

# THE LUXURY LIFESTYLE IN THE NURMUIŽA MANOR

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## Abstract

This paper presents briefly the history of the Nurmuiža estate and its owners, and summarises the results of the 2008 and 2009 archaeological investigations. Nurmuiža belonged to the von Fircks, one of the most influential families of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia. The influential positions the family held since the 16th century demanded a certain standard of presentation. The visually impressive Nurmuiža estate served this purpose well. The family's status was also shown by its settled standard of living. The way of life on the estate has so far been deduced from written and iconographic sources. The aim of this paper is to look at the 16th to 19th-century luxury lifestyle at Nurmuiža through the most interesting archaeological finds from two seasons of excavations.

Key words: estate, von Fircks, Duchy of Courland, luxury lifestyle, artefacts.

Since the 1990s, the attention paid by Latvian archaeologists to Post-Medieval objects has increased. However, archaeological investigations into Post-Medieval estates have only been carried out a few times. Until now, a wide range of written sources, some maps and historic images were available about the Nurmuiža estate. The archaeological excavations held in the years 2008 and 2009 supplemented these sources in several respects, and have provided an interesting collection of artefacts.

The location of the Nurmuiža estate,  
the history of its owners,  
construction and research

The Nurmuiža estate is located near the Riga-Talsi highway at Lauciene in the Talsi region, ten kilometres from Talsi and 105 kilometres from Riga. It is situated on the left bank on a bend in the River Jādekša.

The name of the village Nurme (Norme) appeared in written sources in the 14th century. The village came under the authority of the Kandava fort as a domain of the Livonian Order. Its name derives from the ancient Liv word *nurm* for a meadow. In the year 1387, Robin of Elz, the Master of the Livonian Order, granted as a feud four ploughs from the village of Nurmuiža to the knight Hermann Rummel (Caune, Ose 2004, p.357). However, the village was not established as an administrative centre until the end of the 16th century.

In the first stage of the Livonian War, it was important to the leaders of the Order to provide military and financial support. Consequently, Gotthard Kettler, the Master, the emerging Duke of Courland, farmed out a large part of the former lands of the Order to his close

associates, former vassals. Also, in 1561 the village of Nurme ceased to exist as a domain of the Order. On 24 July 1561 it was allocated to the vassal Christopher Hoerde 'in gratitude for his faithful service to the Order from an early age' (Kvaskova 2001, p.216). On 18 January 1566, Hoerde sold the village of Nurme to his brother-in-law Georg von Fircks (d. 1600) (Caune, Ose 2004, pp.357-358). In March, von Fircks promised to pay for it 'via Amsterdam and Danzig' (LVVA 1, p.1). In April 1569, Gotthard Kettler confirmed a purchase contract at the same time that Nurme was given as a feud to von Fircks (LVVA 2, p.1). Nurme belonged to the family until the land reform of the 1920s. It was the largest property belonging to the von Fircks in the Duchy of Courland.

The von Fircks were one of the most influential families of Livonian knights. The ancestors of Georg von Fircks were vassals of the King of Denmark in Estonia. The first member of the family received the Kuldiga region in Kurzeme as a feud in the year 1494. In 1505, they bought the estates of Okte and Šķēde, which were near Nurme (Kvaskova 2001, p.216). The diplomatic career of the von Fircks family in the duke's court began with the first owners of Nurme. These processes coincided with the construction of the manor house and the whole estate at Nurme. Georg von Fircks was an advisor to the Duke of Courland, and lord of the manor of Kuldiga. He won these posts for service in the Livonian War and for the transfer of large sums of money for Gotthard Kettler's disposal (Kvaskova 2001, p.216). The next owner of Nurmuiža manor, Kristopher von Fircks (d. 1649), was appointed *burggraf* of the duchy; he later became chancellor (Kvaskova 2001, p.216ff). In 1620, Kristopher von Fircks applied to the matriculation register of Courland knighthood of

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the whole family 'like all the well-known age-old aristocratic families, some of which as long as 300 years ago served the Crown and the King of Denmark as a councillor in Tallinn'. Georg von Fircks (d. 1662), the next owner of Nurmuiža, served as an extraordinary envoy of Duke Jacob to the court of the French King Louis XIV (Kvaskova 2001, p.216ff).

