

# LIVING ON A HILLFORT: SACRAL SITES AROUND DZIRKAĻI HILLFORT

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*I am a professional archaeologist working for more than 25 years in heritage protection and teaching in universities. In 1996, following the post-Soviet rules and using compensation certificates I bought Dzirkaļi Hillfort (Latvia) in a very far and woody countryside. After that I spent almost every weekend, especially in wintertime, at the hillfort cleaning bushes and trees and considering about the site. The hillfort has not been excavated before. While living at the hillfort it was interesting to notice the change of attitude of local people and the accumulation of knowledge about the site without excavation.*

*At the first stage, the local municipality was not interested in giving over the hillfort to somebody from the capital city. They argued that I was spending a lot of time abroad; therefore I would be able to sell the hillfort to some foreigner. Local legends tell that there are a lot of treasures hidden in the hillfort, and the intention of the new owner of the site would be to obtain these treasures. The hillfort is listed as the monument of culture, but only about 1/5 of local schoolchildren have visited it, although the school is situated only about 2 km from the site. Later the authorities of the local municipality and local people discovered for themselves that they have a really attractive site in their remote location.*

*Being at the hillfort for a long time in different seasons and in different times of the day made it possible to obtain new knowledge about the site and its vicinity without using any destroying methods, e.g., archaeological excavation. It was figured out that the defence system of the hillfort was complicated. Close to the hillfort there were detected the cult hill, an extended settlement, two cemeteries, a system of roads and paths, the site of a spring with drinkable water, etc.*

*The hillfort step by step is becoming a well-known site for local people, and at present it is involved in their everyday life. The knowledge obtained helps to introduce the site to the general public and visitors, also from beyond the local municipality.*

In 1996, following the post-Soviet law and using the so-called compensation certificates, the author bought Dzirkaļi Hillfort. Later some neighbouring territories also were added to the same property. The author spent a lot of time, especially in winter, at the hillfort removing bushes and trees and considering about the site. The hillfort has not been

excavated before, i.e. there was no information about the chronology and there was almost no information concerning the sacral sites or sacrality.

Being at the hillfort for a long time during different seasons and in different times of the day, and speaking with local people provided new knowledge about the site and its vicinity

without the use of any destroying methods, e.g., archaeological excavation. In the course of time, a lot of different archaeological features were discovered like a big settlement, ancient fields with stone heaps at the edges, a system of old roads or holloways and paths leading to the hillfort, burial sites, remains of earthen houses, etc. The author has been writing a diary about every visit to the hillfort. Excerpts from this diary have been published.<sup>1</sup> Also some other more general considerations about the hillfort and its vicinity, hillfort's folklore and its place and role in the existence of the wooden castle on the hillfort, which was later destroyed, have been published or waiting for it.<sup>2</sup>

DzirkaĶi Hillfort is located in Central Latvia, about 160 km eastwards from Riga, 1.5 km SW of Kūkas railway station at the railway route Riga — Rēzekne — Moscow.

The ancient fortification was established on a side-branch of the plateau, sharply facing a marshy lowland. Northern hillside, facing this lowland, is additionally fortified by a terrace. On the southern side where natural boundaries are not so pronounced, the hill is separated by a moat and a 1.5 m high rampart, the latter is separated from the plateau by another moat (Fig. 1, 2). Now the hill is overgrown with trees (Fig. 3). The earliest images from the beginning of the 1920s show the hillfort only with small bushes. People remember that before the First World War the plateau of the hillfort was used as a field, but meadows close to the hillfort were used for cutting grass and as pastures. During the last 100 years, the hillfort and its vicinity has totally overgrown with forest and bushes.

Archaeological excavations have been conducted on the hillfort. Finds — mainly pottery — in the black cultural layer allow concluding that the hillfort and probably settlement in general goes back to end of I millennium BC — beginning of the 2nd millennium AD.<sup>3</sup> The hillfort is quite well known, and the hillfort or the nearby Baznīcas kalns (a hill)

has been frequently described or mentioned in literature,<sup>4</sup> however, no broader assessment of the significance of DzirkaĶi Hillfort has been offered yet.

