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# The Practices of Preserving Medieval Castles in Latvia from 1945 to 1991: The Case of Turaida Castle

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**Abstract**

The practices followed in the preservation of medieval castles in Latvia during the Soviet occupation period have not yet been comprehensively examined. This article seeks to elucidate this issue by considering a single case study—Turaida Castle. From the 13th until the mid-16th century, Turaida Castle functioned as one of the principal residences of the Archbishop of Riga. From the 17th century onward, its medieval fortifications progressively deteriorated. Between 1952 and 1991, during the Soviet occupation period, the ruins of Turaida Castle became the subject of major restoration, reconstruction, and conservation projects, as well as systematic archaeological investigation. These preservation efforts were impeded by the deteriorated condition of the original brickwork and by the limited availability of appropriate methodologies and theoretical literature. Nonetheless, owing to the scope and continuity of these interventions, Turaida Castle has become one of the most frequently visited heritage sites in Latvia, attracting both international and domestic visitors from the 1960s to the present. The article outlines the principal achievements of the site's preservation practices and identifies key challenges and shortcomings that have emerged throughout the process.

**Keywords:** Turaida castle; Baltic region; medieval castles; heritage site; archaeology; conservation; restoration; reconstruction

## 1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the Livonian Crusades in the 13th century, a constellation of territorial entities collectively referred to as *Livonia* emerged along the east coast of the Baltic Sea, within the area corresponding to present-day Estonia and Latvia. The designation *Livonia* is derived from the name of one of the region's indigenous ethnic groups—the Livs (Latin *Livones*). This territorial formation comprised the dominions of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order, the Archbishopric of Riga, and several bishoprics. Across these territories, the respective lords and their vassals gradually established more than 150 stone castles—fortified residences that functioned as political, economic, and military centres within their jurisdictions. Within the territory of present-day Latvia alone, over 100 such castles existed during the medieval period.

Following the Livonian War (1558–1583), the lands formerly controlled by the Order and the bishoprics underwent secularisation. Numerous castles suffered damage during the hostilities and were subsequently abandoned, while others passed into private

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ownership, and their medieval fortifications ceased to be maintained. By the 18th century, most of these structures had fallen to ruin.

Interest in medieval architecture as a significant part of the historical heritage began to emerge within Baltic German intellectual and cultural circles at the end of the 18th century. This development was stimulated both by the Romantic era's fascination with ancient ruins and by the increasingly detailed awareness of local history made possible through the publication of written sources. The major castle ruins were documented in drawings by artists and educated amateurs, and their histories were disseminated through newspapers, guidebooks, and various other publications. Sites situated in picturesque landscapes and readily accessible to the public became especially popular among travellers exploring their native region.

Following the inauguration of the Riga–Valka railway line in 1889, the number of travellers and summer visitors to the area known as "Livonian Switzerland" (German *Livländische Schweiz*) increased substantially. This designation refers to the surroundings of Sigulda town, where the ancient valley of the River Gauja attains a depth of approximately 80 m, with striking exposures of Devonian red sandstone cliffs along the riverbanks. The natural scenery of the Gauja valley is significantly enriched by the presence of three medieval castle ruins. Among these, the tall Main Tower of Turaida Castle—constructed of red brick and visible from a considerable distance—constitutes the most visually prominent landmark.

As a consequence of the Second World War, the Baltic states were subjected to Soviet occupation. The framework for the protection of architectural heritage within the Soviet Union was shaped by the political and economic imperatives of the state. Although legislation concerning the preservation of cultural heritage was enacted [1] (p. 561), the shortage of resources rendered it impossible to maintain all of the historical structures. As a result, only a small number of sites deemed suitable for practical utilisation were preserved in adequate condition.

In 1948, the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR adopted a resolution aimed at improving the protection of cultural monuments and issued the *Regulation on the Protection of Cultural Monuments* [2]. This document divided architectural heritage into three categories:

1. Monuments unsuitable for practical use;
2. Monuments suitable for use as museums;
3. Monuments suitable for economic exploitation.

The regulation stipulated that research, reconstruction, and groundworks on architectural monuments could be undertaken only with the authorisation of the Architectural Committee of the USSR Council of Ministers. It also required district authorities to supervise the protection of monuments and prevent their deterioration or destruction.

The first official list of cultural monuments of the Latvian SSR was also compiled at this time but was published only in 1959 [3]. It is noteworthy that the *Lexicon of Castles in Ancient Livonia* (1922), authored by the Baltic German scholar Karl von Löwis of Menar, identified 96 medieval castles or castle ruins in present-day Latvia [4], whereas the 1959 register included slightly more than half of these sites—also omitting the ruins of Turaida Castle. The most extensive list produced in the Soviet period appeared in 1969, designating 69 castle ruins as archaeological monuments and 15 castles or castle ruins as architectural monuments [5] (p. 60).

Inclusion in the official Soviet heritage register did not, however, ensure the preservation of all listed castle ruins. The only museum was established in Riga Castle, where a museum had already existed prior to the occupation. Fewer than ten castles, which had been partially rebuilt and roofed over, were converted for institutional purposes: to serve as schools, a hospital, a home for the disabled, military facilities, or residential apartments.

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Ruins that could not be adapted for practical use were neglected for decades, and the damage inflicted upon them generally went unpunished.

