

IN THE WAKE OF THE CURONIANS

Longer distances of the route are heading along asphalt roads, but access to ancient cult sites mostly is available along gravel and forest roads.

Length of the route 145 km

1 THE BOWL-SHAPED STONE IN THE MUSEUM OF KULDĪGA

Kuldīga In the yard of the Kuldīga County Museum 56°58'03" 21°58'56"

The stone with a hollow that brings forward many unanswered questions to scholars. On the surface of the stone, there is a perfectly round evenly levelled bowl, as well as 5 side grooves on one side of the stone. The origin of the stone and its former application are unknown. There is an opinion that hollow stones are related to traditions of sacrifice and the hollows had been made for offerings.

2 THE VENTA RAPID

Kuldīga In the Venta River opposite the historic centre of the town 56°58'08" 21°58'75"

The largest and most popular rapid in Latvia formed over the dolomites of the Plavjavis Range. It is one-level rapid with the height of 1.6 m. Its width is 270 m, and it is the widest rapid not only in Latvia and the Baltic states, but also in all Europe. The Venta Rapid is a very popular tourism object and a recreation site favoured by the inhabitants of Kuldīga. According to tales, the Latvians were fighting with the Līvīši. The Līvīši was associated with life-giving powers, purity, and fertility. At the Kurmāle Baltavots Spring even nowadays continuation of the ancestors' traditions



3 THE CURONIAN HILL FORT OF VECKULDĪGA

Kuldīga 56°59'66" 21°57'68"

Long before the introduction of Christianity in the ancient land of Cursa and expansion of the Livonian Order, on the present site of the hill fort of Veckuldīga, at the significant waterway of the Venta River, one of the largest and best fortified castles of the Curonians with an ancient town was situated. The hill fort was located in the ancient land of the Curonians named Bandava, its area was around 1 ha, and the area of the ancient town – 10 ha.

In the first half of the 13th century, the Curonian lands were invaded by the German crusaders who burnt down the castle of Kuldīga, but the settlement was there yet for some time. According to some scholars, there used to be both the centre of the Curonian land of Bandava and a residence of the Curonian King Lamekin mentioned in 1230.

4 KURMĀLE BALTAVOTS SPRING

Kuldīga A path trodden by animals leads to the spring 56°58'89" 21°53'75"

The Kurmāle Baltavots Spring is also called the Holy Spring. The depth of the spring outlet is up to 1.5 m, and in it several water and sand eruptions are whirling. In the nearby surroundings, there is also another remarkable spring – the Melnavots Spring that nobody has been able to show it anymore lately.

Ancient health springs were special shrines and healing sites for the ancestors. The spring was associated with life-giving powers, purity, and fertility.

At the Kurmāle Baltavots Spring even

nowadays continuation of the ancestors' traditions

is still observed: in the nearby trees, there have been various items hung up – offerings that have been left there for using the spring water.

5 MĀRA'S CHAMBERS

Gibūļi Parish, Talsi County About 2 km of the Sabile–Renda highway 57°04'86" 22°21'96"

A naturally formed cave system in the sandstone decretion of the right bank of the Abava River Valley. Two caves are located on one slope of the ravine, another one – on the opposite side. O. E. Šmits has attempted to explain the origin of the cave name as follows: once Catholic priests placed a picture of the Virgin Maria in the ancient cult cave. So the ancient name of the cave disappeared and instead of it the Latvian version of the same period typical of the Baltic Finns were established.

When visiting the hill fort, we recommend you to see a typical stone of ancient rituals – a cup-marked stone that is located in its original place being there already for thousand years. A cult hill corresponding to the Mežīte Hill Fort is located nowadays on the opposite side of the asphalted road. The Idols' Hill is a large, up to 25 m high hill massive overgrown with dense forest. It has steep slopes and a large natural, quite even surface. There is a tale about the hill that an underground passage leads from the hill fort to the hill.

6 MEŽĪTE COMPLEX

Lacučiņi Parish, Talsi County On the left side of the Libagi–Laučiņi highway; at the road there is an indication sign "Mežītes pilskalns 0,2" (Mežīte Hill Fort 0,2). The cup-marked stone is situated at the lower part of the Mežīte Hill Fort's A slope, the Idols' Hill – 400 m of the hill fort, on the right side of the Libagi–Laučiņi highway 57°01'17" 22°42'62"

The Mežīte Hill Fort is one of the visually most beautiful hills of Kurzeme. It is dating back to the late Iron Age.

There was a hypothesis made that in the Mežīte Hill Fort, the "Castellatura Lodigae", mentioned in some document

is still observed: in the nearby trees, there have been various items hung up – offerings that have been left there for using the spring water.

7 VANAGKALNS HILL

Lībagi Parish, Talsi County Not far from the Mundigciems of the Talsi County 57°13'19" 22°37'50"

There is a tale that it is an ancient sacrificial hill. From written sources it is known that south of the hill, there is a smaller hill of a peculiar form – the so-called David's Hill (Dāvida kalniņš), which also, probably, is related to ancient cult traditions. According to tales, nearby there used to be the Dreams' Grove (Sapņu birz) where fortune tellers explained dreams in ancient times. Nowadays on the Vanagkalns Hill,

there is a hypothesis made that in the Mežīte Hill Fort, the "Castellatura Lodigae", mentioned in some document

is still observed: in the nearby trees, there have been various items hung up – offerings that have been left there for using the spring water.

