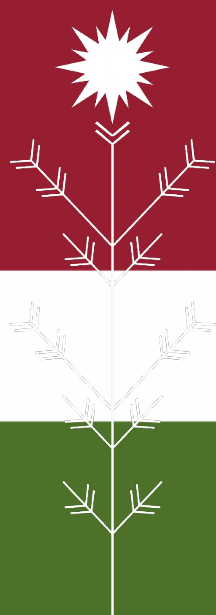


Summary of the Study

# SELONIA



## THE BEGINNING IS TODAY

**Interreg**



Co-funded by  
the European Union

**Latvia – Lithuania**



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## General Description

Selonia is a historical land nestled in south-eastern Latvia, bordered by Lithuania to the south and Belarus to the east. The region's administrative boundaries were officially defined for the first time in the 2021 Law on Latvian Historical Lands. Throughout its history, Selonia's development was profoundly shaped by the Daugava River, which served as a vital trade artery, and by dynamic cooperation with Lithuania. The region has been the homeland of numerous prominent figures in Latvian culture. As a historical land of Latvia, Selonia had its own coat of arms and flag approved in 2023.

The name "Selonia" derives from the ancient Baltic tribe known as the Selonians (*sēļi*), who from the 5<sup>th</sup> century inhabited not only the lands now called Selonia but also the basin of the Aiviekste River and parts of northern Lithuania. Historically, Selonia was also known as Upper Land (*Augšzeme*), Upper Courland (*Augškurzeme*), or the "Eastern Crown of Semigallia".

In terms of present-day administrative divisions, Selonia spans four municipalities: Aizkraukle, Jēkabpils, Augšdaugava, and Krāslava Municipalities on the left bank of the Daugava River. The region encompasses parts of four larger cities: Aizkraukle, Jēkabpils, Daugavpils, and Krāslava on the Daugava's left bank, as well as five smaller towns: Aknīste, Ilūkste, Jaunjelgava, Subate, and Viesīte. Jēkabpils serves as Selonia's most significant state city and functions as an important road and railway hub. Historically prominent are also two former county centres – Ilūkste and Jaunjelgava.

Aknīste and Viesīte formerly functioned as local centres of trade and transport. Across all of Selonia's smaller towns, visitors can still find preserved wooden architecture and at least a few cobbled streets dating back centuries. The portion of the state city of Daugavpils located within Selonia encompasses the historical town of Grīva, which served as the former centre of the Grīva district. Nereta, the former centre of the Nereta district that was later reclassified as a municipality, also remains a regional focal point.

As of early 2025, approximately 61,000 inhabitants live within the historic lands of Selonia.

Selonia's landscape and terrain have fundamentally shaped the region's settlement patterns. As the glacier of the last Ice Age retreated, the land folded into small hills, leaving raised bogs, tiny lakes, and winding streams in the lower areas. The fertile and easily cultivable land became highly fragmented. This natural terrain discouraged the formation of large agricultural areas and protected Selonia from the landscape transformations of agricultural industrialisation.

Historically, Selonia developed clusters of isolated farmsteads known as *skrajciemi* – sparse settlements that are not yet villages, not quite hamlets. These gatherings of farmsteads are locally known as “islands”. Human islands in the midst of nature – that is the quintessential, near-sacred image of the Selonian land.

The south-eastern edge of Selonia has long served as a confluence of Latvian, Lithuanian, and Belarusian cultures. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, marked by wars and sweeping societal shifts, the region welcomed waves of Russian Old Believers and Jewish settlers. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Orthodox Russians had also taken root in the area. Before the outbreak of the Second World War, the north-western part of Selonia was predominantly inhabited by ethnic Latvians. Meanwhile, parishes along the Lithuanian and Polish borders were home to a diverse population that included Belarusians, Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Jews. However, the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Soviet occupation dramatically reshaped Selonia's ethnic composition. The Holocaust tragically erased the Jewish minority from Selonia, while deportations and emigrations significantly reduced the proportion of ethnic Latvians.

Today, Selonia's population is a mosaic of ethnicities and faiths. Latvians form the majority in the western and central areas. Yet, east of Ilūkste, the demographic is vividly multi-ethnic. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a sizeable community of Russian Old Believers has resided here, and several parishes also count large numbers of Polish descendants among their residents. Lithuanians, too, reside along the Latvian-Lithuanian border.

Following the restoration of Latvia's independence, agriculture and forestry have remained the cornerstones of Selonia's economy, complemented by a growing focus on services and tourism. Still, large enterprises capable of sustaining substantial employment remain sparse. A renewed wave of development stirred in 2021, when Selonia was officially recognised as a historical land.

A vital catalyst for regional cohesion is the Community Cooperation Network *Islands of Selonia*, a unifying force that brings together the small towns, rural communities, and most dynamic NGOs within the historical land. This cooperation network strives to elevate Selonia's visibility, enhance local identity, and improve the quality of life in rural areas.

A central pillar of Selonia's patriotic spirit is the ongoing tradition of the Selonia Congresses, inaugurated in 1999 on the initiative of academician Jānis Stradiņš. The 11<sup>th</sup> Congress of Selonia was held in the town of Viesīte in 2024. Equally significant is the regional folk arts festival *Selonia Adorns (Sēlija rotā)*. In 2024, this festival was held for the ninth time, thanks to collaboration among Selonia's municipalities.

## Nature and Landscape

The borders of the historical land of Selonia are shaped both by natural geographical features – such as the Daugava River and Selonia Ridge – and by the national frontiers with Lithuania and Belarus. The border between Selonia and Semigallia, however, is more symbolic than strict. According to the maps appended to the Law on Latvian Historical Lands, Selonia's border begins at a notable bend in the Mēmele River where the Latvian-Lithuanian border stream sharply turns southwest. From there, it follows the current border of Aizkraukle Municipality, stretching across the Taurkalne Plain towards the Daugava River, reaching it near Jaunjelgava.