The article is devoted to the sacral places and sacral meanings of the local objects close to the hillfort or in its close vicinity. Old folklore or, more precisely, separate fragments of ancient folklore are still living in the memories of local people. One of the kinds of such folklore is the view that the whole hillfort is an ancient sacred site, inhabited by devils and, to confirm it, the lightning is said always to strike the hillfort. This fact is also connected with beliefs that great treasures have been buried in the hillfort. These beliefs are still confirmed by thresher hunter diggings on the hillfort and illegal use of metal detectors by unauthorised visitors. It is highly possible that during the existence of the castle on the hillfort, some sites might have been located there, which could be associated with sacrality or cult, but this can be detected only by archaeological excavations; folklore might have hardly retained such evidence. It should be noted that on nearby Asote Hillfort, which has been extensively archaeologically investigated, several formations have been found which were named by E. Šnore, leader of excavation, as offering sites.<sup>5</sup>

Next to the hillfort is a hill named Baznīcas kalns or Baznīckalns (Church Hill) (Fig. 1:2; Fig. 2:2; Fig. 3). This information about the place name was obtained on 28.08.1975 from Minna Kaļķis (b. 1909) living in the Pilskalni farmstead next to the hillfort. She had no explanation why the elevation bears this sacral name. A more widespread and more recent place name for this elevation is Trumuļa kalns, but this name is currently not understandable for people. *Trumulis* is a part of a threshing-machine or a device that was used in agricultural works up to the 1950s. It is quite possible that the Church Hill was used for placing of a threshing-machine during harvesting works.



Fig. 1. Dzirkāji Hillfort and its sites. 1 — Dzirkāji Hillfort; 2 — Baznīckalns (Church Hill); 3 — Site of Naudas avots (Money Spring)



Fig. 2. A bird-view of Dzirkāji Hillfort. 1 — Dzirkāji Hillfort; 2 — Baznīckalns; 3 — site of Naudas avots; 4 — site of the new spring; 5 — ancient burial mound





Fig. 3. *Baznīcalns* (in the foreground) and *Dzirkāļi Hillfort* (in the background)

In recent years, thanks to publications and conversations with local people, the place name Church Hill is being used again. Local legends testify that treasure had been buried there. Zenta Blūmentāle (b. 1927) from Priednieki told, on 29 June 2003, that during a school excursion, together with the teacher, they had dug and searched treasures, but had found nothing. A lot of such dug-up places were found in *Baznīcalns* at that time.<sup>6</sup> Another earlier folklore record of the 1920s (?) offers a hint that “there had been a castle of a knight — robber on the hillfort, but the king himself lived on this side on a smaller hill”.<sup>7</sup> It follows from the context of the legend that the king had lived on *Baznīcalns*.

Church Hill is an artificially unelaborated, loaf-shaped sandy hill overgrown with deciduous trees, situated immediately behind a

very narrow place quite close to the hillfort. It rises 19 metres above the nearby swamp; on other sides the hill is lower; it is the lowest (only 5 m) on the southern side. The top of the hill, which is approximately 15–20 m across, is slightly flat. It is about the same height as the hillfort, or even higher. The northern part of the hillfort plateau rises 16 m above the swamp; the southern part, where the moat is situated, is 22 m high, so at least a part of the hillfort plateau was quite well visible from Church Hill. No visible artificial elaboration has been made with exception of late pits for potato storage on the slopes and perhaps treasure hunter pits on the top of Church Hill. No cultural occupation can be detected. We can imagine that in ancient times the wooden buildings on the hillfort were very well visible from the Church Hill. This is one of the peculiarities of

Latvian hillforts, which is characteristic not only for Dzirkāļi Hillfort, when close to the hillfort there is another hill, which is higher than the hillfort. Sometimes those hills bear also some sacral meaning.

In Latvia there are a lot of examples, when the site next to the hillfort bears the place name in connection with some holiness, sacrality or mythology.<sup>8</sup> Those sites, like in Dzirkāļi can be attributed as an ancient cult place next to the dwelling site, i.e. hillfort. In many cases those sites are named as Church hills or Church sites, but there is no information about any Christian background of those sites. A well-known Church Hill with archaeologically fixed remains of offering pits dating back to 11–13<sup>th</sup> cent. without any evidence of the presence of a Christian church is situated close to Strazde Hillfort in the western part of Latvia.<sup>9</sup> It is highly possible that in the case of Dzirkāļi Hillfort there was a place for sacral purposes close to the hillfort. As a rule, in such places there is no cultural occupation and only folklore or even a place name like in Dzirkāļi records the sacral meaning of the site. It is worth noting that not far from Asote Hillfort, which is the nearest to Dzirkāļi Hillfort, there is also a place, called Baznīcas kalniņš (Church Hillock).<sup>10</sup>

