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Pre-Christian Maritime Societies
in the Eastern Baltic

*Les sociétés maritimes préchrétiennes
dans la Baltique orientale*

Abstract: The Viking Age and 11th-12th-centuries Eastern Baltic was not a homogeneous society, as is often presumed, but consisted of distinct ethnic groups with different languages, mythology and social structures. Clear differences can be distinguished between the northern, mainly Baltic Finnish part of the region, and the southern half that was inhabited by various ethnic Baltic peoples. Especially the Baltic Finnish warriors in coastal areas had developed a cultural sphere that resembled the Eastern Scandinavian one in many aspects, despite certain differences in social systems. This shared cultural sphere of warriors, characterising the coastal areas along the northern half of the Baltic Sea, is the main subject of the Chapter, which takes under consideration archaeological, historical and saga literature sources about this part of the world.

Résumé : À l'époque viking, aux XI^e et XII^e siècles en Baltique orientale, il n'y avait pas une société homogène, comme on le suppose souvent, mais des groupes ethniques aux langues, mythologies et structures sociales différentes. On peut distinguer clairement les différences entre la partie septentrionale de la région, principalement la partie finlandaise de la Baltique, et la moitié méridionale, qui était habitée par diverses ethnies baltes. Les guerriers finlandais baltes des régions côtières, en

particulier, avaient développé une sphère culturelle qui ressemblait à celle de la Scandinavie orientale à bien des égards, malgré certaines différences dans les systèmes sociaux. Cette sphère culturelle commune de guerriers, qui caractérise les zones côtières de la moitié nord de la mer Baltique, est le sujet principal du chapitre, qui prend en considération les sources archéologiques, et historiques ainsi que les sagas évoquant cette partie du monde.

Key words: medieval Eastern Baltic, societies in northern Europe, heterarchy, Baltic Sea communication.

Mots-clés : Baltique orientale médiévale, sociétés du nord de l'Europe, hétérarchie, communications dans la mer Baltique.

The political situation prevailing for most of the previous century has caused the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – to be perceived as a single cultural unit, whereas Finland appears to originate from quite another world. This perception has, often unintentionally, been projected back into prehistory. As it happens, however, it is difficult to find a uniform 'Baltic' culture embracing all the Baltic States in our time, and much less so in the region's history.

The Eastern Baltic in the 11th–12th centuries

The 11th–12th-century Eastern Baltic was home to quite a number of archaeologically diverse cultures, as indicated by artefacts, burial customs and several other sites, for example hillforts. These various cultures can, however, be divided between different spheres, in the first place between maritime and inland cultures (Figure 1).¹ Especially in Finland and Estonia, the maritime culture, embracing not only the actual coast but stretching inland for dozens of kilometres, was characterised by intensive contacts with the Eastern Scandinavian coastal areas.² The sea united different people, creating cultural norms, values and attributes, especially those associated with warriors, which were similar in all the areas along the coasts of the northern Baltic Sea.

¹ Marika Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press / Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 7–25.

² Marika Mägi, 'Societies East and West of the Baltic Sea: Prehistoric Culture Contacts Revisited' in Johan Callmer, Ingrid Gustin & Mads Roslund (eds.), *Identity Formation and Diversity in the Early Medieval Baltic and Beyond. Communicators and Communication* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 17–47.

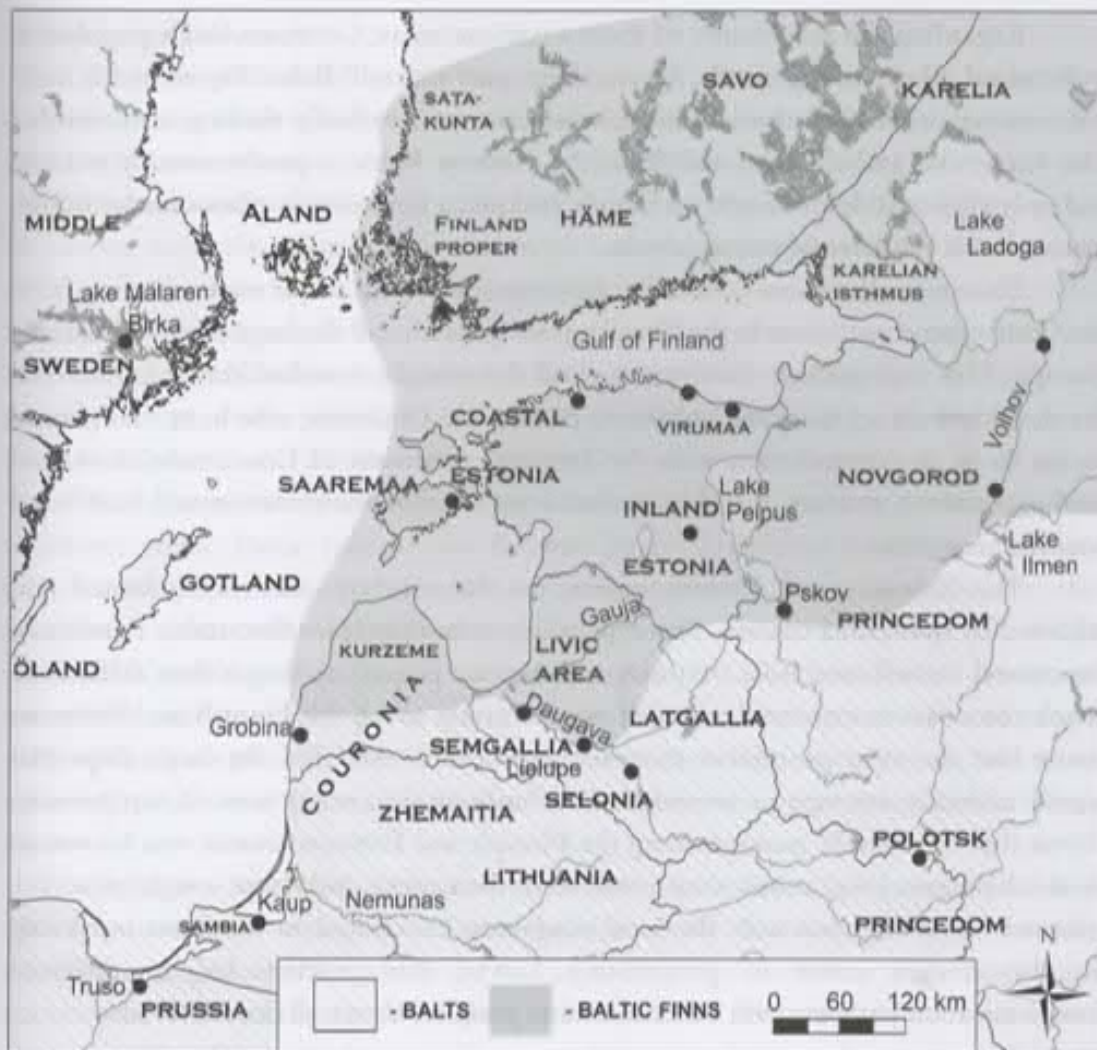


Figure 1 – The historical districts of the Eastern Baltic with some most important Viking Age centres. Drawn by M. Mägi.

Ethnicity is another factor not to be underestimated when it comes to the late prehistoric Eastern Baltic. As we know from the chronicles of the early 13th century, Baltic Finnic languages, a branch of Finno-Ugric languages, were spoken in the northern half of the Eastern Baltic, in Finland and Estonia, as well as in a large part of present-day Latvia. The rest of Latvia, together with all other areas in the southern half of the region, spoke the Baltic languages of the Indo-European family. These language groups are linguistically very different; even more essentially, obvious differences also characterised the mythological worlds and social structures of the peoples belonging to these language groups.

Regarding the inhabitants of these maritime areas, Couronia had a population with mixed ethnic backgrounds. Its northern part was still Baltic Finnic in the early 13th century, while the ethnic Baltic inhabitation was gradually shifting northwards.³ The Couronian coast in the middle of the Eastern Baltic is predominantly straight and only slightly indented, with no islands and just a few suitable places for harbours, mainly at the estuaries of certain rivers.