Several documented cases illustrate the consequences of this approach. The remains of Ādaži Castle were incorporated into a military base, where construction and terrain alteration rendered the precise location of the castle no longer discernible. In the case of Burtnieki Castle ruins, one of the medieval blocks was destroyed in 1969 to accommodate the construction of a new administrative building. The ruins of Saldus Castle, although included in the 1959 register, were demolished in 1970 to make way for the construction of a new hospital. In the 1970s, for the construction of an open-air stage in the south outer bailey of Alūksne Castle, a cultural layer several metres thick was dug up, without the supervision of an archaeologist [6] (pp. 44, 72, 115, 454). The construction of a series of hydroelectric power stations on the River Daugava resulted in the flooding of the ruins of Lokstene, Altene, Salaspils, and Holme castles, which were only partially excavated prior to inundation. The creation of large reservoirs not only drastically transformed the surrounding landscape but also raised water levels, thereby accelerating the erosion of the foundations of the castle ruins at Ikšķile, Sēlpils, and Koknese [7].

During the 1950s and 1960s, conservation and partial restoration of medieval castle ruins was undertaken only at a limited number of sites. These projects were developed by the Scientific Restoration Workshop, established in 1951 under the Architectural Directorate of the Latvian SSR (renamed the Scientific Restoration Design and Engineering Bureau in 1965 and the Cultural Monument Restoration Design Office in 1976). A gradual improvement became evident in the latter half of the 1970s. In 1977, legislation on the protection of historical monuments was enacted, and archaeologists increasingly collaborated with architects in the development of restoration projects. Although approximately 30 castle ruins were investigated archaeologically to various extents during the Soviet period, conservation or restoration projects were prepared for only 20, and only a portion of these were implemented, primarily during the late 1970s and the 1980s [8]. Some restoration work was undertaken at castles that were still inhabited [9] as well as the few castle ruins located within urban areas, where limited conservation measures were introduced to ensure visitor safety [10]. Turaida represents one of the few castle ruins where extensive research and reconstruction work was carried out, and this case will be examined in detail in the present article.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### *2.1. Unpublished Sources*

The most extensive information on preservation practices at Turaida Castle is contained in primary sources—namely, freehand drawings and architectural project documentation produced between the 1950s and the 1980s. This material includes surveys of the territory of the castle ruins, drawings documenting construction elements and archaeologically exposed masonry fragments, as well as conservation, restoration, and reconstruction project plans, brief typewritten reports, and photographic negatives. Although these unpublished sources are preserved in the archive of Latvia's National Heritage Board (NHB), they have not yet been comprehensively systematized. A portion of the architectural documentation and project drawings have been digitized and are accessible through the National Digital Library of Latvia (LNDB) [11].

Copies of selected documents are also held in the archive of the Turaida Museum Reserve (TMR), which also preserves records pertaining to the archaeological investigations. These include excavation area drawings, photonegatives and typewritten field reports on each year's excavation [12].

### *2.2. Publications*

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Only a limited number of publications in Soviet-occupied Latvia addressed medieval architecture or the protection of architectural heritage. A few brief articles by Latvian architects appeared in the daily press and in popular science periodicals, offering concise introductions to the principles of castle ruin preservation, as applied at the time. These sources permit only a partial understanding of the various stages in the preservation history of Turaida Castle.

The most substantial study on architectural heritage protection undertaken after the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991, authored by the historian Mārtiņš Mintaurs, touches only briefly on the preservation practices applied to medieval castle ruins during the Soviet era [13,14]. So far, the only detailed examination of preservation practices is to be found in a study on Cēsis Castle [15]. To date, no researcher has produced a comprehensive account of the reconstruction history of Turaida Castle.

Some information on heritage preservation practices can be derived from publications specifically devoted to Turaida Castle. Archaeologist Jānis Graudonis, who directed excavation of the site from 1976 to 2000, compiled annual reports and authored a monograph on the castle, in which he describes the exposed cultural layers, architectural structures, and artefacts [16]. The monograph by architect Gunārs Jansons, who conducted architectural research and prepared restoration and reconstruction projects between 1968 and 1990, focuses primarily on the architectural development of the castle, although it also contains occasional references to specific restoration activities [17]. Additional brief insights into the work carried out at Turaida Castle appear in the popular publications of Anna Jurkāne [18], who directed Sigulda Local History Museum from 1973 up to 1988, and subsequently, right up to 2021, served as director of the TMR, which was established on the institutional basis of the museum.

### *2.3. Methods*

In preparing this article, the descriptive method was employed as the principal analytical tool, in order to present a chronological overview of the research, conservation, and reconstruction activities undertaken at Turaida Castle from the 1950s to the 1980s. This method made it possible to systematize the archival material, project documentation, and archaeological reports, thereby revealing the sequence and scope of interventions carried out during the Soviet period. The comparative method was applied to identify and assess the divergent approaches adopted by various architects and research teams over time in the preservation of the castle ruins. By juxtaposing project designs, methodological principles, and outcomes from various periods, it became possible to discern trends, shifts in professional thinking, and inconsistencies within the broader framework of Soviet-era heritage management.

## 3. Construction, Decline, and Restoration of Turaida Castle

### *3.1. A Brief History of Turaida Castle*

The construction of stone castle in Turaida began in 1214 by instruction of Bishop Albert of Riga [19] (p. 170). From 1255 to 1566, it served as one of the main castles of the Archbishop of Riga, housing the residence of the bailiff (German: *Vogt*) [20]. Over more than three centuries, a fortified complex approximately 200 m in length was developed, comprising the north and south outer baileys, residential and ancillary buildings around the main courtyard, and seven towers: the approximately 30 m high Main Tower; the rectangular south tower; the five-storey west tower (now the great semicircular tower); the small semicircular west tower; and three round towers adapted for firearms at the north gates [17] (Figure 1).