His son Kristopher von Fircks (1634–1695) ended his life as a landmarshal of the duchy, while Carl von Fircks (1667–1746/7) was *oberburggraf* of Jelgava and the duke's chief councillor. The particular situation of Nurmuiža in the duchy is confirmed by the Swedish king's 'Protection guarantee paper' (*Salva guardia*). This document, which threatened corporal and capital punishment for Swedish soldiers who did any harm to Nurmuiža, its owners or farmers, was obtained by Kristopher von Fircks (LVVA 3, p.1). With the incorporation of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia into the Russian Empire in 1795, the political careers of the Nurmuiža von Fircks ended. At the beginning of the 19th century, economic life in Nurmuiža manor flourished, though the manor house retained its function of presentation.

The construction of the Nurmuiža estate began with a manor house at the end of the 16th century. The will of Georg von Fircks from 1598 mentions that he spent a considerable amount of money on the construction of the stone manor house (Kvaskova 2001, p.216ff). However, the opinions of historians about the year of the construction of the manor house remain unclear. Johann Gottfried Arndt considers that in 1384, the chapel of the vassal of the Order's castle already existed there. Karl von Lewis of Menar, the researcher into Livonian castles, describes Nurmuiža as the castle of a vassal of the Order, which was built in 'late times'. Armin Tuulse includes Nurmuiža manor as a vassal's castle; however, he does not mention a specific time of construction of the castle. He believes that the former castle at Nurme was destroyed, and it was rebuilt as a manor house at the end of the 16th century. Heinz Pirang holds the view that the Order built a castle at Nurme for 'farm management purposes, in the decline of the Middle Ages' (Kvaskova 2001, pp.215-216). In their turn, the Latvian archaeologists and castle researchers Andris Caune and Ieva Ose note that the castle was built in the second half of the 16th century, and there are no other historic stone structures in which a newly constructed building was included (Caune, Ose 2004, p.358).

We have to conclude that the Nurmuiža manor and the whole estate were built no earlier than the second half of the 16th century. However, judging by its geographical location, Nurmuiža could have been both a

vassal's castle, built as an outpost of Talsi castle, and a manor, appearing on a crossroads in the second half of the 16th century. The proximity of the Riga-Talsi road was also an important factor in its development.

Between the end of the 17th century and the year 1912, the manor house was rebuilt four times, while the manor farm developed from the beginning of the 19th century until the First World War. The first rebuilding work by Carl von Fircks was carried out at the end of the 17th century. During these works, the manor house and the whole estate acquired the appearance in which they were depicted in the Paulucci album in 1827 (Plate VIII.1). The period of the first reconstruction coincided with the zenith of the influence of the Nurmuiža branch of the von Fircks family at the beginning of the 18th century. In the memoirs of the nobleman Karl Johann von Blomberg, which were published in London in 1701, Nurmuiža manor house is mentioned among palaces where the owners lived as small rulers (Blomberg 1701, p.277).

In the first quarter of the 19th century, a tall tower was added to the manor house by the architect Shenk. The next alterations went on from 1873 to 1875, overseen by the architect Theodor Zeilert. The last rebuilding, from 1909 to 1912, was supervised by the architect Wilhelm Bockslaff. By then, changes affected manor house interiors, and the tower was pulled down.

The stable and the barn were built, along with the manor house, at the end of the 16th century. The eastern end of the stable was joined to the thoroughfare by a gatehouse. On the south side, along the road, a cattle shed was built, and on the opposite side a coach house and servants' quarters were built. These buildings were grouped around the farmyard. It ended with a hedge, thereby a quadrangular space was formed (Zilgalvis 1995, pp.24-33).