Except for the Nemunas River, there were no other major routes leading from the Couronian coast towards the Russian principalities and the large rivers of Eastern Europe. This topographic disadvantage and the straight coastline certainly hindered the development of maritime culture in prehistoric Couronia, which, at first glance, seems to be in contradiction with the frequent mentions of Couronians in several medieval written sources. Possible explanations for this phenomenon will be offered later in this article.

The Estonian and Finnish coasts, on the contrary, are very indented and adjoined by numerous islands. This type of shoreline provides favourable conditions for coastal surveillance from outposts and vantage points, making it thus difficult to attack the coast unexpectedly. And it was precisely along the Finnish and Estonian coasts that the most prominent eastward trade routes ran.⁴ For the cargo ships that would normally attempt to overnight at a harbour site, safety was of top priority. Given that the vessels' passage along the Finnish and Estonian coasts was known to local inhabitants long before they could land, their crews may have sought peaceful, contract-based relations with the local magnates. Compared to the areas bordering on the straight coast of present-day Latvia, this practice led to different communication patterns with other maritime peoples, above all Scandinavians

Two culture spheres

In archaeological evidence, clear differences between the Baltic Finnic and the ethnic Baltic halves of the eastern coast can be traced through burial customs. Several researchers have pointed to the correlation between the individuality expressed in burial rites and the social stratification of the society practising these rites.⁵ In this aspect, the Baltic Finnic graves differed from all of their Indo-

³ Jānis Asaris, Vitolds Muižinieks, Arnis Rādiņš, Ingrida Virse & Irita Žeiere, *Kurli senatnē* (Couronians in Antiquity) (Riga: Latvijas Nacionālais vēstures muzejs, 2008).

⁴ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr: The Role of the Eastern Baltic in Viking Age Communication across the Baltic Sea* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 94–117.

⁵ Eg. Kristian Kristiansen, 'From Stone to Bronze - the Evolution of Social Complexity in Northern Europe, 2300–1200 BC' in Elizabeth Brumfiel & Timothy Earle (eds.), *Specialization, Exchange, and Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 30–51; Richard Bradley, *The Passage of Arms. An Archaeological Analysis of Prehistoric Hoard and Votive Deposits* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1998);

European neighbours.⁶

The late prehistoric burials practised in most of the Baltic Finnic areas were collective cremations where the remains of many deceased persons of various ages and both sexes were scattered between stones. The intermingling of bones was clearly intentional, manifesting collective attitudes where members of a certain affiliation, probably a family or a clan, were united in eternity, without demarcating differences between individuals. The same was valid for grave goods that in the 11th–12th century could consist of a variety of badly damaged and burnt items – it was only the family affiliation that mattered, all dead members getting their share. It was impossible to say who was able to take more, or fewer, material goods with them to the Afterlife.⁷

Such burial customs were in stark contrast with the practices prevalent in the southern, ethnic Baltic half of the Eastern Baltic. Individual burials, in different ethnic areas predominantly inhumations or cremations, characterised most of this area, with certain collective cremation graves – the so-called *Aschenplätze* – found in southern Couronia and Prussia as an exception.⁸ Collective burials were not completely uniform in the Baltic Finnic area either. The southernmost Finnic people – Livs – had adopted individual burial rites from their Baltic neighbours, and some areas with individual graves could also be found separately in other Baltic Finnic areas.

Collective attitudes expressed in burial rites often characterised societies where power was arranged collectively, frequently forming parallel, mutually complementing hierarchies which did not necessarily dominate over each other. Such societies have sometimes been labelled as heterarchies and are in most cases based on extraordinarily strong clan ties.⁹ Power and property belonged to a clan and could

Jean Guilaine & Jean Zammit, *The Origins of War. Violence in Prehistory* (Malden / Oxford / Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 158 ff; Robert D. Drennan, Christian E. Peterson & Jake R. Fox, 'Degrees and Kinds of Inequality' in T. Douglas Price & Gary M. Feinman (eds.), *Pathways to Power. New Perspectives on the Emergence of Social Inequality (Fundamental Issues in Archaeology)* (New York: Springer Verlag, 2010), 45–76. See also Marika Mägi, 'Societies East and West of the Baltic Sea', *op. cit.*

⁶ Marika Mägi, 'Late prehistoric societies and burials in the Eastern Baltic', *Archaeologia Baltica*, No. 19 (2013), 177–94; Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 78–88.

⁷ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 30–45.

⁸ eg. Roman Shiroukhov, 'Prussian Graves in the Sambian Peninsula with Imports, Arms and Horse Harnesses from the Tenth to the 13th Century: the Question of Warrior Elite', *Archaeologia Baltica*, No. 18 (2012), 224–255.

⁹ Alice E. Rautman, 'Hierarchy and Heterarchy in the American Southwest: a Comment on McGuire and Saïta', *American Antiquity*, No. 63 (1998), 325–33; Tina Thurston, *Landscapes of Power, Landscapes of Conflict. State Formation in the South Scandinavian Iron Age. Fundamental Issues in Archaeology* (New-York-Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002); Dmitri Bondarenko, 'Homoarchy as a Principle of Socio-

not be directly bestowed upon an individual. Typically, these societies featured assemblies making decisions on various spheres of life, often elected based on different principles, and acting autonomously from each other.

Some traces of heterarchy can be traced nearly everywhere in medieval Northern Europe, as is best indicated by the outstanding importance of assemblages which passed decision on the most relevant questions in these societies. In Scandinavia these bodies were called *ting*, and in the area of what is now Northwestern Russia, *veche*. The chronicler Henry the Livonian mentions similar assemblies in early 13th-century Estonia,¹⁰ and analogous institutions presumably also characterised the ethnic Baltic part of the Eastern Baltic.

However, in the 11th–12th-century Scandinavia and the southern half of the Eastern Baltic, power was arranged along individual lines. The Chronicle of Henry the Livonian mentions by name several chieftains, princes and kings of Baltic ethnicity who led armies and fought against, or negotiated and allied themselves with the German crusaders in the 13th-century Eastern Baltic.¹¹ The mightiest of them were the princes of Lithuania who managed to consolidate power under one prince by the middle of the 13th century.¹² Theirs was a power system in many aspects similar to the Christian Northern Europe, albeit heathen, less institutionalised, unstable, and controlling only limited territories.

As for archaeological evidence, the indication of the consolidation of power among the Balts is somewhat complicated. Some hillforts can be interpreted as leaders' residences,¹³ while princely burials distinct from other richly equipped graves are more or less absent. In several areas, male graves in particular contain a large number of artefacts, suggesting a broad stratum of social elite. Moreover, virtually no conspicuous grave monuments are known from the Eastern Baltic.

Archaeological evidence in the Baltic Finnic part of the Eastern Baltic – collective burial grounds with intermingled human remains – seems to be in

Political Organization: an Introduction', *Anthropos*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (2007), 187–199; Robert D. Drennan *et al.*, 'Degrees and Kinds of Inequality', *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Henricus Lettus, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, Translated and with a New Introduction and Notes by J. A. Brundage (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003), XX: 2.

¹¹ Herbert Ligi, *Talupoegade koormised Eestis 13. sajandist 19. sajandi alguseni* (Taxes and Duties of Estonian Peasantry from the 13th to the 19th Century) (Tallinn: Ajaloo Instituut, 1968), 14–38.

¹² Zigmantas Kiaupa, 'The Establishment of the State' in Zigmantas Kiaupa, Juratė Kiaupienė & Albinas Kuncevičius (eds.), *The History of Lithuania before 1795* (Vilnius: Lithuanian Institute of History, 2000), 45–72.

