

Identity Formation and Diversity in the Early Medieval Baltic and Beyond

Communicators and Communication

Edited by

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Societies East and West of the Baltic Sea: Prehistoric Culture Contacts Revisited

Marika Mägi

When comparing countries around the northern part of the Baltic Sea at present, it is impossible to deny a certain cultural “togetherness”, although this has been greatly restricted by the difficult political circumstances of the twentieth century. Still, we wear similar clothing, use the same artefacts, share similar tastes in design and music, practice similar burial customs, and so on. All of that would seem sufficient for an outside observer or even for future archaeologists to consider us a common cultural sphere. Northern Europe can be identified as a particular cultural sphere from the perspective of central or southern Europe, let alone more distant areas.

However, from a closer perspective, considerable differences between the northern Baltic Sea countries appear, especially in the field of social order, differences which can hardly have emerged solely from the historical circumstances of the twentieth century. What is more, one cannot stress only the differences between east and west, as divergences of similar scale appear between north and south. The following chapter tries to demonstrate the existence of similarities and divergences throughout the prehistoric period as well. The focus will be on Estonian archaeological evidence and its comparison with areas with which contacts have traditionally been regarded as important in the formation of the local culture, in a longer temporal perspective. First of all relations over the sea, and thus mostly archaeology of present-day Latvia, Lithuania, Finland and Sweden, in addition to Estonia, will be discussed (fig. 2.1).¹

The Evolutionist Development Model and Prehistoric Society in the Northern Baltic Sea Area

For interpreting prehistoric societies in these areas, two concepts are inescapable: the dominant evolutionist worldview, and the interconnectedness of scientific research and the political situation.

¹ The writing of this article was conducted in the framework of Project No IUT18–8 of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, and Grant No. ETF9027 of Estonian Science Foundation.



FIGURE 2.1 *Map of the areas discussed*

In the definition of social development, clear-cut paradigmatic differences between archaeologies on the eastern and western shores of the Baltic come to light. Eastern Europe of the twentieth century has been most influenced by the Lewis Henry Morgan – Friedrich Engels – Karl Marx scheme of social development, while on the western shore, the leading scheme is that of Marshall Sahlins, Elman Service, and Morton Fried.² Although the two schools employ seemingly disparate terminology, both schemes rely on an evolutionist paradigm, according to which human society develops from a lower level to a higher one according to certain universal rules. In the archaeologies of Estonia and Latvia in the 1980s, this situation allowed the earlier Marxist social model to be replaced with the Service system without substantial friction. The pre-state stages of social development were now categorized as band, tribe (or segmentary society), and chiefdom.³ The researchers, however, have

² For eastern Europe: Engels 1884/1958; Ligi 1995: 187–89; Šnē 2002: 23–97, 440–45. For western Europe: Fried 1967; Service 1971; Sahlins 1972.

³ e.g. Ligi 1995; Šnē 2002.

organized the stages mentioned and their typical traits in the societies under consideration according to a certain hierarchy, as had been done previously; inevitably, certain societies are defined as “more highly developed” than others.

According to the evolutionist viewpoint, a social order with relatively egalitarian social relations will precede a more hierarchical one. Iron Age Estonia and Finland, which have been defined as societies with egalitarian social relations by almost all investigators, should thus have witnessed retarded social development in comparison with their neighbours. According to that line of thinking, if conquest and Christianization from abroad had not taken place, these societies instead would have witnessed, by virtue of intra-societal resources alone, a more developed hierarchy and thereafter, apparently, even the evolution of statehood.

However, it seems that the egalitarian, or more precisely collective social model has been implanted more deeply in some areas than in others, and its inevitable transition into a deeply hierarchical society even without foreign impulses is far from certain. Furthermore, the term “egalitarian society” is somewhat inaccurate, as it suggests a false impression of general equality. Certain power relations still exist in all societies, and their presence in late Iron Age Estonia and Finland is beyond doubt. Thus, a more promising approach is to focus on the modelling of how power relations are organized and how great a proportion of society has access to power.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the territory of present-day Estonia and Latvia remained politically fractioned, preserving the social relations already typical of the prehistoric periods. In addition to various seigneurs, a strong vassalage existed, and the influence of the latter on political decision-making varied markedly from region to region; in a large part of the territories under consideration, this influence can be considered greater than in contemporary Scandinavia, let alone most countries in western Europe (Raudkivi 2007). Certainly the political authority of the members of the vassalage also varied, and families that were more influential could be clearly distinguished. However, collective traits occasionally appeared in power arrangements, and the society as a whole could be defined as more egalitarian than societies elsewhere Europe – the continuation of a tradition that can be traced back to the prehistoric period.

During the medieval period, a hierarchical social structure with relatively egalitarian or collectivistic traits has usually been regarded as a cultural peculiarity, rather than evolutionary backwardness.⁴ Recognition of similar power structures in Estonia and Latvia has been hindered by the ethnic conflict caused by the German and Danish conquest in the thirteenth century, which

4 compare, e.g., medieval society in Iceland or Gotland, Yrwing 1978; Sawyer 1982: 56–59.

developed into national segregation in later centuries. The latter situation has often been projected back into the Middle Ages by historians, who suppose a highly hierarchical social organization simply on the basis of (assumed) ethnic origin.⁵

Evolutionist prejudices about social order should also be avoided when discussing pre-state structures. A society that appears more egalitarian in its social relations does not necessarily need to be classified at a lower level of development. It would rather be appropriate to speak of cultural singularity, which should also appear in other aspects of society in addition to social relations, e.g. modes of subsistence, gender relations, mythological worldview, or material culture. The roles played by the natural environment in and around the area, the population size, and the regional political situation in the persistence of such a social order is beyond doubt. The existence of a society with a hierarchical social order in the vicinity accordingly influences the situation in a society with more egalitarian relations, and vice versa.

Another essential influence on the interpretation of definite prehistoric societies is the political situation contemporary to the act of interpretation, especially when the contemporary social order is associated with communications in different directions.