8 MEŽĪTE HILL FORT OF TALSI

Talsi, Centre of Talsi 57°04'58" 22°35'92"

The Talsi Castle was one of the most remarkable and powerful centres of the northern part of the territories inhabited by the Curonians. The hill fort was inhabited during the 10th–14th centuries, and the Curonians were dominant in the 11th century. It used to be one of the best fortified and the largest hill forts of the land of Cursa with complicated fortifications – ramparts and several hillside terraces. The Hill Fort D was adjacent to a small antecastle, and next to it there was about 40 000 m² large settlement.

A probable cult site with a symbolic name of "Church Hill" and a peculiar burial ground – Vilkumuiža Lake,

where remains of the Curonian cremation graves were sunk, were part of the settlement complex. During archaeological excavation works, in the hill fort, there

were remains of sacrificed animals found, especially skulls of sacrificed horses. During archaeological excavation works of the Hill Fort of Talsi, remains of

some 11th century building were uncovered that were

believed to be a "healer's cabin" where wooden dishes

and a box, benches and candlesticks were found. It is

believed that only special people could be healers in

ancient times who inherited accrued knowledge from

generation to generation.

9 KRAUJAS VANDZENE SECULAR STONE

Vandzene Parish, Talsi County Situated at the 3rd km of the Vandzene–Valdemārpils road, about 300 m to the right 57°21'01" 22°43'36"

The stone is one of the most interesting cult monuments in Latvia. Yet until the 19th century, holy lindens grew around the stone, whereas the last one was

chopped down around the year of 1930. The stone and the linden, according to local people, are an ancient sacrificial site. Sacrificial bonfire was made near the linden rather than on the stone itself in order not to damage the stone.

10 POPRAGS MULTIPLE TRUNK TREE

Vandzene Parish, Talsi County At the Poprags Mill, on the right side of the road Valdemārpils–Laidze, in an open area 57°01'98" 22°39'17"

The linden is under protection as a unique nature

rarity. It is believed that in ancient times at the

linden, there used to be a sacrificial site, because

in the nearby fields there were coins found. There

are tales narrating that the old linden had been

chopped down and two new linden grew instead.

When those ones had been chopped down, 24 new

trunks grew instead.

11 MĒRSRAGS DEVIL'S STONE

Mērsrags Parish, Mērsrags County At the Mērsrags Lighthouse, 50 m off the shore 57°22'04" 23°07'26"

The narrow upper part of the Devil's Stone (1.5 m) is

visible above the water level. According to tales, the

stones were carried and heaped into the sea by the

Devil to build a bridge across the gulf.

12 KONIŅCIEMI IDOL'S GROVE

Turlava Parish, Kuldīga County On both sides of the Kuldīga–Alzīte highway, about 1 km SW of Turlava, 0.5 km NE of Konīciems 56°49'85" 21°44'88"

The Idols' Grove is the remains of the former holy

forest of the Curonian kings preserved by the

time and people. Both the kings of the

and written historical sources have preserved tales that

the most ancient kings of the Curonian kings are

descendants of the ancient Curonian rulers called

"konīji" or "kēnīji" (kings or rulers). There has been

no evidence found to prove this, but the historical

scene shows that this is quite possible.

A renowned phenomenon of the life of those

kings was long-lasting and lavish feasts that

were held both at annual events and on persons'

life celebration days. Feasts had both a unifying

function of the society and a ritual nature that

intervened in most cases in the culture of the

ancient Balts. The first news about everyday life of

the kings was provided by the traveller Reinhold

Lubenau in 1585. "At Christmas [in Konīciems Village] they went hunting in their holy forest

where on other occasions throughout the year it

is neither permitted to hunt anything nor to

chop anything; they skinned the hunted roes, deer,

and hare, put them on a long table and stuck wax

candles around to feed the souls of their parents,

grandparents, children, and relatives, eating and

drinking themselves as well, inviting us also to join

them; then an empty beer barrel was brought on

which they drummed with two small sticks, then

men, women, and children kept on dancing around

the table all night."

This narration proves that the pagan tradition

– feeding the souls of the dead – was practised

absolutely openly in the presence of strangers,

without being afraid of the repressions by the

church or the secular power. It is known that the

Order was indulgent towards pagan traditions

that did not blaspheme against the God, that is why

such behaviour of the kings was not unusual.

Tales narrate that in ancient times in the Idols'

Grove, there were huge lindens and a stone altar, on

which offerings were burnt to honour the Mother

Earth – kids, lambs, sheaves of grain. For the ancient

Curonians, holy forests were cult places of special

gods – those of the earth, water, and wild nature, as

well as a dwelling place of the ancestors' spirits or

gates to the other world.

13 INDULIS GRAVE STONE (INDULĀ KAPA AKMENS)

About 5 km N of Embūte, on the slope of the Vēre Hill – hill fort, on its top, in a bushy forest of deciduous trees 56°32'87" 21°44'29"

Since time immemorial, the surroundings between

Priekule and Vainode have had a fascinating name –

Idols' Land.

Although the spring is difficult to access

and might be difficult to find without a guide or

directions, it is surprisingly interesting. It is a climbing

spring with purely bluish water that has accumulated

in a small pond at the point of its outflow. Since time

immemorial, the spring has been associated with

healing powers, and the ancestors believed that the

spring water has healing power, especially for eyes.

14 EMBŪTE SACRIFICIAL HILL

Embūte Parish, Vainode County About 150 m W of the Embūte–Skruņa road 56°30'70" 21°44'57"

There is an opinion that the Sacrificial Hill is a cult site

corresponding to the Embūte Hill Fort – a holy hill of