¹³ Romas Jarockis, 'Semigallia 1100–1400. A Review of Archaeological and Historical Sources' in Nils Blomkvist (ed.), *Culture Clash or Compromise? The Europeanisation of the Baltic Sea Area 1100–1400 AD* (*Acta Visbyensia*, XI), (Visby, 1998), 45–53.

correlation with the 13th-century written sources. Unlike the ethnic Baltic territories, no records are known of undisputed rulers in Estonia, and there is only one modest hillfort associated with a concrete person, Lembitu. Lembitu was nothing more than a warlord, probably a charismatic personality who did not, however, possess any far-reaching institutionalised power.¹⁴ Restricted mandates also characterised other Estonian figureheads appearing in chronicles, while no mention has been made of any local leader at all for the island of Saaremaa, by all accounts the most powerful region in Estonia at that time.

This phenomenon, at one time frequently used as an argument for the 'backwardness' of the early 13th-century Estonian society,¹⁵ can well be explained by corporate power structures as described above. Nothing in the archaeological evidence from Estonia points to the local technological or social development lagging behind the ethnic Balts. Corporate arrangement of power, on the other hand, may have caused misunderstanding and confusion among the crusaders who were at a loss as to whom to negotiate with, or which leader to trust while concluding treaties.

Another characteristic feature that fits in with the more collective nature of the Baltic Finnic society in the northern half of the region is gender-specific. As indicated in ethnic Baltic burial customs, male and female attributes seem to have been strictly differentiated. Males were often buried with abundant jewellery, but the types of specific ornaments for men were nearly always different from the female jewellery.¹⁶ In areas where inhumations dominated, Baltic men and women were traditionally buried in opposite direction, and the number of female graves in one cemetery was often considerably smaller than that of male graves.¹⁷ The tendency to emphasise the difference between men and women normally characterises societies

¹⁴ Kristjan Oad, 'Lembitu. Juhtimiskunsti meistriklass vastsel Maarjamaal' (Lembitu of Leole. Masterful Leadership in Nascent Mary's Land), *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2017), 26-48.

¹⁵ See overview Priit Ligi, 'National Romanticism in Archaeology: the Paradigm of Slavonic Colonization in North-West Russia', *Fennoscandia archaeologica*, Vol. X (1993), 31-39; Priit Ligi, "'Aktive Slavs" and "passive Finns": a reply', *Fennoscandia archaeologica*, Vol. XI (1994), 104-112.

¹⁶ Eg. Audronė Bliujienė, *Vikingų epochos kurtų papuošalų ornamentika* (Style and Motif in Couronian Ornaments during the Viking Period) (Vilnius: Diemedžio Leidykla, 1999); Arnis Rādiņš, *10.-13. gadsimta senkapi Latgali apdzīvotajā teritorijā un Austrumlatvijas etniskās, sociālās un politiskās vēstures jautājumi* (Burial Fields of the 10th-13th Century in Latgalian territory in Context of the Ethnic, Social, and Political History of the Eastern Latvia) (Riga: Latvijas Vestures Muzeja raksti, nr. 5. Arheoloģija, 1999); Andris Šnē, *Sabiedrība un vara: sociālās attiecības Austrumlatvijā aizvēstures beigās* (Society and Power: Social Relationships in Eastern Latvia during Later Prehistory) (Riga: Intelekts, 2002).

¹⁷ Eg. Elvira Šnore, *Kivtu kapulauks* (Kivti Cemetery) (Riga, Zinātne, 1987); Antonija Vilcāne, 'Višķu Maskavas kapulauks (8.-12. gs.)' (The Višķu Maskava Burial Field (8-12th Centuries)), *Arheoloģija un etnogrāfija*, Vol. XVIII (1996), 162-180; Andris Šnē, *Sabiedrība un vara, op. cit.*, 178-201.

where the role of women in decision-making was restricted.¹⁸

In the Baltic Finnic burial grounds, on the other hand, male and female attributes were mixed and the number of unisex artefacts high. Especially jewellery was normally used by both genders, with a few types predominantly associated with females.¹⁹ In these Baltic Finnic areas where individual graves could be distinguished, e.g. among the Livs or Karelians, artefacts primarily associated with one gender could occur in graves of the other gender, for instance, weapons are sometimes found in graves together with abundant female-associated ornaments.²⁰ This, together with numerous unisex artefacts, suggests a society where men and women were not segregated. Drawing cross-cultural parallels with traditional societies known from anthropological studies, we can presume that the role of Baltic Finnic women in decision-making was probably greater than among their Indo-Germanic neighbours.

Some evidence of the gender-specific differences between the Baltic Finnic and the Baltic societies can be found in medieval written sources. The 13th-century German and Russian chroniclers seldom mentioned women, with the exception of routine references to women and children as casualties of war. As for ethnic Baltic women, Henry the Livonian talks of Lithuanian widows who hanged themselves after their husbands were killed during a campaign.²¹ Livic women on the other hand appear in the same chronicle in a much more active role, for instance declining baptism for a sick man, probably a family member.²² An Estonian woman helped her husband kill a German trader,²³ or killed him herself with an axe,²⁴ and another Estonian woman was exempt from paying taxes because she had saved two

¹⁸ Susan Kent, 'Egalitarianism, Equality, and Equitable Power' in Tracy L. Sweely (ed.), *Manifesting Power. Gender and the Interpretation of Power in Archaeology* (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), 30-48.

¹⁹ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr*, *op. cit.*, 82-88.

²⁰ Pirkko-Liisa Lehtosalo-Hilander, 'Keski- ja myöhäisrautakausi' (Middle and Late Iron Age) in *Suomen historia* (Finnish History), Vol. 1, (Espoo: Weilin+Göös, 1984), 402-403; Svetlana I. Kochkurkina, *Arheologicheskiye pamyatniki Karelii V-XV vv* (Archaeological Sites in Karelia V-XV Centuries) (Leningrad: Nauka, 1981), 92-93; Evald Tõnisson, *Die Gänja-Liven und ihre materielle Kultur (11. Jh. – Anfang 13. Jhs.)* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1974), 109, Tables II, VI; Marika Mägi, *At the Crossroads of Space and Time. Graves, Changing Society and Ideology on Saaremaa (Ösel), 9th-13th centuries AD (CCC papers, 6)* (Tallinn: Institute of History, 2002), 79; Anna Zariņa, *Salaspils Laukskola kapulauks 10.-13. gadsimts* (Salaspils Laukskola Cemetery, 10th-13th Centuries) (Riga: Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Apģāds, 2006), tab. 191, 1.

²¹ Henricus Lettus, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, *op. cit.*, IX: 5.

²² *Ibidem*, I: 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, XXVI: 10.

²⁴ *The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*. Translated with an historical introduction, maps and appendices by Jerry C. Smith and William L. Urban (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1977), 1278-1332.

crusaders imprisoned in an Estonian hillfort.²⁵

Further hints, albeit obscure, can be found in the 13th–14th-century legislation first written down for the Livs in the early 13th century.²⁶ The earliest legislation in medieval Livonia was surprisingly laconic about family and succession; given that only topics that were relevant for German landlords were recorded, we can presume that family issues were generally addressed by local courts that administered the so-called 'laws of the land' (not preserved). However, the first Livic legislation included provisions that can be interpreted as referring to a matrilineal descent system in this Baltic Finnic ethnic group. It is stipulated, for instance, that when a man takes a wife, all his goods shall 'follow his woman', and if he wants to leave her, his property will go to his wife and daughters.²⁷ When the same text was applied to Baltic Couronians in the second half of the 13th century, sentences were added which may have changed the original meaning to the opposite.²⁸ However, similar ideas still existed in Western Estonian legislation dating from around 1400, where the topics dealing with succession were primarily discussed through women. Remnants of possible matrilineal succession can also be seen in some parts of Estonian folklore that in general is conspicuously female-dominated.²⁹

The possible female-line succession fits well with archaeological evidence and historical records, suggesting that the Baltic Finnic society was characterised by strong collective features, family- or clan-based property rights and corporate power structures. Power in the ethnic Baltic societies was more individual, arranged in lineage and, judging by the available evidence, based on a patrilineal descent system. However, in most of the Baltic territories, including coastal regions in Couronia and Prussia, the concentration of power was quite limited, as indicated by leaders who

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 777–802.