Selonia's landscape remains unspoiled by industrialisation or large-scale agriculture. What is often viewed as the region's greatest hardship – its poor road infrastructure, which hinders economic development – has helped preserve its natural charm. One rarely encounters straight roads, motorways, overpasses, or barriers here. People move naturally – like water, like blood, like air flowing between hills and groves. This synergy between people and nature is a priceless treasure that many in Selonia truly recognise and value. In Selonia, you must drive slowly; in bad weather, some rural roads become nearly impassable. But in return, every stretch of road offers a scenic, varied, and engaging view.

Scattered farmsteads, sparse settlements, and tiny villages are nestled among the soft curves of Selonia Ridge, alongside little meandering streams with amber-brown waters filtered through sphagnum moss. Bogs, forests, meadows, and wild animals are just as essential to Selonia as its people. Nature here is still treated with reverence and deep

respect. The forest, bog, meadow, and lake are regarded as true temples – places to be alone with oneself and contemplate the order of things.

The roads that connect the “islands” of Selonia are among the most beautiful and picturesque in Latvia. Each year, during the nationwide Home Café Days event, Selonia invites visitors to experience its scenery by travelling the small white roads that wind between hills carved by the last great glacier.

Selonians treat nature with reverence – not as something to be consumed, but as a partner. It is an immense resource for mental well-being and regional appeal – one that can be used for tourism and entrepreneurship, whilst, most importantly, serving as a wellspring of strength, identity, lifestyle, and harmony.

In 2024, the Community Cooperation Network *Islands of Selonia* produced a 45-minute meditative film as part of a LEADER project funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The film takes viewers along Selonia’s small roads through all four seasons, showcasing not only the beauty of nature but also its varied hidden values – those that cannot be seen from the road or noticed at first glance. The rivers Daugava and Dienvidsusēja are also revealed as symbolic roads within the film. The video is available for public viewing on YouTube on the *Sēlijas salas* channel under the title *Sēlijas ceļi* (The Roads of Selonia).

Selonia’s crown jewel lies in its rich biodiversity – its wide variety of animal and plant species, diverse habitats, and varied landscapes, all coexisting with people living simply in an environment still untouched by industrialisation. Although solar and wind farms are gradually making their way into the region, there is hope that a balance will continue to be maintained – where the benefits of bioenergy and bioeconomy do not come at the cost of a healthy, thriving space for plants, animals, clean waters, and contented human life.

Latvia’s most scenic route is particularly picturesque, running from Jaunjelgava to Jēkabpils and continuing further along the Daugava River to Dviete. From the Jaunjelgava promenade and the Jēkabpils dam, wide panoramic views open up across the river to the opposite bank.

For boating enthusiasts, Selonia recommends enjoying the smaller rivers such as the Mēmele and the Dienvidsusēja. In spring, during the flood season, the Dviete floodplain provides a truly unique boating experience. After snowy winters, the small Dviete River

can overflow, flooding a vast area. Tourists often refer to this phenomenon as the “Sea of Selonia”, though locals know it as *atbūda* (freshet). The highest spring water levels are typically observed in years when the Daugava basin holds a large snow mass that melts rapidly in spring, or when ice blockages form near Glaudāni Island on the Daugava River. As the Daugava’s floodwaters enter the ancient Dviete valley, water levels in the Dviete River rise quickly, flooding not only the valley but also its surroundings. During extreme flooding, water levels in the lower Dviete can rise over six metres above the winter norm.

A particularly unique natural site worthy of attention is the Korkuļi Swallets, Latvia’s largest river water sink system observable in nature. Within a 650-metre section of an ancient valley, at least ten sinkholes can be seen, where, due to geological processes, the river disappears underground and continues as a dry riverbed. The sunken waters of the Korkuļi stream resurface at eight locations in the Lauce Valley, more than 550 metres away. The elevation difference between the Korkuļi and the Lauce is 25 metres, with waters filtering through fissured dolomite layers. The Korkuļi Swallets are located just ten kilometres from Jaunjelgava, in Sērene Parish.

Lakes Klaucāni and Priekulāni in Kalna Parish, Jēkabpils Municipality, are home to the floating water caltrop, one of Latvia’s rarest plant species, found in only four lakes. It is a relic from the Atlantic climate period, surviving from warmer times. In the Middle Ages and earlier, its “nuts” were ground into flour for bread-making. The plant is listed in Category 1 of the Red Data Book of Latvia, and it is strictly forbidden to pick it. The area is designated as a nature reserve with special protection regulations.

The Dviete floodplain is worth visiting not only during the freshet season. Dviete Floodplain Nature Park is one of the largest and best-preserved examples of natural river floodplain habitats in Latvia and Europe. It holds global significance as a resting and breeding ground for migratory birds, earning it designation as an Important Bird Area. The park includes birdwatching towers and rare, little-altered floodplain meadow habitats. A total of twelve specially protected plant and animal species have been recorded in the area.

Selonia is also home to three points of the Struve Geodetic Arc: Jēkabpils in Jēkabpils City, Bristene in Sece Parish, and Dabors-kalns in Sēlpils Parish. Near Dabors-kalns is a 28-metre-high observation tower built on Taborkalns Hill, which rises to 157.8 metres above sea level. From the tower, one can enjoy sweeping views of the typical Selonian landscape.