(**a**) (**b**)

**Figure 1.** (**a**) Turaida Castle—view from south-east [21]. (**b**) Plan of Turaida Castle with restored buildings: 1—Main Tower; 2—west block; 3—west tower; 4—south tower; 5—tower at the north outer gate; 6—tower at the north inner gate; 7—north block; 8—east block; 9—small semicircular west tower; drawn by Gunārs Jansons [17] (p. 107).

During the Swedish–Polish War (1600–1625/27), the castle was captured first by Polish forces and then, by the Swedish army, after which in 1625 it became private property [22] (pp. 28, 29). Following a fire in 1776, the medieval buildings were largely abandoned; only the west block was rebuilt as a granary, and a wooden house for the manor owner was erected in the northeast corner of the main courtyard. Bricks from the collapsed ruins were gradually removed for the construction of new manor buildings outside the castle. By the end of the 19th century, only the Main Tower and west tower remained standing, both roofless, with collapsed upper walls and loss of the intermediate floors; only fragments of internal staircases survived (Figure 2). The west block remained the sole roofed structure, serving as a storehouse, while most of the other walls, towers, and buildings had collapsed to ground level and were covered by debris [22].

**Figure 2.** The main courtyard of the Turaida Castle ruins: the Main Tower in the center, the west block on the left, the 18th century wooden building on the right; photo on the early 20th-century postcard (TMR, Sm 5351).

Following the establishment of the Republic of Latvia in 1918, land reform nationalized the estates of the nobility. In 1925, the newly established Monuments Board took the Turaida Castle ruins under its protection. The wooden house in the courtyard was leased to the Riga Teachers' Trade Union as a summer residence. In 1936, missing sections of the Main Tower staircases were reconstructed, and a concrete viewing platform with an open light shaft covered by glass was installed to adapt the 25 m high tower for tourists [23].

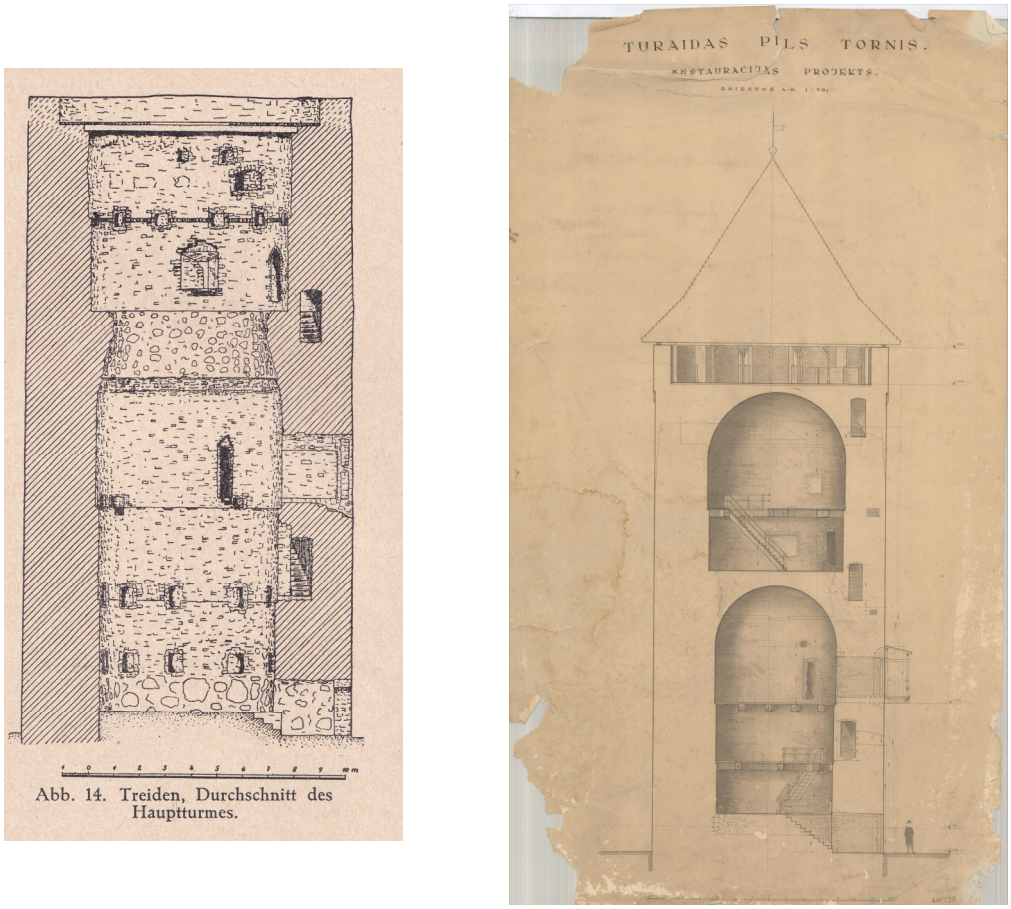
After the Second World War, Latvia came under Soviet occupation, and no preservation work was undertaken in the immediate postwar years. Reconstruction of Turaida Castle commenced in 1952 and continued until the renewal of Latvian independence in 1991. The Soviet-era interventions in heritage protection can be divided into three chronological phases.