In Estonia and Latvia, the essence of archaeology of the nineteenth century was mostly determined by the Baltic Germans, who proposed a so-called Gothic theory. According to this theory, the majority of archaeological monuments of the area were interpreted as a legacy of the Goths, who stopped in the Baltic countries during their peregrinations. The theories developed by the Baltic Germans relied upon the *Kulturträger* concept, according to which archaeological sites could be created only by Germanic peoples, i.e. Goths or Vikings, and never by “primitive” indigenous populations.⁶

The beginning of national movements at the end of the nineteenth century also brought about the association of antiquities with local peoples. Particularly in Estonian archaeology, the heyday of cultural-historic theories resulted in the displacement of the concept of Germanic relations and Gothic theory by that of a strong Scandinavian influence on prehistoric Estonia. In Latvian archaeology of the 1920s and 1930s, the focus was not so much on the role of Scandinavian connections in the formation of local prehistoric culture, but rather on the influences from the south, including Germany.⁷ This clear difference in conceptions about cultural relations in Estonia and Latvia is probably

⁵ e.g. Moora and Ligi 1970; Raudkivi 2007: 19ff.

⁶ Vasks 1999; Tvauri 2003.

⁷ Vasks 1999.

correlated to the markedly stronger influences of Finnish archaeology in Estonia.⁸

The interpretations of the prehistoric period in Finland have long issued from the idea that the coastal areas of Finland have undergone strong Scandinavian influence for most of the period; thus, these areas were seen as peripheries of the Scandinavian cultural sphere. While analysing the formation of the concept, one cannot overlook the fact that Finland belonged to the Swedish state for a long time, and the Swedish-speaking minority still has a rather prominent role in Finnish state and culture. The national movement of Finland, on the other hand, has stressed the importance of Finns during the prehistoric period. Derek Fewster has thoroughly described the spread of anti-Swedish sentiments and the influence of these on interpretations of the prehistoric period, particularly since Finland was incorporated into the Russian Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁹ During the 1920s and 1930s, the idea that influences originating from Scandinavia were central to the formation of local cultures prevailed in both Finnish and Estonian archaeology; these were successfully combined with nationalist interpretations of the prehistoric period.¹⁰

During the Soviet period, connections with the Slavs to the east became a compulsory part of the archaeology of Estonia and Latvia.¹¹ Identification of contacts with Scandinavia in the archaeological material, on the other hand, turned into a form of passive resistance. According to the positivist paradigm dominant in archaeology at that time, such “contacts” were mostly reduced to parallels that could be found in the finds collected, and in similar grave types that could be identified in both territories. The contemporary Finnish archaeology, on the contrary, could operate within an independent state, and the diminishing importance of the Scandinavian influences when interpreting prehistoric society was a characteristic feature of it. Although the coastal areas especially were still considered part of the Scandinavian cultural sphere, a specifically Scandinavian population was no longer assumed to have lived in these areas. Even in the territories where the archaeological material appeared very similar to that of Sweden, the preference was to speak of a Scandinavian-Finnish mixed population.¹²

8 For connections between Finnish and Latvian archaeologies during the interwar period, cf. Buža et al. 1997.

9 Fewster 2006.

10 Kokkonen 1993; Ligi 1995; Vasks 1999; Fewster 2006.

11 Vasks 1999; Ligi 1995: 187–89; Mägi 2002: 8–14; Lang 2006b: 13–40.

12 e.g. Salo 1970: 140ff.

In Estonia and Latvia, a new wave of Scandinavian orientation in interpreting the prehistoric societies appeared in the 1990s, following the restoration of the independence of these states.¹³ Without a doubt, this orientation was connected to the Baltic countries' shift toward political and cultural affiliation with the West, especially the Nordic countries.¹⁴ Similarly to the period of interwar independence, the two most recent decades of Estonian archaeology can be characterized by a relatively greater emphasis on Scandinavian contacts.

The valuation of the influence of Scandinavia or any other region on the archaeology of Estonia and Latvia explicitly depends on the region and the period in question, but in my opinion, an undue emphasis on communication links originating solely from the west has characterized the archaeologies of the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea in recent decades. As the present chapter aims to provide a critical overview of the cultural contacts between the territories under consideration, we will turn now to a discussion of the character and change of these connections over time.

From the Bronze Age Until the Migration Period

Estonian archaeologists have traditionally considered the Bronze Age a period with an especially strong Scandinavian cultural influence on the present Estonian territory. In the prevailing view, the late Bronze Age Scandinavian cultural influence was so significant that it fundamentally shaped cultural development in the current Estonian area during the following millennia. Important keywords in this context include the beginning of the burial tradition in stone graves, the cult of ancestors, and more recently farming; all are considered late Bronze Age cultural loans from Scandinavia.¹⁵

Although the majority of publications emphasize Scandinavian influence on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, the relations were definitely not one-sided. This especially affects central Sweden directly, where pottery from a few Bronze Age fortified settlements even suggests a degree of immigration of colonists from the east.¹⁶ *Tarand* graves dated to the late Bronze Age and the pre-Roman Iron Age have been found from the coast of Södermanland and

13 See e.g. Lang 1995; 1996; Ligi 1995; Mägi 2002 for Estonia; Šnē 1999b; Zariņa 2006; Spirģis 2008 for Latvia.

14 See e.g. Andersson et al. 1997.

15 Lang 1996: 337ff.; 2007: 260–65; Jonuks 2009: 158–215.

16 Jaanusson 1981: 123; on eastern influences see also Bolin 2004.

Uppland. Björn Feldt has connected these with analogous graves distributed in Estonia, Finland, and Latvia and the cultural influences from the east.¹⁷

Eduards Šturms is of the opinion that during the Bronze and pre-Roman Iron Age significant Scandinavian features characterized primarily Estonia, the part of Latvia situated north of the Daugava River, and northern Curonia, whereas impulses from the south prevailed in the southern part of Latvia.¹⁸ Among the Latvian archaeological material of the period under discussion, the ship graves located on the coast of the Kurzeme Peninsula possess the most direct connections to Scandinavia, which, according to Andris Šnē, indicates a short-term Scandinavian colony or the possibility that local inhabitants adapted to Scandinavian practices.¹⁹