For the attentive traveller, the numerous hillforts of Selonia are striking and distinctive features in the landscape. Under the guidance of archaeologist Juris Urtāns, twelve hillforts have been identified stretching across Selonia Ridge from Sēlpils in the north to the Lithuanian border in the south, marking ancient trade and military routes. The Latvian Hillforts Map on [www.latvijas-pilskalni.lv](http://www.latvijas-pilskalni.lv) also highlights other ancient sites, which are testimonies of the ancient Selonian tribe: the Lejasdopeli burial ground in Staburags Parish, early and middle Iron Age burials in Slaten Pine Forest, Rubene Parish, and more. Much still remains to be researched and documented. Even today, when ploughing fields, fragments of bronze jewellery, pottery shards, and ancient burial remains are occasionally unearthed.

A worthy destination is Sauka Nature Park, home to Ormankalns – the highest peak of Selonia Ridge and part of the European network of protected natural areas. In southern Selonia, visitors will also find the Daugava Meanders, the Dviete Floodplain, Medumi Lake Nature Park, Silene and Svente Nature Parks, as well as the Augšzeme and Augšdaugava protected landscape areas. The symbolic Sunflower marker, indicating Latvia's southernmost point, is located near the Demene border control post.

## Craftsmanship and Skills

Selonia boasts strong and still actively preserved traditions of craftsmanship. Much of the role of traditional crafts in daily life is shaped by the region's historical settlement pattern that remains widespread today: scattered farmsteads and clusters of farmsteads, sparse settlements ("islands"), villages, and small towns.

The prestige of craftsmanship in Selonia stems from a long-standing value system that places more importance on what you know rather than what you own. This mindset was shaped over generations by repeated shifts in political regimes, deportations, and the repression of the more affluent members of society. In such times, a prosperous landowner could lose all material possessions overnight, yet no regime could ever strip away a person's knowledge or skills. A skilled person can survive in any era.

Selonian artisans are proud of their high-quality standards, aesthetic and design excellence, product diversity, and the depth of their technological expertise. Craftsmanship in Selonia stands on three main pillars:



- **Quality.** There is a clear distinction between a hobby and professional craftsmanship. A true artisan is a master of their trade, usually with at least a vocational education background. They have mastered their craft's techniques, studied materials science, and have a foundation in art history and visual arts.
- **Functionality.** It is not considered good form to keep useless items at home – everything should have a purpose and be practical. Whether it is tools, household items, crockery, clothing, or furniture – every traditional handcrafted item must first and foremost be functional. If an object is both beautiful and functional, it will find a buyer, and it is worth producing.
- **Preservation and transformation of cultural heritage.** Craftsmanship tells the story of who we are, reflecting our culture and history. Very few artisans create works that do not include some element of cultural heritage. This may manifest in the artisan's own life story – perhaps their craft has been passed down through generations; in their techniques – some stages of production are based on traditional knowledge; in design – through the choice of colours, forms, patterns, or functions; or in the item's marketing – through legends, naming, or visual presentation. Whether knowingly or not, craftspeople have taken on the role of cultural and historical mediators across time.

In Selonia, visitors and craft enthusiasts can explore four very different ceramic workshops: Ināra and Guntis Ozoliņš's workshop in Daudzeva, Zanda Ragele's workshop in Nereta, Mareks Zavodnijs' workshop in Bebrene, and Anda Svarāne and Ieva Svarāne's workshop in Zasa.

Results of research into craftsmanship and traditional skills – and in some cases, live demonstrations – can be found at the Selonian Crafts Centre Rūme and the Selonian Cultural Space in Zasa, as well as at the Open-Air Museum Selonian Farmstead (*Sēļu sēta*) in Jēkabpils, specifically at the Crafts House.

## The Artisan and the Community

In nearly every community in Selonia, there lives an artisan or a family whose lifestyle revolves around craftsmanship. These individuals are often idea-generators or informal leaders with significant influence on community life. In Selonia, artisans remain highly respected, and craftsmanship as a whole holds a level of prestige high enough to be



considered one of the defining elements of regional identity – keeping the thread of tradition and intergenerational connection tightly woven.

Handicrafters and artisans come together in interest groups, modernising the age-old tradition of evening gatherings in ways suited to contemporary life. These groups often evolve into associations, driven by the need for appropriate shared spaces and equipment, as well as the desire to document their skills, study local ornamentation and ethnography, and foster connections between generations. New networks emerge, linking artisans, like-minded individuals, researchers, and other active communities.

In many places across Selonia, communities engage in economic activity by selling by selling their handicrafts and handmade products at mobile travelling markets and on-site venues, welcoming visitors and experience-sharing groups.

Among those communities that vividly illustrate the positive impact of craftsmanship and artisans on modern social interaction are: Kaldabruņa Community with the Ūdenszīmes Association, Dunava Community with the Dzīves prasme Association, Bebrene Community with the Māra Knitting Studio, and Leimaņi Community with its Crafts House Rūķīši.

## Community-Based Tourism and Associations

Selonia's relatively poor road infrastructure and the absence of large cities have historically hindered the development of the tourism sector, pushing locals to seek non-traditional approaches to attract visitors to the region. There is still a lack of accommodation and food services, and no major tourism infrastructure “magnets” have been created. These would be crucial for generating sufficient tourist flow, allowing accommodation and catering businesses to predict more stable incomes. This results in a vicious cycle: no demand means no supply, and vice versa.

However, thanks to several successful, community-led projects, Selonia has developed an innovative model that sustains a certain level of tourism: Community-Based Tourism. The definition of Community-Based Tourism is: “A form of rural tourism whose main goal is to enhance the vitality of a place, the self-esteem of its people, and the attractiveness of the region”.