²⁶ Jevgenya Nazarova, "Livonskiye pravdy" kak istoricheskyi istochnik ("Livonian Legislation" as a Historical Source), *Drevneishie gosudarstva na territorii SSSR. Materialy i issledovaniya* (The Oldest States in the USSR. Materials and Studies) (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), 5–218, esp. 43, 172–173; Nils Blomkvist, *The Discovery of the Baltic. The Reception of Catholic World-System in the European North (AD 1075–1225)* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 182–91; Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 86–88.

²⁷ Nils Blomkvist, *The Discovery of the Baltic, op. cit.*, 182–91; Marika Mägi, 'Abielu, kristianiseerimine ja akultuuratsioon. Perekonkliku korralduse varasemast ajaloost Eestis' (Marriage, Christianisation and Acculturation. Early Family History in Estonia), *Ariadne lõng*, Vol. IX (2009), 76–101; Merili Metsvahi, 'Description of the Peasants' Sexual Behaviour in August Wilhelm Hupel's *Topographical Messages* in the Context of the History of the Estonian Family', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 47/3 (2016), 301–323.

²⁸ Jevgenya Nazarova, "Livonskiye pravdy", *op. cit.*, 177–178.

²⁹ Merili Metsvahi, 'Description of the Peasants' Sexual Behaviour...', art. cit.; for parallels in the folklore of other, historically known matrilineal societies see eg. Marisa Rey-Henningsen, *The world of the Ploughwoman. Folklore and Reality in Matriarchal Northwest Spain*, FF Communications No. 254 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1994).

could only exercise control over restricted areas.

Two spheres, two modes of cultural contact

Another feature dividing the late prehistoric eastern coast of the Baltic Sea into two clearly different spheres was the cultural impact from Scandinavia. Archaeological material reveals great similarity between all coastal areas along the northern half of the Baltic Sea, while the southern half of the Eastern Baltic was characterised by a material culture that differed from the Scandinavian material culture in most aspects. The division of Eastern Baltic maritime cultures thus seems to have followed the same ethnic lines as discussed above. On the other hand, the Scandinavian cultural impulses presumably spread along the main communicational routes – which, due to the topographic situation, ran mainly through the areas inhabited by the Baltic Finns (Figure 2).

Mutual contacts between Eastern Scandinavia, Couronia and the coastal regions of Estonia and Finland date back to the Bronze Age and gained momentum in the 7th–8th centuries, after the introduction of the sail in the Baltic Sea. This innovation encouraged sailing across the open sea, resulting in a comparatively rapid Scandinavisation of warrior-related material culture existing along the north-eastern coasts of the Baltic Sea. The Viking Age saw the emergence of a common cultural sphere of warriors along these coastal regions, manifested in similar weapons, ornament styles and jewellery, but presumably also in shared warrior values and attitudes, and the ability to communicate in each other's languages. Eastern Scandinavia being the core area for the shared cultural sphere, Old Nordic probably gained dominance as the common language.³⁰

Such unification of culture, even though it applied to only one social sphere, was hardly possible without personal contacts. It may have been mainly young men who moved between different societies, acting as retinue members for foreign chieftains, participants of campaigns and trade expeditions, or were raised in the households of family friends abroad. Marriage ties would also be likely, though probably not very widespread, at least in certain areas where female attributes in the material culture remained distinctly local throughout the whole period. The movement of Scandinavian women to the Baltic Finnic areas because of mixed marriages may have also been hampered by the different succession systems.³¹

³⁰ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 132–135.

³¹ Indrek Jets, *Labingu maad. Skandinaavia 9.–11. sajandi kunstistilid Eesti arheoloogilistel leidudel* (The Battle Serpents. 9th–11th Century Scandinavian Art Styles on Estonian Archaeological Finds) (Tallinn: Tallinna Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2013), 266; Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 132–135.

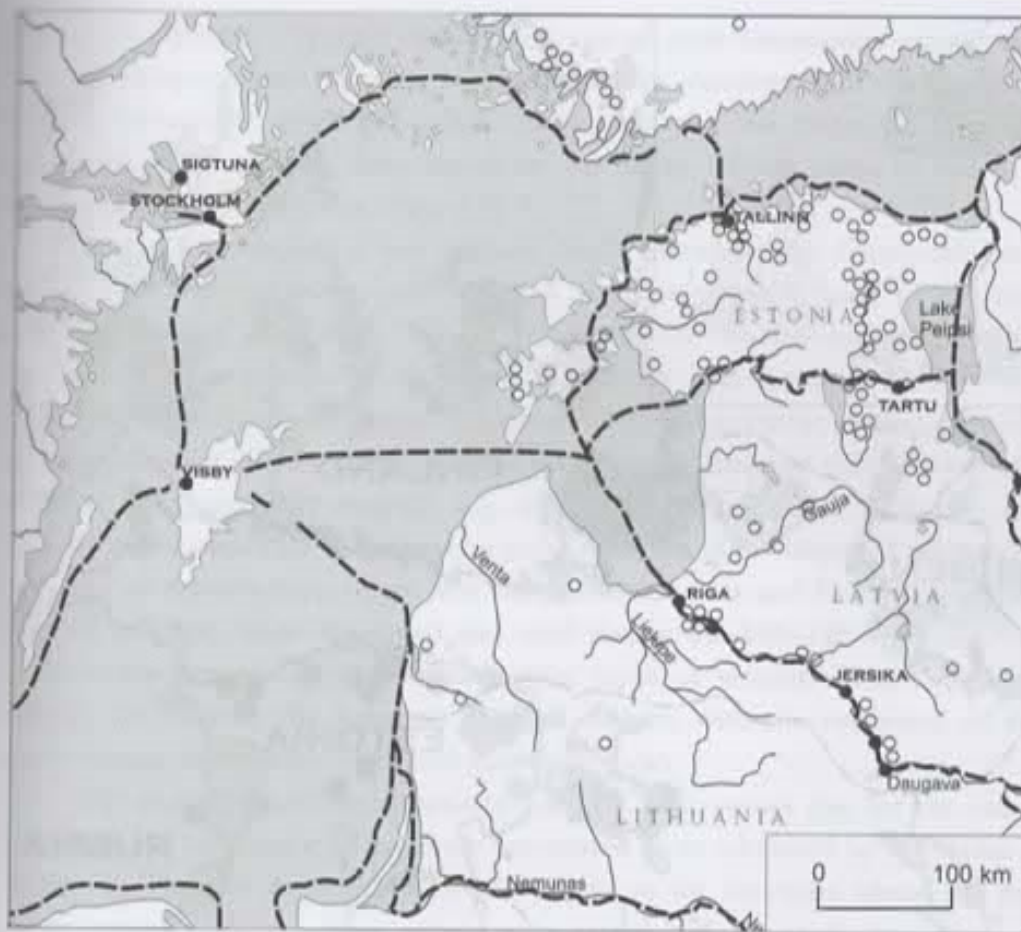


Figure 2 – The most relevant trade routes and centres of the 12th century with 11th–12th-century hoards in the Eastern Baltic. Drawn by M. Mägi.

Cultural exchange in the sphere of shared values was not one-sided. Eastern Baltic cultures clearly influenced the development of the distinct material culture on the island of Gotland, and were obvious both in Birka and Sigtuna in Middle Sweden.³² Neither did the shared cultural sphere mean that artefacts and ideas demonstrating the shared values were all imported from the core area. On the contrary, the patterns and values once taken over were adopted locally, and sometimes exported back to the original core area.³³

³² Daniel Gunnarsson, *The Distribution of Bronze Artefacts of Viking Age Eastern Baltic Types Discovered on Gotland. Iron Age Networks and Identities*. Gotland University, Master (one year) Thesis/ Magisteruppsats, 2013/spring, 2015; Ingrid Gustin, 'Contacts, Identity, and Hybridity: Objects from South-Western Finland in the Birka Graves' in Johan Callmer et al., *Identity Formation and Diversity in the Early Medieval Baltic and Beyond*, op. cit., 205–258.