It is impossible to disregard Scandinavian traits in the culture of the Bronze Age and the first half of the Iron Age in the Finnish coastal areas. According to Unto Salo, the Bronze Age archaeological material found there is evidently a part of the central Swedish bronze culture – he sees it as the same cultural area. As indicated by Salo, this also meant a population originating from Scandinavia, or more exactly, the current Swedish territory, although he does not consider an outright Scandinavian settlement possible as did the researchers in the 1930s.²⁰ In Finland the treatment of the Scandinavian cultural sphere likewise rests predominantly on similar grave forms, while at the same time ample influences from southern Scandinavia, the east, and the territory of Lusatian culture can be seen in artefactual material. According to Salo, a certain influx of inhabitants from Scandinavia is also implied by house remains and building culture typical of Scandinavia.²¹

In the Finnish pre-Roman Iron Age, on the other hand, Salo sees southern influences of the *tarand*-grave culture, in both grave forms and artefacts. In his view, the influence of the Curonian cultural sphere at the beginning of the Roman Iron Age is so strong that a definite Curonian settlement can be identified at the estuary of the Kokemäen River. Salo considers that the distribution of *tarand* graves indicates new residents from the south as well.²²

As in Finland, the interpretation of Scandinavian influences in Estonia relies mainly on graves. The tradition of connecting Estonian stone-cist graves persistently with Scandinavian influence started with Birger Nerman

17 Feldt 2005: 127–39.

18 Šturms 1935.

19 Šnē 1999a.

20 e.g. Tallgren 1937.

21 Salo 1970: 140–52.

22 Salo 1970: 152–67.



FIGURE 2.2 *Reconstruction of Tõnija Tuulingumäe Roman Period tarand-grave, Saaremaa*
 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

and is directly linked to the evolutionist and political factors in interpreting prehistory presented above. According to Nerman, the founders of Estonian stone-cist graves might have been migrants from Gotland or central Sweden.²³ Estonian archaeologists have generally considered local people the erectors of stone-cist graves, although the idea of the direct takeover of the grave form from Scandinavia has persisted as well.

In Estonia stone-cist graves have long been interpreted as family burial sites in which the head of household was buried in the central cist and other family members in the part of the grave enclosed with a circle surrounding the central cist. With the Marxist view of social formations ascendant, the Bronze and pre-Roman Iron Ages in Estonia began to be observed as “the period of patriarchal clan society”; accordingly, the stone-cist grave was now identified as the burial place of a nuclear family, with groups of graves representing extended families.²⁴ In a rather similar interpretation of *tarand* graves (fig. 2.2), a single *tarand* was suggested to be the burial site of a nuclear family, with the grave as a whole belonging to an extended family.²⁵ Although Marxist terminology has since been discarded, a new treatment of the organization of the society that

²³ Nerman 1933.

²⁴ Moora 1954; Lang 2006a: 86–87.

²⁵ Moora 1954; Lang 2006a: 87–88.

buried their dead in the stone-cist and *tarand* graves has yet to be proposed by most Estonian archaeologists dealing with this period; thus by default the old interpretation remains in force. Nevertheless, the terminology has changed: Estonian society since the late Bronze Age has been now defined explicitly as a chiefdom, or more vaguely as a social order that, in its characteristic features (e.g. the private ownership of arable lands), is still akin to a chiefdom.²⁶

Since the mid-1990s biological analysis has begun on the generally excellently-preserved osteological material of Estonian stone-cist graves as well as the so-called early and classically joined *tarand* graves of the first half of the Iron Age. This has implied a picture of the buried people different from the earlier one, a result that should change the concept of the society that erected the graves. In the case of Estonian stone-cist graves we should not discuss individual but rather collective burial sites, where bones of many individuals, including those of males, females, and children in relatively equal proportions, which had previously been placed elsewhere, have been brought. Collectivist tendencies in Estonian burial tradition were even further intensified in the pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age *tarand* graves, whose construction does not allow the display of particular parts of some of the buried individuals.

According to anthropological parallels, the secondary burial customs, where bones of individuals from different sex and age are mixed together, primarily characterize segmentary societies with extensive agriculture. These are mostly societies whose members reside in communal houses and where clan origin is of major importance. Even in these cases a complete burial ritual is not available to all individuals but only to a certain section of the population, for example only for the members of the single dominant family from every longhouse. The perceptions of death and the beyond will vary, but as a rule the rituals used to emphasize the connection to ancestors have especially enormous significance in analogous societies.²⁷

Another characteristic feature of pre-Migration Period stone graves is the scarcity or total absence of weapons, with the exception of a short period around the beginning (c.1 A.D.) of the era under consideration here, as will be discussed below. Neither a single warrior grave nor even a collectivist burial site with abundant weapons is known from Estonia from such an early period. Although in some periods a similar phenomenon characterizes certain regions around the Baltic Sea – for example, the area of Wielbark culture in Poland – the burial customs there still emphasize individuality.²⁸ In the case of Estonia

26 Lang 1996: 465ff.; 2007: 221–65.

27 For anthropological examples and the analysis of rituals see e.g. Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 79–161; Carr and Knüsel 1997: 167–69.

28 e.g. Kaliff 2001: 26–41; Pawleta 2003.

the occurrence mainly of jewellery as grave goods stresses the suggestion of a segmentary ranked society, which had formed on the basis of the unquestionably collective burials and where the rank-based membership of a clan took precedence over warrior status. Although jewellery cannot be connected to individuals, one might suggest that the majority of these adorned the representatives of both sexes, thus meaning that we are dealing with the “ungendered” items.

The Roman Iron Age with copious jewellery in Estonian graves is in marked contrast to the period's abundant finds of weapons in the graves of the majority of countries directly surrounding Estonia. The latter, however, are mostly connected to individual burials.²⁹ The absence of weaponry in Estonian graves implies that in this society warriors did not have as important a role as in many neighbouring countries, and social prestige was rather emphasized by means of “soft” elements based on family origin – jewellery and perhaps the burial site itself.³⁰

The structure of society is more or less directly connected with subsistence practice. Until the mid-1990s researchers shared the opinion that a simple two-rotation system and swidden cultivation dominated in Estonian territory until the fifth or sixth century.³¹ In 1995 Valter Lang proposed that the communal ownership of land and shifting slash-and-burn agriculture by the end of the Bronze Age had already been replaced by the individual ownership of land and permanent fields, the direct evidence of which is the emergence of Celtic and Baltic field systems.³² In the opinion of the present author the emergence of Celtic fields need not have symbolized the ownership of arable lands by single farmsteads; the latter is not indicated by defining stone graves as the burial sites of families either – presuming that only the members of the dominant family were allowed to be buried there.³³ The burial custom as a whole, as demonstrated above, rather indicates collective ownership of land, as suggested even before Lang's publications.