While working to establish and implement the Community-Based Tourism model, it became clear that what matters more than the service level of the tourism product and the revenue it generates is the unity of the local community, the development of place identity and recognition, and personal connection – both to the place and to the guests. In Selonia's historical land, tourism manifests as a tool for shaping the land itself, built on these principles:

- by telling others about our land, we come to know it better;
- by shaping our land, we understand it more deeply;
- by showing our land, we discover its hidden details;
- by collaborating with the people of our land, we awaken its vitality;
- by welcoming guests and taking pride in our achievements, we enhance its appeal.

Many local associations in Selonia are actively engaged in preserving, sustaining, and promoting traditional lifestyles and crafts. It is common for a single association to bring together local history enthusiasts, culinary heritage guardians, handicrafters, artisans, small-scale producers, musicians, and decorators. These associations serve as multifunctional community hubs, capable of creating and maintaining community tourism products and offering services that help generate income to support the association and community-led initiatives.

Some prominent examples of Community-Based Tourism that highlight Selonia's people and lifestyle include the Saules aka Association in Sunākste, the Ērbergietes Association in Mazzalve, the Ūdenszīmes Association in Kaldabruņa, the Sēlijas laivas Association in Aknīste, and the Dvietes vīnogas Association in Dviete.

These associations offer exceptional, personalised experiences tailored to visitors' interests. Their programmes often include guided tours, lectures, storytelling, creative workshops, and meals – giving guests the feeling of being truly welcomed visitors, not just tourists.

## Traditional Homesteads and Architecture

Selonia has long been shaped by the historical migration of diverse ethnic groups, which has left a visible imprint on all aspects of economic and cultural life. Over time, various parts of Selonia have belonged to different administrative and territorial entities: the Duchy

of Courland, the Courland Governorate, Polish Livonia (Inflanty Voivodeship), the Vitebsk Governorate, Swedish Vidzeme, and the Governorate of Livonia.

As a result, farming methods, homestead layouts, architectural styles, kitchen gardens, interior design, and household customs today still differ noticeably between the north-western and south-eastern parts of Selonia. The landscape, terrain, and soil fertility also play a role in shaping how people live in harmony with nature. Even today, the ethnic diversity is clearly felt – for example, in communities with a high proportion of Slavic residents, one can see distinct differences in homestead organisation, village layouts, and architectural style compared to those in central or north-western Selonia.

Over the last 20 years, the expansion of large-scale farming has led to large farms purchasing arable land “right to the doorstep”. This development has altered both the traditional landscape and its architectural character, while also indirectly hampering remigration, making it harder for people to return or relocate from urban areas or villages to rural homesteads. Nevertheless, Selonia remains a land of isolated farmsteads and clusters of such farmsteads (sparse settlements or “islands”), preserving a unique settlement model that is rare in today’s urbanised and industrialised Europe.

What is considered a “traditional” Selonian rural homestead today reflects cultural landscape and lifestyle features from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, similar to how the concept of a “national costume” is also associated with that historical period.

A specific architectural heritage worthy of attention is Selonia’s traditional roadside inns (*krogi*), which in recent years have become the focus of detailed research by the [historia.lv](http://historia.lv) team. These inns provide insights not only into architecture but also into social customs and the movement of people for trade, administrative purposes, and maintaining family ties, revealing the natural flow of human activity throughout different periods. Thanks to the efforts of local cultural history enthusiasts, both existing inns and the locations of former ones have now been identified and are being mapped and documented.

While most old inn buildings have since been repurposed as residential or amenity buildings, a unique and worthwhile place to visit is Gricgale (Medņi) Inn in Pilskalne Parish, near Nereta. This establishment has been carefully preserved by the local community to be as authentic as possible to this day and is open for both public and community events.

Ethnographer Saulvedis Cimermanis describes the region as follows: “Selonia (or Augšzeme), as the homeland of the ancient Selonians and their descendants, has long been under the influence of the Latgalians, Lithuanians, Semigallians, and their successors. Culturally, it remains a transitional zone between Central/Western Latvia and Eastern Latvia. The western part of Augšzeme is culturally closer to Semigallia and Vidzeme, while the eastern part is closer to Latgale. Over the last thousand years, particularly in the east, the region has also been strongly influenced by Belarusian, Russian, and Polish cultures, which is still evident in all areas of local life.”

In western Selonia (Augšzeme), homesteads were constructed with harmonious proportions, layouts suited to their functions, and well-thought-out, carefully crafted structures. The central building was typically the residential house, sometimes with a chimney, around which the outbuildings were arranged along the sides of a rectangular courtyard. More fire-prone structures like threshing barns were placed farther away from other buildings. The yard and sometimes its sections were enclosed with upright timber fencing. Along the roads, fences of various kinds, including post-and-rail types, were built. Some buildings along the courtyard edge also served a fencing function, with their rear walls aligned with the adjoining fencing. Entrance to the yard was through tall, wide double gates: a broad, likely double-leafed section for vehicles, and a narrower, single-leaf gate for pedestrians. The tall gateposts often featured decorative braces, supporting a crossbeam, above which a small gate-roof was mounted.

There are only a few remaining traditional rural homesteads in Selonia today that are both inhabited and accessible to the public. Most surviving examples date from the early or mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. However, efforts are underway to preserve this heritage. A Selonian homestead is currently being recreated at the Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum in Rīga – the first of its kind. Meanwhile, visitors to Jēkabpils can explore the Open-Air Museum Selonian Farmstead (*Sēļu sēta*), an open-air section of the Jēkabpils History Museum.

