

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 **T** In the yard of the Kuldīga County Museum **56°58'103 21°58'568**
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 **T** In the Venta River opposite the historic centre of the town **56°58'083 21°58'750**
The largest and most popular rapid in Latvia formed over the dolomites of the Pļaviņas 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 Livs, the Livs prayed their God Piktulis for help, and then the Devil went to the Brieži Shelf, seized a pile of stones, and half filled up the Venta River at Kuldīga, but when bringing the second pile, a rooster crowed, and the Devil fled. From the first pile carried by the Devil the rapids appeared then.



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THE GREEN TEMPLES OF THE LAND OF CURSA

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 280 km

12 KŌNIŅCIEMS IDOL'S GROVE

Turlava Parish, Kuldīga County **T** On both sides of the Kuldīga-Aizpute highway, about 1 km SW of Turlava, 0.5 km NE of Koniņciems **56°49'850 21°44'883**
The Idols' Grove is the remains of the former holy forest of the Curonian kings preserved by the time and people. Both the kins of the kings and written historical sources have preserved tales that the most ancient kins of the Curonian kings are descendants of the ancient Curonian rulers called "koniņi" or "kēniņi" (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 person's 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 Koniņciems Village] they went hunting in their holy forest where on other occasions throughout the year it is neither permitted to hunt anything there nor to chop anything; they skinned the hunted roes, deer, and hare, put them on a long table and stuck wax



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13 INDULIS GRAVE STONE (INDUĻA KAPA AKMENS)

About 5 km N of Embūte, on the slope of the Vēre Hill – hill fort, on its top part, in a bushy forest of deciduous trees **56°32'875 21°48'295**
A mythological stone, about which legends tell that under the stone, the chief of the Curonians and the ruler of Embūte Indulis was buried. The stone lies in the hill fort of the Vēre Hill, at the D end of which there are two 3 and 1-1.5 m deep big hollows that used to be called sacrificial hollows in ancient times.



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3 THE CURONIAN HILL FORT OF VECKULDĪGA

Kuldīga **56°59'664 21°57'688**
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

Kurmāle Parish, Kuldīga County **T** A path trodden by animals leads to the spring **56°58'889 21°53'757**
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

5 MĀRĀ'S CHAMBERS

Gībuli Parish, Talsi County **T** About 2 km of the Sabile-Renda highway **57°04'866 22°21'966**
A naturally formed cave system in the sandstone detritation 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. Smits has attempted to explain the origin of the cave name as follows: once Catholic priests placed a picture of the Virgin Maria at the ancient cult cave. So the ancient name of the cave disappeared and instead of it the Latvian version of the name Mary appeared – Māra's Chambers.

6 MEŽĪTE COMPLEX

Lauciena Parish, Talsi County **T** On the left side of the Libagi-Lauciena 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-Lauciena highway **57°11'172 22°42'629**
The Mežīte Hill Fort is one of the visually most beautiful hill forts of Kurzeme. It is dating back to the late Iron Age. There was a hypothesis made that in the Mežīte Hill Fort, the "Castellatura Lodgiae", mentioned in some document



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dating back to 1234 about enfeofing of 25 acres of land to the Rīga St. Peter's Church, was situated. The hill fort was located in the Curonian land of Vanema. The Mežīte Hill Fort was constructed on a solitary, about 13 m high hill, the slopes of which had been artificially made steeper. Its plateau is of a triangular form, 55 x 30–50 m large, with a narrower southern part, on which a 3 meters high rampart had been heaped up. It used to protect the ascent to the hill fort, which, just like in many other Latvian hill forts, was planned in such a way that when invaders were striving to conquer the hill fort, their shoulders, unprotected by a shield, would be turned against the hill fort's defenders. On the opposite side of the ascent (southeast of the hill fort), a smaller hillock is situated, the so-called small hill fort. According to its location, there could be some additional fortifications located for the defence of the ascent to the hill fort. All around the hill fort, in the area of almost 3 ha, there used to be a settlement place where the cultural layer sometimes reaches the depth of about 1 m. When examining this settlement place at different times, several artefacts were found and pieces of crockery. Not far from the hill fort, two burial ground sites are known – in the so-called Kapurkalns, the artefacts typical of the Curonians of the late Iron Age were found, but in the ground of the Kalnenieki homestead, in a gravel hillock, inhumation graves 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 it to the hill fort.