In the second half of the 1990s the physical anthropologist Jonathan Kalman, in his analysis of bones from multiple gravesites, indicated that the prevalence of dental caries among the people of the first half of the Estonian Metal Ages

29 e.g. in Finland, Sweden, and western Lithuania, see e.g. Nerman 1935: 121–29; Tautavičius 1968; Salo 1984; Rasch 1994; Banytė-Rowell 2001; Michelbertas 2002.

30 Mägi 2007.

31 e.g. Jaanits et al. 1982: 300.

32 Lang 1995.

33 Lang generally portrays these as the dwelling sites of nuclear families; see Lang 1996: 355–58. For earlier similar opinions in Sweden and their respective counter-arguments see e.g. Göthberg 2000: 93–122.

was significantly lower than is usually characteristic of areas with intensive agriculture. As the disease is positively correlated with the use of subsistence farming – which caused more sugar- containing plant material to become a larger source of food – Kalman accordingly suggests that agriculture, although known in the present Estonian territory, hardly formed a dominant part of the economy during the first half of the Iron Age. Whereas in agricultural Neolithic Denmark the prevalence rate of caries was 2.3 per cent, on the basis of the bones from graves the rate in Estonia was only 1 per cent during the Bronze Age and 3.5 per cent in the pre-Roman Iron Age. However, the prevalence of caries gradually increased in Estonia as well, which according to Kalman corresponds to the intensification of agriculture.³⁴

Kalman's observations support the interpretation of collectivist features of Estonian burial custom. In most cases segmentary societies form during the transition to agriculture and are characterized by minimally-intensive farming. From North American areas where environmental conditions are similar to those in Estonia, examples of segmentary societies can be cited among corn-growing, partly hunting tribes before and immediately after European colonization.³⁵ In southern Scandinavia the mixed secondary burials were characteristic of the Megalith culture, thus reflecting the period of the transition to farming economy there as well. The Danish researcher Niels Andersen has connected the burials with mixed bones from the Funnel Beaker Culture directly with the period of extensive agriculture.³⁶ In northern and central Europe, the intensification of agriculture coincided with the emergence of the Single Grave culture, the end of the erection of huge cultic structures characteristic of the Megalith culture, and the change of the social structure already at the end of the Neolithic.³⁷ The transition to individual burials occurred in tandem with the transition to a more intensely hierarchized form of social organization, which has often been called chiefdom. According to Kristian Kristiansen, the process took place in southern Scandinavia approximately 1600 B.C. and was a result of settlement expansion and increased exploitation of the landscape.³⁸ Estonia did not undergo a comparable process until the Migration Period.

Some changes in the local culture took place around the turn of the era, thus at the end of the pre-Roman Iron Age when more grave goods – including

34 Kalman 2000a; 2000b.

35 Fagan 1991: 305–426.

36 Andersen 2000.

37 e.g. Bradley 1998; Andersen 2000; Guilaine and Zammit 2005: 158ff.

38 Kristiansen 1987.

weapons – were placed in graves almost everywhere on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. In the general picture, differences among the burial customs of various regions of Estonia, Finland, and Latvia were vividly expressed during this period and thereafter.

In Estonia graves from the end of the pre-Roman Iron Age are mostly known from coastal areas. Single weapons occurred around the turn of the era among the grave goods, which generally consisted of jewellery, belt fragments, and pottery. Archaeologists have been unable to connect these weapons to individual burials, as the bones in these graves have been completely mixed; while the weapons (as other artefacts) at the time of burial were probably associated with a particular person, as a result of the burial rites we are unable to ascribe the ownership of a given weapon to a particular set of bones. To a limited extent, the placing of weapons in graves seems to indicate an elevated importance of the warrior in society and thus perhaps the intensification of intra-social hierarchy. The emergence of small fortifications in several places in Estonia supports the latter interpretation. Both weapons and fortifications, however, had already disappeared by the beginning of the Roman Iron Age, thus remaining a short-term phenomenon. The burial custom of *tarand* graves, which during the Roman Iron Age spread everywhere over the present Estonian area, seems to manifest a completely collectivist social organization.

The present Latvian and Lithuanian coastal areas welcomed a new grave type around the turn of the era, named stone-cist graves in the literature, which were characterized by abundant grave goods of weapons and by individual burials.³⁹ During the following period weapons became more common in graves than previously, and single, richly-furnished warrior graves seem to reflect an abrupt intensification of social hierarchy.⁴⁰

Weapons were already being placed in the Scandinavian-like burial sites in Finnish coastal areas during the Bronze Age. The pre-Roman Iron Age there was generally poor in grave goods, but at the end of the period and especially during the Roman Iron Age richly-furnished individual warrior burials emerged; these are usually associated with population from either Scandinavia or continental Europe.⁴¹ Although *tarand* graves also spread in Finland during the end of the pre-Roman Iron Age, the Roman Iron Age, and the Migration Period, their find material differed from Estonian *tarand* graves due to the presence of weapon graves – admittedly, not found in all similar graves.⁴²

39 Tautavičius 1968; Banytė-Rowell 2001; Michelbertas 2002.

40 e.g. Banytė-Rowell 2007; Bliujienė and Butkus 2007.

41 e.g. Pihlman 1985; Salo 1984: 220–23; 1995.

