This is the published version of a chapter published in *De-Bordering, Re-Bordering and Symbols on the European Boundaries*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Lundén, T. (2011)
Religious Symbols as Boundary Markers in Physical Landscapes: An Aspect of Human Geography.
In: Jarosław Jańczak (ed.), *De-Bordering, Re-Bordering and Symbols on the European Boundaries* (pp. 9-19). Berlin: Logos Verlag Berlin
Thematicon

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-21060
Religious Symbols as Boundary Markers in Physical Landscapes. An Aspect of Human Geography

Thomas Lundén

Introduction

With the changes occurring in the spatial extent and content of authoritative rule in Europe from the late 1980’s to the end of hostilities in the Balkans, two opposite processes have taken place; de-bordering and re-bordering.

**De-bordering** is a process whereby contained territories are opened towards surrounding areas. In Western Europe, i.e. the 15 first members of the European Union plus Norway and others, this de-bordering process started with simplified rules for crossing state borders, and ended with, in principle, the withdrawal of border passport controls. In Central and Eastern Europe, i.e. the former non-Soviet members of the Warsaw Pact plus the former Soviet Baltic Republics, the de-bordering process started with the amalgamation of the two German states in 1990 and the change from a state territorial authoritarian system into a market economy. But not until the membership of the European Union and the successive entrance into the Schengen regime did these states enter a truly de-bordering phase.

**Re-bordering** in the same time took place in the former union or federal states of Eastern and Central Europe; the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. In many cases, border barriers were built where they had not existed before. In these states, the member republics were demarcated but internal boundaries were not controlled. With the break-up of the unions, three types of re-bordering appeared:

a) Visa – requirement borders: Mainly between western and westernized states (Baltic States and the former non-Soviet members of the Warsaw Pact) on one hand and Russia and Belarus on the other;

b) One-sided visa requirement borders: By EU states for entrance from Ukraine, Serbia and Moldova but not in the other direction;

c) Re-bordering between the former Baltic Soviet republics becoming independent states (later to be de-bordered through Schengen), and between Russia and Belarus (later to enter a customs union), and between the former republics of Yugoslavia (with special non-recognition between Serbia and independent Kosovo).

Some physical effects of re-bordering and de-bordering are obvious: Boundary demarcations, new border control stations and – with de-bordering – fossilized remnants, sometimes only a few years old. But the new border situations also re-
sulted in more symbolic expressions of bordering, often aimed as a message to the other side of the boundary. In this article, the focus is on religious symbols, often related to nationalistic manifestations placed at or near the boundaries of (often antagonistic) neighboring states.

The spatiality of religious symbols

The ecology of religion is primarily focused on the impact of the environment on religion, primarily its impact on the image of God, where ritual space is located and the spatial diffusion of cults. The analysis of spatial phenomena is a cornerstone in the discipline of geography, defined as the “study of struggles over power of the entry of phenomena and events into space and time”\(^1\). Like history, geography does not concentrate on specific objects or subjects but on their *conviviality*, with the emphasis on the question of their spatial arrangement. From a geographical point of view, the *location* of religion in all its forms, spiritual or physical, would be of interest, but has so far attracted only limited attention.

Three definitions:

*Religio*: obligation, commitment: The definition of religion is contested, but in the modern sense of the word, commitment and obligation seem to be related to holiness and belief in an order beyond scientific reason.

*Regio* has a meaning of *direction, reign* or *rule*. The state (the reign) is a territorial organization claiming monopoly of power over its territory. The independent state is thus the most important principle of authoritative division in the modern world. It is usually the strongest in a hierarchy of territorial organizations (called *domains* by Hägerstrand\(^2\) where authority is exerted, but there are also cases where other levels are more decisive e.g. in weak states with strong ethnic or religious cleavages. State legislation and regulations influence the reach and the movement patterns of its citizens and also of non-citizen (alien) residents. The state boundary is thus an extremely strong dividing line between two sets of rule\(^3\).

The relation between authority and religion was defined in the Peace of Augsburg 1555 as *Cuius regio, eius religio*, indicating the role of the territorial state in the symbolic representation of religion. In the contemporary world states have different relations to religion, differing from autarchic theocracy (Vatican, Iran) to a total formal separation of state and religion (USA, Turkey, France).