³³ Description of shared cultural milieu see Chris Gosden, *Archaeology of Colonialism. Cultural contact from 5000 BC to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge Archaeology Press, 2004), 39–40.

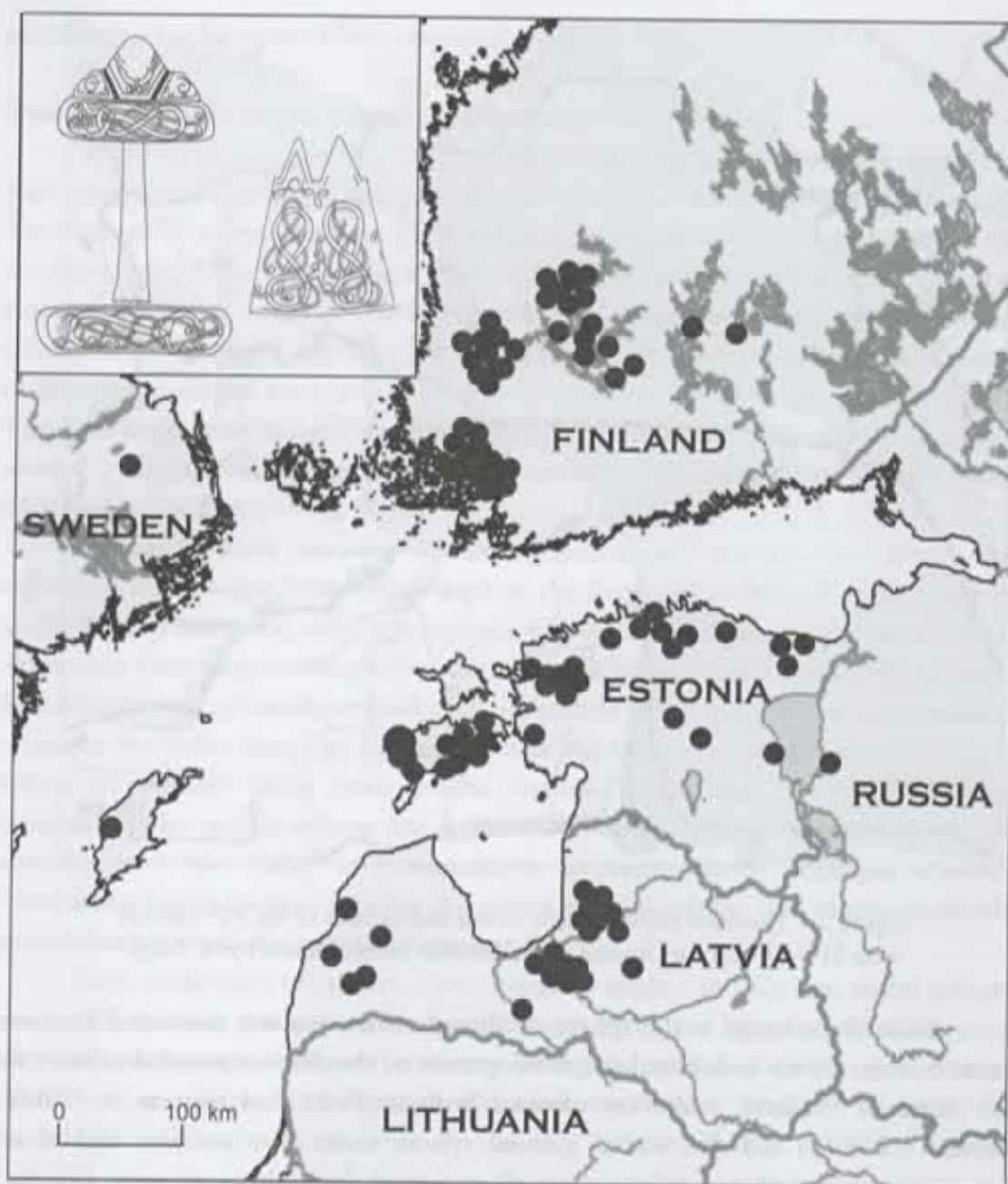


Figure 3 - Distribution of weapons decorated in Urnes Style, with some examples from Estonia (Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr*, fig. 7.5–7.6).

A good example of this phenomenon in the Baltic Finnic coastal territories is offered by the distribution of certain pattern-welded spearheads that imitated 'Scandinavian' shapes and decorations but were largely produced in Couronia,

Estonia or Finland.³⁴ Specific variants of animal style ornaments, mainly used to decorate weapons and warrior accessories, were developed in the same areas. Weapon ornaments in the so-called Urnes style, the last phase of Scandinavian animal art, have actually been found in the Baltic Finnic areas in much larger numbers than in Scandinavia (Figure 3).³⁵

By the 11th century it had become nearly impossible to distinguish between, for instance, the Gotlandic and Saaremaa warriors when it came to the material culture associated with them. Taken over from the West sometime in the past, warrior-related attributes in the material culture had become a local feature, produced and developed by local craftsmen. Most Baltic Finnic coastal areas do not provide evidence of the existence of a more 'local' material culture attributed to warriors, while in other regions, e.g. among the Livs, certain originally eastern features co-existed with Scandinavian-style elements. The shape of women's oval brooches of Scandinavian origin was adopted in Livonia and Karelia where similar types of jewellery were developed and used during the 11th–12th centuries.³⁶ Some western ornament designs influenced other types of women's brooches made in Finland. In Estonia, the feminine material culture, with the exception of certain unisex ornament varieties, remained manifestly local.

The earliest Scandinavian written sources, runic stones that for the most part date from the 11th century, frequently mentioned areas inhabited by the Baltic Finns (Figure 4). These were mainly short references to the locations where the men in whose commemoration these stones were raised had arranged expeditions to or where they met their deaths. Middle Sweden was the concentration area of the runic stones, which also explains why eastern territories were named about twice as often as the lands west of Scandinavia. Of the Baltic Finnic areas, various places in Estonia were mentioned on nine stones, and locations in Finland and Latvia on six stones, while the south-eastern coast of the Baltic Sea merited no mention at all.³⁷ In fact, the texts on the runic stones referred to the very region that was archaeologically

³⁴ Kristina Creutz, *Tension and tradition. A Study of Late Iron Age Spearheads around the Baltic* (Stockholm: Stockholms Universitet, Theses and Papers in Archaeology N. S. A. 8, 2003).

³⁵ Indrek Jets, *Lahingu maad, op. cit.*, 91–203, 265–270.

³⁶ Roberts Spirģis, *Brūņrupuķu sakāvis ar krūšu važiņrotām un lībiešu kultūras attīstība Daugavas lejdaļē 10.–13. gadsimtā* (Tortoise Brooches with Pectoral Chain Ornaments and the Development of Liv Culture in the Lower Daugava Area in the 10th–13th Century) (Riga: Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Apgāds, 2008).