The Selonian Farmstead features six 19<sup>th</sup>-century rural buildings from Augšzeme: a residential house, a granary, a small barn, a smithy, a windmill, and a bathhouse, as well as an exhibition of 19<sup>th</sup>-century tools and household items representing the daily life of a moderately wealthy farmer from the region. The first structure to be moved to the Selonian Farmstead site was a barn from Skārdupes in the Aknīste area in 1952, with the others

added between 1953 and 1958. Since 2022, the Selonian Farmstead has also featured a Crafts House, equipped with workshop spaces and an introductory exhibition about Selonia and its traditional crafts.

## Cuisine

The influence of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions remains strongly felt in Selonia. The natural human desire for variety, combined with increased access to information and freedom of movement, opens unlimited opportunities for influence from neighbours in all aspects of life. This mixture makes it difficult to draw strict boundaries between what is “Selonian” and what is not – including in the culinary realm.

Visitors to Selonia – tourists, groups coming for exchange visits, and educational tour participants – are often curious about traditional Selonian dishes. In south-eastern Selonia, it remains common to celebrate Shrovetide (*Metēņi*) with Slavic-style dishes like stuffed pastries and a wide variety of pancakes. However, in central and north-western Selonia, these white flour-based dishes are less favoured. Variations of Lithuanian potato dumplings (*cepelinai*) are popular in the central part of the region. A stuffed potato pie known as *gulbešņīki* is served in various styles during Latvia’s annual Home Café Days also in the south-east of Selonia and along the Lithuanian border. The beet greens soup with smoked bacon and a boiled egg, called *batviņi*, is often cited as a traditional Selonian food, although the name itself suggests close ties to Slavic culinary traditions. Other notable dishes include: *knapsieriņi* – small salty curd cheese balls dried in a well-ventilated place; *zirņu pikas* – pea patties; plain potato dumplings served with bacon, onions, and sour cream sauce; potato sausage and blood sausage; stuffed pork stomach; *karašiņas* – rye flour flatbreads; *kuģelis* – a baked potato pie with bacon, and its simpler, meatless version, *bāba*. These foods are found not only in Selonia but also throughout Latvia, Lithuania, and neighbouring regions.

What makes a dish truly Selonian today is the person who prepares it, the place where it is served, the way it is presented, and the story behind it, including interaction with the hosts. Notably, public catering remains underdeveloped in Selonia, due more to administrative and infrastructural challenges than people’s reluctance. However, on special occasions, it is possible to enjoy more than just traditional food. Events like the previously mentioned Home Café Days or a pre-arranged visit with a request for a tasting will allow guests to get to know the cuisine, the farmstead, and the hosts all at once. Hosts may invite guests to

participate in the cooking, explore herb gardens, offer homemade herbal tea blends or honey, and share apples, flower seedlings, or other delightful surprises.

A culinary heritage journey through Selonian offers visitors the chance to savour authentic traditional flavours. In Pilskalne Parish, Aizkraukle Municipality, Gricgale (Medņi) Inn and Pilskalne Manor invite guests to experience the richness of the Selonian cuisine. At Gricgale Inn, guests can taste traditional *batviņi* soup made with beet greens, cheese made by hand using ancient methods, potato pancakes, *kuģelis* (a potato pie), and *bukstiņputra* (a barley and potato porridge). The true speciality, however, is yeast pancakes baked outdoors on a wood-fired stove, offering a taste as rustic as it is delightful. Pilskalne Manor is equally inviting, known for the delicious meals prepared by hostess Irma Tomsone and the entertaining storytelling performances of her husband, Valdis Tomsons.

In Sēlpils Parish, visitors can explore the traditional cuisine in the authentic setting of the Boļāni homestead, where hostess Maija-Daina Paegle dries a variety of herbal teas by the bucketful and bakes her signature Selonian breads known as *karašas*.

In Rubene Parish, the Gulbji homestead provides the opportunity to arrange cooking workshops. Upon request, guests may be served a spread of local dishes, including beet greens soup, Selonian-style potato dumplings, stuffed potato pie *guļbešņīki*, a hearty lung stew known as *šmurgulis*, as well as turnip soup, stewed beans, homemade cheeses (including smoked and farmhouse varieties), and tray-baked cakes made from the farm's own produce.

Meanwhile, in Kaplava Parish, the kitchen at the Klajumi horse farm serves traditional meals that blend both Selonian and Latgalian influences, in both recipe and name. Among the dishes are *guļbešņīki*, dumplings with milk, potato sausages, and other meals. After a long horseback ride through the scenic bends of the Daugava River, a nourishing and hearty Selonian meal here provides the perfect reward.

## Clothing

The diversity of communities and cultural identities in Selonian is visible in both local dialects and traditional costumes. No two identical folk costumes were ever worn. While general features may be common within a region or parish, every individual's costume was unique.

Ethnographer Ilze Ziņģīte, in her scholarly article *Traditional Clothing as a Marker of Ethnic and Cultural-Historical Features*, provides a comprehensive research base on the unifying characteristics and distinctive details of folk costumes in the Selonja region. She notes that folk costumes are deeply intertwined with other aspects influenced by geography, ethnicity, and administrative changes. The characteristics of traditional dress are closely linked to the distribution of dialects and regional identity. Today, what is referred to as a “traditional folk costume” generally represents festive attire worn in a particular region during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

When discussing the folk costumes of the historical land of Selonja, the term *Augšzeme* (literally “Upper Land”) is often used. Therefore, anyone wishing to conduct an in-depth study of Selonja’s traditional dress is encouraged to search for sources also using the keyword *Augšzemes tautastērps* (folk costume of Augšzeme). When identifying the features common to folk costumes across the Selonja region, the following clothing traits from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries have been documented:

- 1) tunic-style shirts with sewn-in shoulder inserts, and shirts with shoulder inserts attached along the direction of the fabric grain;
- 2) white shoulder shawls (*villaines*) with embroidered patterns made from colourful woollen thread;
- 3) woven belts (*audenes*) with alternating patterns in the middle of the belt and decorative narrow sashes (*celaines*);
- 4) white knitted mittens and socks with colourful patterned bands.

