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# The Yew Cross from Szczuczyn – a Symbol of Life and Death or an Unusual Memento?

**Abstract**

Michalik J. 2022. The Yew Cross from Szczuczyn – a Symbol of Life and Death or an Unusual Memento? *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia* 17, 71–79

Archaeological research in the crypts of the Church of the Holy Name of the Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn has been carried out since 2012. Many years of research have made it possible to identify some of the buried people, including the Piarists who served as the hosts of the church. One of the monks identified was Stanislaw Marszycki, who took the name Simeon of St Joseph after his monastic vows. Identification of the Piarist was possible thanks to the information on the coffin. On the deceased's vestments rested a wooden crucifix, which can be interpreted as part of the deceased's individual equipment. The crucifix was subjected to wood species identification using a microscope with transmitted light. This made it possible to determine that it was made from the wood of the common yew tree (*Taxus baccata L.*). Yew wood is a valuable material and was used to make both large boatbuilding components, furniture, and weapons, and was also readily used in 18th-century gardens. The yew was also a tree around which there was a great deal of superstition. Because of its toxicity and longevity, it was treated as both a tree of death and life. The cross from the monk's coffin, according to superstition, might have guarded the deceased against evil, been an individual object with which the deceased was associated, or perhaps was chosen because yew wood was eminently polishable and with a beautiful colouration.

**Keywords:** Szczuczyn, crypts, yew, piars, wood, cross

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## Introduction – archaeological research in Szczuczyn

The town of Szczuczyn is located near Grajewo in Podlaskie Voivodeship (Fig. 1). It was founded in 1692 on the initiative of the Lithuanian sub-chancellor Stanisław Antoni Szczuczka. The founder's greatest dream was for his town to become an important point on the map of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. For this reason, in 1697 he funded the construction of a monastery and the Church of the Holy Name of the Virgin Mary and brought in Piarist monks. The Piarists, as the church's hosts, buried their confreres in the vaults of their temple according to custom. The construction of the crypts was planned by the city's founder himself in 1709 (who was the first to be laid to rest in them). Before the commissioning of the crypts, the deceased Piarists were buried in a tomb in the nearby cemetery (Dudziński *et al*. 2017, 23–28).

Archaeological research in the Szczuczyn crypts carried out under the direction of Dr Małgorzata Grupa has been the subject of study by archaeologists, archivists, historians, and botanists since 2012. The original aim of the work was to document and inventorize the preserved coffins. However, in order to do so, it was first necessary to clean up the rubbish that had been deposited through an unsecured vent or left behind by visitors to the crypts (who entered through the same opening through which the rubbish had been thrown). An important part of the research was also to identify the deceased persons in the crypts, and to determine the approximate number of burials, both lay and Piarist. Thanks to the favourable environmental conditions prevailing in the crypts, spontaneous mummification of the remains of the deceased occurred (Kozłowski and Krajewska 2013, 91–97). This allowed for the preservation of, among other things, clothing and other artefacts