7 VANAGKALNS HILL

Libaga Parish, Talsi County **T** Not far from the Muidgicieņi of the Talsi County **57°13'194 22°37'500**
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 Hillock (Dāvīda kalniņš), which also, probably, is related to ancient cult traditions. According to tales, nearby there used to be the Dreams' Grove (Sapņu birzs) where fortune tellers explained dreams in ancient times. Nowadays on the Vanagkalns Hill,



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14 EMBŪTE SACRIFICIAL HILL

Embūte Parish, Vainode County **T** About 150 m W of the Embūte-Skrunda road **56°30'701 21°49'576**
There is an opinion that the Sacrificial Hill is a cult site corresponding to the Embūte Hill Fort – a holy hill of the type well-known at the hill forts of the southern Kurzeme.

15 IDOLS' LAND EYE SPRING

Vainode Parish, Vainode County **T** 590 m N of the Priekule-Vainode highway, in alder underbrush **56°25'682 21°44'623**
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.

16 EZERSKOLA SACRIFICIAL STONE

Nica Parish, Nica County **T** In Pape Nature Park, around 3 km W of the Liepāja-Klaipeņa highway, at the road to the former Ezerskola School **56°13'583 21°04'289**
There are tales stating that at the stone there used to be a holy grove. 20 m NE of the stone, there is a secular linden (with the circumference of 5.15 m) which is sometimes called the Sacrificial Linden. Nowadays people often sacrifice money on the stone that is a peculiar continuation of our ancestors' traditions.

17 ŠĶILI (GRAVIŅI) STONE AND LINDEN

Nica Parish, Nica County **T** In Pape Nature Park, in an underbrushy forest at the former Šķili homestead **56°12'873 21°04'009**
Probably a heritage stone and a foot-print stone. The stone seems to be in its original place. Both the form of the stone resembling a human face

and the linden with eight forked branches growing next to the stone are visually attractive.

18 DIŽLĀŅI IDOL'S HILL

Vecpils Parish, Durbe County **T** In Vecpils, next to a paved road connecting Vecpils with the Rīga-Liepāja highway 4 km away **56°37'428 21°29'190**
In Dižlāņi Idol's Hill, which, judging by the name, is an ancient cult site, nowadays there is an old cemetery and ruins of a chapel. The Idol's Hill, probably, is a corresponding cult site of the nearby impressive Vecpils Hill Fort. Idols' hills are considered to be typical sacred sites of the Curonians dating back to 450–1350. Old tales narrate that offerings were brought to idols' hills and burnt there.

19 IDOLS' GROVE WITH SPRINGS

Laža Parish, Aizpute County **T** On the right side of the rural road Apriķi-Cirava, in an underbrushy forest. The site of the Idols' Grove is usually localized on the other – left – side of the Apriķi-Cirava road, however, the springs are slightly away and have not been wider described up to now **56°47'207 21°29'509**
Small wood and individual clusters with big trees have survived from the former Idols' Grove. The cult of holy woods was widely spread in the land of Cursa. The trees, animals, and birds dwelling in the holy forest were inviolable. In the holy groves, there were usually several holy sites. In the Idols' Grove of Laža, nowadays one can visit a spring and oaks, the largest of which is 2.8 m in circumference. Tales reveal that in ancient times people brought offerings to the groves and made bonfires there.



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ancestors' traditions are still kept alive by celebrating traditional annual festivals there – Mārtiņi Festival, Miķeļi Festival, Christmas, Easter, and Jāni (summer solstice celebration).