42 Salo 1984: 199–223.

In Finland, individual burials occurred alongside collective burial sites. The amount of the latter increased after the third century A.D. as cremation and the custom of destroying grave goods became dominant.⁴³

Thus, after the turn of the era at the latest, a different development can be traced in the social organization of the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. This development possibly could be associated with ethnic origin – strongly collective traits in burial custom seem to characterize the areas inhabited by the Baltic Finns to a greater degree than other areas. Strong cultural uniformity with Scandinavia is continuously illustrated in Finnish coastal areas, whereas communication between Scandinavia and the present Estonian and Latvian territory seems to have significantly diminished. While in Lithuania and the majority of Latvia archaeological material may well suggest a hierarchized society, in the present Estonian area we are most likely dealing with a persistently segmentary society throughout the Roman Iron Age.

Some researchers have proposed a relatively short existence for so-called segmentary societies – having adopted cultivation, it quickly became intensive and fostered the continuous growth of social hierarchization.⁴⁴ On the basis of the above it can be suggested that in some northern areas, e.g. Estonia and Finland, cultivation remained modest for a considerably longer time, thus maintaining a social structure more egalitarian than those in the regions with intensive agriculture.⁴⁵ The society of the Bronze Age or the first half of the Iron Age in Estonia and Finland cannot be defined as a chiefdom if only due to the lack of individual burial sites and weapon graves. This, however, indicates a very significant difference; if early Metal Age Estonia is compared with contemporary southern Scandinavia, this simultaneously throws doubt upon the theories of a particularly strong Scandinavian influence during the late Bronze Age.

The difference in social structures apparently resulted in a difference in ideology between the eastern and western shores of the Baltic Sea during the first half of the Metal Age. The cult of ancestors is a universally distributed phenomenon and therefore it is difficult to prove whether its emergence in the present Estonian area proceeded from a particular Scandinavian cultural impulse. Moreover, on the basis of several indicators, the cult of ancestors might be considered more intense in the areas inhabited by Baltic Finns than in Scandinavia.⁴⁶ Mythological worldview is connected with social organization,

43 Salo 1984: 208.

44 Fried 1967: 109–85.

45 On Finland see also Shepherd 1999: 33–47.

46 See e.g. Shepherd 1999: 45–46.

and therefore the worldview of one society is unlikely to take over directly in another society with a different social organization. Thus, in the case of the Baltic Finn areas, it is impossible to discuss with certainty whether there was a direct linkage into the Scandinavian cultural sphere during the Bronze Age, let alone the first half of the Iron Age. A part of the Finnish coastal areas has to be excluded from this interpretation, as in some places there a population ethnically and culturally uniform with Sweden can probably be suggested.

Still, there are ample grounds for discussing communication, which in some periods became more intense than in others. Here too the automatic treatment of communication as unilateral should be avoided as an assumption that often rests only on traditional attitudes. Nevertheless, Bronze Age impulses from the east are apparent in the archaeological record in central Sweden, thus indicating that relations were reciprocal.

From the Migration Period Until Christianization

All over Europe, the period from the fifth to the seventh century was one of momentous transformation. For most areas surrounding the northern part of the Baltic Sea, this period witnessed the appearance of burials richly furnished with weapons. Usually, these are interpreted as an increase in the role of warriors in society, a rapid increase of hierarchization and in some areas as first indications of the appearance of states. On the eastern shores of the Baltic, changes from that period have been explained almost universally as a sudden increase of Scandinavian cultural influence.⁴⁷ The extent of the changes that actually took place in the societies of various areas on the eastern shores of the Baltic seems to be directly connected to earlier developments in the respective societies. The peculiarity of the archaeological material from Estonia and parts of Finland in comparison with that of their neighbours nevertheless still catches the eye.

In Estonian burial customs, the changes were reflected in the first place by the appearance of weapons in graves from the fifth to seventh century, as well as individual cremation burials that have been recorded in western Estonia.⁴⁸ Individual burials also took place in the sand barrows of south-eastern Estonia from the fifth and sixth centuries, and in the stone-circle graves of Saaremaa from the seventh century (fig. 2.3).⁴⁹ Judging from the weapons found together with cremated bones, most of the individual burials seem to be male, thus

47 e.g. Pihlman 1990: 17–19; Schauman-Lönnqvist 1996; Høiland-Nielsen 2000; Žulkus 2000; Bitner-Wroblewska 2001: 121–27; Raninen 2005.

48 Mandel 2003.

49 Aun 1992: 78–113; Mägi 2002: 125–32.



FIGURE 2.3 *Viking Age stone-circle graves at Piila, Saaremaa*
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

reflecting the triumph of warrior attributes as well as individuality. The same situation has been noted in Finland, where these phenomena have formed the basis for suggesting that a so-called double ideology dominated in the society: on the one hand, stressing individuality and warrior attributes, which, however, only included a section of the male inhabitants; and on the other hand, emphasizing collectivity, which had already begun during the previous period.⁵⁰

The number of Estonian burials from the fifth to the eighth century is surprisingly small, especially compared to the contemporary abundance of finds from the neighbouring areas. From the fifth or sixth century onwards, stone cemeteries without formal structure with indiscernible cremation burials are known; during the following centuries, this type emerged as the dominant grave type.⁵¹ In the coastal areas and islands of Estonia, so-called single-*tarand* graves spread during that period; these were possibly one-time mortuary

50 Purhonen 1996: 126–28; Wickholm and Raninen 2006.

51 Selirand 1974; Mägi 2002: 125–32; Mandel 2003.

houses, where the human bones – either cremated or not – appeared in a mixed form, in accordance with the older tradition.⁵²

In both Estonia and Finland, individual burials with weapons spread in the coastal areas, i.e. in territories where communication across the sea played an important role.⁵³ According to the present author, in Estonia it was during the fifth to seventh centuries that Scandinavian influence was remarkably intense, affecting even changes in social structure, apparently accompanied by ideology justifying the latter. Directly in archaeological material, i.e. grave types and finds, however, the similarity to Scandinavia during the fifth to seventh centuries appeared only partial, and even that was limited to certain areas. Items of Scandinavian origin can be found, as expected, in luxuriously furnished weapon graves, both individual and collective ones, while in most of collective stone graves, either items widespread in the eastern Baltic or those developing further local traces prevailed; in the main, these were ornaments.