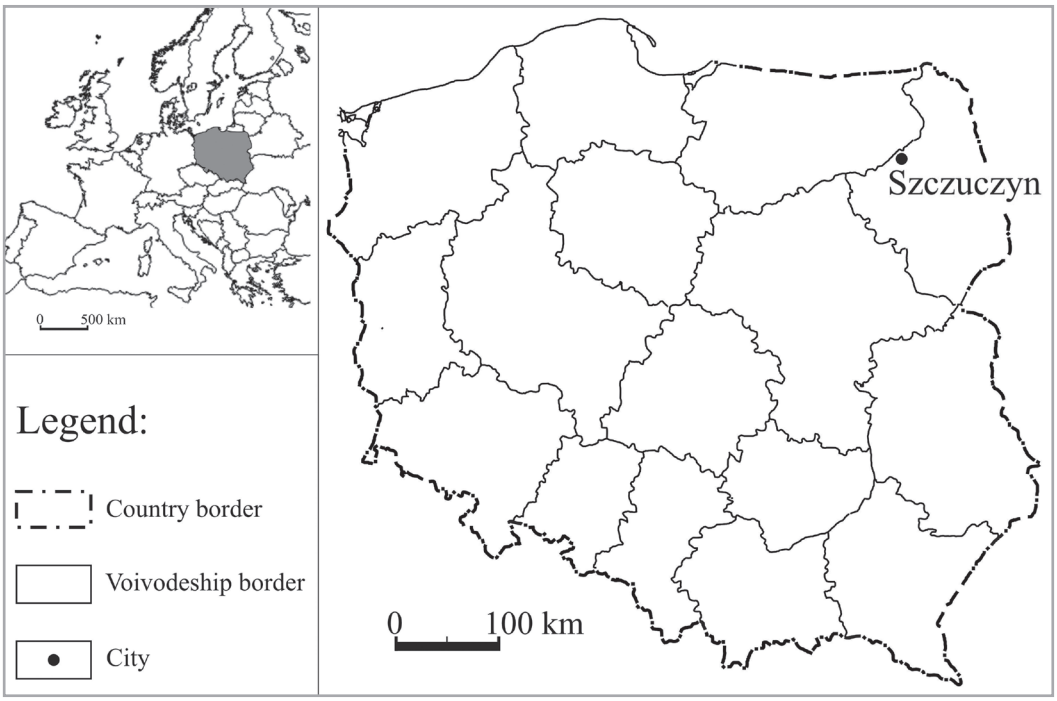


**Fig. 1.** Location of Szczuczyn on the map of Poland (drawn by J. Michalik).

made of organic materials, which are often destroyed in earthen graves.

## The burial of Simeon of St Joseph (Stanisław Marszycki)

One of the monks identified was Stanislaw Marszycki, who took the name Simeon of St Joseph after his monastic vows. The identification of the Piarist was possible thanks to the inscriptions painted on the coffin: "P. Simeon a S. Joseph SP" (Fig. 2: A), as well as "Obijt Anno 1754 aug 15" (Fig. 2: B; Dudziński *et al.* 2013, 19; 2017, 34, 55, 129). The coffin contained the body of the deceased, which had undergone natural mummification thanks to the favourable environmental conditions in the crypt. A large number of scattered clothing fragments were documented next to the body of the deceased, which were identified as liturgical vestments (Fig. 3). A cross was found on the vestments, which can be interpreted as a piece of the individual equipment of the deceased (Fig. 4; Dudziński *et al.* 2017, 104–105).

## Wooden cross

The cross from the coffin of Simeon of St Joseph was wooden, with additional metal elements. The height of the vertical beam was 13.6 cm and the span of the horizontal beam was 7.1 cm. The other dimensions of the beams were identical, with a width of 1 cm and a thickness of 0.3 cm. The metal elements consisted of a cast figure of the crucified Christ, as well as an appliqué below it depicting a stylised skull with crossed tibias. A nail hole in the top of the vertical beam may indicate the placement of the Titulus Crucis there. The ends of the beams were finished with metal caps. The cap at the top had an eyelet hanging on a small chain or ribbon, for example. It can be assumed that all of the metal parts were made of a metal alloy containing copper in large amounts – this is evidenced by the greenish colour of the corrosion (Grupa 2013, 133; Dudziński *et al.* 2017, 106–107, 130).

## Wood identification process

The wood fragment from the cross was collected during archaeological work in 2020. The research conducted at that time focused on collecting, among other things, botanical samples from burials, such as herbs deposited in coffins, pillow and mattress fillings, as well as wood from coffins and devotional items (Michalik 2020, 221–222). The identification of the wood collected from the cross from the coffin of Simeon of St Joseph was carried out using a transmitted light microscope, a Scope.A1 model from Zeiss with a Zeiss AxioCam ICc 3 camera and Axio Cam software.


**Fig. 2.** Szczuczyn. Coffin of Simeon of St. Joseph. A – view of inscriptions on lid; B – view of inscriptions on top of coffin from head side (photo by A. Wojciechowska).

**Fig. 3.** Szczuczyn. Burial of Simeon of St Joseph. Visible shuffling of the deceased's clothes, traces of feathers and scratches indicate the presence of rodents in the coffin seeking shelter (photo by A. Wojciechowska).

