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REIiHE

PRESERVATION OF CONFLICT-DAMAGED SACRAL HERITAGE IN A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: THE CASE OF ZVĀRDE CHURCH RUINS



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HISTORICAL FACTS

The beginning of a thriving church

YEAR BUILT

1783

FUNDING

Joint Donations

- Local farmer’s contributions
- Courland nobility
- Duke Biron’s patronage

SIGNIFICANCE

160+ years

Heart of the parish community.



THE MILITARY ERA

From parish to bombing range

Soviet aviation training grounds established in 1953

AREA SEIZED

24,000+

Hectares of Land

Massive Soviet aerial target complex.

Forced Eviction

Thousands expelled by May 1955.

Farms Erased

Five collective farms liquidated.

Aviation Targets

Church bombed as simulated target.

Closed Zone

Strict civilian ban until 1993.



THE AFTERMATH

Reclaiming a devastated land

Decades of target bombing left severe destruction and danger

SOVIET DEPARTURE

1993

Territory Returned

Left behind devastated, hazardous wasteland.

Churches in Ruins

Historic stone walls shattered into rubble.

Cemetery Desecrated

Ancestral graves ripped open by craters.

Unexploded Munitions

Thousands of active aerial bombs underground.

Toxic Contamination

Destroyed roads, heavy metal soil pollution.







TIMELINE

Rebirth and vitality of Zvārde church

From military wasteland to a thriving center for community, culture and memory

1993-2000

First Steps

- Russian military leaves range.
- First volunteer cleanups at Rīteļi graves & church ruins.

2000

Spiritual Return

- Saldus Martin Luther Church takes ruins into custody.
- Regular open-air summer worship begins.

2007

Oak Cross

- Monumental oak cross erected & consecrated at the altar.
- Visibly marks the ruins as a holy sanctuary.

2010-2015

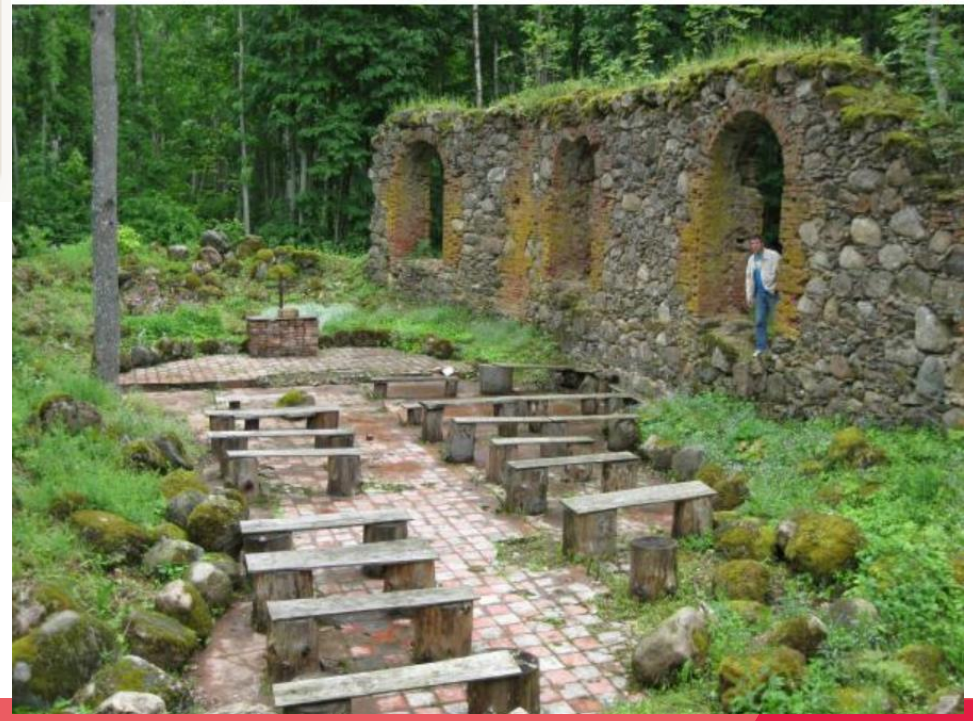
Care & Culture

- Sacred music concerts echo inside the ruins.
- Essential masonry stabilization to preserve walls.