³⁷ Kristel Zilmer, 'He Drowned in Holm's Sea – His Cargo-Ship Drifted to the Sea-Bottom, Only Three Came out Alive'. *Records and Representations of Baltic Traffic in the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages in Early Nordic Sources* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, Dissertationes Philologiae Scandinavicae Universitatis Tartuenssis, Vol. 1, Nordistica Tartuensia, No. 12, 2005); Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 184–186.

characterised by the shared cultural milieu of warriors.³⁸

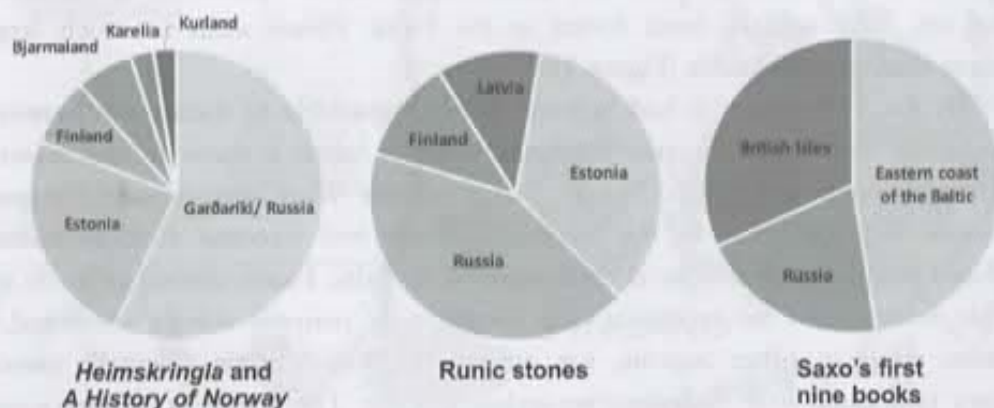


Figure 4 – Diagrams of modern regions cited in different written sources. For the first two diagrams, only areas in the eastern Baltic Sea are depicted (Marika Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic*, fig. 3).

Another 11th-century writer, Adam of Bremen, probably had in mind the same shared cultural milieu when writing about three islands in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea, *Aestland*, *Churland* and *Semland*, all of them subjects of Sweden.³⁹ *Semland*, however, was also linked with islands in the western end of the Baltic Sea, was said to be located close to Russians and Poles, and inhabited by 'a most humane people'. What Adam of Bremen exactly meant by *Churland* and *Aestland* remains somewhat obscure – in those times especially the present-day Estonian island of Saaremaa may have been associated with *Churland* rather than *Aestland*.⁴⁰

Prussia and southern Couronia, i.e. areas inhabited by ethnic Balts in the 11th–12th centuries, were characterised by a rich and original material culture that, however, bore only slight resemblance with Scandinavia. It may therefore seem surprising that the only Scandinavian colonies known from the Eastern Baltic – Grobiņa, Kaup-Wiskiauten and Truso – were all located in this very region.⁴¹ All of

³⁸ Marika Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic*, op. cit., 13, 21–22.

³⁹ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 4: 16–18.

⁴⁰ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr*, op. cit., 149–151, 179–182.

⁴¹ Wojciech Wróblewski, 'Invaders, Merchants or Settlers? Archaeological Evidence of Scandinavian Activity in South-Eastern Zone of the Baltic Sea during the Viking Age' in Mindaugas Bertasius (ed.), *Transformatio Mundi. The Transition from the Late Migration Period to the Early Viking Age in the East Baltic* (Kaunas: Kaunas University of Technology, Department of Philosophy and Cultural Science, 2006),

these places were indicated by cemeteries with typically Scandinavian burials that stood out conspicuously against the local Baltic burial places in the same area. By the second half of the 11th century, all these colonies had ceased to exist; the Scandinavian inhabitants of Grobiņa may have left even as early as at the beginning of the Viking Age. The sites, however, continued to be used by the local population, as was just the Scandinavian artefacts that disappeared. It is impossible to assess whether the colonists assimilated into the local culture, moved back to their homelands, or were killed off.

What is most remarkable about the Scandinavian colonies in the southern half of the Eastern Baltic is that apparently their cultural influence did not reach much further than a few dozen kilometres from the actual sites. The rest of Couronia and Prussia remained comparatively untouched by the overseas cultural impulses. Nevertheless, some researchers have tried to see Scandinavian colonists in certain 11th–12th-century trading places on the Couronian coast, like Palanga and Žarde.⁴² The archaeological material from these sites that could possibly refer to influences from Scandinavia is, however, scant.⁴³ The very modest amount of Scandinavian artefacts on the south-eastern coasts of the Baltic Sea has intrigued several researchers who have sought to explain this phenomenon, without questioning the existence of 'intensive contacts' as such.⁴⁴

The firm notion of a strong Scandinavian impact affecting restricted areas in

107-116; Mateusz Bogucki, 'Some Oriental Finds from the Port of Trade at Janów Pomorski (Truso), Poland' in Ulf Fransson, Marie Svedin, Sophie Bergerbrant & Fedir Androshchuk (eds.), *Cultural Interaction Between East and West. Archaeology, Artefacts and Human Contacts in Northern Europe* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, Stockholm Studies in Archaeology, Vol. 44, 2007), 164-170; Vladas Žulkus & Mindaugas Bertasius, 'Handelsplätze zwischen Danziger und Rigaer Bucht zur Zeit Wulfstans' in Anton Englert & Athena Trakadas (eds.), *Wulfstan's Voyage. The Baltic Sea Region in the Early Viking Age as Seen from Shipboard* (Roskilde: Viking Ship Museum, Maritime Culture of the North, Vol. 2, 2009), 198-204.

⁴² Vladas Žulkus, *Kuršiai baltijos jūros erdvėje* (Cours in the Baltic Sea Space) (Vilnius: Versus Aureus), 2004; Jonas Genys, 'Žardė: a Medieval Couronian Trade and Craft Centre' in Gintautas Zabiela, Zenonas Baubonis & Eglė Marcinkevičiūtė (eds.), *Archaeological Investigations in Independent Lithuania 1990-2010* (Vilnius: Lietuvos Archeologijos Draugija, 2012), 44-49.

⁴³ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 404-407.

⁴⁴ Eg. Vladimir Kulakov, 'Baltiyskiy akzhent v dvizheniy vikingov (etniceskie diffuzii i traditsii iskusstva)', *Archaeologia Litvana*, Vol. 1 (1999), 197-213; Audronė Bliujienė, 'Role of the Curonians in the Eastern Baltic Area. The Transition Process from the Late Migration Period into the Early Viking Age (Cultural Aspects)' in Mindaugas Bertasius (ed.), *Transformatio Mundi. The Transition from the Late Migration Period to the Early Viking Age in the East Baltic* (Kaunas: Kaunas University of Technology, Department of Philosophy and Cultural Science, 2006), 183-193, esp. 189; Vladas Žulkus, 'Settlement and Piracy on the Eastern Shore of the Baltic Sea: the Middle Ages to Modern Times', *Archaeologia Baltica*, Vol. 16 (2011), 58-71.

Couronia and Prussia can be explained by two prominent factors. Firstly, written sources still play a major role in the interpretations of East European Viking Age. A long narrative regarding Couronia can be found in Rimbert's Chronicle *Vita Ansgarii* dated to the 9th century and describing a campaign of the Swedish king Olaf to the land of the *Cori*.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the Nordic sagas written down in Iceland only seldom mention Couronia, especially compared with the northern half of the Eastern Baltic. However, this shortage of information is offset by a very long, detailed and vivid description in Egil's Saga of Egil plundering a chieftain's farm in Couronia during a Viking raid.⁴⁶ Stories featuring *Estland*, *Eysýsla* or just *Austrvegr* were normally much more laconic, and these areas often appeared as no more than brief mentions of pillaging targets.

Secondly, the whole period from about the 8th to the 12th century is frequently viewed as a single, uniform segment in Eastern Baltic archaeology, using evidence from the beginning of this era, e.g. the Scandinavian colony in Grobiņa, in argumentation concerning much later centuries. However, by the end of the Viking Age (800–1000/1050) – not to mention the next two centuries – the political situation around the Baltic Sea had changed considerably.

The Viking Age Scandinavian colonies along the south-eastern coasts of the Baltic Sea, and their generally weak cultural impact on the surrounding areas were typical of a specific mode of contacts that has sometimes been called middle ground colonisation. In this, socially complex groups of colonists moved over to another territory where they lived in one cluster among the native people. Typically, hardly any acculturation took place, while both the colonists and the natives believed that they were in control. It meant that two cultures existed side by side during a certain period.⁴⁷ The colonies in Grobiņa, Kaup-Wiskiauten and Truso were established due to the Scandinavians' interest in the trade routes towards the south, predominantly along the Vistula River.⁴⁸ When this interest waned at the end of the 10th century, the colonies were abandoned, leaving no clear traces in the local culture.