**Fig. 4.** Szczuczyn. Cross found in the coffin of a monk (photo by A. Wojciechowska).

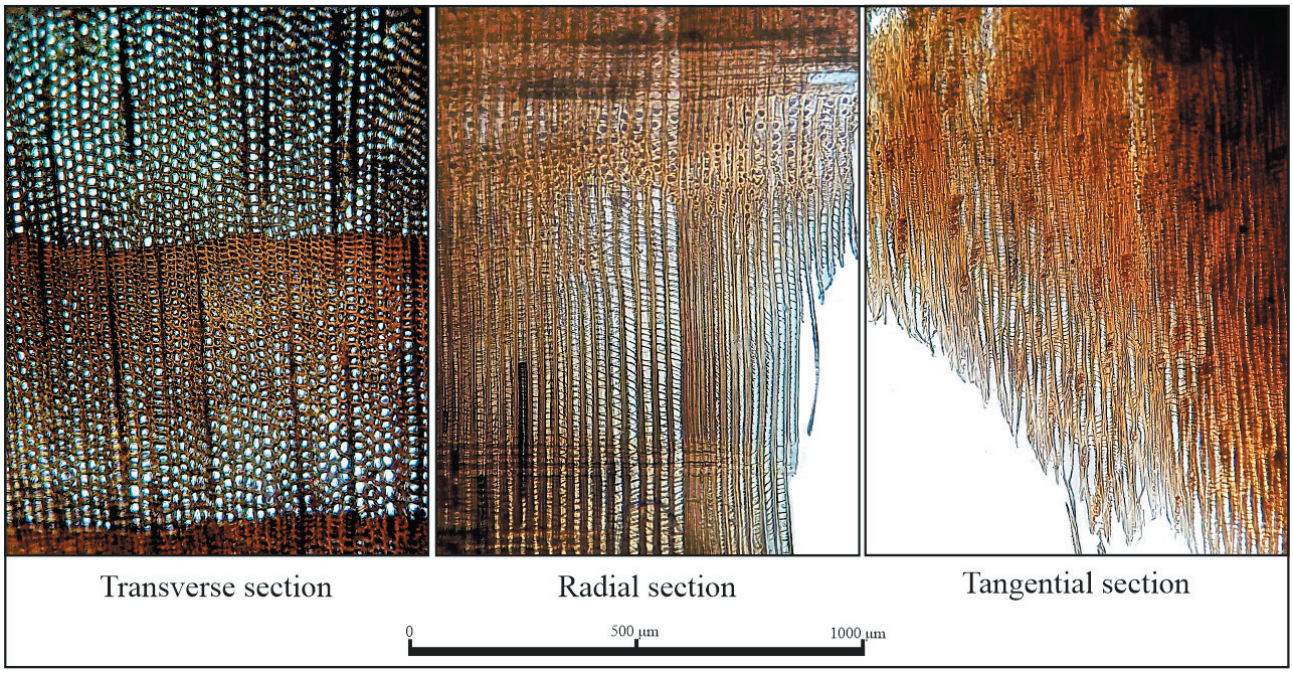


**Fig. 5.** Szczuczyn. Wood tissue from a yew tree (*Taxus baccata L.*) taken from a cross (photo by J. Michalik).

Observation of the wood tissue with the transmitted light microscope required exposing and aligning the surface of the monument in three planes: transverse, tangential, and radial. In the case of the cross from Szczuczyn, the situation was simple in that its arms were made longitudinally to the grain, thus the cross-section of the wood tissue was located at the two ends of the beams. This ensured that interference with the structure of the object during sampling with aligned cross-sectional planes was minimal. The next step, already carried out in the laboratory, was to take and prepare on microscope glass three, thin slices of wood from the aforementioned cross sections. The preparations were then examined under a microscope.

The observation of the anatomical structure makes it possible to identify the species, or at least the type of wood. The observation of general differences in the structure of the transverse anatomical system of wood should already initially allow a preliminary separation of wood type into coniferous and deciduous trees, with a division of the latter into ring-porous and diffuse-porous, which is due to the completely different structure of these three types of wood. In contrast, capturing more detailed relationships and common features in the tissue structure allows for more precise identification. The catalogue publications of F. H. Schweingruber (2011), P. Greguss (1959), D. Grosser (1977), and A. Warywoda (1957). Observation of the transverse cross-section of the tissue at the outset led to the conclusion that the crucifix was made of coniferous wood. Another quite characteristic feature was the absence of resin ducts, as well as the clear demarcation of the annual rings into thin-walled earlywood and thick-walled latewood. The coils in the radial and tangential sections have another characteristic feature, which is the intersecting spiral thickenings found on the coils. In addition to these, funnel cavities of the taxoid type were observed, arranged in a single row. In addition, the woody rays are arranged in a uniform and single row. All these features indicate that the crucifix was made from the wood of the common yew (*Taxus baccata L.*) (Fig. 5).

