



Zilais kalns – Blue Hill in Latvia

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Introduction

Zilais kalns, Valmiera municipality, is the highest point of NW Vidzeme, Latvia. Geologically it has formed as the result of the movements of the glacier and under-ice streams. The top of Zilais kalns rises 127 m above the sea level. The relative height of the hill is 66 m, which is significant for the topography of Latvia. The hill is surrounded by boggy areas. Zilais kalns by itself is a block of hills, which extends ca. 1.6 km in W–E direction, and about 2 km in N–S direction. The top of the hill is plain. The northern side of the hill is very steep and 36 m high, whilst the other sides are gently sloping.

The Latvian name *Zilais kalns* means Blue Hill. Blue colour in place names is very often one of the marks to identify a place as holy, not only in Latvia, but also in many other parts of Northern Europe (Kursīte, 2008). The blue colour was associated with sky, holiness, nobleness, etc. In Baltic German literature Zilais kalns has been mentioned since the end of the eighteenth century (Börger, 1778; Hupel, 1782).

Folklore and written records on Zilais kalns

Several hundreds of folklore records about Zilais kalns have been collected

< Upurkalns (Offering Hill) on the top of Zilais kalns.

in the Archive of Folklore of Latvia. The main motifs in folklore are connected with the hill as an ancient holy place. Very often a holy spring was mentioned, which was used in folk medicine. When the spring dried up, the people continued to use the sand from the spot of the spring for healing. See folklore collections in German and Latvian languages (Balodis, 1909; Hunnius, 1912; Ancelāne, 1988; Ruberte, 1999) and numerous folklore reviews (Ašmanis, 1930; Cukurs, 1930; Cukurs, 1936; Meisters, 1971; etc.).

The Blue Hill as the unofficial cemetery of local peasants was mentioned in the seventeenth century written records. In this cemetery the local people have been buried without acceptance of the Church (Bregžis, 1931). This cemetery was situated on the top of the hill, where archaeological findings and human bones have been discovered since 1874 (Grewingk, 1876). In 1973, during trial archaeological excavations conducted in the place of forthcoming tower, 28 burials from sixteenth to seventeenth centuries were unearthed (Cimermane, 1974). There are written records of the seventeenth century mentioning the hill as a meeting place of witches (Straubergs, 1992). The same was evidenced also in folklore records (Šmits, 1937; Ruberte, 1999). It is quite possible that a Christian chapel or cross once stood on the hill (see Kurtz, 1924; Bregžis, 1931; Mannheim, 1936). This was the praxis for Christianising an ancient 'pagan' holy place throughout Europe. In folklore big and regular markets are described

close to Zilais kalns, which go back to medieval times or even earlier. Those markets were connected with orphans, who came to this holy place from very distant places. The rule was that the visitors of the market had to give donations to the orphans (Abbuls, 1921; Ruberte, 1991, etc.). Those folklore texts have been partly influenced by the so-called folk Christianity. Perhaps the existence of a medieval chapel on Zilais kalns has also provided basis for the existence of folk Christian tradition.

There are a lot of folklore records telling about several objects with sacral meaning, like *Upurkalns* (Offering Hill), *Svētavots* (Holy Spring), stones, trees, etc. on Zilais kalns. There are folklore records telling that the local people used mud from the bogs close to Zilais kalns for healing purposes (Ruberte, 1999). Unfortunately those places in the bogs have not been localised.

Part of folklore is connected with the stories about witches, who used Zilais kalns as an assembling place (Šmits, 1937, 263; Ancelāne, 1988, 102; Ancelāne, 1991; Ruberte, 1999; etc.). Perhaps it may not be a coincidence that in the 1960–1980s not far from Zilais kalns lived a woman who practiced healing and was famous all over Latvia. Her nickname was *Zilā kalna Marta* (Marta of Blue Hill). Her memory is living in present day folklore and also in literature (Zālītis, 2001; Plaudis, 2002; Plaudis, 2008; Plaudis, 2011), exhibitions and theatre performances.

Since the end of the nineteenth century Baltic German and Latvian investi-

gators in many publications have been accepting the general opinion that Zilais kalns is one of the holy places of ancient Latgalians with more central significance, the place for different folk assemblages, which dates back to the Late Iron Age, i.e. to the first centuries of II M AD (Olavs, 1892; Баллод, 1910; Balodis, 1911; Balodis, 1936; Adamovičs, 1937; Malvess, 1937; Balodis, Tentelis, 1938.; *Latvijas PSR arheoloģija*, 1974; Johansons, 1975; Urtāns, 1993.; *Latvijas senākā vēsture 9. g. t. pr. Kr. – 1200. g.*, 2001, 363; Skutāns, 2010, 14; etc.). Unfortunately this has not been proved by any archaeological or historical material. It is quite possible that the role and meaning of Zilais kalns was enlarged only in the nineteenth century, under the influence of romanticism literature, but in fact Zilais kalns was an important holy site only for the surrounding parishes (Laime, 2011, 14). Despite of that the magnificent hill Zilais kalns, which is dominating over the extended plain and its surroundings, has been discussed as a sacral landscape (Kursīte, 2001).

