INSCRIBING OBJECTS WITH MEANING:

SAILING SHIP AS A SYMBOL OF A PORT CITY

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Meridianas is an old wooden sailing ship which came to be considered the symbol of Lithuania's port city, Klaipėda. It is moored to the right bank of the Danė river, at the very heart of the city. My first encounter with the ship happened during the annual Sea Festival, just after my family had moved to Klaipėda. The ship was decorated with colourful flags and stood proudly with its sails stretched. Lots of people were trying to get to the ship so that they could see its interior and have a look around the quay from another viewpoint. My first impression of Meridianas was quite vivid and it quickly became a part of the image of the city which I was just starting to explore. However, the sailing ship soon started to merge with the urban landscape that I saw every day. It seemed as if Meridianas was just one element of scenery which became nothing more than a backdrop to our daily lives. It was an object that all of us knew very well but would never talk about.

Everything changed in October 2012, when Meridianas Support Fund revealed the critical condition of the ship. The founder of the fund, Artūras Žičkus, declared that the vessel had fallen into disrepair because he could not get financial support for its renovation. Local municipality refused to sign a cooperation agreement with Meridianas Support Fund, arguing that money from the city's budget cannot be used to cover fund's debts. Situation was further complicated as the ship was removed from the state-protected cultural heritage objects' list. As a result, the artefact lost its legal protection, which left little hope to get support from EU funds. The ship's hull was extremely damaged and it could start sinking any time; leaving it on the riverbank became too dangerous. As the owners of the vessel were no longer able to save it, they asked Klaipėda municipality for a permission to drown it to the bottom of the Baltic Sea so that it could become a diving attraction. Not surprisingly, the majority of Klaipėda's citizens found this idea ridiculous. Those who cared about Meridianas were shocked by such decision. The fund's inability to take care of the city's symbol as well as government's insensitivity to the worsening ship's condition provoked public resentment. Such immediate reaction was the

reason why I became interested in Meridianas' case. Why is this sailing ship the symbol of the port city and how it came to be considered as such? What role does it play in the construction of the image of the city? Is it so important because it is invested with collective and personal memories? These were the main questions that I set out to explore in my ethnographic project.

Meridianas as a Social Being

I had left my home city long before Meridianas' problem came into view, and I had not seen the ship for quite a long time. It was interesting to observe the course of events from this somewhat detached viewpoint. People started to use social networks to show their solicitude for their city's symbol and to draw the government's attention to the ship's condition. In a matter of days, hundreds of people joined Facebook groups which were directed at saving the ship. Every newspaper article about Meridianas that was available online received a lot of comments showing citizens' concern with the decay of this symbolic artifact. Many people showed willingness to donate their money for its renovation. Also, a small-scale protest against the decision to drown the ship was organized. Citizen's response to the possibility of loosing Meridianas suggested that, over time, people had formed a unique relationship with the ship. According to Alfred Gell, material objects can be 'social beings' because people form 'social relations with things' (Gell 18). Artefacts acquire agency 'once they become enmeshed in social relationships' (*Ibid* 17). According to Janet Hoskins, the possibility of things having agency implies that 'we need to pay more attention to the phenomenological dimension of our interactions with the material world, and interrogate objects which fascinate us as well as the reasons for feeling this fascination' (*Hoskins* 2006: 76). Meridianas certainly fascinated local people, and thus was turned into a person-like agent. It was evident in some of the expressions that citizens used to describe their relationship with the ship: some of them said that they are 'fond of it', or that they 'grew up together'.

However, there seemed to be a gap between different age groups. Older people could recall events that happened inside the ship: 'In Soviet times, there used to be a restaurant in Meridianas. It was the most popular place, you had to know someone if you wanted to get a table on the weekend. Musicians used to perform there. My ex-boss had been a bar tender in

Meridianas for nearly 16 years. […] He used to tell me about his memories all the time.' (Simonas). According to Lynch, 'Every citizen has had long associations with some part of the city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings.' (Lynch 1960: 1). This could be applied to the members of the older generation who were more likely to inscribe the ship with their personal memories. On contrast, those who were born after Lithuania regained its independence valued the ship primarily because of its esthetic qualities. 'To be honest, it doesn't evoke any deeper emotions in me. It's simply nice to look at it, to admire it. It's lovely to see it on a warm summer evening, when it's floating on the water lit up by lanterns…' (Ieva). Although many said they feel nostalgic about the ship, this feeling stemmed from a sense of getting used to something that one sees everyday rather than their personal memories: 'I don't idealize it, but it is nice to see it every time you pass by. Perhaps you simply get used to that view…' (Tomas). Irrespective of age, most citizens felt some form of emotional attachment to the ship, even if it was for different reasons.