*Symbol*: a Greek name meaning *recognition sign*, communicating message and meaning, formed according to rules pertaining to a certain culture. Religious sym-

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bols, as pointed out by Karl W. Deutsch4 cover a wide range of aspects including abstractions, pictorials, persons (heroes, saints), places, organizations and others. In the physical landscape religious symbols range from direct messages of denomination (e.g. places of worship, graveyards, shrines etc.) to more indirect messages such as flags or coats of arms of states with symbols of religion or even the indirect results of religious practices (vineyards, pig farms or the orientation of sacred buildings). Their messages range from fossilized markers of historical events to the direct dichotomization of in-group versus out-group. Symbols are often markers of domination of a territory or of the ‘translation’ of one domain into another, as at physical boundaries.

The physical landscape is an outcome of invisible decisions and rules, including the imposition of symbols. A cultural landscape is an artifact where the spatial arrangement can be interpreted as symbols5. Landscape symbols may help to “alleviate cultural stress through creation of shared symbolic structures that validate, if not actually define, social claims to space and time”6 but in contested areas they may also cause stress and conflict, as in the Sovietized formerly German city of Königsberg/Kaliningrad7. In formally non-religious statehoods as the United States of America, accepted symbols underline what Zelinsky8 calls nationalism and statism whereas religious symbols are absent from the public sphere. Just as symbols may serve to unite they may also define otherness.

In this article I do not intend to treat my objects from a strict semiotic point of view. Rather, I will discuss a number of examples without trying to interpret their meaning to the location or to the onlooker, rather to understand the reasons for the political decision to erect retain or delete them.

Symbols in the landscape

It has been said that the advantage of a flag as a symbol for the territorial state is that a flag does not mean anything in itself9. This is not, strictly speaking, accurate. The fact that a certain combination of colors or a certain symbol on the flag is associated with a certain people or a certain religion may make it offensive to minorities or even oppressed majorities. In the Nordic countries of today, the cross symbols on

the flag have no religious connotation to most people, but in certain Muslim states (many of which have corresponding Islamic symbols on their flags) the cross-flag can be seen as a reminder of the detested Christian Crusades. Even when used as boundary marker towards another state of strong Christian culture, the cross flag gives a strong signal of religious state nationalism. At Skamlingsbanken, an elevated point in Southern Denmark that was at the border of Denmark after Prussia annexed Slesvig in 1866, a giant Dannebrog flag marks the memory of Denmark’s territorial and cultural loss. Dannebrog has a mythical history tied to Danish crusades against the pagan Estonians, but it is probably related to the symbols of the barons of the German(ic) Mark in the border regions of the medieval German empire. In their study of life in Tønder, a border town of Denmark with a significant German-minded population, the sociologists Wolf and Svalastoga showed that local Germans can be recognized by the fact that they do not have flagpoles on their plots. In the massive demonstration of flags and reunification symbols characterizing Southern Jutland the Germans refrain from using the flag of Germany, that would be an insult to their Danish neighbors, but as they would not fly the Danish flag they rather refrain from having a flagpole\textsuperscript{10}. It should be noted that the German flag rather has a revolutionary background dating back to 1848 and that until recently it was not used as a symbol of family and national neighborliness in contrast to the flags of the Nordic countries.

Not only flags can be interpreted in different ways, depending on circumstance (i.e. situation) and timing. On the Italian-Yugoslav boundary – part of the Iron Curtain that divided the old railway street (Gorizia, Italy) and the railway station (Nova Gorica) – the Yugoslav building exposed a big red socialist star facing the Italian side. After the demise of Yugoslavia and independence of Slovenia the star was turned into a Christmas star, and after the holidays it was removed for good. A socialist symbol was reinterpreted into a symbol of a Christian holiday, and eventually abolished\textsuperscript{11}.