Close to Dzirkāļi Hillfort, at the foot of the hillfort and Church Hill, there was a spring named Naudasavots (Money Spring) (Fig. 1:3; Fig. 2:3). The spring was associated with many folk tales about a sunken barrel with money and unsuccessful attempts of the local people to get this money. Retrieving of this money is connected with the mythological beliefs of offering a white bull.

The people from neighbouring homestead Pilskalni (Hillfort), who have no well in their property, used the spring as a well up to the 1960s. Then forest draining took place close to the hillfort and Money Spring ceased to exist as a spring. The place where the Money Spring used to be is known, and possibly in the future there will be a good chance to

carry out archaeological excavation. Notably, the cultural occupation is also found close to the previous spring place, which means that the spring was situated between or close to the settlement buildings.

This is one of the numerous characteristic legends about Dzirkāļi Money Spring, which was recorded as early as in the 1920s:

“Nearby the hillfort there is a spring, around which a white bull was led, so that money would rise. The bull was led around once, and nothing followed. When the bull was led for the second time, wolves appeared. When the bull was led for the third time, they tried to take the bull. The bull was not given, and money fell back into the spring. A hoop fell off the barrel. The bull had been borrowed from Ķunci.”<sup>11</sup>

Some other legends stress the name of the spring Naudasavots and the white colour of the bull — nothing happened when a bull with three black hairs in its nostril was led around the spring, so the bull was not entirely white.<sup>12</sup>

These are folktales, or their fragments, that the local people keep in their minds up to the present. Yet other legends have been told about the spring, which testifies to the valence of this place to attract folklore. Thus, Minna Kaļķis (b. 1909) told that sometimes a whirlwind spins at the spring. Astrīda Straume (b. 1939), her daughter, in July 2003, told that before the Second World War her grandmother had seen a small pig going to the spring on the Christmas Eve. She had followed the pig, but it had disappeared near the spring, and then she figured out that the pig was not a real animal, but a ghost leading her to the spring.

Natural springs as a source of good drinking water were essential for the living community of every place. In Dzirkāļi case the spring was situated close to the hillfort and settlement, and the people used the water every day. Thus, the importance of the spring survived in folktales and obtained also some sacral aspects — for example, the money,

which belongs to the chthonic world, wolves as the dogs of God taking the bull as the offering, the role of the white colour of the bull, etc. The characteristic name and legends involving money, symbolism of colours, and the bull as an animal of sacrifice are significant in ancient beliefs and views.<sup>13</sup> It is possible to consider that the spring that was used by many people for a long time was specially elaborated for taking water. The remains of elaboration like wooden constructions might give background to the folklore of a wooden barrel or chest in the spring.

The situation as it is in Dzirkāļi when next to the hillfort there is a spring associated with beliefs concerning money, is not unique in Latvia. Now at least seven hillforts with a Money Spring or a Money Pond close to the hillfort are known in Latvia.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting that after the Money Spring had been exhausted the people from the local farm started to use another spring in a different place, but also close to the hillfort (Fig. 2:4). About 30 years ago, the new place of this spring was elaborated as a well. In more recent times, legends about ghosts haunting this place have been told. It should be noted that this place is situated next to the cultural layer marking the hillfort settlement.

Fifteen years ago, there was no information about possible burial places close to the hillfort. In the course of time, narratives were obtained about a burial ground not far from the hillfort to the west of the hillfort. Latter two burial mounds were discovered to the east from the hillfort (Fig. 2:5). In one case this was clarified by the local narratives about this place as ancient burial place. Archaeological excavation showed that the mound was not used as an ordinary burial place, but the artificial origin of the construction is out of doubt.<sup>15</sup> Both burial mounds are situated not far, but at the same time not very close to the hillfort, on the relief elevations. From those points when the territory was not overgrown with forest, the hillfort with the wooden castle

was quite well visible. In both cases the burial mounds are situated close to the ancient roads leading to the hillfort. Possibly here we face the tradition of mythical guards at the road leading to the hillfort. Human remains found close to the entrances of the hillforts or in essential places of defence buildings of the hillfort are known also in other hillforts of Latvia.<sup>16</sup> It is worth mentioning that opposite to the entrance of Dzirkāļi Hillfort there is an artificial formation which judging by its outer shape is similar to the burial mound. This site has not been excavated and we do not know its real meaning with regard to the hillfort.