## Characteristics of yew wood and products

The common yew is the only tree representative of this genus in Poland. It is also found in Europe (except for the northeast), and North Africa. It grows for a very long time, which is why it is considered one of the slowest surviving conifers. Its lifespan is estimated to be up to 1000 years or more, reaching heights of up to 15–20 m and a trunk diameter of approx. 70 cm (Warywoda 1957, 32; Godet 2008, 42; Seneta and Dolatowski 2012, 26, 28).

Yew wood is a highly valued material. It is hard, heavy, and strong yet flexible, making it one of the hardest conifers, not least because it has no resin ducts. Its noble qualities are also evidenced by its colour, usually slightly shiny, reddish, or brown, with

light, narrow sapwood. The wood also polishes very well and can take on a purplish colour underwater (Warywoda 1957, 34; Godet 2008, 42; Seneta and Dolatowski 2012, 28). The durability and ease of polishing the wood, as well as the beauty of the evergreen needles, were noted and described by researchers living in the 17th–18th centuries. From their accounts, one can learn that yew wood painted black could imitate exotic ebony wood (Kluk 1778, 38; Jundziłł 1799, 433–434; Gerald-Wyżycki 1845, 113–114).

Yew wood was used to make both large pieces used in shipbuilding and smaller pieces to make everyday life easier. Some of them were shaped into various forms during turning and including among other things, parts of furniture. Mention should also be made of the long tradition of making crossbows, arrows, and bows from this wood, of which Italian products were particularly popular (Marcin z Urzędowa 1595, 384). Yew was used in various ways. Due to its high burning temperature, it was used in glassworks whilst another use saw its tannins extracted from the bark (Fischer 1938, 8–9; Warywoda 1957, 34; Czartoryski 1975, 137; Biedermann 2000, 111; Godet 2008, 42; Kobielus 2014, 44; Kujawska *et al*. 2016, 120). In many medieval and modern houses, it was used as a torch to illuminate the chambers if a pine firewood was not available (Moszyński 1929, 589; Kujawska *et al*. 2016, 120). Furthermore, yews tolerate shearing well, which influences their density. As a result, they were readily planted in 18th-century French-type gardens. At that time, they were used to form hedges and rows, but also fancy figures and geometric shapes (Fig. 6; Seneta and Dolatowski 2012, 28).

The versatile properties of yew wood made it an excellent export material, and the first mention of yew trade with the Netherlands dates back to 1287. The trade took place through the port of Gdansk, and the wood was floated down the Vistula River from as far away as the Carpathian Mountains, Ruthenia, and Tyrol. Less than 150 years later, the demand for yew almost caused it to be completely exploited, to the extent that felling was banned by a law issued by King Władysław Jagiełło in 1423 (Czartoryski 1975, 138; Falencka-Jabłońska 2004, 31; Cywa 2018, 126). Unfortunately, intensive felling of yew trees took place throughout Europe, so their stands never again returned to their original form. The former ubiquity of yew trees in Poland even today is evidenced by the nu-


**Fig. 6.** Postcard from 1930 depicting formed yew trees in the park by the Łączcy palace in Posadowo, near Lwówek (Wielkopolskie Voivodeship) (https://polska-org.pl/foto/9409/Palac_Lackich_Posadowo_9409597.jpg, access: 21.10.2022 r.).

merous city names that refer to them (Turowska 1928, 63; Kujawska *et al*. 2016, 120). In the Podlasie region, where Szczuczyn is located, these include Ciszewo (Grajewski County), Cisów (Augustów County), or Cisówek (a village in Augustów County and a hamlet in Suwałki County).