8 CURONIAN HILL FORT OF TALSĪ

Talsi, Centre of Talsi **57°14'582 22°35'922**
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 – Vilkuizūla 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 was a sacrificial tradition, especially typical of the Curonians, established – in the foundation of 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 VALDEMĀRPĪLS IDOLS' LINDEN

Valdemārpils Parish, Talsi County **T** In the yard of the Sasmaka manor house **57°22'730 22°36'016**
One of the most popular secular trees in Latvia having the circumference of the trunk of 8.5 m, and it is the thickest linden in the Baltics. It is an ancient



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tree, its age could be around 400–500 years. In the territory of Latvia, sacralisation of trees was widely spread. Trees were considered to be shrines due to a conviction that nature spirits and fertility gods dwelled there. People came to the trees with offerings hoping to solicit gods' grace.

10 KRAUJAS VANDZENE SECULAR STONE

Vandzene Parish, Talsi County **T** Situated at the 3rd km of the Vandzene-Valdemārpils road, about 300 m to the right **57°21'016 22°43'363**
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.

11 MĒRSRAGS DEVIL'S STONE

Mērsrags Parish, Mērsrags County **T** At the Mērsrags Lighthouse, in the sea, 50 m off the shore **57°22'049 23°07'268**
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.



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EVENTS RELATED TO ANCIENT TIMES IN KURZEME

LĪVA VILLAGE

In the centre of the City of Liepāja, at the market place and its surroundings, annually in May
The festival Līva Village ("Līvas ciems") is one of the most extensive events of the Latvian traditional culture combining folk music, traditional culture, arts, and crafts. Every year more than 200 craftsmen participate in it, focusing on demonstration of craft skills and involvement of festival visitors into mastering various trades. www.livasciems.lv

LĪVS' FESTIVAL IN MAZIRBE

In the centre of Mazirbe, traditionally on the first Saturday of August
Every year on the first Saturday of August, the Līvs' Festival in Mazirbe is organized. It is the largest and most significant event of the Līvs' cultural life, during which everyone has a chance to experience the Līvs' culture. During those days Mazirbe becomes a venue where the Līvs, the Līvs' descendants and representatives of the Līvs' culture come together from all over Latvia, as well as guests from abroad, for example, from Estonia. www.ziemeļkurzeme.lv, www.kolka.lv



DUKE JACOB'S FAIR

In the Old City of Kuldīga from the Venta Rapid till Baznīca Street and Liepāja Street, in the month of birth of the Duke Jacob in October
This fair is one of the largest traditional autumn fairs in Kurzeme. You can find everything at the great autumn festival or fair of the Duke Jacob – carriages full of nature gifts and items produced by skilful craftsmen from all over Kurzeme. People from each parish take out of their corn-bins, cellars, chests, barrels, and tubs the best things they have grown, brewed, produced by their own hands. www.kuldiga.lv

SEA FESTIVAL

In seaside towns – Nīca, Liepāja, Pāvilosta, Ventspils, Roja, etc., traditionally at the weekend of the second week of July
Sea and Fishermen Festival in Kurzeme has become a cultural and historical value since 1936. During the festival, powerful nature forces and people whose daily work is related to the sea are honoured and named with pride – fishermen, seamen, and fish processing people. There are fish and crafts markets almost in every fishermen village, and guests have an opportunity to taste fish meals specially cooked for this event, as well as enjoy drinks produced by local breweries. www.latvia.travel



JĀNIS DAY CELEBRATIONS

Traditionally, the pagan Jānis Day Celebrations (summer solstice festival), inherited from the ancestors, is celebrated during the summer solstice of June 21 and 24
Bubbling beer mugs, cumin cheese, songs and dances, the shortest night spent at the bonfire, various nature rituals, decoration of homes and yourself with meadow flowers and tree branches, romantically mystical search for the fern flower – this is what this very popular festival in Latvia is like, which can be called both the Ligo Evening or Jāni. For some people this festivity is like a mediation on the traditions and beliefs of our ancestors, for others – purifying their soul and body by singing and going to a bathhouse, for somebody else – a great meal time with joyful dancing, playing, and other celebration activities. If you wish to celebrate the Jānis Day in accordance with special ancestors' traditions, we recommend you to celebrate it in Rucava together with the Rucava Traditions Club with self-cooked Jānis Day meals, games, etc. www.rucava.lv



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24 USMA IDOLS' LINDEN

Usma Parish, Ventspils County **T** On NW bank of the Usma Lake, on the cape called Elkrags (Idols' Cape), in the old manor house's yard **57°12'394 22°09'099**
They say there used to be as many as twelve or, according to other data, nine forked branches or offsprings. According to tales, in ancient times our ancestors brought offerings to the souls of the dead ones under the linden. There is a tale about a maiden who broke a branch from the linden, after that her legs started to ulcerate, and she became lame.