Present Day

Living Site

- Integrated into Military Heritage routes.
- Vibrant community hub & forest destination.



METHODOLOGICAL PARADIGM

Conservation over reconstrucion



✕ TRADITIONAL PATH REJECTED

Full architectural rebuilding was deemed financially unfeasible and conceptually sterile, risking the erasure of the site's true wartime tragedy.

✓ THE SMART STRATEGY IMPLEMENTED

Controlled Conservation: Minimal structural wall stabilization ensures complete safety while leaving the open sky as the ceiling.

Digital Augmentation: The "ZvARde" AR app provides interactive 3D historical visualization without altering the physical stones.

COLLABORATION AND FUNDING

Financing the Sacred Heritage Site

Grassroots Care

PARISH & COMMUNITY

- **Parish Stewardship:** Ongoing spiritual care and site guardianship by Saldus Congregation.
- **Volunteer Labor:** Decades of volunteer cleanups (*talkas*) by descendants.
- **Small Grants:** LEADER micro-projects for initial landscaping and pathways.

Site Demining

STATE DEFENSE BUDGET

- **National Armed Forces (NAF):** Professional clearance of aerial munitions.
- **Safety First:** Continuous risk neutralization across the former range.
- **State-Funded:** Fundamental precondition for any civilian access.

Conservation

~€5,000

TARGETED MASONRY WORKS

- **Structural Safety:** Targeted wall stabilization to stop stone collapse.
- **Cost Efficiency:** Maximum safety achieved with modest capital injection.

Military Heritage

~€40,000

TOURISM & ACCESSIBILITY

- **Major Upgrade:** Cross-border EU project opening site to wider audiences.
- **Visitor Infrastructure:** Informative stands, wayfinding signage, pathways.
- **Digital Tools:** AR interactive app (*"ZvARde"*) for immersive storytelling.

EVALUATION AND IMPACT

Evidence or practical success

Community Reclamation

Restored Belonging: Re-established identity for displaced families returning to ancestral land.

Civilian Reclaim: Turns a closed military zone into an open, welcoming gathering space.

Spatial Policy Integration

Municipal Planning: Embedded into Saldus County development as a key cultural destination.

Dual Protection: Perfectly balances nature reserve biodiversity with heritage preservation.

Revitalized Living Memory

Active Function: Hosts regular summer liturgy, wedding ceremonies, and memorial services.

Authenticity: Proof that sacral life thrives without artificial roofs or walls.

Transferability and policy learning

The Ruin as a Living Landmark

Revitalization Without Costly Construction

Perfect for rural ruins, estates, or abandoned churches where full reconstruction is financially unviable. The site functions as a space for peace, memory, and culture in its current authentic state.

Minimal Intervention & Nature Synergy

Heritage & Green Tourism

Integrating ruins as a natural landscape element. Aligning objects within nature reserves, woodlands, and dedicated 'slow tourism' walking or cycling routes.

Smart Heritage & Digital Accessibility

Interactive Digital Tools

Preserving raw physical authenticity and ensuring minimal impact on nature, while providing rich historical interactivity through Augmented Reality (AR) and digital guides.

Community-Led Rural Regeneration

Empowering Local Growth

A case study on how small grants, targeted municipal planning, and volunteer efforts can drive social cohesion and spark new economic momentum in remote areas.

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PRESERVING SACRED HERITAGE IN HYDRO-ALTERED LANDSCAPES: THE RUINS OF IKŠĶILE CHURCH