Religious symbols in the northeastern border landscape

Whereas the border between Protestantism and Catholicism is rather unclear both historically and spatially, the Protestant – Orthodox dividing line was for a long time quite sharp. There is even an example of how a religious symbol, the chapel of Boris Gleb originating in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century Russian Orthodox mission to the Fennoscandian north, helped to determine the boundary between the Russian Empire and Norway in the 1826 treaty between Norway-Sweden and Russia, in a very conspicuous and geometrically complicated way\textsuperscript{12}. The chapel of Boris Gleb stands

\textsuperscript{10} P. Wolf, K. Svalastoga, En by ved grænsen, København 1963, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{11} T. Lundén, On the boundary..., op. cit., p. 108.
in stark contrast to the nearby Protestant church at Kirkenes, Norway, erected after the destruction of the town in 1944 and its liberation from Nazi German troupes by the Soviet Union, which is commemorated by a statue of a Soviet soldier in a prominent place in this outpost of NATO power in the Arctic.

The sharp dividing line of Protestantism and Orthodoxy ran from northern Norway through Karelia, divided between Russia and Finland, and followed the Russian-Estonian border towards the Catholic areas in the south. In spite of Finland being a Grand Duchy under the Russian Tsar 1809-1917, the freedom of religion was granted, but the legacy of Russian hegemony over Finland is symbolized by an Orthodox chapel built for the tsarist soldiers next to the Swedish border in Tornio. Another border-related landmark of the religious diversity of Russia is the fortification at Bomarsund, Åland Islands near Sweden, where cemeteries for the soldiers and staff were arranged for Protestants, Orthodox, Catholics, Jews and Muslims. An even more formal confirmation of the special status of Finland within the Empire is at Alexander Square, Helsinki, where the Protestant Cathedral is placed in front of a less significant Orthodox church. For other religious groups the symbolic location was rather negative. In Helsinki of the 1880's "the division of the city into two symbolic environments, the ‘better’ and the ‘poorer’ is clear from the institutional location.

**Picture 1.** The enormous statue of Saint Aleksander Nevsky and his men is situated at Pskov, Russia near the Estonian border and facing west, towards the enemy

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**Source:** Thomas Lundén.

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Not only were the Jewish believers’ institutions located in the northwestern periphery. Here the Muslims had their mosques; here were the houses of prayer of the free churches’ “14.

In some cases, the religious symbolism is less visible, but even stronger if seen from a cultural perspective. The Russian-Estonian borderland was, and still is, an area of ostentatious symbols, recently demonstrated dramatically by the war of monuments15. In Pskov, one of Russia’s border towns towards Estonia there is a recent, enormous statue of Aleksander, prince of Novgorod who was given the name Nevsky when in 1240 he defeated an army of Catholic Swedish crusaders at the River Neva. Two years later Nevsky won a battle against the German Order on the ice of Lake Peipus (in Russian Chudskoye Ozyoro, Lake of the Finns i.e. strangers). Nevsky is a saint in the Russian Orthodox Church, and seen as the border guard of the Holy Religion. He was also depicted as a hero defending the holy Russian soil against the Germanic Catholic Crusader invaders in Sergei Eisenstein’s film from 1938. Paradoxically enough, on the Estonian side of this border lake there are several settlements of Old Order Orthodox who felt safer under the more liberal rules of the Livonian Gubernia than in Imperial Russia proper16.

The spatially uneven spread of the Enlightenment and its effects on culture nationalism resulted in different relations between state, religion and ethnicity depending on who defined the group: the group itself, the state of domicile, or ‘the ethnic homeland’. In the border area between southern Estonia and the Pechory/Petseri area in the Pskov region, Russia, lives a group sometimes called the Seto. They speak a Finno-Ugric dialect strongly influenced by Russian, and colored by their Orthodox faith. During the inter-war period 1920-1940 Petseri belonged to Estonia. The Setos were accepted as a religious minority but ethnically a slightly divergent part of the Estonian people. After the annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in 1940/1944 the boundary was moved west, placing most of the Seto on the Russian SFSR side, where they were not regarded as a nationality. After 1991, independent Estonia has formally claimed its legal right to the Petseri area, and the Setos are depicted as an Estonian and/or Seto ethnic group on the territory annexed by the Russian Federation. Because of better living conditions in Estonia many young Seto people are leaving their local area crossing over into Estonia, where they have good possibilities to become citizens. The ethnic self-image of the Seto is weak; religion seems to play a more important role than language17.