### *3.2. Creation of the Viewing Tower and Reconstruction of the West Block (1952–1961)*

Following the Second World War, the glass cover of the central light shaft on the Main Tower's viewing platform was shattered, and the stairs had deteriorated, rendering the tower unsafe for visitors, as noted in contemporary press reports [24]. The 1952 work plan, drawn up after the establishment of the Scientific Restoration Workshop, included the adaptation of the Main Tower as a viewing tower. Architect Kārlis Vikmanis was commissioned to prepare the restoration project. In 1952–1955, the tower was surveyed [25] and photographed, and a reconstruction project drawn up (Figure 3b).

In 1953, a small trial excavation was conducted adjacent to the tower by archaeologist Adolfs Stubavs, revealing foundations and structural remains [26], but these were not incorporated into the reconstruction design. The reconstruction project envisioned three wooden floors, restoration of the third-storey vault, and construction of a fifth-storey vault, although the ruins provided no evidence of a fifth-storey vault [27] (p. 43) (Figure 3a). The outer walls were to be raised, adding a sixth-storey viewing platform with a conical tiled roof, reflecting a utilitarian approach to restoration. Drawings preserved in the NHB archive primarily document the new design, recording only a few of the original structures. The architect invented numerous elements, including the third-storey fireplace, the form of the wooden staircase, the door leaves, various metal fittings etc. Construction commenced with the demolition of an 18th-century wooden building in the courtyard, which had not been surveyed, resulting in the loss of data for architectural history. On completion, the tower walls reached 30 m, attaining 35 m together with the roof. The viewing platform opened to tourists in summer 1957, and many of the first visitors left inscriptions—their names and dates—on the walls. Ancillary elements, such as a lightning rod, flag weathervane, and electric chandelier, were designed and installed in the next three years, all of which were newly invented.

In 1957, architect Gunārs Zirnis joined the project, overseeing the survey and reconstruction of the west block, which was to house the local history museum [17] (pp. 104, 105). The records show that limited documentation of the original structure was carried out, and no archaeologist was involved [28]. The digging of trenches along the exterior walls destroyed evidence of the building's construction history, highlighting the lack of established methods for architectural and archaeological investigation of masonry structures at the time. Zirnis also designed a modern museum interior, while a wooden gallery on the courtyard façade was reconstructed based on the visible putlog holes. From the late 1950s, the restored Main Tower became a Sigulda landmark and a symbol of the medieval castle. Its image was widely reproduced on postcards, in popular publications, and other media. The creation of a safe, accessible observation tower and the relocation of the Sigulda Local History Museum to the west block in 1961 significantly increased visitor numbers.




(**a**) (**b**)

**Figure 3.** (**a**) Cross-section of the Main Tower; drawn by J. Armolik, 1939 [27] (p. 43). (**b**) Restoration project—cross-section of the Main Tower [29].

### *3.3. Slowing of Restoration Works (1962–1973)*

The NHB archive preserves a 1962 conservation project for the west tower prepared by architect Gunārs Zirnis [30]. At that time, urgent measures were necessary to prevent accidents, as the ruins posed a danger to visitors due to falling bricks from the collapsing façade and upper floors (Figure 4a). The project included filling wall gaps, restoring collapsed openings, and covering the top of the ruins with a concrete layer. In 1963, a sketch plan for the main courtyard was drafted, proposing conservation of the ruins of the enclosing wall and indicating the layout of the former east and north residential blocks by means of rows of concrete slabs [31]. These plans were not implemented.

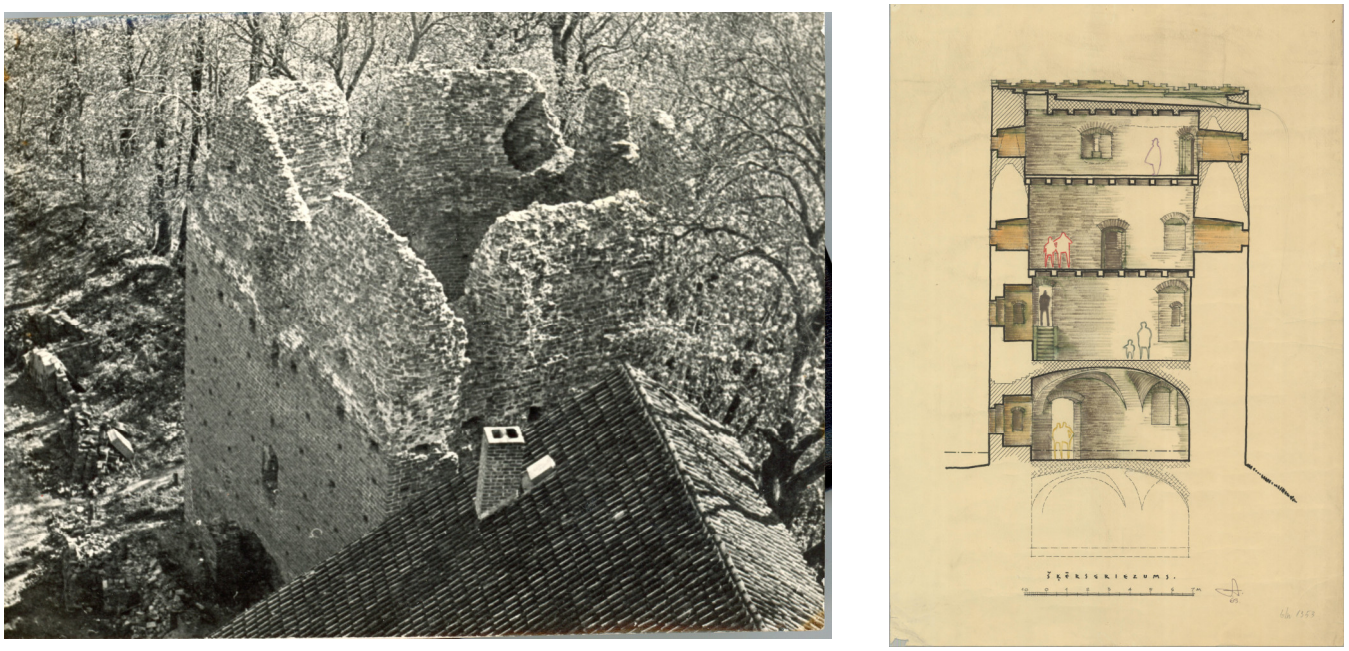
Starting from the late 1950s, historians Aleksandrs Jansons and Roberts Malvess studied the history of Turaida Castle, collecting archival images, 16th-century Polish inspection reports, 17th-century plans etc. This work slowed in the 1960s, but these sources subsequently became essential references for research and project design and were partially published after Latvia regained independence [32,33].