⁴⁵ Rimbert, *Anskar, The Apostle of the North, 801-865, Translated from the Vita Ansgarii by Bishop Rimbert, His Fellow Missionary and Successor*, Translated by Charles Henry Robinson (London, SPCK, 1921), 30.

⁴⁶ *Egil's saga*, Translated with an introduction by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London / New York, Penguin Books, 1976), 46; William Sayers, 'A Glimpse of Medieval Curonian Vernacular Architecture in Egil's Saga Skallagrímssonar', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 44/3 (2013), 363-374; Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr*, *op. cit.*, 321-325.

⁴⁷ Chris Gosden, *Archaeology of Colonialism*, *op. cit.*, 26-32.

⁴⁸ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr*, *op. cit.*, 128-140.

Trade routes, pirates and seafarers

The different nature of the Viking Age cultural interaction between Scandinavia and the Baltic Finnic coastal societies in the northern half of the Eastern Baltic implied that the originally Scandinavian features adopted into the local culture were now probably considered native and developed further locally. However, after a transformation period in the first half of the 11th century when the Scandinavian eastern trade interests seem to have temporarily ceased also in the northern half of the Eastern Baltic, new networks were established and became stabilised during the second half of the century. The Viking adventures along the Eastern Way were over, now it was mainly trading between the Russian principalities and the Scandinavian kingdoms that influenced the Baltic Finnic part of the Eastern Baltic. The most prominent routes used by this network were still running through what are now Estonia and Latvia.

Internationally relevant routes are marked by archaeological evidence, especially coins and hoards. The amount of 11th–12th-century coins found in Estonia is twice the amount found in Latvia, Lithuania and Finland put together.⁴⁹ Several luxury silver items of Scandinavian origin have been retrieved from Estonian hoards, and the whole 12th-century material culture of Estonian warriors still resembled the Scandinavian prototype, even though most of the items were now produced locally. The material evidence thus indicated intensive contacts between the same coastal areas around the northern half of the Baltic Sea that were interacting in the Viking Age.

12th–13th-century written sources rather frequently mentioned pirates from the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, who threatened Scandinavian coastal areas. Actions of Couronian and Estonian pirates were described in quite a detail in the chronicle of Henry the Livonian, albeit always in the context of an encounter with the 13th-century crusaders. The chronicler emphasised, however, that plundering raids to Scandinavian coasts were commonplace among the inhabitants of Saaremaa and Couronia.⁵⁰

In the Nordic sagas, problems with eastern freebooters, Vends, *Kurlanders*, or just 'men from the East' often occurred in narratives that presumably happened in

⁴⁹ Tuukka Talvio, *Coins and Coin Finds in Finland AD 800-1200* (Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, Vol. 12, 2002), Table 1; Zenonas Duksa, 'Pinigai ir jų apyvarta' (Money and its Turnover) in Laima Vaitkūnienė (ed.), *Lietuvių materialinė kultūra IX–XIII amžiuje* (Lithuanian Material Culture IX–XIII Centuries) (Vilnius: Mokslas, 1981, 83–129); Ivar Leimus, 'Viikingid – röövlid või kaupmehed?' (Vikings – Plunderers or Merchants?), *Tuna: Ajalookultuuri ajakiri*, No. 1 (2006), 17–29.

⁵⁰ Henricus Lettus, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, op. cit., VII: 1.

the 11th–12th centuries.⁵¹ The Nordic kings who were interested in consolidating their power, made efforts to defend their coasts, more or less successfully. The measures taken presumably stopped most of the spontaneous Viking-style raids carried out with only a few ships. Campaigns from the East that reached the Scandinavian coasts now comprised, according to written sources, quite a number of warships and warriors.⁵²

Saxo Grammaticus and the authors of certain sagas, e.g. the *Knytlinga Saga*, made particular mention of Couronians as active plunderers of the Scandinavian coasts, only rarely naming 'other peoples from *Austrvegr*' in the same context. This, however, seems to be in clear contradiction with archaeological evidence. Henry the Livonian who was familiar with the early 13th-century circumstances in the Eastern Baltic, was certainly also aware of Couronians, but his narrative does not by any means depict them as more active operators on the sea and overseas compared to the Saaremaa seafarers. Even more astonishingly, Saaremaa – *Eysysla* in Old Nordic and the most frequently encountered Eastern Baltic toponym in, for instance, *Heimskringla* – was never once mentioned by Saxo.

A possible explanation for this apparent contradiction is provided by the old name of the Estonian island of Saaremaa. Until as late as the beginning of the 19th century, the present-day Saaremaa was called *Kuresaar*, that is, Couronian Island. According to folklore, *kuralased*, i. e. Couronians, lived both on an island and on the Kurzeme Peninsula, that is, the part of mainland that is now known as Couronia. However, the *kuralased* of the Estonian folklore were predominantly Baltic Finnic inhabitants of the Kurzeme Peninsula, whose material culture exhibited strong similarity with the inhabitants of Saaremaa, as is vividly demonstrated by several archaeological excavations.⁵³ Some researchers, including this author, therefore support the theory that rather than being an ethnonym, the term *Couronians*/*kuralased* may have originally denoted a pirate or warrior, along the same lines as how *Viking* equalled a pirate in certain other areas of Northern Europe.⁵⁴ The social term

⁵¹ Eg. *The Saga of Magnús the Good. Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway* by Snorri Sturluson, Translated with Introduction and Notes by Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 538–576, esp. 23; *Knytlinga Saga. The History of the Kings of Denmark*, Translated by Hermann Pálsson & Paul Edwards (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 29. See overview in Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 254–360.

⁵² Marika Mägi, 'De søfarendes konflikter' (Seafarers Conflicts) in Carsten Selch Jensen, Marika Mägi, Kersti Markus & Janus Møller Jensen, *Da danskerne fik Dannebrog. Historien om de dansk-estiske relationer omkring år 1200* (When Danes got Dannebrog. Danish-Estonian Contacts around 1200 AD) (Tallinn: Argo, 2019), 107–117.

⁵³ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr, op. cit.*, 61–68.

⁵⁴ Argumentation in *ibid.*, 179–184.

became an ethnic indicator only later, when it was exclusively adopted for the inhabitants of Couronia, by that time predominantly ethnic Balts.

The narratives describing the 12th and early 13th century eastern seafarers in Scandinavia suggest in some cases that Christian kingdoms may have used the looting foreign troops in their own mutual wars in much the same way as some centuries earlier Anglo-Saxon rulers had tried to use Viking armies in their struggles against neighbouring kings. For instance, the *Knytlinga Saga* and Saxo Grammaticus have both described a battle fought in 1170 in Blekinge, present-day Southern Sweden. While Saxo says the county was plundered by Estonians and Couronians, the attackers are all called Couronians in the *Knytlinga Saga*.⁵⁵ The foreign troops arrived with ten ships and, accordingly, consisted of approximately three hundred men – Henry the Livonian has in several instances mentioned thirty men aboard an Estonian or Couronian ship.⁵⁶ Any raid to the opposite shores with so many men must have involved several logistical problems. As the texts say, the Estonians-Couronians had set up a base on the island of Öland. At that time in Sweden's possession, the island was plundered during the same events by Danes instead of men from the East. In 1170, Denmark and Sweden were waging war against each other, and the eastern seafarers who seem to have looted only the areas belonging to the Danes, were presumably allied with the Swedes.⁵⁷

Henry the Livonian writes that in the year 1203, a group of crusaders on their way to Livonia encountered sixteen warships from Saaremaa ravaging the Danish areas in present-day Southern Sweden. These armed forces may have consisted of nearly 500 warriors who, as we learn from the same story, had free entrance to Visby and the other Gotlandic harbours.⁵⁸ The raid was very well timed: king Canute VI of Denmark had died suddenly in November, and the plunderers attacked Denmark as soon as the sea became navigable again after the winter months. The quick action was probably motivated by the hope of taking advantage of the period of confusion after the ascension of the new king, when coastal defence have been relatively

⁵⁵ *Knytlinga Saga*, *op. cit.*, 123; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum. The History of the Danes*. Volumes I–II, edited by K. Friis-Jensen, translated by P. Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford Medieval Texts, 2015), 14: 40. See also Nils Blomkvist, 'East Baltic Vikings – with Particular Consideration to the Couronians' in *Praeities Pustapiat: archeologija, kultūra, visuomenė* (Pages of the Past: Archeology, Culture, Society) (Klaipėda: Klaipėdos universiteto Baltijos regiono istorijos ir archeologijos institutas, 2005), 71–93.