History and Memory

It is interesting that Meridianas is considered to be one of the most recognizable symbols of Klaipeda, even though it was not built in this port city. In fact, its historical origins have little to do with Lithuania. The ship was built in 1948 by the Finns in Turku shipyard, and was one of the barquentines which Finland had to give to the Soviet Union as war reparation. Meridianas first came to Lithuania in 1949 when it was transferred to Klaipėda's Maritime School. For quite a long time it was used as a training vessel for cadets; however, after a sea mishap in 1968 it was concluded that the ship was no longer suitable for training purposes. After the accident the sailing-boat was moored to Dangė river bank which became its permanent location. In 1971 Meridianas was turned into a ship-restaurant and became an integral part of the city's old town. However, its symbolic and historical value is questionable. Maritime historian Romaldas Adomavičius is sceptical about current ship's status as a symbol of the city: 'Meridianas became a symbol "out of necessity". The city is 760 years old, yet its symbol is found in the last 50 years of its history. I understand that people admire this ship, but it has never sailed with a Lithuanian flag. In fact, it could be considered a symbol of Stalin's victory. After all, when the Finns lost the war against Stalin, they were forced to build 90 similar

ships. [...] During the years of independence, the ship remained a catering establishment – the only difference was that a Lithuanian flag was raised over it. This ship has no significance to our history.'[1] The supporters of Meridianas opposed such opinion however, ideas raised by the historian were not entirely unjustified.

While conducting my research I came across a comparison between Meridianas and Gediminas castle tower, which is considered the symbol of the capital. It is an object recognized by every Lithuanian - every educated person would be able to tell a little bit of its history. Some people argued that drowning Meridianas would have the same meaning as the demolition of the castle. Thus, as I was trying to find out why this ship is so important to local people I expected to hear about their shared memory of its history. However, most of the people that I talked to did not know much about its historical origins. Moreover, their knowledge of the ship's history did not depend on their age. Some of them identified it as a "Scandinavian" or "Norwegian" ship which was used to train sailors. Others admitted that they cannot recall or that they never knew where it was built and how it came to their home city. As one of my friends claimed, 'We don't care where it is from and how it came here. We simply like it!' (Simonas). The only fact that everyone was aware of was that sometime during Soviet Union times the sailing ship was turned into a floating restaurant and that it stayed in the same location for several decades. Unlike many other artefacts that become imbued with cultural importance, Meridianas did not seem to evoke collective remembrance of any particular people or events that would be significant to Klaipeda's history. Nevertheless, it was still called a symbol of this port town. It was clear that citizen's attachment to the ship stemmed from something else than its historical context.

Meridianas as part of the landscape

When I started to talk to people on a more personal level, I discovered that the primary reason why they wanted to save Meridianas was a sense of nostalgia and emotional attachment. Sometimes objects that previously seemed quite ordinary become 'sacralized' through communally shared feelings of nostalgia (Osbaldiston 2012: 63). Citizens' nostalgia

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[1] My own translation from the Lithuanian source

towards the ship stemmed from their experience of time and space. Firstly, people emphasized that the ship has been a part of the old town for a very long period of time, which is why they became so accustomed to it: 'It stood there when I was born and as I was growing up, and it's still there today… I guess I simply became used to it.' (Simonas); 'My children have already grown up, and Meridianas was always there' (Aldona). Another aspect which received much attention was the ship's special location. As it was situated in the central area of the city, citizens would see it very often. Klaipedians became accustomed to the sight of this object because they had been seeing it for their whole lives. It could be said that Meridianas became an important element of what Lynch calls 'the mental image' of the city (Lynch 1960). People's mental images of urban environment consist of series of physical elements that can be classified into five types: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks (Ibid 46). Meridianas would most likely be seen as a landmark. According to Lynch, 'Landmarks become more easily identifiable, more likely to be chosen as significant, if they have a clear form; if they contrast with the background; and if there is some prominence of spatial location.' (Ibid 78-79). The ship had all of the aforementioned qualities, which strengthened the observers' impression. Moreover, when different elements are closely arranged in the same space, they may 'reinforce' one another and thus create a more memorable mental image (Ibid 83). Meridianas floats on the river which could be considered an *edge* as it divides the old town into two *districts*. It is also very close to the bridge which, at the same time, is a main *path*. The bridge can also be seen as a *node* because it is the main link between the two sides of the river, an extension of the main road which runs through the whole city, and a point of break for those who stopped to look down to the river or to take a picture of Meridianas. Therefore the ship came to be perceived as a part of a complex which formed a memorable environmental image.

This has affected not only the appreciation of the ship, but also the perception of the space which was occupied by it. According to Lynch, 'if the environment is visibly organized and sharply identified, then the citizen can inform it with his own meanings and connections. Then it will become a true *place*, remarkable and unmistakable.' (Ibid 92). Most people held a vivid mental image of Meridianas and its surroundings, thus the ship came to be perceived as a part of the landscape. This was evident in some of the expressions used to describe its relationship

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to the place, such as "rooted in there", "tied up with the place", etc. Interestingly, the notion of "rootedness" has been used to describe an object which is actually floating on the water. Apparently, as the ship has not changed its location for many years, it became inseparable from its environment. Meridianas was just one element in the mental image of that area (just like the river, the bridge, the quay, the nearby square with benches and the old buildings in the background), and it was an image that everyone seemed to share. Consequently, it could be interpreted both as an individual object and as an artifact which is connected to its surroundings and thus has no clearly set boundaries.

