

Mystery and Memory

— Exploring Kraków's Suburban Mounds —



by Duncan JD Smith

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This month sees the publication of the 12th European city guide in the ever-reliable and hugely stimulating series written by Duncan JD Smith and published under Duncan's own imprint. 'Only in Krakow' is a 232-page cultural expedition through Kraków's royal heritage which takes in dragons, idols and miracles.

Duncan has been a regular contributor to hidden europe and we are pleased to publish this text which is adapted from a section of his new book.

Four great earthen mounds stand in Kraków's suburbs. Raised by human hands, two of them are ancient and two are modern, conveniently bookending much of Kraków's history. Locals and visitors have long been drawn to them, eager to scale their summits and to plumb their meaning.

ABOVE: Krakus Mound in Kraków's district of Podgórze is the highest elevation within the Polish city. It dates back in part to the 8th century (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

Of Kraków's two ancient mounds, the best known is Krakus Mound (Kopiec Krakusa) on ul. Franciszka Maryewskiego in the district of Podgórze. Not only is it Kraków's oldest man-made structure, but the summit of the 16-metre-high mound is also the highest elevation anywhere in the city.

The mound's name reflects the traditional belief that it contains the body of Kraków's mythical founder, the shadowy 12th-century King Krak (or Krakus). Although archaeological work conducted in the 1930s failed to find his grave, it did reveal artefacts dating even further back to the 8th century.

Nowadays historians believe that Krakus Mound was created by members of a Slavic tribe (probably Avars or Vistulans) sometime between the 6th and the 10th centuries, although its purpose remains unclear. The fact that four smaller mounds once stood around its base suggests it was some sort of cult site. The place still retains an ancient and alluring aura especially on the Tuesday after Easter, when locals climb it in celebration of the pagan *Rękawka* festival. The name, meaning 'sleeves', recalls how according to legend the earth used to create the mound was transported to the site in the builders' sleeves.

Kraków's other ancient mound is Wanda's Mound (Kopiec Wandy) near the junction of ul. Ujastek Mogilski and ul. Bardosa in Nowa Huta. It seems fitting that this mound stands near the remains of the ancient village of Mogiła, which has been inhabited since around 5000 BC. Historians theorise that like the Krakus Mound, Slavs

constructed the mound during the early Middle Ages. As to its purpose, legend insists that King Krak's daughter, Princess Wanda, is buried here (although again no evidence for a burial has been found). She famously resisted the advances of a German suitor — both amorous and military — thereby keeping Poland out of foreign hands. A statue of Wanda that once topped the mound has been replaced by a stone eagle carved by renowned 19th-century artist Jan Matejko who lived nearby.

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Both mounds offer sweeping views, raising the possibility that they perhaps served some defensive, observational or signalling purpose. More attractive, however, is the likelihood of a calendrical function. Though seemingly unrelated within the modern cityscape, the mounds become magically connected at certain times of year. Climb Krakus Mound at dawn on the first day of

May (the Celtic sun feast of Beltane) and the sun will be seen rising directly over Wanda's Mound ten kilometres away to the east; then climb Wanda's Mound at dusk on the summer solstice and watch the sun setting directly over Krakus Mound. This seemingly intentional alignment supports the theory that both mounds are Celtic in origin and part of some vast landscape calendar that helped divide the year into seasons and perhaps dictated the dates of farming activities and festivals.

COMMEMORATING POLISH INDEPENDENCE

Kraków's ancient mounds inspired the raising of two further ones during the 19th century to commemorate contemporary military heroes. The first, Kościuszko Mound (Kopiec Kościuszki),

VISITING THE MOUNDS

The Krakus, Wanda and Piłsudski mounds are freely accessible at all times. Only the Kościuszko Mound has an entrance fee but with it comes admission to a museum and panorama café (open daily in summer 9.00 till dusk, winter 9.30–18.00, last entry 30 minutes before closing). The museum is open 9.30–19.00.

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was constructed in the 1820s close to al. Jerzego Waszyngtona in Zwierzyniec. It honours Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746–1817) who fought in vain against the partition of Poland during the Kościuszko Uprising of 1794. He had previously fought with distinction in the American War of Independence and was described by Thomas Jefferson as “the purest son of liberty that I have ever known.”

Kościuszko Mound was constructed in the 1820s in the Kraków district of Zwierzyniec in honour of Tadeusz Kościuszko (photo © Duncan JD Smith).



The tallest of Kraków’s mounds, it is 33 metres high and was made using earth brought from battlefields where Kościuszko fought, including Raclawice, Maciejowice and Dubienka. During the 1840s, a winding path to the top was added, where a commemorative stone was placed. A decade later the Austrians fortified the mound as part of their ambitious plans to make Kraków an impregnable fortress. In deference to Kraków’s ancient mounds and their seemingly deliberate alignment, the sun when seen from Kościuszko Mound on 1st November (Celtic New Year) rises directly over Krakus Mound.

Kraków’s other modern mound is Piłsudski’s Mound (Kopiec Piłsudskiego). Standing farther west on al. Do Kopca in the Wolski Forest (Las Wolski), it was completed in 1937 to honour the revered Polish statesman Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935). A key architect of Poland’s bid for independence after 123 years of partition, he became head of the Second Republic on 11th November 1918. Not surprisingly, the Nazi regime earmarked the mound for demolition and the communists used tanks to topple a huge granite cross that once stood on the summit. Despite all this, it still stands as an enduring icon of Polish independence and on a clear day offers views reaching as far as the Tatra Mountains.

The story of Kraków’s mounds may yet have a further chapter. In recent years, there has been some debate in the city about the construction of another mound in honour of the late Polish pope, John Paul II. ■

Duncan JD Smith is a Vienna-based writer who tells extraordinary tales about lesser-known aspects of cities. His widely acclaimed ‘Only in’ guidebooks give a perspective on cities which is a world apart from mainstream accounts for tourists. The series covers cities like Edinburgh, London, Paris, Prague, Vienna, Berlin and Munich. Duncan’s ‘Only in Krakow: A Guide to Unique Locations, Hidden Corners and Unusual Objects’ is published by The Urban Explorer in November 2019. Find out more about the series at www.onlyinguides.com – for more on Duncan’s wider work see www.duncanjdsmith.com.