At the beginning of the 19th century, Nurmuiža started to develop as a farm: a variety of farm buildings and a watermill were built. A pond was made for the needs of the watermill. It was built in the valley of the River Jādekša, flooding it for a length of about 400 metres. A dam on wooden piles at the northern end of the pond was made. In the last third of the 19th century, the pond and the dam were altered.

More extensive building work on the Nurmuiža estate was carried out by its owners in the second half of the 19th century, when the flourishing estate increased its revenues. From 1827 to 1923, craftsmen's houses, a greenhouse, a cattle shed, servants' quarters, a gardener's house, an equipment shed, a stable, a granary, a calf shed, a dairy, a carpenter's workshop, a fire equipment store and two grain stores were built there (Zil-

galvis 1995, p.27), so that in the second half of the 19th century, a busy farming estate at Nurmuiža formed. Not all of the farm buildings were arranged around just one yard: a solitary group of buildings began to form a short distance away. The central part of the Nurmuiža estate was the front courtyard of the manor house. Then the farmyard was set up; but a little further away there was a group of buildings standing alone, which included a brewery, a mill and the miller's house.

The whole estate was nationalised in 1920. During the Soviet occupation, a kolkhoz was based on the estate. From 1991 to 2005, the owners of the Nurmuiža estate changed several times.

Around 1827, the Nurmuiža estate was surveyed, and a colour image of it was published in the Paulucci album. The manor house was surveyed in 1949 by the architect Andrejs Holcmanis. In 1986 and 1991, it was surveyed by the architects Andris Ceļmalis and Ilmārs Dirveiks. The castle was surveyed in 1999 by the archaeologists Andris Caune and Ieva Ose. The history of the Nurmuiža estate was researched by the historian V. Kvaskova (1995, 2001).

#### Archaeological research in 2008 and 2009

Since 2006, large-scale restoration work has been carried out on the whole estate. In the course of it, archaeological layers were also touched. The first archaeological investigations were carried out by an expedition from the Institute of Latvian History. The archaeological studies covered the following areas: in 2008 archaeological investigations were applied during the excavation of both the manor ponds, two trenches and one shaft. In 2009, archaeological excavations were carried out in the castle courtyard and cellar, and archaeological investigations were carried out in two trenches and 14 archaeological boreholes (Plate V.2). In all, an area of 285 square metres was studied. In the course of archaeological investigations during pond purification, 39,250 cubic metres of archaeological soil was examined.

Stairs to the basement were uncovered in the foundations of the manor house's southern wall. In the basement between the courtyard and a passage, two brick arches were exposed. The exposed constructions from the 16th century had not been used since they were built. Also, there was no evidence of an earlier building in the area studied, but a cultural layer which applies to the period before the construction of the castle was found



PFig. 1. The book binding (photograph by R. Brūzis).

In the course of the archaeological investigations, we were able to conclude that the cultural layer in the two ponds had been formed since the beginning of the 19th century.

A cultural layer from the 19th century was exposed in the course of digging trenches. Across the bridge of the pond, there was a roadway from the second half of the 19th century. In the archaeological boreholes, the foundations of the gatehouse and the castle walls were exposed. The foundations of the tower were dug to a depth of 0.8 metres, while the manor house had 16th-century foundations dug to a depth of three metres. In a borehole by the west wall of the manor house the foundations of the stairs designed by the architect T. Zeilert were exposed.

Finds from the archaeological investigations include pipe stems and heads, work tools, harnesses and stove ceramics. The artefacts found provide an insight into the everyday life of the manor's inhabitants, the manor's farm, and the history of its construction. They dated the history of the Nurmuiža estate from the 16th to the 20th century.