The information contained in the written sources confirms the artefacts discovered at the archaeological sites which are made of yew wood (Hageneder 2008, 201; Cywa 2018, 126–127). These are mainly staved vessels of various sizes, but mostly medium and small, handles, decorated woodcarving details, spoons, and playing pawns (Woźnicka 1961, 14; Cywa 2018, 118–119; Michalik 2018, 96–97). It is worth mentioning that yew was also very popular in prehistory. Its wood was used to make the famous bow belonging to Ötzi, the Neolithic man discovered in an Alpine glacier (Hageneder 2008, 201; Oeggl 2009, 3). Relics of yew arches from the Neolithic period have also been found in Poland, with the find from Kamiennik in the Carpathian region serving as an example (Margielewski *et al*. 2010).

## Yew – the wood of life and death

A particular feature of yew is also its toxicity. All parts of the plant apart from the thistles contain an alkaloid, taxin, which is highly poisonous to humans (Biedermann 2000, 110; Seneta and Dolatowski 2012, 27–28; Cywa 2018, 126). Yew needle extract has been used as a poison for centuries, including by the Celts to commit ritual suicide and also to poison arrowheads (Biedermann 2000, 110; Wilson *et al*. 2001, 929; Kobielus 2014, 43–44; Cywa 2018, 126). According to accounts, a stealthy assassin of the time may have given his victim wine in a yew cup to secretly murder them (Falencka-Jabłońska 2004, 31; Cywa 2018, 126). The fear of yew in terms of its toxicity was to such an extent that it was advised against sleeping under it, or even passing under it, as its very shade was venomous (Marcin z Urzędowa 1595, 384; Rostafiński 1893, 14; Fischer 1938, 8–9; Kujawska *et al*. 2016, 120). Some scholars have denied this myth in their herbaria, which only shows how ingrained it was in the local consciousness (Kluk 1778, 39).

The longevity and immense benefits of the yew must have made it a very important tree in spiritual cultures. As an example, there were high customary penalties enforced by the Celts when someone tried to cut down a yew, which they considered a sacred tree. A similar situation occurred in 10$^{th}$-century Wales, where cutting down a consecrated yew tree was punishable by a fine that exceeded the lifetime wealth of most subjects (Hageneder 2008, 202; Kobielus 2014, 44). There is also a theory that the sacred tree of the Norse people, Yggdrasil, was not (as is commonly believed) an ash tree, but a yew (Hageneder 2008, 202).

Often, yews were seen as a symbol of death and afterlife forces, probably influenced by the, already mentioned, toxicity of this wood, as well as its longevity. For this reason, they were often planted in cemeteries already in ancient times. For the Greeks, the yew was the gateway to the underworld and the guardian of the souls of the dead. The Romans, on the other hand, associated it with the Furies – demons of the underworld – according to Stacius. A similar custom prevailed in the British Isles, particularly in Wales, where the presence of yew trees was found even on sites dating to the Neolithic period (Hageneder 2008, 202, 205; Kobielus 2014, 43). It was also customary in Poland to plant yew trees in cemeteries. This tree was planted when one wanted to commemorate a deceased person for eternity (Gerald-Wyżycki 1845, 113–114).

On the other hand, yew trees in cemeteries were also planted in the hope of resurrection. At the time, the tree was a symbol of life, or more precisely immortality. This perception was certainly influenced by the tree's longevity, resilience, and evergreen needles, and its use in funerary ceremonies was meant to represent a balance between life and death (Biedermann 2000, 110; Hageneder 2008, 205). The yew was also said to have healing and protective functions in folk medicine, with smoke from burnt yew twigs used to heal cattle and horses and ward off misfortune, and its bark applied to a wound or drunk as a decoction to cure rabies (Jundziłł 1799, 433–434; Fischer 1938, 8–9; Kujawska *et al*. 2016, 121). Yew twigs bought in Częstochowa from herbalist women who sold them at Jasna Góra were said to be particularly powerful (Fischer 1938, 9; Kujawska *et al*. 2016, 121).