Work at Turaida Castle was halted for several years, possibly due to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's 1960 critique of castle restoration practices in the Baltic in the context of insufficient funding and ideological factors [34] (p. 187), or due to the ambitious River Daugava hydroelectric projects undertaken from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, requiring intensive archaeological research and architectural survey of the affected historical sites, including several medieval castle ruins [35] (p. 55).

By the late 1960s, cultural heritage management had improved. In 1967, the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR issued a decision to enhance heritage protection, and in

1968 the Ministry of Culture established the Scientific Research Council for Museums and Cultural Heritage (later the State Inspection for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, now NHB) [13] (p. 182). In 1969, an updated architectural heritage list included Turaida Castle as site no. 231, highlighting three components: the restored west block housing the museum, the Main Tower with its observation platform, and the large semicircular west tower together with the enclosing wall [36] (pp. 268, 269).

In 1968, architect Gunārs Jansons was appointed to design the restoration of Turaida Castle. From 1969, he resumed the work of detailed measurement and reconstruction of the west tower, initially proposing intermediate floors and an observation platform at the top [37] (Figure 4b). This design was rejected by the Restoration Council, which requested a "full restoration" to accommodate museum exhibitions, requiring reconstruction based on the 1590 revision protocol and the 18th- and 19th-century drawings of the ruins. A second design, featuring a wooden gable, was also rejected. Jansons' third design, which was approved, included a masonry gable, an open wooden gallery at the second-floor level, and reconstructed interior spaces. By 1973, the upper walls of the west tower had been completed and the tower roofed over. Work then paused for several years because of the need to remove the debris filling the interior spaces.



(**a**) (**b**)

**Figure 4.** (**a**) Ruins of the west tower, photo ca. 1955 [38]. (**b**) Rejected conservation project for the west tower [39].

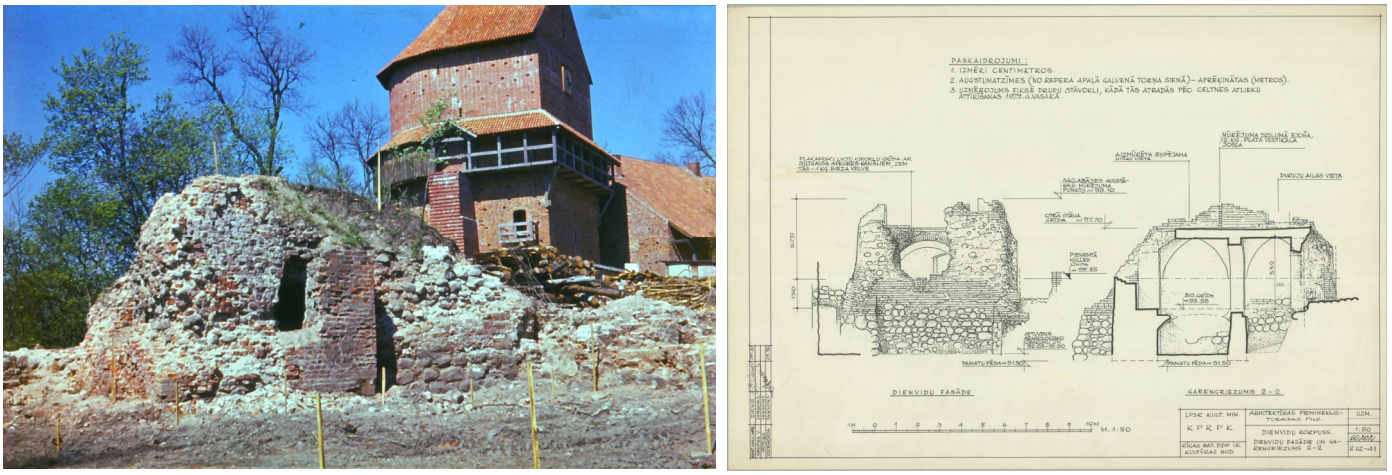
### *3.4. Extensive Research, Conservation, and Reconstruction Works (1974–1990)*

In the mid-1970s, Turaida Castle entered a new phase of restoration. In 1973, historian Anna Jurkāne was appointed director of the Sigulda Local History Museum. Her leadership facilitated the recruitment of specialists and the securing of funding, enabling extensive research and restoration of the castle ruins. In 1974, debris was cleared from the basement of the large semicircular tower under the scientific supervision of archaeologist Jānis Graudonis.