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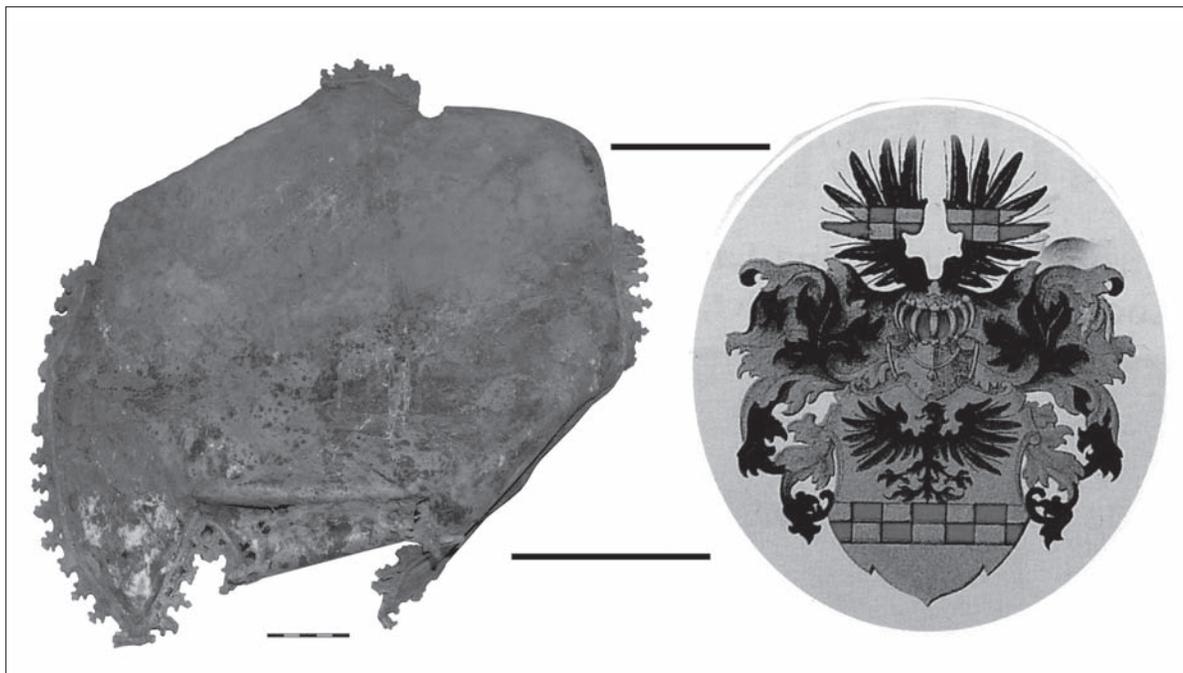


Fig. 2. The escutcheon plate and the coat of arms of the von Fircks family (photograph by R. Brūzis, reconstruction after V. Mašnovskis 2007, p.99).

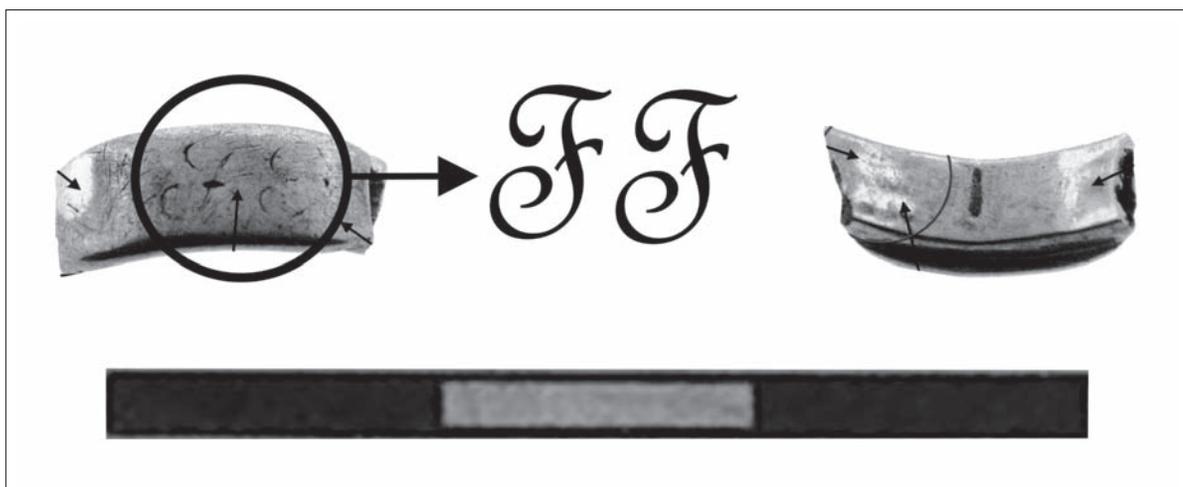


Fig. 3. The segment of a gold ring (reconstruction by R. Brūzis).