The protective power of the yew was also reflected in the folk beliefs which developed over time as part of the Christian religion. The evergreen tree came to symbolise immortality and thus resurrection, and it was therefore believed that the cross on which Christ was crucified was made from this wood. For this reason, yew branches began to be hung and carried (Fig. 7), and children in south-eastern Europe were given yew crosses to protect them from the evil influence of demons (Biedermann 2000, 111; Kobielus 2014, 44–45). Nevertheless, the use of yew wood in crosses can be considered rare. Similar wooden crosses found in crypts and under the floors of churches are known from other archaeological sites and, for the

most part, their wood has been identified. Examples include finds from studies in Gniew (Fig. 8; Grupa *et al*. 2015, 134) or Szprotawa (Wrzesińska 2009, 86–87), among others. In Lublin, on the other hand, the cross found was made of coniferous wood (Niedźwiadek *et al*. 2015, 71–84, 104), as was the cross from a study of crypts in Płock (authors's own research). The situation was different at Końskowola (Dobek and Michalik 2021; Nowosad *et al*. 2021, 97–99), where two pilgrim crosses were identified as an ebony cross and a birch cross, which, painted black, were thought (like the yew) to imitate ebony wood (Fig. 9).

**Fig. 7.** Portrait of a princess of the house of d'Este, painted between 1435 and 1449 by the Italian master Pisanello. A branch of yew can be seen at the left shoulder, which was supposed to protect the bearer from evil powers (Louvre, France; photo by Franck Raux; https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010064951, access 21.10.2022 r.).

**Fig. 8.** Gniew. Wooden cross from archaeological research of the south crypt (photo by D. Grupa).

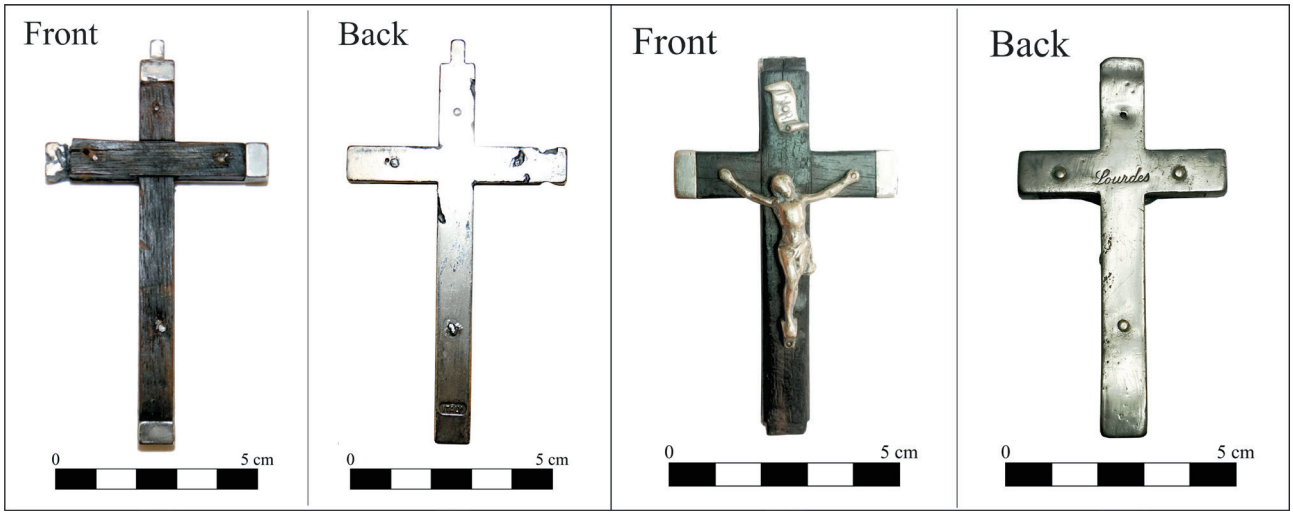


**Fig. 9.** Końskowola. Wooden crosses from the archaeological research of crypts (photo by J. Michalik).

## Conclusion

It is difficult to determine at what time Simeon of St Joseph became the owner of the yew cross. It is possible that this cross accompanied him throughout his entire religious life, being intended to protect his body and soul from evil during his life and after death, and may have given him hope of eternal life in his final moments. It is difficult to determine unequivocally whether this was a symbol of the cross in Christianity (in the monastic life) or whether there was any significance in it being made from yew. This remains an unanswered question at this stage of the research but what is certain, however, is that yews have played an important role in human spirituality throughout history, from prehistoric times to the modern era. The once meticulously cultivated customs associated with this species of tree are no more than a curiosity today, although, given the yew's longevity, we can be sure that trees which our ancestors held in real fear and respect still live on in some places.

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