In the following years, the museum director and archaeologist aimed to uncover new evidence of the region's cultural history, enrich the museum collections with archaeological artifacts, and reveal the castle's original layout as a guide for future restoration [40] (p. 49). From 1976, Graudonis directed annual archaeological excavations, gradually

exposing nearly the entire castle site and documenting the medieval German castle layers and, in some areas, traces of earlier Liv settlement as well, which was a significant historical discovery in Latvia. Over fifteen years, practical rebuilding work and archaeological excavation proceeded in parallel, architect Jansons surveying exposed walls and designing conservation, restoration, and reconstruction projects. In 1978 and 1979, excavation of the south block revealed the vaulted ground floor of the adjoining rectangular tower—the only original vault preserved on the site (Figure 5).

The 1590 description indicated that the first floor had also been vaulted. A few steps embedded in the first-floor ruins suggested another upper floor, prompting the architect to design a three-storey tower, in accordance with the Restoration Council's concept, which stipulated that in the reconstruction of the castle buildings, the towers should have the number of storeys indicated in historical descriptions and must be roofed over [17] (pp. 57–84). As the exterior brick cladding had mostly collapsed, the façades were rebuilt with new bricks, while interior medieval walls, vaults, and fragments of the original first-storey flooring were preserved.



(**a**) (**b**)

**Figure 5.** (**a**) Unearthed ruins of the south tower in the foreground, the restored west tower and west block in the background [41].; (**b**) south façade and cross-section of the ruins of the south tower [42].

By the early 1980s, restoration practice emphasized the requirement to distinguish original elements from those that had been reconstructed: the interior medieval walls were left unplastered, while the new upper floors were plastered. Even in hidden areas, historically accurate analogues, such as hinge pins reproduced after unearthed fragments, were used.

Construction work continued in the 1980s on other buildings as well. The enclosing wall on the west side was restored and increased in height. The lower part of the tower on the east side of the north gate was exposed and its ground floor adapted to serve as an electrical substation, while the first floor was reconstructed in accordance with the 1590 description, and the tower was covered with a gently sloping roof. In contrast, at the east and north sides of the main courtyard, the exposed ruined walls were only conserved using new brickwork and concrete.

Rising visitor numbers in the 1980s prompted construction of a path around the outside of the castle, in order to disperse tourists and facilitate external viewing of the walls. Debris was cleared from the steep slopes, terraces built, and enclosing walls with unearthed buttresses conserved, creating a secure museum area accessible via the former inner north gate. The excavations served to reveal the medieval layout of the whole castle [17] (p. 107).

Restoration was facilitated by changing attitudes toward cultural heritage and tourism. In 1977, the Latvian SSR law on historical sites was passed [43]. The law stipulated that architectural monuments were to be preserved and restored to serve scientific, cultural, educational, and touristic purposes. In 1973, the Gauja National Park was established, with the aim of protecting the unique natural values of the ancient Gauja valley and its surroundings. At the same time, the Gauja National Park was defined as one of the most popular tourist destinations in Latvia [44] (p. 828). The influx of tourists was also facilitated by a new hotel for 200 people built near Turaida in 1965, which was included in an all-Soviet-Union tourist route. Turaida also benefited from foreign tourism, which was organized by the all-Union state travel agency *Intourist*. Foreigners were forbidden to visit almost all places in occupied Latvia, except Riga, and the towns of Jūrmala and Sigulda [45] (p. 15). Turaida Castle, designated an architectural monument of all-Union significance, had drawn over three million visitors between 1957 and 1977 [46 (p. 27),47] In the following years, the number of visitors increased rapidly, and by 1990 reached 409,044 [18] (p. 30).

After Latvia regained independence in 1991, border and currency changes led to a sharp decline in visitors from Russia and the former Soviet republics. Funding for large-scale projects became insufficient, reducing the scale of archaeological work and halting construction from 1992. Although projects for conserving the tower at the north inner gate had been prepared in 1988 [48], financial constraints delayed implementation, and the tower ruins were covered with a temporary wooden roof.

## 4. Assessment of Preservation Practices at Turaida Castle

### *4.1. Positive Aspects of the Intensive Research and Restoration Work at Turaida Castle*

The construction of the observation tower in the 1950s and the subsequent conversion of the west block into a museum ensured the preservation of these structures, although the interventions demonstrated limited respect for the original architectural fabric and enclosing archaeological layers. In contrast, the restoration of the west and south towers during the late 1970s and 1980s reflects the advancement of architectural research and restoration practices in this period. As later emphasized by Gunārs Zirnis, chief architect at the Cultural Monuments Restoration Design Office, attitudes toward the architectural heritage shifted in the 1970s, prioritizing the maximal preservation of authentic elements and minimal supplementation [49]. Consequently, restoration interventions at Turaida Castle in the 1970s and 1980s can be assessed more positively than the earlier work.

Turaida Castle occupies a prominent position in the development of medieval archaeology in Latvia. Extensive archaeological excavation conducted over fifteen seasons from 1976 to 1990 in the Soviet period, and continued on a small scale until 2000, provided a comprehensive understanding of the castle complex's layout, enabled detailed surveys of individual buildings, and documented the architectural evolution of the site. The systematic record of archaeological exposures, taking the form of photographs, descriptions, drawings, and surveys, together with the recovery of several thousand artifacts—including ceramics, building materials, and other finds—has provided a significant resource for future research. Although the excavation uncovered a huge area, the leaving of certain areas untouched should be considered a positive aspect. For example, in the main courtyard, the cultural layer was removed only to the level of the most recent, i.e., early modern period pavement, and the access route through the north outer bailey remained unexcavated, preserving opportunities for future research.