## Luxury lifestyle artefacts on the Nurmuiža estate

The most interesting and historically significant finds tell us about luxury aspects of the lifestyle on the Nurmuiža estate. These were: a book binding, escutcheon plate, ring segment, a rifle pull cramp and oyster shells.

The book binding (Fig. 1) was found beside the shore of the northern pond, which is located close to the centre of the Nurmuiža estate. This shaped piece is made of thin bronzed tin. A stylised apple tree is portrayed on the surface, but in the lower part of the tree trunk a snake is shown. In the middle of this part, along the tree's trunk, stylised apples are shown, but beneath them there are lotus flowers. The sides of the part are decorated with symbolic palm tree leaves, but in the lower part it is decorated with rectangular decoration, whose central part is decorated with a grid, and the edges with inclined lines. All the edges around it are decorated with pearl chain ornament. Judging by the biblical motif, it is from the cover or the back of a Bible or prayer book. This decoration of a book's cover fits stylistically into the transition period from Renaissance to Mannerism, and dates from the period from the second half of the 16th century to the beginning of the 17th century. Although the printing of books was possible in this period, books were still very rare. A home library, in which a Bible was one of the most important books, conferred aristocratic prestige in early modern times.

The escutcheon plate (Fig. 2) was found on the bank of the Nurmuiža estate's northern lake. It is made from sheet iron, and its edges are decorated with a row of palmette ornaments, which are made from iron tin. Although the plate has been severely damaged, it is possible to see the remains of the coat of arms of the von Fircks family in the lower part of it. We can make out chequered decoration, which consists of black and white rectangular fields. Judging from the shape of the escutcheon plate, typologically it is similar to the so-called 'English shield', which dates from the end of the 18th to the 20th century. The Neo-Gothic style and the area of palmette decoration proves that this plate was made in the 19th century. Judging by its decorative composition, it mostly resembles epitaphs that were made from tin. These epitaphs were used in the second half of the 19th century. After a funeral, they were placed on the wall near the altar or in the family vault. Often they were duplicates of the escutcheon which were attached to the coffin.

Pictures and bas-reliefs of the coat of arms have been preserved in the interior of the church at Nurmuiža.

Since its origin, the coat of arms has had a very deep meaning. In Latvia, nobles and knights who adopted coats of arms in the 13th century later become manor owners, the owners of large areas of land. Although not only noble families could have a coat of arms, heraldry shows various features which pointed out the status of its owner. For example, in 1620 the von Fircks family became one of the immatriculated families of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia. A sign of this noble status appears in the coat of arm as a crown placed above the shield. This is the first escutcheon find in the history of archaeology in Latvia.

A segment of a gold ring (Fig. 3) was found near the west facade of the manor, in the place called the 'black yard', inside the ruins of a precious porch and stairs whose architect was Theodor Zeilert. The ring was made in the 'hollow' technique, and was decorated with the initials 'FF'. An analysis of the metal content showed a high gold content, 80.19%. This ring belonged to Fridrich von Fircks, who was the owner of Nurmuiža manor in the second half of the 19th century. Although the father of Fridrich von Fircks was also called Fridrich, the manufacture technique of the ring shows that it belonged to the younger Fridrich. The technique of making hollow jewellery appeared in the second half of the 19th century. This technique was primarily used to make large jewellery, like bracelets and brooches, where large quantities of precious metals were needed. The technique allowed for savings on these metals, because it used a precious metal to make the jewellery, but inside it was hollow.

The ring is also a contextually important discovery. It was found near the location of the manor's former stairs and veranda, in a very mixed cultural layer. Therefore, we can date the dismantling of that construction to the end of the 19th century.