As in Finland, the archaeological material from Estonian coastal areas bears witness to a sort of duality. On the one hand, the period is characterized by the appearance of rich and sometime individual burials of warriors; the items in the burials, and occasionally the burial custom itself, demonstrate a sort of similarity to contemporary burials in Scandinavia, especially Sweden. It may be assumed that those buried in this way belonged to a military elite, which had recently increased its influence in society. The Scandinavian element present in their burials indicates the possibility that their contacts with elites in Scandinavia constituted one source of their social prestige. It seems likely that these contacts in fact involved their military service for the leaders of the nascent petty kingdoms in the region of present-day Sweden and Denmark.

On the other hand, one of the characteristics of Estonian archaeological finds from the Migration Period and pre-Viking Age is that the ornaments in use develop stepwise more specific, local traces. These ornaments bear significant similarities to those of other areas on the eastern shore of the Baltic, but few similarities to the ornaments of Scandinavia can be seen. In graves, the same tendency can be seen in the collective burials that still dominate. Anna Wickholm and Sami Raninen have interpreted the collective burials in Finland during the later part of the Iron Age – where ornaments constitute a large share of the grave goods – as the burial places of women and non-warrior men.⁵⁴ The present author considers the persistence of collective burials, where ornaments comprise the most dominant group of grave goods, as

52 Mägi 2005; 2006.

53 e.g. Mägi 2002; Pihlman 1990; Raninen 2005.

54 Wickholm and Raninen 2006.

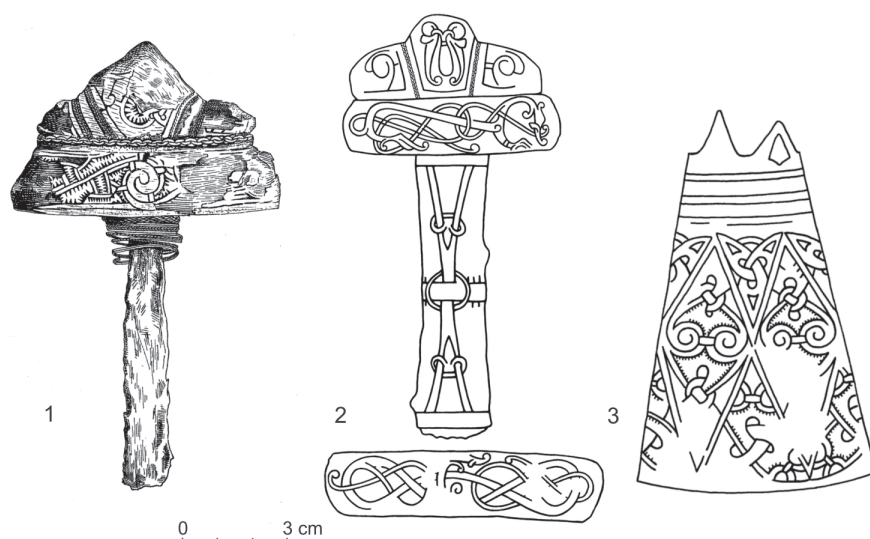


FIGURE 2.4 Three examples of about 30 Estonian sword hilts and more than 30 spear-head sockets decorated in Scandinavian animal styles. Nos. 2 and 3 represent local variants 1 – LIIVA-PUTLA (MUSEUM OF SAAREMAA 6048), 2 – MAIDLA (ESTONIAN HISTORY MUSEUM 839: 1, 2), VILTINA (INSTITUTE OF HISTORY 3884: 3905). FROM: JETS 2013, FIGS. 13: 1; 18; 16: 1

an indication of the continuation of older social structures. There should be no great difference, in the ideological sense, in whether the partial skeletons of the members of some kind of unit, probably a large family, either cremated or not, were brought to a common *tarand* grave, as was the case during the previous period, or whether the cremated remains of skeletons were scattered between the stones of a grave without a formal structure. The persisting domination of that burial practice seems to point to the endurance of clan-based segmentary societies, although a new military elite was forming among them.

Warrior burials, richly furnished with weapons, appeared in other areas on the eastern and south-eastern coast of the Baltic Sea during the Migration Period, where these have been directly connected with the cultural influence of Scandinavia and the appearance of a military aristocracy (fig. 2.4). As a characteristic pattern, it should be pointed out that also in other eastern Baltic areas apart from Estonia and Finland, cultural orientation to Scandinavia mostly influences coastal areas, while in the inland regions changes in social order remain modest, at least according to archaeological sources.⁵⁵ Still, in

55 e.g. Žulkus 2000; Bitner-Wróblewska 2001: 121–27.

the territories of present-day Latvia and Lithuania, individual burials prevailed, and numerous occurrences of weapons in male graves were characteristic of the latter. Especially in the burial practices of Lithuania, a few princely, furnished inhumation burials stand out, indicating that the social structure was deeply hierarchical, due in large part to the military aristocracy.⁵⁶ The constitution of Iron Age societies in the territory of present-day Lithuania thus included greater similarities with southern Scandinavia than has ever been proposed on the basis of material from Estonia or Finland.

In the burial customs of the territories on the eastern side of the Baltic Sea, the dominance of warrior attributes usually continued after the Migration Period. In Estonian territory, on the other hand, this phenomenon remained relatively short-lived. The eighth to tenth centuries in these areas were characterized again by generally collectivistic burial customs with remarkably limited grave goods, among which weapons were relatively exceptional. The existing individual burials are concentrated on Saaremaa and south-eastern Estonia, but usually weapons were not used in these to manifest status.⁵⁷ The archaeological material in general, however, still indicates certain changes in the structure of society. In the first place, this is evident in the numerous hillforts that were constructed throughout Estonia during and after the Viking Age. The social structure had become clearly more hierarchical, but parallel to this, older, evidently clan-based structures continued to exist.