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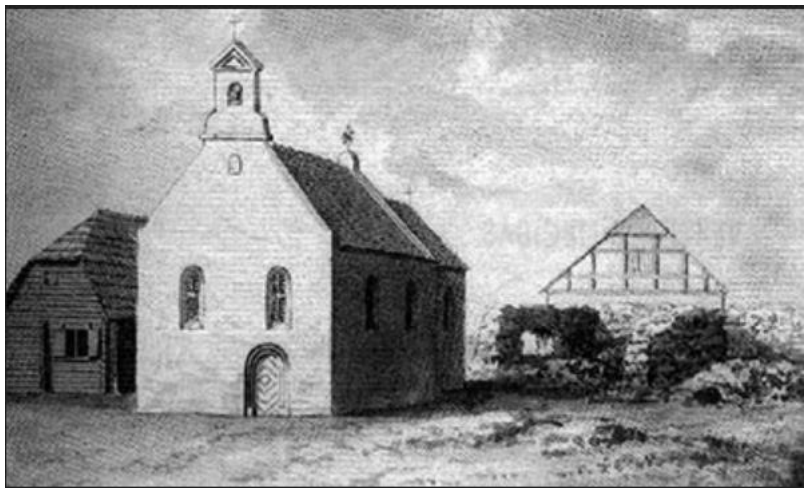
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HISTORICAL FACTS

The birth of stone architecture and faith in the Baltics

YEAR BUILT

Around 1184-1185



SIGNIFICANCE

- First stone structure in the Baltics
- Saint Meinhard’s first church and cathedral
- Where Latvia’s Christianization began

ARCHITECTURAL AND STUCTURAL EVOLUTION

Chronology of reconstrucions

1184–1186

Single-Nave Church

Semicircular apse, thick defensive dolomite masonry.

First stone building in the Baltics; castle stood detached.

EARLY 13TH C.

Two-Nave Hall Church

Four vaulted bays, central pillar, Gothic pointed portal.

Flat choir wall; fully integrated into castle defense system.

1688–1798

Sacristies & Roof

Bindenschu timber roof structure with cornices and gables.

Preserved ground plan; added two functional sacristies.

1879

Historicist Redesign

Felsko expansion to six bays with a polygonal apse.

Slender bell tower and St. Meinhard statue on west facade.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT & HYDRO-LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMATION

Historical Context and the Impact of Riga HPP

Balancing engineering infrastructure and the preservation of a national monument

1915–1918

WWI Destruction

Destroyed by heavy artillery.

Turned into ruins; protected in 1926 with first digs in 1927.

1970–1975

Hydrological Threat

Riga HPP reservoir flooding.

Created imminent risk of bedrock erosion and permanent submersion.

ENGINEERING RESCUE

Hydro-Technical Protection

Protective dike construction.

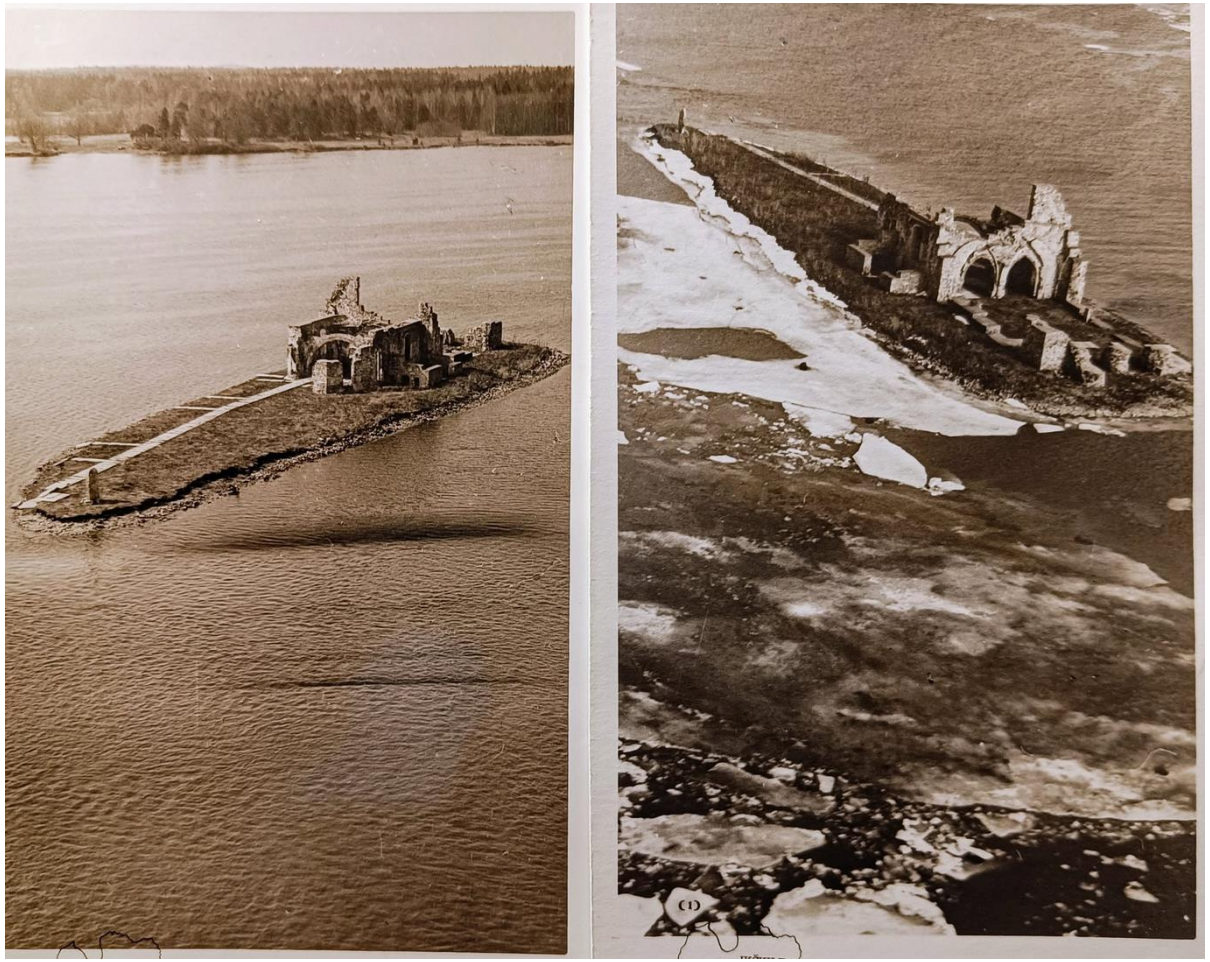
Earth and rock barrier built, creating an artificial refuge island.