The colours and patterns of skirt fabrics could vary even within a single parish, as weavers influenced one another, or native regional designs were brought into new homes through marriage. In the eastern part of Selonja, light speckles are often visible in the striped skirt fabrics. This distinctive pattern results from a special yarn dyeing technique – certain parts of the yarn were tied off during the dyeing process, creating decorative speckles within the stripe arrangements once woven.

The folk costumes of Selonja (Augšzeme) also show similarities with the traditional Baltic Finnic attire. One of the most striking similarities is the *matpine*, a symbolic headband. While crowns were traditional for unmarried girls in most of Latvia, ribbon-like headbands were traditional in regions with Livonian heritage and other Baltic Finnic peoples. These were also made on red fabric bands and could be worn together with the maiden’s crown.



An outstanding headband reconstruction can be seen at the Ūdenszīmes Association in Kaldabruņa, Rubene Parish, where the headband known as *Krievānu Māras josta* is preserved. Visitors can also learn the story behind this unique piece.

In Selonia, narrow tie-back crowns worn by unmarried girls were common – for example, a Sece Parish version made on a blue fabric base. For married Selonian women, the festive headwear was a headscarf, often edged with bobbin lace.

Mitten patterns are the greatest “travellers” among traditional textile designs, as mittens were not only gifted during engagements but also given as tokens of special gratitude. They accompanied students to the big cities, spreading not only the patterns but also knitting techniques across wider regions. However, in Selonia, some mitten patterns have been documented that are unique to this region and are considered characteristic of specific parishes. Among these are the mittens from Slate, Zasa, and Aknīste. Festive mittens were traditionally knitted on a white background. Often, mittens from Selonia use only two colours – white combined with dark grey, black, dark brown, or deep blue.

## Antique Collections in Selonia

Antique collections are a distinct part of the contemporary cultural landscape of Selonia. Private collections attract visitors with the opportunity to touch and try out many of the exhibits – to sit in a horse-drawn carriage, handle blacksmith tools, or carefully lift vintage apothecary bottles from times past. The personal stories of the collection creators, their genuine interest, and selfless contribution to building these collections bring the past closer to us. Many of them do not have formal education in history or museum studies. They are people who have managed to add an extra layer of meaning and value to their lives – something tangible, aromatic, and wrapped in living stories.

Three outstanding private collections in Selonia are available to visitors by prior arrangement: the collection of Konrādijs Degro in Nereta Parish, Aizkraukle Municipality; Valdis Kalnietis’ collection *A Step into the Past (Solis sendienās)* in Gārsene Parish, Jēkabpils Municipality; and the Stikāns family collection in Medumi Parish, Augšdaugava Municipality.

## The Land of Writers

When examining Selonia's cultural and historical heritage, it becomes evident that it is strongly shaped by its many writers, poets, and folklore collectors. The region has produced renowned literary figures such as Jānis Akuraters, Aleksandrs Grīns, Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš, Gotthard Friedrich Stender (Old Stender), Jānis Veselis, Zenta Liepa, Ansis Līventāls, and Skruzīšu Mikus. The greatest Latvian poet Rainis and the refined poetess Velta Toma also hail from this land. Writers like Lūcija Ūzāne, Māra Svīre, and Vladimirs Kaijaks have left a significant impact on Selonia's contemporary cultural identity. In the landscape of Latvian literature, Selonia stands equal to the literary richness of Piebalga – a fact that should not be overlooked when exploring the region today. The museums, memorial sites, and parks dedicated to Latvia's great masters of the written word have a profound influence on community life in villages and small towns.

### **Gotthard Friedrich Stender, or Old Stender**

His most significant contribution to Latvian culture involved the reform of Latvian religious, secular, and educational literature, as well as the popularisation of sciences. Notably, this includes his primers: *New Teaching of ABC and Reading* (*Jauna ABC un lasīšanas mācība*, 1782) and *Picture ABC* (*Bildu ābice*, 1787), along with his work dedicated to natural sciences and natural philosophy: *The Book of High Wisdom from the World and Nature* (*Augstas gudrības grāmata no pasaules un dabas*, 1774).

Today, you can explore Stender's legacy in Eglaine, Viesīte, and Sunākste. The Stender family grave is located by the Sunākste White Church, on what's known as Stender's Hill. Here, you will also find a memorial stone inscribed with a quote from The Book of High Wisdom.

### **Rainis**

The greatest Latvian poet, Rainis, whose real name was Jānis Pliekšāns, was born on 11 September 1865 at Varslavāni in Dunava Parish. He spent the first three years of his life at the Tadenava grange, built by his father. Rainis' legacy in Selonia can be explored at the Rainis Museum Tadenava, at Rainis' childhood home Berķenele, and by visiting the Rainis monument in Rubene Nature Park.

### **Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš**

Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš is the Latvian literary figure whose works reveal Selonia most vividly to the reader. His novel *The White Paper* (*Baltā grāmata*), a gem of Latvian literature, reflects the nature, traditions, and language of the Nereta region, serving as a clear mirror of both time and place. In addition to being a writer, Jaunsudrabiņš was also a distinguished artist. His minimalist illustrations, just like his vivid language, remain an inseparable part of the cultural landscape of Selonia. His legacy can be explored at the Museum Riekstiņi in Nereta Parish, Aizkraukle Municipality. The museum is housed in a historic farmhouse that reflects the traditional way of life and craftsmanship once typical in Selonia. The homestead itself still retains its 19<sup>th</sup>-century appearance, embodying the world portrayed in Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš's renowned work, *The White Paper*.