14 S.-E. Åström, Samhällsplanering och regionsbildning i kejsartidens Helsingfors, Helsingfors 1957, p. 287.
monastery of the border town Pechory, now in Russia, is seen as the center of Seto
image18.

The largest concentration of opposing religious symbols can perhaps be seen in
the area around Narva, which was for centuries contested between Catholic later
Protestant and Russian Orthodox interests. Not far from Narva, at Kuremäe/Pjucht-
titsa on a hill called Mother-of-the Lord, a conflict over the sacred place ended with
the Tsarist regime making it an Orthodox monastery for women in 189119. The
Narva River is today the boundary between Estonia and Russia. Narva, on the Esto-
nian side has a population mostly descendant from Russian-speaking immigrants
from the 1940’s and 1950’s, while the pre-war population which had an Estonian
ethnic majority were expelled and dispersed during and after the war. On the Rus-

sia20 side of the river, at Ivangorod, there is an Orthodox church financed by the rich,
originally German Protestant Stiglitz industrial family at the end of the 19th century,
in order to mark their conversion to Orthodoxy. On the Estonia side, a Christian
cross marks the 1900 Russian commemoration of the Battle of Narva 1700, when
Sweden had a short-lived victory over Peter the Great’s Russia and hundreds of
Russian soldiers lost their lives, many drowning in the river. Near this monument is
an Estonian cemetery from the War of Independence 1917-19 with a resurrected
monument, surrounded by stumps of iron crosses, which were cut off and sent to
scrap during the Soviet régime of the 1960’s. A German war cemetery from 1941-42
was destroyed during Soviet times but reconstructed in 1996 with symbolic crosses
and names. The ruined Protestant church has now been rebuilt, used by almost no-
body. A Soviet tank commemorating the victory over what is called ‘German-Fascist
forces’ was used by wedding couples to lay their flower bouquets21.

Is this religion? The iconography of the Eastern Church had its peculiar renais-
sance during High Stalinism: “The history of the symbols of the Stalin epoch and its ritu-
als form the history of the revenge of an old hierarchy and its re-incarnation”22. Perhaps
even the placement of Lenin at the end of the main street of Pskov in front of the
Pedagogical University is inherited form the Orthodox Church. In Estonian Narva,

18 R. Kaiser, E. Nikoforova, Borderland spaces of identification and dis/location; Multiscalar narra-
tives and enactments of Seto identity and place in the Estonian-Russian borderlands, “Ethnic and
19 K. Brüggemann, Wie der Revaler Domberg zum Moskauer Kreml wurde: Zur lokalen Repräsenta-
tion imperialer Herrschaft im späten Zarenreich, [in:] J. Baberowski u.a. (eds), Imperiale Herrschaft
in der Provinz. Repräsentationen politischer Macht im späten Zarenreich, Frankfurt am Main 2008,
20 The determination ‘Russia/Estonia side’ is used as Narva, in Estonia, is ethnically over-
whelmingly Russian.
21 V. Bulatnikov, O nekotorikh pamyatnikakh goroda Narva, [in:] Sbornik statey Narvskogo muzeya,
Narva 1999, pp. 33-44; S. Kattago, Commemorating Liberation and Occupation: War Memorials
along the Road to Narva, ”Journal of Baltic Studies”, no 39(4), 2008, pp. 431-149; T. Lundén, On
the boundary…, op. cit., pp. 108-111.
22 L.E. Blomqvist, Introduction, [in:] C. Arvidsson, L.E. Blomqvist (eds), Symbols of power. The
esthetics of political legitimization in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Stockholm 1987,
pp. 8-10.
Lenin was moved from the main square to the backyard of the historical museum, surrounded by dustbins.

The crossroad landscape of religious symbols

If the border zone between Soviet/Orthodox creed and increasingly liberal and secular Protestantism is marked by more or less aggressive but fossilized symbols, there are areas in Europe where differences in religion, disguised as ethnicity, have

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created symbols of destruction and victory. Symbols of religion that marked the difference between the three major contending Christian groups were selected for destruction, and in the ethnically cleansed areas, the place of worship of the winning side was conspicuously rebuilt.

