site.

Although there has been increasing scholarly interest in historical memory in recent years, the Estonian realms of memory have so far not been extensively mapped. We can nevertheless point out some key features of the Estonian national historical memory and its realms of memory: in their current shape they reach back to the era of the National Awakening in the middle of the 19th century, the era of the invention of tradition and the emergence of new nations. As expected, in this process the topic of 'the same' and 'the other' becomes crucial. For the Estonian historical memory – characterised best by its traumatic nature – this was, and still is, a complicated issue. As local territories for a long time belonged to the German cultural space, which was proclaimed 'the other' from the National Awakening period onwards, and especially during the first republic, this inevitably raised the question of what was actually 'the same' in our cultural legacy – in written and visual culture, institutions, historical events, heroes etc. Here, also, distinguishing between 'our' and 'alien' landscape and monuments played a significant role. An excellent example in this still relatively little-researched topic is Pirita, where, remarkably, both narrative and visual layers exist.

The main reason for Pirita's fame is, without doubt, the historical novel by Eduard

Bornhöhe, *Prince Gabriel or the Last Days of the Pirita Convent* (1893). In 1969 Grigori Kromanov turned it into a historical adventure film, *The Last Relic*, with some catchy tunes, and both the film and the songs became hugely popular. Estonian national historical memory has largely been shaped by writers and, besides the national epic *Kalevipoeg* (Kalev's Son, 1857–1861), Eduard Bornhöhe's novels about the Estonians' ancient and eternal fight for freedom have had a major impact on the formation of national identity, primarily his *Tasuja* (Avenger, 1880). In most schools, his novels, including *Prince Gabriel*, are still included in the compulsory reading lists and, during the decades since the film was made, it has likewise become one of the most beloved cinematic achievements in Estonia. It might even seem paradoxical, in hindsight, that although the works seemingly strove to erase the place from our memory – after all, the Pirita convent in these stories stands for something 'alien', which should be, and indeed is, burnt down by the Estonian protagonists – they nevertheless guaranteed it a firm place in the Estonian historical consciousness.

Both stories focus on the love story of the two main characters, the aristocratic maiden Agnes and the adventurer of peasant origin and 'free man' Gabriel. Both works also contain sharp opposition between 'the same' and 'the other', expressed on two levels: in addition to the love between the protagonists who belong to different social classes, the peasants' revolt against the nobility and the convent is also central to the plot. Unlike various 'old European countries', where the Middle Ages in historical memory primarily signify roots and continuity, in Estonian historical memory the same period denotes disruption, and the loss of the ancient freedom to the German-speaking elite. Within this dis-

course, the Pirita convent is not an 'our' realm (of memory), where we can earnestly search for our roots amongst the crumbled walls. The antagonistic role of the convent emerges even more powerfully in the film, where it was allegorically depicted, at the time of the post-Prague spring (1968), as a symbol of an alien ideological power, and the suppressor of free will, freedom of speech, and heretics (i.e. dissidents). Although this interpretation model should not be applied to all Estonian viewers, the impact of an approach that forcefully alienated the convent as a representative of 'the other' must certainly be taken into consideration in creating an image of the Pirita convent as something 'alien'.

However, this is not the only Pirita that we know and remember. The second part of the article examines the 'positive occupation' of Pirita, because although the cult film and the towering ruins in the landscape no doubt mutually enhance their fame, they also live their own life. From that point of view it is quite telling that in the film *The Last Relic* a cardboard model was used instead of the real thing. However, what kind of meaning could this 'real' convent, not of cardboard but of limestone, have? It is certainly one of the most prominent visual signs of medieval Estonia and its western gable has become a standard element in studies of Estonian history, as well as in school textbooks and on a wider popular level: in tourism booklets, postcards, picture albums, logos of institutions located in Pirita etc.

Among the medieval monuments, its massive bulk places it in line not so much with churches-monasteries as with great medieval strongholds, such as Viljandi, Kuressaare etc. Due to the opposition of 'the same' and 'the other', which has played, and still plays, a significant part in creating Estonian landscapes of memory, the attitude to the strong-

holds and to other structures, for example to manor houses, has been, and is, quite complicated. What we see here is the constant wavering between domestication and alienation, where the strongholds and manors fulfil the role of 'bastions of the alien mind and power', but their monumentality and heritage value do not allow them to be totally abandoned.