### **Aleksandrs Grīns**

Aleksandrs Grīns was born on 15 August 1895 in Ziedi, Birži Parish, Jēkabpils County. In his two-part novel *Restorers of the Earth* (*Zemes atjaunotāji*), readers will recognise the landscapes of Dignāja, Kalna, and Rubene Parishes. The novel vividly portrays the land of Selonia, the characters of its people, and the possible events that unfolded during the Great Northern War and the subsequent Great Plague (1700–1721). His novel *Blizzard of Souls* (*Dvēseļu putenis*) is considered one of the great treasures of Latvian literature. Alongside Aleksandrs Čaks' poem *Touched by Eternity* (*Mūžības skartie*), this work most powerfully reflects the historical role of the Latvian riflemen in the formation of the Free State of Latvia. To honour Aleksandrs Grīns' legacy, a park bearing his name has been established in Kalna Parish, Jēkabpils Municipality. The Grīns family burial site can be found in the Lūcāni Cemetery in Slati Parish, Jēkabpils Municipality.

### **Jānis Akuraters**

Born on 13 January 1876 in Jaunzemji, Dignāja Parish, Jānis Akuraters later lived in Beitāni, also located in Dignāja, now part of Ābeļi Parish. His literary works frequently include place names from Selonia and word forms typical of the Selonian dialect area. At the writer's birthplace in Jaunzemji, Ābeļi Parish, Jēkabpils Municipality, there is an oak tree named after Akuraters and a commemorative stone. In Brodi, which is in the centre of Ābeļi Parish, visitors can follow a dedicated Jānis Akuraters Literary Trail, which presents information about the writer's life and creative legacy.

### **Lūcija Ķuzāne**

Born on 30 October 1927 in Medņi, then part of Mēmele Parish, later Pilskalne Parish. Lūcija Ūzāne was a prolific and truly Selonian writer – her entire literary output of 18 books is dedicated to Selonian. Her home is located in the Gricale Inn, Pilskalne Parish, Aizkraukle Municipality. The Gricale Inn is a popular tourist site in Selonian, managed by the Upmales mantinieki Association (Heirs of Upmale). The head of the association, local historian and writer Lidiņa Ozoliņa, collaborated with Lūcija Ūzāne on the books *Between Three Rivers: The Book of Pilskalne – Pilskalne (Starp trijām upēm: Pilkalnes – Pilskalnes grāmata)* and *We the People of Nereta: The Book of Nereta (Mēs – neretieši: Neretas grāmata)*.

### **Valdis**

Valdis (real name Voldemārs Zālītis; 1865–1934) was a writer and educator. He gained his most vivid childhood impressions in Vīgante near Staburags – experiences he later depicted in his most successful novel, *The Children of Staburags (Staburaga bērni, 1895)*. This book has introduced generations of Latvian children to the story of the legendary Staburags Cliff.

### **Māra Svīre**

Born on 13 October 1936 in Jaunlaicene Parish, Māra Svīre is a Latvian prose writer and playwright. She is the scriptwriter of *A Limousine the Colour of Midsummer's Eve (Limuzīns Jāņu nakts krāsā)*, a film included in Latvia's cultural canon. Since 1975, she has been a professional author. Her connection to Selonian stems from a countryside home she and her husband, writer Vladimirs Kaijaks, purchased in Staburags Parish in the 1970s, where they spent many summers.

**Vīgante Park**, located in Staburags Parish, Aizkraukle Municipality, preserves the literary legacy of both Valdis and Māra Svīre. It was this area that inspired Valdis to write *The Children of Staburags*. For nearly fifty summers, the acclaimed Latvian literary couple Māra Svīre and Vladimirs Kaijaks stayed here. In the park, visitors can see the sculpture *Daina* by sculptor Aleksandra Briede, which symbolises the songful spirit of the Latvian people. Also on display is the memorial *Ear of God* created by Solveiga Vasiļjeva and unveiled in 2003. The memorial is surrounded by the Unity Grove, where all presidents of Latvia have planted trees. In 2011, wooden sculptures of Jancis and Marčs – the main characters from Valdis' book *The Children of Staburags* – were installed in the park.

## Language

In Selonia, people speak the Augšzeme dialect of the Latvian language, including both its deep and shallow subdialects. Until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the ancient Selonian language was spoken in this region. Traces of it remain in place names and dialects found in both Latvia and Lithuania. Over time, this language gradually merged with the tongues of other Baltic tribes, contributing to the development of modern Latvian and Lithuanian. Folklorist Beatrise Reidzāne identifies thirty-eight Selonian subdialects.

Today, the Selonian dialect is still spoken daily in the central parts of Selonia – in and around Aknīste, Bebrene, Dignāja, Subate, and Zasa. However, its geographic reach is shrinking, and younger generations rarely speak it fluently. Nevertheless, in recent years, the dialect has started to appear in marketing as a recognisable symbol of Selonia's identity. The Selonian speech is notable for its rising-falling or purely rising intonation, often retained even by those who now speak only standard Latvian and no longer use the dialect.