SPATIAL PLANNING

Intersectoral Balance

Energy vs. cultural memory.

Harmonizing national hydropower needs with historical preservation.



MINIMAL INTERVENTION & FUNCIONAL REACTIVATION

Smart conservation and the open sacred space

No Full Reconstruction

The ruins are deliberately preserved in their fragmentary state as an honest, tangible witness of history and identity.

Architectural Canopy (1998–2002)

A lightweight metal and wood canopy protects the exposed medieval dolomite walls from atmospheric rain and freeze-thaw cycles.

Open-Air Sanctuary Creation

A 10-meter metal cross and stone altar were erected directly upon the ancient foundations, establishing a new sacred focal point.

Spiritual Practice Continuity

Regular open-air church services, weddings, and annual Saint Meinhard pilgrimage feasts keep the site actively alive.





COMMEMORATION & CONTEMPORARY HERITAGE

Preserving memory in everyday life and culture

INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Spiritual & Community Life

Living liturgical continuity.

Regular open-air services, weddings, and confirmations on the island; annual August Saint Meinhard pilgrimages unite believers internationally.

SHORELINE MUSEUMS

Museums & Exhibitions

Curating pre-flooding history.

Ikšķile Cultural Heritage Centre and Ogre History Museum curate excavated artifacts, archival photographs, and scale models of the original valley.

PUBLIC LANDMARKS

Urban Memorials & Trails

Promenade interpretation signs.

Information stands and markers along the Ikšķile shoreline promenade and boat pier narrate the submerged river valley and island genesis.

FUNDING RESOUCES

Financial model and cross-sectoral governance

1970–1975

Initial Infrastructure

Hydropower budget.

Dike construction funded as an integral component of state HPP engineering works.

1998–2002

Multi-Source Funding

Civic & state synergy.

Financed by National Heritage Board, State Culture Capital Foundation, municipal budget, and church donations.

CAPITAL ALLOCATION

Capital Efficiency

Smart conservation.

Protective canopy prevented costly full restoration and unsustainable upkeep burdens.

COALITION

Cross-Sectoral Model

Multi-stakeholder alliance.

Active collaboration between municipality, state experts, parish, and power operators.