Not very far from the Dzirkāļi Hillfort a natural boulder stone *Velna akmens* (Devil's Stone) (2.0 × 1.4–1.5 × 0.6–0.8 m) is situated, although the connection of this stone with the hillfort is uncertain. The situation when stones with mythological place names and associated legends are situated not far from archaeological sites is well known not only in Dzirkāļi. As a rule, the sites connected with Devil's names are situated in swampy areas. In our case this was the case, because before the drainage Devil's Stone was situated in a swampy valley.

Another mythical stone connected with legends about Devil, according to folklore, is situated in Lake Baļotes,<sup>17</sup> but this place is within the distance of 2 km to the north-west from the hillfort. Next possible sacral place which also probably is not directly connected with the hillfort is the village Dieviņi (God's village) which is situated about 3.5 km to north-east from the hillfort. In the 1970s, the local people of Dieviņi were able to show the stone heap and oak trees, where the offering once took place, but at present nobody knows, where this place is situated.

Living at the hillfort allows the author obtaining new information concerning ancient dwellings including also information about the sacral and mythological role of some sites and the later attitude of the local people to the Dzirkāļi Hillfort and its vicinity.

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## DZĪVOJOT PILSKALNĀ: SAKRĀLĀS VIETAS PIE DZIRKAĻU PILSKALNA

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### Kopsavilkums

Raksta autors ir profesionāls arheologs, kas 25 gadus darbojies kultūrvēsturiskā mantojuma aizsardzības jomā un bijis augstskolu pasniedzējs. 1996. gadā, atbilstoši pēcpadomju laika likumiem un izmantojot kompensācijas sertifikātus, viņš tālā un mežainā apvidū iegādājās Dzirkaļu pilskalnu. Pēc pilskalna iegādes autors gandrīz visas brīvdienas, sevišķi ziemā, pavadīja pilskalnā, attīrot to no krūmiem un kokiem un domājot par pilskalnu. Pilskalnā iepriekš izrakumi nebija veikti. Dzīvojot pilskalnā, bija interesanti vērot to, kā mainījās vietējo iedzīvotāju attieksme, un tika uzkrātas zināšanas par pilskalnu pat bez izrakumu izdarīšanas.

Sākumā vietējā pašvaldība nevēlējās atdot pilskalnu kādam no galvaspilsētas. Viņi domāja, ka autors daudz laika pavada ārvalstīs, tāpēc viņam ir iespēja pārdot pilskalnu kādam ārzemniekam. Vietējās leģendās apgalvots, ka pilskalnā esot apslēpts liels daudzums dārgumu, un jaunā īpašnieka mērķis varēja būt šos dārgumus iegūt. Pilskalns ir novērtēts kā kultūras piemineklis, tomēr tikai apmēram viena piektdaļa vietējo skolēnu jebkad to ir apmeklējuši, kaut gan skola atrodas divus kilometrus no pieminekļa. Vēlāk vietējās pašvaldības amatpersonas saprata, ka pilskalns ir pievilcīga vieta viņu apkaimē.

Atrašanās pilskalnā ilgu laiku un dažādos gadalaikos, dažādās diennakts stundās dod iespēju iegūt zināšanas par pilskalna vietu un tā apkārtni, iztiekot bez jebkādu postošu metožu izmantošanas, tostarp, neizmantojot arheoloģiskos izrakumus. Novērojumi liecina, ka pilskalna aizsardzības sistēma ir bijusi visai sarežģīta. Pilskalna tuvumā apzināts kulta kalns, apmetne, divas apbedījumu vietas, ceļu un taku sistēma, teiku avots ar dzeramo ūdeni u.c.

Pakāpeniski pilskalns kļūst par vietējiem iedzīvotājiem pazīstamu vietu un jau tagad ir iesaistīts viņu ikdienā. Iegūtās zināšanas noder, iepazīstinot ar pilskalnu vietējos iedzīvotājus un apmeklētājus, arī viesus no citurienes.