Meridianas' importance as part of the landscape became especially apparent once it abandoned its permanent location. Soon after the ship's critical condition had been revealed, it was bought by a couple of businessmen who undertook it to bring it back to life. The ship was sailed to the dockyard for reconstruction; it was the first time Meridianas left the quay for such a long period time. The river shore was described by the citizens as 'naked', 'empty' or 'grey'. None of the people that I talked to were happy with the present appearance of the area: 'There is a feeling as if something is missing… that place now looks insignificant, empty…' (Ieva); 'Whenever you walk by that place where it used to be, it looks very dull. There is no beautiful view when you look in that direction.' (Gintarė). When asked how they feel about Meridianas' departure, people focused on the strange appearance of the space which it used to occupy instead of the ship itself. It demonstrates that this sailing vessel was remembered and imagined in relationship to its surroundings. 'Memories and history always have referents… […] But when the referent is lost, despite whatever kind of corroboration we can find, an important emotional element of the past is dissipated…' (Archibald 2002: 74). Perhaps this temporal loss of a referent made people more aware of their surroundings as they tried to connect the new, altered urban landscape with their old memory of the place. Such reaction to the transformed sense of place can be explained by Rodman's notion of multilocality. According to Rodman, when people's surroundings become transformed in some way, or when they become 'dislocated from their familiar place', they become very much aware of the opposition between 'the known and the unfamiliar', which makes them 'see a new landscape in terms of familiar ones' (Rodman 2003: 221). People's perception of the place became multilocal in a sense that

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the new landscape was consistently compared with the one they remembered and which had Meridianas as its main feature.

Meridianas and the identity of the city

Another reason why the ship's importance was heightened was its symbolic and representational role. Symbolic meanings of sites are created through 'social and ideational associations.' (Low and Zúñiga 2003: 19); therefore, the ship's symbolism was constructed around its direct associations with the sea and the port. Indeed, it could be said that the vessel became a symbol of the city because it epitomized the essential attributes of a typical port city. While speaking about the sailing ship, people placed a lot of importance on the city's identity as a seaport: 'Everyone associates Klaipeda with the seaside, whereas for Klaipedians themselves the image of the city is formed around Meridianas. [...] There are various notable sites in Klaipeda, but whenever someone talks about this city the first representative image which comes into mind is that of Meridianas. We have an archeological castle site, but nobody gives a damn about it. This is a seaport; we don't care about castles' (Simonas). The ship was also seen to represent the character of a maritime region, thus enhancing the unique atmosphere of the place: 'Klaipeda is a seaport, and a sailing ship situated in its central area reflects the spirit of a port city' (Gintarė). Because of such associations with the sea and the port, as well as ship's esthetic qualities, it came to be seen as something that city dwellers can be proud of: 'Visitors of the city could admire this old sailing ship, and we could be proud that we managed to preserve it' (Ieva). The site was perceived as a possible attraction for tourists: 'Meridianas has a unique design, it is old, and you wouldn't see identical ship in other places. After seeing such a ship, city guests could be sure that this is a proper seaport' (Tomas). Moreover, as one of the citizens observed, 'in keeping with an unwritten rule, pictures of the ship are used in ads, booklets and elsewhere as a background image or even a symbol.' (Michailas). This shows that the ship's symbolic and representative role was also partly promoted by the media and commercial advertising. All of this suggests that Meridianas became a symbol because it helped to construct and promote the city's identity as a seaport. In material culture studies, formation of social identity is often connected to the process of objectification. Group identities can be objectified in things because they are 'the very medium through which we make and know

ourselves'. (Tilley 2006: 61). Material objects are the means by which collective identities are consistently reproduced and legitimized (Ibid). Meridianas helped citizens to connect to their locale-specific identity. Klaipedians saw themselves as dwellers of a port city, thus the city's identity as a seaport became objectified in a sailing ship.

Conclusion

Miller reflects on his own work as an anthropologist: 'my only real hypothesis is that I really have very little idea of what I'm going to find when I go out to conduct fieldwork. This hypothesis has always proved to be correct.' (2010: 7). While working on my ethnographic encounters project, I have learnt that such openness is vital. Before I started conducting interviews, I thought of Meridianas as an object which is similar to many other historical artefacts that have the capacity to evoke social memory. However, while talking to the citizens of Klaipėda I discovered that this sailing ship was very different from historical monuments or memorials. Meridianas was not imbued with collective memories of any specific events that could be important to Klaipėda's history. After I had changed my "hypothesis", admitting that I really know nothing about an object which I used to see everyday, new ideas started to flow. I discovered that, depending on one's viewpoint, same object can simultaneously be a symbol, a landmark, a historical artifact or a part of urban landscape. Meridianas was important to the people because it was perceived as an element of the landscape and an indispensable part of their shared memory of a *place.* The ship may be described as valuable in and on its own; however, its true significance was embodied in its relationship to its location and peoples' collective memory of that place.

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