25 ULMALES PINNI STONE WITH BOWL-SHAPED HOLLOW

Saka Parish, Pāvilosta County **T** In Ulmale, about 700 m E of the Liepāja-Ventspils highway **56°55'903 21°16'880**
A very expressive bowl-shaped stone with a bowl-shaped hollow typical of this type of cultural and historical stones that has been made artificially. The depth of the bowl is 12–16 cm, the diameter that of 58–62 cm. The bowl-shaped stone has grooves on its sides common for the stones of this kind, all in all 46 grooves. Written sources report that it was also called the Dieveklis Stone. Stones with a bowl-shape hollow are considered to be ancient cult stones, in the hollows of which small offerings could be laid.



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21 POPRAGS MULTIPLE TRUNK TREE

Laidze Parish, Talsi County **T** At the Poprags Mill, on the right side of the road Valdemārpils-Laidze, in an open area **57°01'981 22°39'175**
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.

22 BASI WEREWOLF STONE

Vandzene Parish, Talsi County **T** It is situated 1.25 km W of the Upesgrīva highway, in a fir-tree forest **57°22'153 22°55'824**
During the Soviet occupation period, in the winter of 1953/1954, they tried to carve a monument to some left radical person named Sudmalis whose activities are evaluated as terrorist. The stone was split into many pieces. There is a tale about the stone that in the stone a werewolf lives who comes out at midnight and midday and eats up people. It is assumed that there could be an ancient cult site.

23 GRĪŽI DEVIL'S SEAT

Tārgale Parish, Ventspils County **T** In the woods between Ventspils and Pope, about 5 km WS-W of it, short half a kilometre south of the Rīga-Ventspils highway, to the left **57°22'824 21°46'248**
Basing on the name and a very short narration in terms of content, it is presumed that this used to be, probably, an ancient cult site. According to a tale, the Devil used to sit on the stone, thus sitting in its form.

TOURISM INFORMATION

Aizpute Tourism Information Centre
Skolas iela 1, Aizpute, Aizpute county
Phone +371 63448880, 29623284
aizpute.tic@apollo.lv, www.aizputenovads.lv

Dundaga Municipality Tourism Information Centre
Dundaga castle, Pils iela, Dundaga, Dundaga county
Phone +371 63232293, 29444395, tic@dundaga.lv, www.ziemeļkurzeme.lv, www.dundaga.lv

Kazdanga Tourism Information Centre
Jaunatnes gatve 1, Kazdanga, Aizpute county
Phone +371 29103813, kazdanga.tic@inbox.lv, www.kazdangaspils.com

Kolkasrags Tourism Information Centre
Kolka, Kolka parish, Dundaga county
Phone +371 29149105, kolkacepe@inbox.lv, www.kolkasrags.lv, www.ziemeļkurzeme.lv

Kuldīga Tourism Information Centre
Baznīcas iela 5, Kuldīga
Phone +371 63322259, 29334403
tourinfo@kuldiga.lv, www.visit.kuldiga.lv

Liepāja Region Tourism Information Office
Rožu laukums 5/6, Liepāja
Phone +371 63480808, 29402111
info@liepajaturisms.lv, www.liepajaturisms.lv

Mērsrags Tourism Information Centre
Zvejnieku iela 2, Mērsrags, Mērsrags county
Phone +371 63237704, 26572494
infocentrs@mersrags.lv, www.mersrags.lv

Nica Tourist Information Point
Bārtas iela 6, Nica, Nica county
Phone +371 63489501, 29458532, turisms@nica.lv, www.nica.lv