A national symbol

Zilais kalns has the role of a national symbol or even cliché. From the beginning of the nineteenth century Zilais kalns, as a direct and well-known symbol of freedom, was used in Latvian literature (see Jansons, 1972; Laime, 2011; etc.). Folklore about Zilais kalns has been collected not only in the vicinity of the hill, but all over Latvia, and



A map of Zilais kalns.

it usually reflects the ideas of national romanticists (Laime, 2011). On the basis of folklore, written records, records about the archaeological findings and results of archaeological excavation, Zilais kalns has been included in the list of Protected Archaeological Monuments of Latvia.

Zilais kalns as the ancient holy place has been widely accepted by Latvian people in all times. In Soviet time, during the 1950s, close to Zilais kalns, a Soviet village was built for the migrants used as a labour force in peat bogs, which degraded and diminished the significance of the holy place. The Latvian people justifiably felt that this was an action by Soviet regime to undermine the perception of the holy place. Later, at the end of 1990s, the authorities planned to build a big rubbish landfill close to Zilais kalns, but this project faced big protests from Latvian people and therefore was discarded (Jakovičs, 1999). Later on voices rose suggesting that Zilais kalns should be denominated a national holy place like famous Catholic basilica in Aglona (Dzērve, 2006).



The label on a liquor bottle.

Religious activities and conflicts

The first ideas about the significance of Zilais kalns as a holy place in renewed folk religion appeared already after World War I (Brašiņš, 1986). From the beginning of 1990s to the present, Zilais kalns has been increasingly used for the rituals of followers of old Latvian traditions, *dievturisms* or neo-pagans.

Unfortunately the religious activities have resulted in unauthorised moving of the Offering stone from its previous place, and erecting it in a new place. In addition, several stone structures, like stone circles and stone settings, have been built, and a number of stones have been unearthed from their original spots and gained a new visual image. This is what has caused a conflict between heritage protection au-

thorities and the followers of neo-pagan beliefs. This conflict exists also in the neighbouring countries of Lithuania and Estonia.

On the other hand, Zilais kalns as a popular place and symbol obtains also commercial value and the image of the old sacred hill has also been used on labels, names of companies, etc.

Natural heritage

Zilais kalns is also one of the first listed nature reserves of Latvia. The status of Zilais kalns as Nature Reserve was adopted on 14 November 1924, for an area of 85 ha. At the present the Nature Reserve covers 118 ha and has been declared a Natura 2000 site. It contains different forest types, including protected habitats defined in European Union Habitat Directive 92/43/EEC as Western taiga (9010) and *Tilio-Acerion* forests of slopes, screes and ravines (9118). Zilais kalns has been investigated geologically to establish the process of its geological development (Markots, Zelčs, 2005).

Zilais kalns is rich in biodiversity. There are records of a number of protected flora species of the Republic of Latvia, consisting of lycopsids (*Huperzia selago*, *Lycopodium clavatum*), mosses (*Anastrophyllum hellerianum*, *Geocalyx graveolens*, *Lejeunea cavifolia*, *Neckera pennata*), lichens (*Arthonia byssacea*, *Arthonia leucopellea*, *Arthonia spadicea*, *Arthonia vinosa*, *Chaenotheca chlorella*, *Lobaria pulmonaria*), and vascular plants (*Lathyrus niger*).

It is worth to mention that the richness and diversity of plant species is one of the significant marks of ancient holy places in Latvia. According to old folk songs and sayings, some of these plants were used in folk medicine. For example, in 1866 A. Bielenstein noted the great variety of plants and the great fertility on the other old sanctuary particularly on the hill Elku kalns (Idol Hill) in Central Latvia. The local farmers used the plants collected in Mid-summer as medicinal herbs. They considered the hill a natural pharmacy (Bielenstein, 1866). Scientific study has been made of the plants growing on Idol Hill and their medicinal value has been confirmed by botanical research (Ledus, 1938).

Management

From a management viewpoint, the nature reserve of Zilais kalns needed to limit the stream of the visitors, therefore at the foot of the hill a parking place for cars has been established. The parking place is provided with toilets and information signs. The landscape of Zilais kalns was partly destroyed by a concrete tower built in the 1970s as the watchtower for fire guarding. Recently, a project has been elaborated

to repair the tower, change its use for sightseeing and open it to the visitors.

Conclusions

Zilais kalns, an ancient holy place probably since prehistoric times, has become a national symbol, and a living and significant place in present day Latvia. Zilais kalns includes historical values, e.g. ancient traditions and archaeological sites; significant natural heritage values, e.g. geological features, rich and rare plant species and a beautiful landscape, as well as newly established and developing traditions, which are claimed to be related with the old pre-Christian religion. These values have been carefully studied and are fully acknowledged, and have prompted the government to adapt several legal norms for protecting the integrity of the holy hill, like Nature Reserve, Nature 2000 site. Some of the challenges for conserving the rich heritage of Zilais kalns in front of increasing visitor pressures have been solved by adequate management measures, but others, especially those related with ceremonial uses, pose new threats, ironically coming from emerging social attitudes related to the immemorial holiness of this site.

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Lobaria pulmonaria is one of the protected species in Latvia. >