

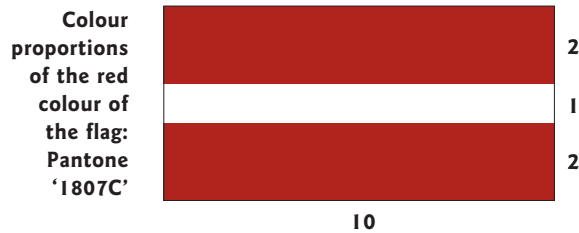


The Republic of Latvia was founded in 1918. Its state symbols have survived through a century of nation building, wars, occupations and liberations. They embody the history, culture and values of those who have lived here by the Baltic Sea for thousands of years.

NATIONAL SYMBOLS OF LATVIA

Text by PhD Raimonds Cerūzis

The official state symbols are the flag, the coat of arms and the national anthem. In addition, the oak tree, amber and the white wagtail are just some of the many natural symbols that appear in Latvian designs and decorations.



The Flag

Written records of the red-white-red Latvian flag have existed since the second half of the 13th century. Bearing a red flag with a white stripe ancient Latvian tribes went to war against ancient Estonian tribes. This historical evidence would place the Latvian flag among the oldest flags of the world.

At the end of the 1860s Latvian student, folklore researcher and later, professor Jēkabs Lautenbahs-Jūsmiņš found reference to the use of a red-white-red flag in The Oldest Rhyming Verse Chronicle of the Livonian Order. The Chronicle depicted events in Latvia in the second half of the 13th century (till 1290) and glorified the feats of the crusaders in converting the pagan inhabitants of the Latvian region to the Christian faith.

Based on the aforementioned historical record, the present day flag design was adapted by artist Ansis Cīrulis in May 1917. The red colour of the Latvian flag is a particular dark red tone that is referred to as 'Latvian red' in the rest of the world. The flag's colour proportions are 2:1:2 (the upper and lower red bands are always twice as wide as the white band in the middle), and the correlation of the width and length of the flag is fixed as 1:2. The Latvian national flag, together with the national coat of arms was affirmed in this format by a special parliamentary decree of the Republic of Latvia that was passed on June 15, 1921.



The Large Coat of Arms

The Coat of Arms

The Latvian national coat of arms was formed after the proclamation of an independent Latvian Republic and was specially created for its independent statehood. The national coat of arms combines symbols of Latvian national statehood as well as symbols of ancient historical districts. The sun in the upper part of the coat of arms symbolises Latvian national statehood. A stylised depiction of the sun was used as a symbol of

distinction and national identity by Latvian riflemen – *latviešu strēlnieki* – recruited into the Russian imperial army during the First World War. During the First World War the sun figure was fashioned with 17 rays that symbolised the 17 Latvian-inhabited districts. The three stars above the coat of arms embody the idea of the inclusion of historical districts (Vidzeme, Latgale and combined Kurzeme-Zemgale) into a united Latvia.

Culturally historical regions are also characterised by older heraldic figures, which already appeared in the 1600s. Kuzeme and Zemgale (Western Latvia) are symbolised by a red lion. The lion appears as early as 1569 in the coat of arms of the former Duke of Kurzeme. Vidzeme and Latgale (Eastern Latvia) are symbolised by the legendary winged silver creature with an eagle's head, a griffin. This symbol appeared in 1566, when the territories known today as Vidzeme and Latgale had come under Polish-Lithuanian control. The Latvian artist Rihards Zariņš designed the Latvian national coat of arms.

The proper use of the Latvian coat of arms is firmly regulated. Three types of symbols are used – large, small enhanced and small.

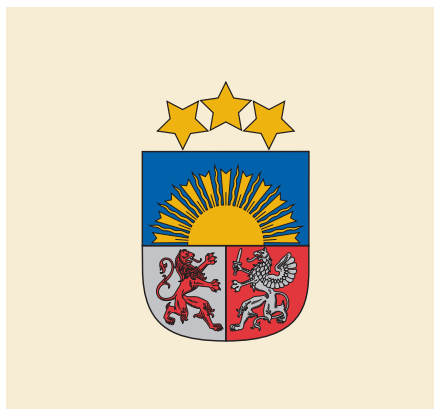
The large coat of arms, for example, can be used by the State President, Parliament, Prime Minister, Cabinet of Ministers, government ministries, the Supreme Court and Prosecutor General, as well as Latvia's diplomatic and consular missions.

The small enhanced coat of arms can be used by agencies of the Parliament, Cabinet of Ministers and other institutions under direct or indirect supervision of the government ministries.

The small coat of arms, for example, can be used by other government institutions, municipal authorities and educational institutions on official documents.



The Small Enhanced Coat of Arms



The Small Coat of Arms

The National Anthem

'*Dievs, svētī Latviju!*' ('God bless Latvia!') is the national anthem. The words and music were written by Kārlis Baumanis (better known as Baumaņu Kārlis). The anthem first appeared in the second half of the 19th century when the Latvian people were beginning to openly exhibit a strong sense of national pride and identity. Kārlis Baumanis was the first Latvian composer to use the word 'Latvia' in a song lyric. The concept of 'Latvia' had only begun to take shape in the minds of writers and activists and was used to describe all regions traditionally inhabited by Latvians. Although most Latvians did not yet dare to dream of a sovereign state totally independent of the Tsarist Russian Empire, the song '*Dievs, svētī Latviju!*' served as a powerful catalyst for the emerging national consciousness. The use of the word 'Latvia' in the song was an open challenge to the Tsarist regime that had little sympathy for national movements.