Pāvilosta County Tourism Information Centre
Dzintaru iela 2, Pāvilosta, Pāvilosta county
Phone +371 63498229, 29121894, tic@pavilosta.lv, www.pavilosta.lv

Priekule Tourist Information Point
Saules iela 1, Priekule, Priekule county
Phone +371 29472063, turisms@priekulesnovads.lv, www.priekulesnovads.lv

Roja Tourism Information Centre
Selgas iela 33, Roja, Roja county
Phone +371 63269594, 28630590
tic@roja.lv, www.roja.lv, www.visit.roja.lv

Rucava Tourism Information Centre
"Buši", Rucava, Rucava county
Phone +371 29134903
rucava.tic@inbox.lv, www.rucava.lv

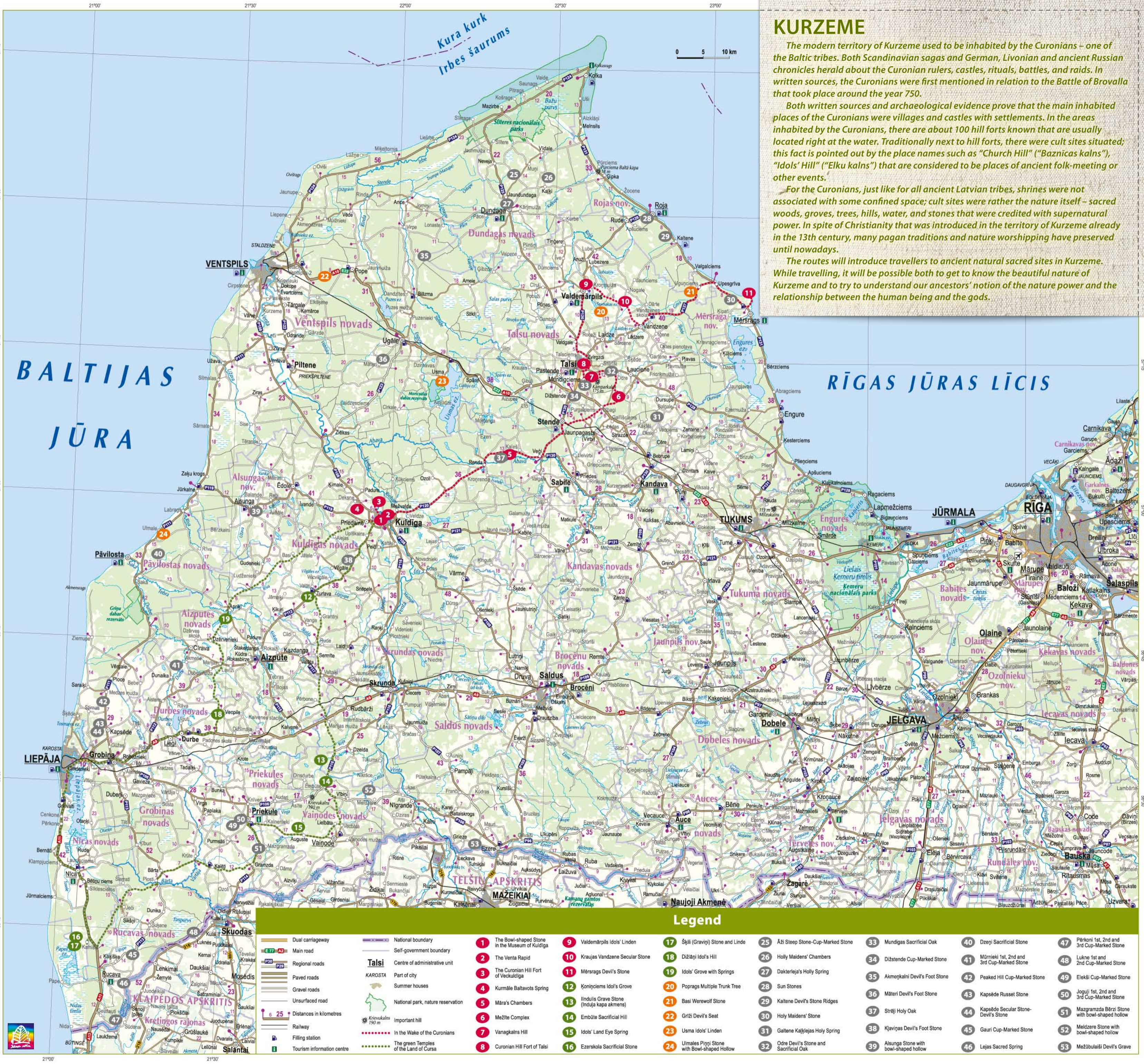
Sabile Tourism Information Centre
Pilskalna iela 6, Sabile, Talsi county
Phone +371 63252344, 27841827
tic_sabile@inbox.lv, www.sabile.lv