HOLISTIC APPROACH

Heritage, landscape and slow mobility

Water & Ruin Symbiosis

The monument lives in a dynamic visual relationship with the expansive water horizon of the Daugava basin.

Slow Mobility Paradigm

Island access is limited to non-motorized craft (rowboats, SUPs) or walking during annual reservoir drawdowns.

Spatial Planning Integration

Anchored in local municipal development plans as a protected destination for cultural tourism and pilgrimage.

Intangible Memory Revival

Preserving a quiet, contemplative historical atmosphere while firmly avoiding commercial degradation.



Added Value: Low-impact ecological accessibility builds deep public respect for natural and historical landscapes.

RELEVANCE FOR INTERNATIONAL ADAPTATION

Transferability potential and strategic relevance

CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Adaptation to Climate Risks

A proven protection template for historical sites situated within flood zones, reservoirs, or rising sea levels.

SPATIAL PLANNING

Integrated Regional Growth

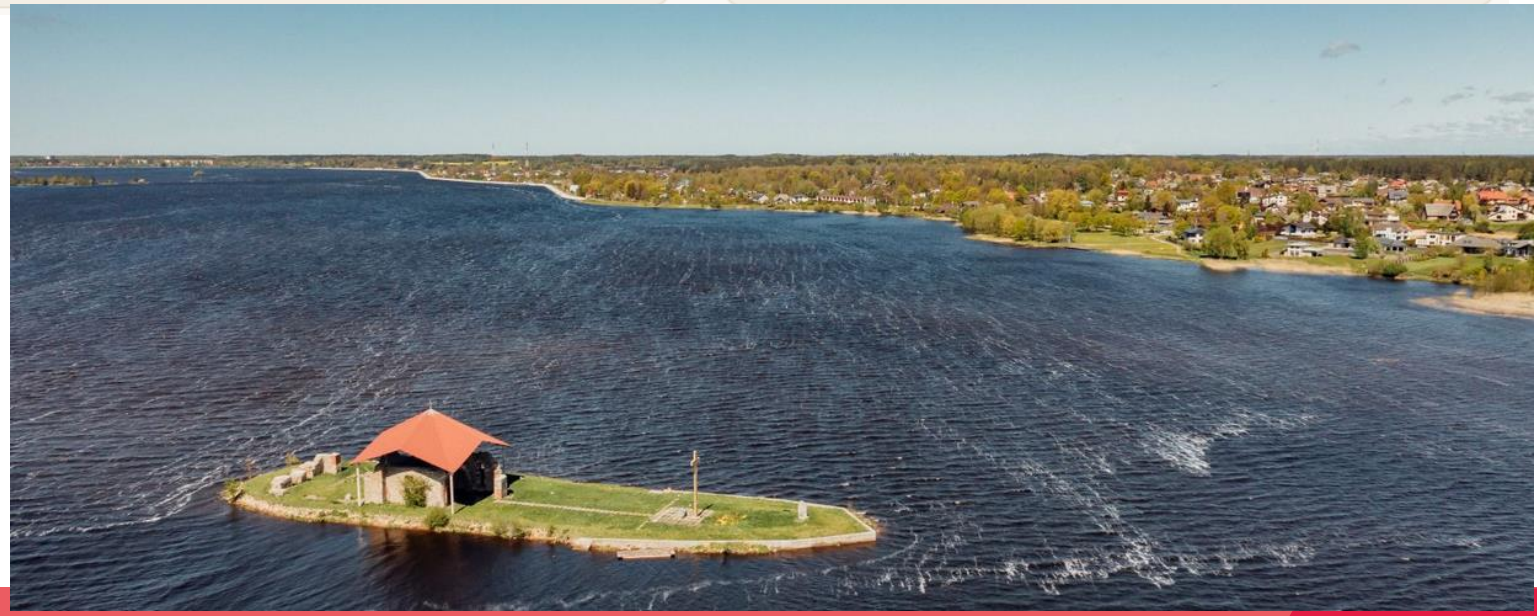
Seamless integration of cultural heritage within wider energy infrastructure and watershed development.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable Slow Tourism

Proactively advancing non-motorized, zero-emission accessibility across rural and aquatic cultural destinations.





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Thank You!

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