Initially, Russian authorities forbid the use of the word 'Latvia' in the title and text of the song and it was replaced by the word 'Baltics'. It was performed publicly in June of 1873 at the First Song Festival in Riga. It was first sung as a national anthem on November 18, 1918 at the proclamation of Latvia's independence. On June 7, 1920 '*Dievs, svētī Latviju!*' was officially proclaimed the national anthem of the Republic of Latvia.

Dievs, svētī Latviju!

Baumaņu Kārlis

Maestoso *f*

Dievs, svē-tī Lat-vi-ju, mūs' dār-go tē-vi-ju, svē-tī jel
Lat-vi-ju, ak, svē-tī jel to! to! Kur lat-vju
mei-tas zied, kur lat-vju dē-li dzied, laid mums tur
lai-mē diet, mūs' Lat-vi-jā! Lat-vi-jā!

The National Bird

The Latvian national bird is the *baltā cielava* or white wagtail (*Motacilla alba*). This slender and graceful bird is often found in Latvia from April till October. The white wagtail can usually be seen running briskly along the ground, wagging its tail up and down. This bird usually nests in the rafters and eaves of buildings, woodpiles, stone piles, and birdhouses. During the winter it migrates to Southern Europe and North Africa. The white wagtail was affirmed the national bird of Latvia in 1960 by the International Bird Protection Council.



The National Insect

The Latvian national insect is the two-spot ladybird (*Adalia bipunctata*). The two-spot ladybird is familiar as a useful insect that protects plants from parasites. Although rather slow by nature, it can defend itself well. Due to its appearance and behaviour it is widely known and liked throughout Latvia. The insect's Latvian name – *māriņe* – is a synonym for the ancient Latvian goddess *Māra*, who embodies the power of the earth. The two-spot ladybird was designated the national insect of Latvia by the Latvian Entomologists' Society.



Latvian peasants gathered around a tree, 18th century, drawing by J.C. Brotze

National Trees

The linden, or lime tree (*Tilia cordata*, Latvian: *liepa*) and the oak (*Quercus robur*, Latvian: *ozols*) are considered the national trees of Latvia. Oak and linden trees are characteristic elements of

the Latvian landscape. Both trees are still widely used for medical purposes. Medicinal infusions are made of linden blossoms as well as oak bark. Latvian *dainas* (folk songs) often reflect ethical and moral concepts of earlier times. Amongst other trees, these folk songs most often mention the oak and linden tree.

In traditional Latvian folk beliefs and folklore the linden tree is looked upon as a female symbol, but the oak – a male symbol. The nation's reverence for these trees, which in earlier times were considered sacred, can be witnessed, for example, in a landscape where, in the middle of a cultivated field there still remains a lone large oak or linden tree.



The National Flower

The Latvian national flower is the *pīpene* or daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*, earlier also known as *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum*), which also grows here in the wild. In Latvian conditions the common or wild daisy blossoms from June till September. Daisies are a very popular flower and are often used in flower arrangements or given as gifts.



Amber

Amber has long been viewed as a precious stone associated with the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Latvians themselves have often referred to the Baltic Sea as the Amber Sea (*Dzintarjūra*), reinforcing the symbolic importance of amber (*dzintars*) in Latvian culture and history. Unlike other precious and semi-precious stones which are formed through inorganic chemical processes, Baltic amber (succinite) is formed from organic elements – fossilised pine resin. For this reason, amber absorbs body heat and is easy to shape.

In ancient times Latvian territory was known as a source for amber. Amber from the Baltic Sea coast was valued as component for jewellery and was used for barter in Ancient Egypt, Assyria, Greece and the Roman Empire. At times it was considered even more valuable than gold. Just as in the past, amber today is most commonly used in jewellery. Amber has traditionally been

used to create amulets, pendants, broaches, buttons, necklaces and intricate pieces of decorative jewellery. Amber has also been used for pharmaceutical purposes, since it contains succinic acid, which is considered to have unique medicinal properties.



Symbol of Latvian Destiny – the River Daugava

The Daugava is considered the Latvian national river. The Daugava is the largest river that flows through Latvia (total length 1005 km, of these 352 km flow through Latvian territory).

Known as the 'river of fate' or 'mother of rivers', the Daugava has served as an ancient trade route linking the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, profoundly influencing the flow of Latvian history. For centuries the Daugava has served as an essential transport artery, means of livelihood, and source of energy. (Latvia's hydroelectric stations are located along the Daugava). Today, as in the past, the Daugava serves as a borderline between distinct Latvian cultural and historical regions, separating Kurzeme and Zemgale from Vidzeme and Latgale.



Symbol of Independence – Freedom Monument

The freedom monument, or *Brīvības piemineklis*, in the capital city Riga has become an undisputed symbol of independence. It was built from 1931 until 1935 from donated funds. The monument is designed by Latvian sculptor Kārlis Zāle.

At the base of the monument sculptural reliefs illustrate different significant moments in Latvia's history, while the very top displays the symbol of freedom – a woman who embodies the idea of Latvia's sovereignty. At the foot of the freedom monument there is never a lack of flowers, which are placed here with deep respect for those, who have formed this nation and who have sacrificed their lives in the fight for independence for the good of the nation and its people.

Jāņi

The annual celebration of the summer solstice, known as *Jāņi* is generally viewed as the most important Latvian holiday. *Jāņi* is celebrated on June 23 and 24. The traditions and rituals associated with the celebration of *Jāņi* are deeply rooted in ancient Latvian folklore and continue to have deep symbolic meaning for the celebrants. Participants gather flowers, grasses and oak leaves which are used for making wreaths and decorations. *Jāņi* night activities include the singing of special *Jāņi*

songs (*Līgo* songs) around a ceremonial bonfire. Home-brewed beer and a special *Jāņi* caraway seed cheese are an essential part of this colourful holiday ritual.



FACT SHEET

ON LATVIA

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