To experience the diversity of Selonian dialects, it is recommended to visit five women who welcome guests at local tourism sites and speak the rich Selonian language:

Ilze Līduma, head of the Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš Museum Riekstiņi in Nereta Parish;

Maija Daina Paegle, hostess of the Boļāni homestead in Sēlpils Parish;

Līga Jaujeniece, head of the local history department at the V. Ancītis Aknīste Library in Aknīste;

Anda Svarāne, ceramic artist at the Crafts Centre Rūme in Zasa Parish;

Ingrīda Degtjarova, glass artist at the Meadow Museum (*Pļavas muzejs*) in Kaldabruņa, Rubene Parish.

## Religion and Sacred Spaces

Selonia is a region characterised by remarkable religious diversity. Its cultural environment developed as a mosaic of distinct community “islands,” which were bound historically by common administration under the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia. However, in contrast to other parts of Latvia, what shaped life in Selonia to a greater extent was the varied local identity of its inhabitants. This identity was defined not only by ethnic differences but also by religious affiliations within separate communities. Sacred architecture plays a prominent role in the landscape and social life of Selonia. Church buildings are largely perceived as bearers of culture, local identity, and historical significance – often with their

direct religious function regarded as secondary. These churches stand as powerful markers of place and time.

Two small towns – Jaunjelgava and Subate – stand out when describing the region's religious diversity. Although separated by more than 100 kilometres, both towns offer visitors the opportunity to explore churches of several different Christian denominations within a very compact area.

Outside these charming small towns of Selonia, churches in villages – and even in locations where villages no longer exist – are also well worth a visit. In such places, the church alone remains as a witness to the sacred fabric of an era and its people. Among these, certain churches transcend denominational boundaries and have become powerful cultural landmarks. While several are at risk of disappearing and require ongoing maintenance or restoration, their very presence in a liminal state – between sacred space and cultural monument, between survival and disappearance – stirs imagination and interest.

## Contemporary Cultural Spaces in Selonia

Over the last decade, several cultural venues and events have been established that have had – and will continue to have – a lasting impact on the region's cultural landscape.

Although some of these places and initiatives are only partially rooted in specific local traditions, they all reflect a shared tendency: the integration of natural elements and landscapes into cultural experiences.

For instance, the Sansusī Festival in the Susēja Forest presents chamber music in a woodland setting. The creator of *Selonia's Sun Islands* (*Sēlijas saules salas*) in Tadenava, artist Kristīne Lipkova, states: “The most important thing is that art is born in the forest”. The Jaunjelgava Concert Dome lets music touch the sky. Similarly, the Zasa Light Nights use light installations to reimagine the park's natural scenery. Sculptor Ojārs Feldbergs describes his sculptural ensemble *Gates of Light* (*Gaismas vārti*) in Sunākste as light breaking through stone. The central theme uniting all these modern cultural sites is the perception of nature as a fundamental value. These places reveal and nurture the sacredness of nature through contemporary artistic forms, making this the defining trend in Selonia's cultural development over the past ten years.

A particularly noteworthy example in Aizkraukle Municipality is Ērberģe Manor in Mazzalve Parish. This site thrives thanks to the active participation of nearly the entire local community. Today, the manor houses a school, but during the tourism season, guests are welcomed by Baron von Hahn and his splendidly costumed entourage, offering humorous and theatrical performances both in the manor and around its grounds.

## The Duchy of Courland and Semigallia Period

The Duchy of Courland and Semigallia was established in 1562. It united the former territories of the Livonian Order located south and west of the Daugava River, encompassing all of Selonja up to present-day Kaplava Parish in Krāslava Municipality. The duchy functioned as an autonomous vassal state of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and later the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, governed as a constitutional monarchy. The ruler held the hereditary title of duke.

Within the duchy, Selonja was referred to as Upper Courland, Upper Land, or Highland, and it was administratively part of the Semigallian portion of the duchy.

This historical period marks a formative stage in the development of Selonja's political, social, cultural, and mental landscape, with a legacy that remains palpable in modern-day Selonja. It distinctly separates Selonja from Latgale in terms of governance and religious influences. The duchy's weak centralisation and liberal stance on religious affiliation fostered the development of individual identity, the freedom of choice, and a reliance on personal and local community resources rather than on distant central authorities. Moreover, this era facilitated the introduction of Enlightenment ideas into Selonja and boosted literacy rates, particularly through the work of Lutheran congregations. The duchy period nurtured tolerance and acceptance of diversity among the local population. At the same time, it strengthened an inner, deeply distinctive understanding of the sacred, where a strong sense of individualism coexists with a high level of tolerance.

Notable heritage sites in the Selonja region from the 15<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries include the historic centres of Jaunjelgava and Subate, Nereta Manor and Nereta Lutheran Church, Āži Inn in Viesīte, Lutheran churches in Zasa and Dignāja, the Jesuit Monastery in Ilūkste, the Church of Egypt, Elerne Lutheran Church, a surviving fragment of Duke Jacob's canal, Dobes Bridge, and Skurstņkrogs Inn.

## Today's Caretakers of Selonian Manors

Selonia's manors today serve various purposes: some as tourist sites, others as cultural or educational centres. Their caretakers also vary widely. For example, Lielzalde Manor is maintained by the Sēļu klubs Association, while Vecmēmele Manor is managed by the Atjauno muižu Association. The historic Nereta Manor gained new and dedicated owners in 2022. Ērberģe Manor houses a lower secondary school, and during the summer season, it opens its doors to tourists, offering an engaging programme. Gārsene Palace is home to a municipal tourist information centre and also serves as a venue for community events. The elegant Červonka Manor in Vecsaliena Parish, owned by the municipality, hosts tourists, plein air artists, and participants of various public events.

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*Design elements include:*

*The flag of the historical land of Selonia, the pattern of Nereta traditional skirt fabric, illustrations by the authors.*