The borderlands of Lithuania, Belarus, Poland and Russian Kaliningrad indicate the territory of the former Lithuanian-Polish Union, a realm of relative religious tolerance, including the three main Christian creeds as well as Jewish and Muslim followers. Near the Polish border in Belarus, Polish-Catholic gravestones remind of the brutal years of World War II, whereas a Jewish cemetery in north-eastern Poland, just at the former boundary towards German East Prussia, is unkempt and gravestones destroyed, probably during World War II. On the Russian part of former German East Prussia (now Kaliningrad Oblast') protestant churches are decaying, reflecting Soviet atheism but also a nationalistic denial of, or disinterest in, a non-Russian heritage. In the former German areas taken over by Poland, some protestant churches were left in ruins after the war, many were converted into Catholic use, but in general German gravestones were demolished. In some cases, however, some stones have been found and put back as memories of the past, especially in recent years.

The aggressive religious symbolism of former Yugoslavia

If the Baltic area mainly reflects the juxtapositions of the aftermath of World War II, former Yugoslavia is a vivid example of a war of religious symbols, often visible in the landscape. In Vukovar, Croatia, which was severely destroyed by Serbian forces, a large Catholic cross has been built on the Danube riverside, facing Serbian territory. The Serbian cemetery in Vukovar is not attended to and partly destroyed. In Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina – officially one town but ethnically divided between Croats and Bosniaks on the western (right) side of the Neretva river – Croats have built a giant Christian cross visible especially to the Bosniak (Muslim) side, officially to commemorate the Millennium. A new catholic church has a steeple higher than the minarets of mosques. In a poor country where in reality few people actively pursue their religion, this showing off has become a major way of spending money and marking the boundary zone between ‘us and them’.

Religious symbols in border landscapes – attempt at a synthesis

The examples from Northern Europe, the Baltic area and the Balkans show different fixed statements of religious symbolism in the landscape. They can be divided into

different categories. Some represent the relationship between state power and religion, others an active cult, others fossilized remains of earlier, sometimes eradicated and forgotten activities. During the Russian Tsarist régime in Finland and what are today the three Baltic States, local religious activities were first respected, but as Russian nationalism became more pronounced in the late 19th Century, Orthodox churches, often in historical style, were built in central and symbolically powerful places. In Helsinki the Uspensky Cathedral was built in a height as to near the City center as possible, in Reval/Tallinn a cathedral with the provocative name of Aleksander Nevsky was built facing the palace; in Riga in the town park that separated the Old Town from the newly built area of modern housing.

**Picture 3.** In Vukovar, Croatia, which was severely damaged by Serbian troops during the civil war, a giant Catholic cross has been built at the Danube river, overlooking the Serbian riverside

![Image of the cross in Vukovar](image)

*Source:* Thomas Lundén.

Active cult usually makes its marks in the landscape, often though spectacular manifestations if allowed by the respective state authorities. In the case of the Balkans, particularly former Yugoslavia, it might very well be that support from abroad, from regimes and organizations supporting the ruling religion have added to the manifestations. Christian crosses – both Catholic and Orthodox – have been

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erected in order to be seen from the enemy side. In the divided city of Sarajevo a number of conspicuous new mosques have been built with financial support from states with official Islam religion.

The attitude to the fossilized religious landscape is also a measure of the relationship to local cultural history. In the southeastern part of the Baltic Sea area, where the relative tolerance of Lithuanian-Polish state allowed for a multitude of religious cults, the ensuing political history has led to very different treatments of its physical remains. In some cases the remnants have been deliberately effaced, while elsewhere, particularly in regard to small and powerless minorities, their symbols are being utilized as tourist attractions.

The physical religious landscape is a palimpsest, where geopolitical history has decided what will remain and what will be erased form the landscape. In the political territory, religious symbols can mark or even enforce inner unity and simultaneously draw a boundary to otherness. Religion thus has a spatial dimension, not only vertical but also physical and horizontal.