⁵⁶ Henricus Lettus, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, *op. cit.*, VII: 1–2. See also Marika Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic*, *op. cit.*, 69–81.

⁵⁷ Marika Mägi, *In Austrvegr*, *op. cit.*, 360–382.

⁵⁸ Henricus Lettus, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, *op. cit.*, VII: 1–2; Marika Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic*, *op. cit.*

slack.⁵⁹ The most remarkable detail revealed in the narrative is that the Gotlanders refused to attack the Saaremaa warships, referring to a treaty between Gotland and Saaremaa.

Treaties with Saaremaa or other parts of Estonia are mentioned in several other paragraphs in Henry's chronicle, and in many cases the context hints at the existence of such treaties between different parties, even if not directly referred to in the text. Nothing is known, though, about the content of these pacts. However, the non-attack treaty and shelter provided for Saaremaa ships in the harbours of Gotland probably meant that Gotlandic ships and sailors could count on similar privileges in the areas controlled by Saaremaa. In any case, the existence of such treaties points to the significant role that Saaremaa and Couronia played in guaranteeing the safety of important trade routes along the Eastern Baltic coasts. Most cargo ships coming from southern Scandinavia and bound for Russian markets in the East sailed over the open sea near Gotland. Once past the island, they could hardly avoid waters controlled by Saaremaa and, in certain cases, Couronia.

In the beginning of the 13th century, Saaremaa and Couronia were also able to block access to Riga, which was rapidly developing into the centre of the Eastern Baltic Crusades. As can be seen from the chronicle of Henry the Livonian, any situation could easily escalate into a serious conflict with the crusaders. During the first decade of the 1200s, Bishop Albert, head of the Livonian mission, tried to avoid clashes with the inhabitants of Saaremaa and the Couronians, albeit not always successfully. Henry the Chronicler often mentions the harbour of Dünamünde in the estuary of the Daugava River, ten kilometres from Riga. It was a long time before the crusaders managed to take full control of both the harbour and entrance into the river, while troops from Saaremaa tried to block the harbour at least once.⁶⁰ The 13th-century debouchment of the Daugava was narrow, so the plan to clog it up with additional buildings seemed quite realistic.⁶¹ Any blockage of the influx of supplies and military forces could have put the Christian centre in Riga at a serious risk. It was obvious that control over the Eastern Baltic maritime societies was a necessary precondition for subjugating the whole region.

Although most of the maritime societies in Estonia and Latvia were characterised by corporate power systems, there is no reason to suggest they were socially, technologically or martially backward compared to their neighbours. Henry of Livonia refers to several well-coordinated military actions aimed at maintaining

⁵⁹ Marika Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Henricus Lettus, *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, *op. cit.*, XIX: 2.

⁶¹ Marika Mägi, *The Viking Eastern Baltic*, *op. cit.*

control over trade routes, or over the centres along these routes.⁶² The sort of treaties mentioned above convincingly demonstrate that the relative absence of individual power structures did not hinder political ambitions or communication with the rest of the world.

As regards the political relevance of Saaremaa, a good example is presented by a letter from the Riga administration to the city of Lübeck in 1227, explaining that the leaders of Saaremaa had recently become their vassals. Namely, the city of Lübeck, then in the midst a conflict with the King of Denmark, had asked Saaremaa for help.⁶³ What kind of assistance was meant or whether it was actually provided or not, is unknown, since neither Lübeck's original letter nor the eventual answer sent from Saaremaa has survived. It is, however, notable that the leaders of Saaremaa, still officially heathen when Lübeck's request for help was sent, communicated with other political powers via letters, probably written in Latin or in Lower German. Nonetheless, the power structures in Saaremaa maintained their corporate nature for several generations after Christianisation. Another treaty, concluded in 1255, was sealed with the coat of arms of Saaremaa, and listed eight persons as the leaders of the island.⁶⁴

Conclusions

As the number of written sources increased considerably by the end of the 12th, beginning of the 13th century, clear-cut differences between the social systems existing in the northern and southern halves of the Eastern Baltic became more obvious. The societies in the southern part of the Eastern Baltic were generally more hierarchical. For instance, early 13th-century written sources described Lithuania as a deeply stratified society with strong leaders called princes who possessed large estates. Several of them were associated with powerful centres and had large military forces under their command. In an agreement concluded with Halitsch-Wolhynien in 1219, five princes mightier than others were said to be ruling in Lithuania and

⁶² Marika Mägi, 'Ösel and the Danish Kingdom: re-visiting Henry's chronicle and the archaeological evidence' in Marek Tamm, Linda Kaljundi & Carsten Selch Jensen (eds.), *Crusading and Chronicle Writing on the Medieval Baltic Frontier: The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia (early 13th century)* (Farnham / Burlington, Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 317-341.

⁶³ F. G. V Bunge (ed.), *Liv-, Est- und Kurländisches Urkundenbuch nebst regesten*, Vol. 1 (Reval, 1953), 117 (1227).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 369-371 (1255); Enn Tarvel, 'Poliitiline ajalugu 13. sajandil ja 14. sajandi algul' (Political History in the 13th and early 14th Century) in *Saaremaa 2. Ajalugu, majandus, kultuur* (Saaremaa. History, Economy, Culture) (Tallinn: Koolibri, 2007), 85-94, esp. 90.

Zhemaitia. In 1245 one of them, Mindaugas, was already called 'the highest king'.⁶⁵

The simultaneous existence of societies based on corporate power structures in the northern half of the Eastern Baltic raises a question about the role topographic conditions may have played in such diverging developments. The Eastern Baltic areas inhabited by the Baltic Finns were positioned at the crossroads of internationally relevant trade routes, but also on the border between different political regimes: the Russian principalities in the East, and the Scandinavian kingdoms in the West. The rapidly consolidating state of Lithuania, occupying the southern part of the region, gradually became an increasing challenge for the eastern and southern territories as well: according to the chroniclers, Lithuanians' plundering raids had a major impact on Livonian local policies. A key role in the political systems was played by religion, Orthodox faith in the East and Catholicism in the West, both engaged in an escalating conflict throughout the 13th century.⁶⁶

Political fragmentation and corporate power structures are comparatively widespread in buffer zones squeezed between political entities, and this is what Estonia and Latvia had developed into by the beginning of the 13th century. Their position at the crossroads of trade routes only encouraged fragmentation. Transit trade was particularly profitable for such intermediary regions that could function as converging points for different forces, without teaming with any of them. It is also difficult to underestimate the role of Christianisation in this political game: to join either the Catholic or Orthodox faith would have automatically brought about one-sided political dominance and undermined trade contacts with the other side. The conversion of Prince Mindaugas of Lithuania in the middle of the 13th century, first to the Orthodox, then to the Catholic faith, serves as a good example here. However, unlike the northern half of the Eastern Baltic, Lithuania was by then a political force in its own right.

⁶⁵ Herbert Ligi, *Talupoegade koormised Eestis*, , *op. cit.*, 37-38; Zigmantas Kiaupa, 'The Establishment of the State' in Zigmantas Kiaupa *et. al.*, *The History of Lithuania before 1795*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Anti Selart, *Livonia, Rus' and the Baltic Crusades in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

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NORDIC HISTORICAL REVIEW

Les Sociétés nordiques et baltes à l'aube
de la christianisation

.....

*Nordic and Baltic Societies at the Dawn
of Christianisation*