Saldus Tourism Information Centre
Strīku iela 3, Saldus
Phone +371 63807443
tic@saldus.lv, www.saldus.lv

Talsi County Tourism Information Centre
Lielā iela 19/21, Talsi
Phone +371 63224165, 26469057
talsutic@apollo.lv, www.talsitourism.lv

Valdemārpils Tourism Information Centre
Raiņa iela 14a, Valdemārpils, Talsi county
Phone +371 63254762
valdtic@inbox.lv, www.valdemarpils.lv

Ventspils Tourism Information Centre
Dārzu iela 6, Ventspils



KURZEME

The modern territory of Kurzeme used to be inhabited by the Curonians – one of the Baltic tribes. Both Scandinavian sagas and German, Livonian and ancient Russian chronicles herald about the Curonian rulers, castles, rituals, battles, and raids. In written sources, the Curonians were first mentioned in relation to the Battle of Brovalla that took place around the year 750.

Both written sources and archaeological evidence prove that the main inhabited places of the Curonians were villages and castles with settlements. In the areas inhabited by the Curonians, there are about 100 hill forts known that are usually located right at the water. Traditionally next to hill forts, there were cult sites situated; this fact is pointed out by the place names such as "Church Hill" ("Baznīcas kalns"), "Idols' Hill" ("Elku kalns") that are considered to be places of ancient folk-meeting or other events.

For the Curonians, just like for all ancient Latvian tribes, shrines were not associated with some confined space; cult sites were rather the nature itself – sacred woods, groves, trees, hills, water, and stones that were credited with supernatural power. In spite of Christianity that was introduced in the territory of Kurzeme already in the 13th century, many pagan traditions and nature worshipping have preserved until nowadays.

The routes will introduce travellers to ancient natural sacred sites in Kurzeme. While travelling, it will be possible both to get to know the beautiful nature of Kurzeme and to try to understand our ancestors' notion of the nature power and the relationship between the human being and the gods.



Ancient natural sacred sites

KURZEME · WESTERN LATVIA
TOURISM MAP



Throughout all times, people have been enticed by the mysterious and the unfathomable. Ancient sacred sites are surrounded by myths and legends allowing a contemporary person have a look, even if only a slight, into history. Legends and notes telling about the rituals performed at the ancient sacred sites, for instance, donation rituals, honouring of nature according to the annual course of the sun, the cult of fire and the deceased, have remained until nowadays.

Sacred sites were not human-made structures for the ancient tribes of the Balts – they were objects of nature. Ancestors believed that trees and stones, groves and forests, hills and water have been endowed with magical powers that help treating diseases, protect from misfortune, as well as ensure health and fertility. Nowadays sacred sites of nature at first sight may seem as a simple stone or hill, but stories and myths that have been passed on from generation to generation tell a different story. They are breathtaking testimonies about the ancient history of our ancestors and their understanding about the power of nature, as well as mutual relationship of people and gods.

This tourism guide features information on nature sacred sites in Kurzeme Region. Similar travel guides about Zemgale, Riga and Vidzeme regions in Latvia as well as counties in Estonia and Sweden are available. Mentioned guides will help not only discover new values of nature and culture, but also gain knowledge about the ancient traditions of nations around Baltic Sea.

www.ancientsites.eu

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