A pivotal change in the archaeological material from Estonia can be seen around the year 1000. From then on, throughout the country, considerably more graves contained weapons. At the same time, the number of grave goods increased, although stone graves without formal structure and with indiscernible cremation burials remained the dominant grave type. From the end of the tenth century onwards, inhumation burials began to spread. The amount of weapons and other grave goods in all types of graves increased through the next centuries, reaching a peak in the mid-twelfth century.⁵⁸ In tandem with the changing burial customs, new and stronger hillforts were erected. Without doubt, the society existent at the end of the Iron Age in Estonia was much more hierarchical than it had been previously; it might be defined as a chiefdom. The latter term, however, is rather vague, and the chiefdom in late prehistoric Estonia cannot be strictly compared to the social structure in Viking Age Scandinavia, or for instance in Lithuania.

⁵⁶ e.g. Tautavičius 1981; Vaitkunskienė 1995.

⁵⁷ Mägi 2002: 125–32; Aun 1992: 85–134.

⁵⁸ Mägi 2002: 142–45.

Relations between genders are connected to the general structure of society, and some investigators have considered more egalitarian gender relations as characteristic of societies more egalitarian in a social sense.⁵⁹ Comparatively egalitarian relations between the genders are more widespread in segmentary societies than in those where warrior status generally had greater importance. In regions with climatic conditions similar to northern Europe, such as parts of North America, quite a number of segmentary societies have been matrilineal.⁶⁰ The different presentation of social values in the archaeological material of Estonia and Finland as compared with other areas may thus be correlated to a difference in the role of women in traditional social order, which in Estonia and Finland was manifested in “soft” values and was not so much affected by the cultural influence of Scandinavia.

In the territories on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea inhabited by ethnic Balts, the clear distinction between male and female grave goods is characteristic, appearing especially clearly in the material from the later part of the Iron Age. Although even male graves are rich in ornaments in these territories, these usually belong to types different from those in female graves.⁶¹ Such a clear distinction of gender in grave goods, and thus probably among items used in real life, is characteristic of other chiefdoms with a military aristocracy, including larger parts of Scandinavia during most of the prehistoric periods.⁶² In Estonian territory, on the other hand, the amount of ungendered artefacts seems to be remarkable. A large proportion of ornament types, for example, could be used by either men or women.⁶³ This tendency is much less distinguishable in the archaeological material from Finland, especially the coastal areas, and in Estonia it also seems to diminish toward the end of the Iron Age. The great number of ungendered items in Estonian archaeological material can however be logically connected to other collectivistic and egalitarian tendencies in society, which appear in other types of material.

Although the Viking Age has traditionally been depicted in the archaeological writings of the countries on the eastern shore of the Baltic as a period second only to the Bronze Age in terms of strong Scandinavian influences, this assumption should be treated with certain reservations. At least in some areas, the hierarchization of society and enhancement of the warrior status may not

59 e.g. Kent 1999.

60 e.g. Rothenberg 1980; Leacock 1981: 13–32; Rapp 1997; Williams 1997; Kent 1999; Troccoli 1999.

61 e.g. Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė 1997; Bliujienė 1999; Radinš 1999; Žiemgaliai 2005.

62 e.g. Rundkvist 2003; Jørgensen 1990; Härke 1992.

63 Mägi 2002: 75–124; 2009b.

be a direct Scandinavian influence, but rather the aftermath of influences from a more general political and cultural background. The social organization of Estonia, and in a broad sense that of Finland, differed from that of neighbouring countries so markedly that certain changes were inevitable. The persistence of collective burials, and their even greater distribution in some regions, e.g. Saaremaa, thus reflects the strong position of collective tendencies even in the altered social order.⁶⁴

A certain similarity appears in the Estonian and Swedish artefactual material during the Viking Age. Whether it involves the mostly one-sided Scandinavian influence as has been traditionally believed is questionable.⁶⁵ According to new data, an entire series of artefact types that have previously been considered to proceed from Gotland or Finland have their roots east of the Baltic Sea, and only afterwards spread into Scandinavia.⁶⁶ Numerous artefact types shared in Sweden and the eastern Baltic were, on the western shore of the sea, distributed mostly in areas where the artefactual material is generally characterized by the richness of items of eastern origin – primarily in Gotland and the Mälaren Valley in central Sweden. Plenty of artefact types, which were simultaneously spread in the eastern Baltic, including the island of Saaremaa, occurred as grave goods in the burials known from Gotland from the period under discussion.⁶⁷ A possible opposite direction of distribution is also indicated by, for example, the large quantity of artefacts of eastern origin gathered from Birka, including the so-called Baltic Finnish pottery.⁶⁸ However, it is especially the jewellery connected with women, as well as the ornamentation on jewellery, that is clearly different in Estonia and elsewhere in the eastern Baltic from the contemporary Scandinavian material.⁶⁹

With reference to burial customs, few parallels can be found between Viking Age Estonia and Scandinavia, especially considering that west of the Baltic Sea Christian burial customs were already spreading during the Viking Age. Excluding the exceptional cemeteries of Birka, we are predominantly dealing with cremation burials in Viking Age central Sweden, which were, however, individual burials, unlike Estonian and Finnish stone settings. Still, certain similarities do exist in places between the individual cremation burials of Sweden

64 Mägi 2007.

65 e.g. Nerman 1929.

66 Mägi 2002: 83–124.

67 e.g. Stenberger 1961; Thunmark-Nylén 1983; 1991.

68 Ambrosiani and Bäck 2007.

69 e.g. Tönnis 1974; Mägi-Lõugas 1993; 1994; 1995; Mägi 1997; Vaska 1996; 2008; Bliujienė 1999.

and Saaremaa.⁷⁰ Cremation burials, including burials of a collective character in big burial pits, also dominated at the end of the Iron Age in Curonia.⁷¹

With regard to the Scandinavian influence, the areas on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea differ from each other during the Viking Age. The Finnish archaeological material traditionally has more features in common with Scandinavia, also comprising the female jewellery where several types are considered local developments of jewellery from Gotland or central Sweden.⁷² In Karelia or the Liv areas, local women adopted Scandinavian oval fibulae, though developing these into local types.⁷³ Several artefact types found in Curonia are associated with Scandinavian influence, but in the inland areas of Latvia and Lithuania the influence from across the sea remained more modest, as expected.⁷⁴

There is no doubt that communication across the sea played an important role in the northern region of the Baltic Sea during the Viking Age; also the role of eastern Vikings, who mostly originated from Sweden, cannot be overestimated in the process. The latter are connected with trade, and the Scandinavian cultural influence seems to be more intense in the areas traversed by international trading routes. However, the intensity of cultural contacts with Scandinavia is not merely defined by geopolitical location. The Viking Age contacts and influences seem rather to proceed from the surface of cultural similarities and differences that had already characterized previous periods. The distinctiveness of Estonian territory compared to several close neighbours can be detected in this respect as well.