A much deformed gun's pull cramp was found (Fig. 4) in the northern pond. The cramp was made from bronze, in figural form, with a specially separated support for the middle finger. It dates from the first half of the 19th century; the cramp was fixed to a hunting rifle at the butt. Hunting has been a popular form of entertainment for the aristocracy since antiquity. Symbolically, it represents dominance, a manifestation of private and public power. Hunting was also an important form of ceremony and protocol. It allowed leading men in society to demonstrate their leadership and courage in a relatively safe environment, outside the military context of armed struggle. Hunting also reflected and highlighted the social hierarchy, as distinct activities in hunting were assigned to different participants. Thirdly, hunting allowed the assertion of rights to the areas in which it occurred.

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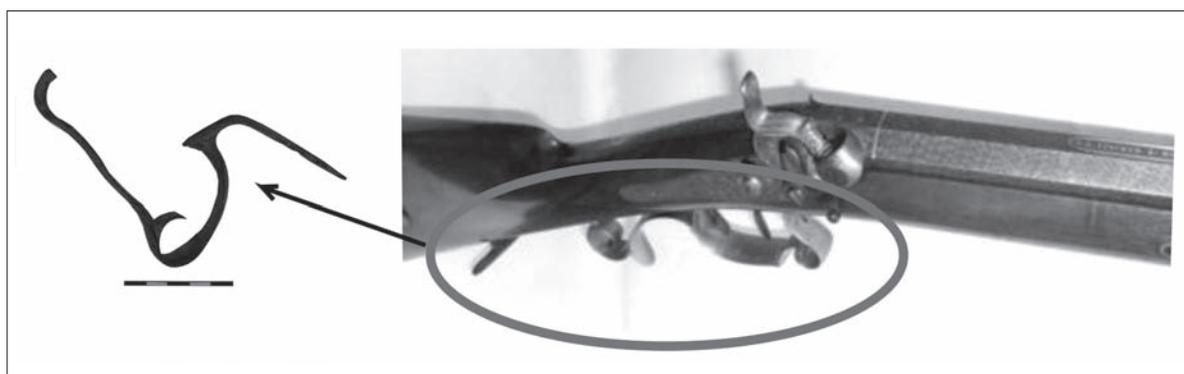


Fig. 4. The gun pull clamp (photograph by R. Brūzis).

Based on the location of hunting ammunition finds, it is possible to identify the local hunting area of the Nurmuiža manor. Two copper chucks from a rifle were found on the eastern slope near the bridge which is located between the two lakes. Lead shot was found at the southern part of the southern lake. These finds are evidence of waterfowl hunting in the lakes of the Nurmuiža manor.

Oyster shells (*Ostrea edulis*) were found by the east and west facade of Nurmuiža castle (Plate V.3). They were in the archaeological layers dated to the 17th and 18th centuries. In total, 26 oyster shells, or parts of oyster shells, were found. These species of oyster were harvested on the North Atlantic coast and then exported to other countries. The 17th and 18th centuries cover the period of existence of the Duchy of Courland. Therefore, it is believed that oysters arrived in Nurmuiža through the port of Ventspils. Oysters as a food contain very few calories, they should be defined as snacks, and yet no formal banquet in the Medieval and early modern period would be imaginable without them. The number of oysters found at the Nurmuiža manor, in relation to the number of animal bones (243 units), indicates the status of exotic gourmet snacks.

## Conclusion

Over two seasons of archaeological research on the Nurmuiža estate, a numerous and interesting collection of 16th to 19th-century artefacts was found. The artefacts provide an insight into the everyday life of the manor's inhabitants, the history of the manor farm, and its construction. A very small part of the collection tells us about the formal life of the Nurmuiža manor owners, the von Fircks family, over the course of four centuries. These artefacts reflect the nobility and wealth of the family, and the desire to impress guests

The Nurmuiža manor house was built at the juncture of two state formations: when the Medieval Livonian Confederation was replaced by the early modern state of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia. This is when the von Fircks family reached its peak in wealth and influence. Over the course of the 17th century, it became one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the duchy, and these processes were followed by a rapid diplomatic career in the duke's court. At the end of the 18th century, when the duchy was incorporated into the Russian Empire, the von Fircks family lost much of their influence. Consequently, the function of the Nurmuiža manor changed from entertaining to being a farming estate. The few luxury lifestyle artefacts reflect the different standards of presentation in those two eras.