Against this background, Pirita's much more positive meaning emerges. The mere fact that it is not a military fortification makes it possible to interpret the convent's mighty walls and dimensions not as dangerous and hostile, but rather as something to be proud of. First of all, Pirita's meaning cannot be regarded separately from its position in the landscape or its idyllic location by the river bend and on the edge of the current garden suburb, which became a popular outing and bathing destination in the 1910s. The convent has thus become part of the image of Pirita in general – together with the beach, sailing club and regattas, motocross track and bicycle track, restaurants and functionalist beach houses.

Pirita's present appearance is largely due to the tidying up of the area preceding the Olympic regatta of the 1980 Games in Moscow. The purposeful designing of the convent and the whole town district, however, started in the 1920s–1930s. In 1925, the Pirita Improvement Society was established and operated very efficiently until 1940, when pre-Soviet regime societies were banned. The activities of the society included improving the reputation and orderliness of the urban district, as well as active 'heritage production'. The convent and the beach were put in good order, a well-functioning bus service was established, road repairs were carried out, photographic and literary competitions were organised etc. These two aspects, the

simultaneous modernisation and historicisation of Pirita, are vividly expressed in the Society publications and visual materials. A special publishing house was established in order to produce postcards, tourism booklets in several languages, and historical novels. The Society also played a significant role in arranging, together with Swedish art historians and heritage preservation specialists, various archaeological excavations and research, as well as publishing and popularising its results.

As often indicated, the 19th century wave of maintaining and researching ruins all over Europe could be interpreted as 'taming' the ruins, as it were, and during this process an attempt was made to domesticate everything that caused fear and discomfort. In the case of Pirita, however, an important part in 'taming the fear' could be seen in taking the ruins away from the Germans and returning them to the Swedes. The idea of the convent as a monument of Estonian and Swedish ancient close connections and cultural co-operation was best expressed in the grand festivities on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the consecration of the convent in 1936, and also in two albums with Estonian and Swedish parallel texts. Here we can clearly see the search for a new identity that characterised the 1920s and 1930s and the determined attempt to tear Estonia away from the German cultural background. There, alongside the Greater-Finland ideas, the Scandinavian or 'Balto-scandian' orientation was quite successful.

Against the general background of Estonian historical memory, this positive image of Pirita, therefore, clearly stands out in comparison, for example, with the overwhelmingly negative image of the Catholic Church in the historical novels of the 1930s. This was also influenced by the renewed interest

in Sweden in the Brigittines, and especially in the Vadstena abbey, for which a positive and prominent image was quickly devised. The Swedish organisers of the Pirita archaeological excavations were involved in the restoration work at the Vadstena abbey and in the plans to establish a museum there; thus, some of their ideas and even the practice of heritage production was transferred to Pirita as well.

Another cause of the positive image could be the fact that, although Pirita accommodated both brothers and sisters, in Estonia it is primarily associated with nuns. In Estonian historical memory, the negative image of the medieval church and monastery is clearly connected with monks and priests, the traditional antagonists of Estonian historical novels, textbooks etc. Nuns not only remove Pirita from that tradition, but also make it seem more harmless and distance it from the traditional masculine sphere of the 'greater history', which focuses on conflicts and wars. Nuns also fit the classical picture of the Middle Ages (maintaining traditional and community values etc.). On the other hand, nuns certainly add excitement to the image: convents make a good background to adventure and love stories and offer a fascinating image of women who live in both a physical and mental prison – and are keenly waiting for someone to set them free. This is associated with another essential aspect, which the current article will not tackle, namely the significance of *The Last Relic* in Estonian popular and commonplace, but also in our romantic and erotic, culture.

The Pirita convent is not therefore simply a part of our historical memory but also of our daily and popular culture, and of course of tourism. All these spheres are interested in the exotic but also in 'domestication', feed-

ing on the familiar and the unknown at the same time. Increasingly, both popular and slightly elitist events, concerts and theatre performances, take place at the convent. Relations with the old *genius loci* have also now been established in the most direct manner: in 2001, a new Brigittine convent was consecrated on the territory of the old one, right next to the ruins. The inhabitants of the convent are already known for their charity and cultural work. In 2005 the Pirita Improvement Society was re-established. All that, as a whole, greatly contributes to the increasingly positive image of the Pirita convent.

In conclusion, we have to admit that there are several 'Piritas' in Estonian historical memory, which have played, or still play, different roles in our memory culture. Urges to both alienate and domesticate it are operating here: in Bornhöhe's novel and in the film *The Last Relic*, which derive from the national discourse, the convent inevitably represents something alien; since the 1930s, on the other hand, the shaping of Pirita and its ruined park as a domesticated realm of memory has been carried out quite purposefully. Popular culture, in turn, strengthens and feeds on the stories, visual images and space created on the basis of both interpretations.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir  
proof-read by Richard Adang*