The cultural presence of Scandinavians is observable in the lower reaches of the Daugava River, where a Scandinavian colony might be indicated by the trading centre situated next to the Daugmale hillfort.⁷⁵ In other coastal areas, including Curonia and the island of Saaremaa which were assumed to play significant roles in the international trade directed to the east, intense relations with Sweden can be observed in the archaeological material of the Viking Age; compared to some neighbouring regions, however, the cultural uniformity with Scandinavia appears to have remained relatively modest.⁷⁶ The latter statement is primarily valid for artefacts associated with women, whereas weapons and jewellery of men were considerably more international.

70 Mägi 2002: 125–32.

71 e.g. Balodis 1940; Kulikauskas et al. 1961: 387–88; Stankus 1995; Žulkus 2000; Mägi 2007.

72 Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984.

73 Kochkurkina 1982: 80–125; Spirgis 2008.

74 Bliujienė 1999; Radiš 1999; Bertašius 2005; Žiėmgaliai 2005.

75 Mägi 2011.

76 Bliujienė 2008; Mägi in press b.

In the opinion of the present author, the fact that Scandinavian features on Estonian territory are mostly limited to warrior attributes can be attributed to the differences in social structure and ideology that could already be observed in all previous periods. Although the society of the final centuries of prehistory in Estonia might be considered hierarchical, nevertheless, judging by the burial customs, it had strongly collectivist traits. One might suggest that society was divided into clans, each with a single dominant family. The representatives of the clan during periods of peace as well as the military leaders were chosen among the clan members; they could vary and possess control only over certain social aspects. Some of the dominant families probably had a bigger role than others but this authority rested on collective ownership and power, i.e. that of families, and could not be directly associated with specific individuals. One might guess that gender relations in this society were more balanced than in the more individually hierarchized and warrior-centred neighbouring societies. The role of women in this social structure might have ensured them an independent social position within certain limits – it is possible that the society was matrilinear or women participated in the administration of the clans (as in, for example, several indigenous North American societies).⁷⁷ Nevertheless, one might suggest that the position of some of the women in society was high and the status was indicated after death by weapons that sometimes appear in richly-furnished female burials in the areas inhabited by the Baltic Finns.⁷⁸

The continuation of the more collective social model in the areas inhabited by the Baltic Finns in contrast to that in the neighbouring countries may have been partly fostered by the harsh northern climate and excessive stoniness of the soil, which held cultivation to a less intense level for a longer period of time than was the case with the southern neighbours. According to Shepherd, who has dealt with Finnish burial customs, the collective mode of burial was conditioned by the widespread swidden cultivation and the system of extended families supporting it.⁷⁹ At the same time, it would be an over-simplification to attribute the long-term preservation of collectivist features in social structure solely to subsistence practice. Estonian farming practices in the second half of the Iron Age are widely held to have differed little from those in the neighbouring countries. During the previous periods similar natural conditions for

⁷⁷ Mägi 2009; see also Blomkvist 2005: 172–91.

⁷⁸ Tönnisson 1974: 109, Tabs II, VI; Kochkurkina 1981: 92–93, pl. 15; 1982: 46; Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982: 36–37; 1984: 402–03; Korkeakoski-Väisänen 1988: 70–72; Šnore 1996: 123; Mägi 2002: 71–81; Zariņa 2006: fig. 1.191; Laul and Valk 2007: 45.

⁷⁹ Shepherd 1999: 33–47.

cultivation could be found, for instance, in central Sweden; however, differences in archaeological material in these areas could be detected as early as the Bronze Age.

Shepherd points to the conservatism of burial customs whereby collectivity in burial traditions could continue long after significant changes in social structure had already taken place.⁸⁰ However, one should avoid the mistaken evolutionist interpretation of cultural and social backwardness in the more egalitarian – or more collectivistic – social organization. We are rather dealing with a specific cultural distinctiveness that characterizes certain regions through history and has apparently developed as the most appropriate for the natural, economic, and perhaps also political conditions of a given society.

A difference in social structures can pose an obstacle to cross-cultural contacts. Differences in the social organizations of Estonia and Scandinavia thus probably generated ample misapprehensions and perhaps even impediments, for example, to forging alliances or contracting marriages. However, the internal contacts were dense and mutual and have left their trace in archaeological material.

Summary

In the course of defining communication, cultural influences, or a common cultural sphere, the depiction of the societies participating in these processes plays a significant role. The interpretation of prehistoric societies, especially on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, has been strongly influenced by contemporary political factors and the evolutionist paradigm. According to the latter's imagined hierarchical scale of human development, prehistoric societies range from primitive to developed. The subjective tendency to depict the ancient society of one's own land as "equal" to that of the neighbouring countries has produced several instances of archaeological facts being disregarded.

When interpreting ancient communication across the Baltic Sea, new possibilities are opened if we delve more deeply into the structure of the societies that participated in the communication; more precisely, its interpretation possibilities are expanded. The eastern shore of the Baltic Sea is characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity that remarkably exceeds that of the western shore. Similar variation is shown by communications locally as well as with the neighbours across the sea.

80 Shepherd 1999: 33–47.

Political factors and the evolutionist paradigm have biased the traditional approach, so that the contacts across the sea in the northern region of the Baltic Sea are seen primarily as one-sided and proceeding from Scandinavia. The factors indicating contacts in the opposite direction have attracted more attention only during the last decade. One might suggest that the interaction with the neighbours across the sea did not bring only single artefacts of eastern origin to the western shore of the Baltic Sea; to some extent the influence affected the social organization and ideology as well. However, the way in which the influence could have been expressed more specifically in, for example, central Swedish or Gotlandic prehistoric society, currently remains outside the scope of this chapter.

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