## Abbreviation

LVVA – Latvian State Historical Archive (Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs).

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LVVA 2 – Pergamenta un papīra dokumenti. Vidzeme. Livonija. Nīderlande. Piltene. Polija. Zviedrija. Kurzemes un Zemgales hercoga Gotharda apstiprinājums 1566.g. 3. martā noslēgtajam līgumam par Kr. Hordes Nurmīžu muižas pārdošanu G. Firksam. Oriģināls. Pergaments, piekārts sarkanā vaska zīmogs. In: LVVA 2, fund. 5561, description 4, file 537.

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## PRABANGUS GYVENIMAS NURMUIŽOS DVARE

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#### Santrauka

Nurmuižos dvaro komplekss yra Talsiņu rajonā, Laučienē. Dvaro pastatai stovi kairajā Jādekšos upes krantē (VIII: 1–2 ilustr.). Rašytiniuose šaltiniuose kaimo vardas Nurme ar Norme žinomas nuo XIV amžiaus. Tačiau administracinis centras kaime nebuvo įsteigtas iki pat XVI a. pabaigos.

Nuo 1561 m. iki pat 1920 m. Nurme priklausė didikų Fircks šeimai, kuri buvo viena įtakingiausių šeimų Kuršo kunigaikštystėje ir Žiemgaloje. Nurmuižos dvaro statyba sutapo su dvaro rūmų statyba XVI a. pabaigoje. Kartu su rūmais XIX a. buvo pastatytas visas dvaro pastatų kompleksas. Nurmuižos dvaras tapo gamybiniu ūkiu.

Nurmuižos dvaro komplekso archeologiniai tyrimai buvo vykdomi 2008–2009 metais. Per tą laiką buvo iširti 285 m<sup>2</sup>, rasti 102 artefaktai, datuojami XVI–XX a. (1–4 pav.). Pagrindinę radinių dalį sudarė pypkių kandikliai ir galvutės, darbo įrankiai, arklių pakinktų dalys ir kokliai. Tačiau įdomiausi radiniai, kalbantys apie Nurmuižos dvaro prabangą. Tarp tokių daiktų minėtini XVI a. antrosios pusės – XVII a. pradžios knygų apkaustai. Sprendžiant iš bibliinių motyvų, šie apkaustai

puošė bibliją ar maldaknygę (1 pav.). Rastas geležinio herbo skydas, kurio paviršiuje yra Fircks šeimos herbo likučiai (2 pav.). Herbas priklauso vadinamųjų anglišku skydų tipui ir datuotinas XVIII–XX a. Tai pirmas tokio tipo herbas, rastas Latvijos archeologinėje medžiagoje. Tarp radinių išsiskiria auksinis žiedas su inicialais FF, pagamintas vadinamąja tuščiavidure technologija (3 pav.). Šis išskirtinis XIX a. antrosios pusės radinys priklausė Fridrichui fon Firckui – Nurmuižos dvaro savininkui. Rasta ir XIX a. pirmosios pusės figūrinė medžioklinio šautuvo spyruoklė (4 pav.). Matyt, šiuo šautuvu dvaro komplekso tvenkiniuose buvo medžiojami vandens paukščiai. Tačiau labiausiai Nurmuižos dvaro šeiminkų prabangą rodo rastos 26 austrių gėdelės, kuriuos į dvarą turėjo atkelti iš šiaurinės Atlanto vandenyno pakrantės (VIII: 3 ilustr.). Manoma, kad austrės buvo importuojamos per Ventspilio uostą. Aptarti dvaro prabangą atskleidžiantys daiktai ir maistas rodo XVI–XIX a. Nurmuižos dvaro savininkų turtinumą.

Vertė Audronė Bliujienė

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