The archaeological programme also had significant social impact. The excavation was regularly reported in local newspapers, introducing the community to the history of Sigulda and its surroundings, and especially Turaida. In the 1980s, local school pupils were invited to participate in summer excavations [50], and students from Latvian and

Russian universities contributed as well [16] (pp. 194, 195), gaining practical experience in archaeology and firsthand knowledge of local history, as well as receiving remuneration for their work. Several participants later pursued careers as historians or archaeologists, some beginning their professional activities at the TMR.

The large-scale reconstruction of the castle likewise had significant cultural and educational benefits. In Latvia, most medieval castles survive only as minor ruins, offering limited insight into their original scale and military significance. Architects observed at the time that visitors wished to experience castles as they had once appeared [51]. During the Soviet period, when travel to Western Europe was greatly restricted, the reconstructed Turaida Castle provided a rare opportunity to engage directly with remains of medieval architecture, and experience the scale of these fortified complexes and the visual prominence of the towers overlooking the surrounding landscape (Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** Turaida Castle on the bank of the River Gauja ancient valley; view from north-west [52].

### *4.2. Challenges and Limitations in the Reconstruction of Turaida Castle*

Even though it was carried out by qualified specialists, the investigation and reconstruction of Turaida Castle is marked by various significant shortcomings. Architectural drawings from the 1950s show that detailed measurements were not recorded in the initial surveys of the structures, which means that today we have only an approximate knowledge of the Main Tower, the west block, and the dismantled late-18th-century wooden residential building as they were before restoration. During the 1950s–1960s, no systematic archaeological excavation was conducted alongside construction work, and so it is unclear to what extent and in which areas the cultural layer was removed around key structures. Evidence of undocumented excavations appears only sporadically in drawings and photographs.

According to architect Zirnis, most funding during the 1950s–1970s went to urgent construction work for preventing structural collapse, less being allocated to research, documentation, or the development of methodology for conservation of monuments. At the

same time, architects had limited experience with scientifically based restoration and had to compromise, so as to adapt buildings for modern use [53] (p. 14).

Archaeological work also faced challenges. Excavation frequently coincided with priority construction work, hindering proper documentation. In the emerging field of medieval archaeology in Latvia during the 1970s–1980s, methodology was underdeveloped, and not all exposed layers and finds were fully documented or dated. Consequently, important information was lost when cultural layers were removed, complicating later interpretation. From today's perspective, the need to excavate the basements of all the buildings is questionable, as they are difficult to preserve through conservation.

Moreover, due to restricted access to foreign heritage sites and literature under the Soviet regime, specialists could only rely on limited local analogues and older publications, further constraining the accuracy of reconstructions. For example, the sample album for the restoration of Turaida Castle in the 1950s, preserved in the NHB archive, shows that only a small number of references were used: the design relied on a few analogies found in surviving medieval buildings in Estonia, the reconstructed Trakai Castle in Lithuania, and Otto Piper's book *Burgenkunde* (Munich, 1912), available in a Riga library [54].

### *4.3. Objective Difficulties in Preserving Brick Architecture*

Turaida Castle belongs to the medieval brick architecture of Northern Europe. The original walls, built in the hollow revetment wall technique, are characterized by a brick "shell", or facing layer, surrounding a core of lime mortar mixed with building debris. Such walls could stand for centuries under a roof, but once the roof was lost, erosion accelerated rapidly (Figures 4 and 5a). Comparing photographs from 1958 and 1968, Jansons noted that the ruins of the west tower were deteriorating at a rate of 15 cm per decade, corresponding to around 2.5 m of wall lost since 1800 [37] (p. 116).

The local climate, with frequent freeze–thaw cycles and high humidity, further weakened exposed brickwork. Water infiltrates the mortar and bricks, freezes in winter, and thaws in spring, causing the walls to shrink and expand repeatedly; this process destroys unprotected facing bricks and leaves only a partially eroded, amorphous core [55] (p. 136). To conserve these walls, crumbling surfaces had to be supplemented with new bricks and levelled at the top to enable protection under a roof [56] (p. 86). However, high-quality historical-type bricks were no longer being produced in the 1970s, and the available perforated bricks were adequate size but mechanically weaker and monochromatic [37] (p. 127). The use of such brick, combined with large-scale reconstruction, sometimes gives visitors the misleading impression that the castle has been rebuilt entirely, because the original core has been concealed and conspicuous new materials make the interventions especially noticeable. Presumably for this reason, Estonian architect Kalvi Aluve, who prepared a restoration project for Kuressaare Castle during the Soviet era, commented that the buildings of Turaida Castle, "reconstructed with too much imagination, give sometimes wrong picture of the medieval ensemble" [57] (p. 96).

During the Soviet period, similar preservation practices—excavation of castle foundations, prosthetic supplementation of vertical surfaces, levelling of walls, and covering them with concrete—were also applied at other sites in Latvia, such as Lielvārde, Sigulda, Cēsis, Āraiši, Grobiņa, and several smaller-scale castle ruins. However, these castle ruins generally saw only minor excavation and conservation or partial restoration of the collapsed walls in the 1970s–1980s. Moreover, except for Grobiņa, these castles were built of stone, so new masonry was less visually conspicuous than at Turaida.

### *4.4. The Changing Understanding of the Term "Restoration"*

The Soviet period witnessed an evolution of the very concept of "restoration". Early projects, such as the 1952 Main Tower reconstruction plan, used the term "restoration"

without distinction. By the late 1970s, architects differentiated between "fragmentary restoration" (minor replacement of lost elements) and "complete restoration" (reconstruction of the building at a specific historical stage using historical records) [49]. Only in the 1980s did reconstruction of lost upper floors begin to be explicitly labelled as "reconstruction". This evolution reflects a growing respect for the preservation of original structures and a methodological emphasis on balancing conservation, restoration, and reconstruction based on how much original material remained [58]. For example, architect Janson's 1987 graphic reconstruction drawing of Turaida Castle's main courtyard was already being described using all three terms—conservation, restoration, and reconstruction [59]. The gradual change in terminology reflects a growing respect for the original parts of monuments and a search for ways to preserve them without alteration.

## 5. Conclusions

During the Soviet occupation, not all medieval castle ruins in Latvia were adequately protected or preserved. Turaida Castle is an exception due to the scale of the archaeological excavation and reconstruction work undertaken there, which was unprecedented in Latvia. The extensive reconstruction of the castle was driven by both economic and technical factors. In the postwar period, the Main Tower of Turaida Castle, popular with visitors, promised substantial revenue, making tourist-friendly solutions a priority for the reconstruction project. In the 1950s, the efforts of the architects focused on functionality, creating a viewing platform and adapting spaces for museum exhibitions, while the preservation of original structures was initially a secondary concern. Most funding went to construction, with little allocated for research or documentation.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the castle's designation as an architectural monument of all-Union significance allowed for more comprehensive work. Archaeologists conducted extensive excavation, almost entirely uncovering the ruins, and better documentation of the layout, brickwork, and architectural details became possible. Conservation efforts gradually focused on preserving original structures rather than full-scale reconstruction. Nevertheless, the initial concept was realized, with the reconstruction of upper floors and roofs for the west and south towers, expanding the exhibition space and managing tourist flows by means of raised enclosing walls and paths around the outside. The museum director played a key role in securing funding and expertise for these works, convincing the authorities of the need to preserve this heritage site, engaging specialists for research and project planning, and securing funding for the work.

In summary, while Turaida Castle benefited from systematic archaeological work and restoration efforts, the early stages of this work suffered from incomplete documentation, limited methodology, and material constraints. The subsequent evolution in restoration philosophy, combined with careful consideration of environmental factors and brickwork preservation, reflects both the challenges and progress of heritage conservation under the conditions of the Soviet occupation.

On the one hand, Turaida Castle exemplifies the idea expressed by historian Mintaurs that, in Soviet cultural policy, medieval castle ruins were often treated illustratively—as symbols of the social order in a given historical period; Turaida Castle was chosen as one of the parade sites, restored in order to demonstrate the Soviet state's concern for cultural heritage [13] (pp. 165, 185). On the other hand, we should not underestimate Turaida's role in fostering interest about life in earlier times and reinforcing a sense of national historical identity among the local Latvian communities. Juris Dambis, the long-time head of the NHB, has emphasized that preservation of the most important architectural monuments was not simply a merit of the Soviet system: it was possible because the specialists of that time knew how to promote the need for restoration and research, employing arguments acceptable to the political regime [60].

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During the Soviet period, only a few castles in the Baltic underwent full-scale restoration for educational purposes: Turaida in Latvia, Kuressaare in Estonia, and Trakai in Lithuania. Trakai was largely reconstructed from ruins, creating a romanticized monument [34] (p. 192), while Kuressaare had been better preserved under a roof [27] (p. 214), requiring less intervention [57 ] (Figure 44). The restoration work helped transform these sites into major tourist destinations. Despite some research gaps and restoration imperfections, the Soviet-era reconstruction was crucial for preserving Turaida Castle, as decay of the brick walls could not have been halted without roofing. The restored castle became the centrepiece of the TMR and ensured the site's long-term survival.

In order to identify all the individuals involved in the design and implementation of restoration works performed in Turaida Castle during the Soviet period, as well as the specific dates of these works, the materials used, and related information, it would be necessary to follow up this account with a more thorough study of the written records preserved in the archives.

Since the restoration of Latvia's independence, Turaida Castle has been listed as a national architectural monument. It is a key factor in making the TMR one of the country's most-visited heritage sites. In 2021, it received the European Heritage Label. The museum employs around 80 people, mostly residents of Sigulda town, and in 2024 welcomed over 173,000 visitors from Latvia, neighbouring countries, and beyond. The combination of striking natural surroundings, historical architecture, engaging exhibitions, and public events continues to educate and entertain visitors.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The photos Figure 1a, 2, 4 a, 5a and 6 are available on request from TMR (address: Turaidas muzejrezervāts, Turaidas iela 10, Siguldas novads, LV-2150 Sigulda, Latvia; e-mail: pasts@tmr.gov.lv). The drawings Figure 3b, 4b and 5b are available on request from NHB (address: Nacionālā kultūras mantojuma pārvalde, Mazā Pils iela 19, LV-1050 Rīga, Latvia; e-mail: pasts@nkmp.gov.lv).

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

| | |
|---|---|
| LNDB | National Digital Library of Latvia |
| NHB | Latvia's National Heritage Board |
| SSR | Soviet Socialistic Republic |
| TMR | Turaida Museum Reserve |
| USSR | Union of the Soviet Socialistic Republics |

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