

# ON THE MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LATE PREHISTORIC SAAREMAA AND THE LIVS

Abstract

Relations between the Livs and the Couronian Livs, inhabiting large areas in the territory of present-day Latvia in the Late Iron Age (9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> centuries), and the Estonian island(s) of Saaremaa are considered in the article. Here, the Baltic Finnic population in the Kurzeme peninsula, usually called the Couronian Livs, are differentiated from the prehistoric Livs who inhabited areas around the rivers Daugava and Gauja.

Burial rites and artefact material of these areas exhibit various common features. The close relationship between Saaremaa and the Couronian Livs is particularly obvious in the comparison of grave forms, as well as of artefacts and artefact complexes found in graves. Comparing Saaremaa with the prehistoric Livs, the similarities are mainly found in artefact material. In the Daugava Livian area, some female burials can even be regarded as the graves of Osilian women. The archaeological evidence indicates, accordingly, that all the aforementioned areas belonged to a common cultural sphere at the end of prehistoric times.

**Keywords:** burial customs, communication, ethnicity, Livs, Saaremaa, Late Iron Age

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## Introduction

Livs, the tribe who gave their name to medieval Livonia, were people living on the eastern coast of the Gulf of Riga in present-day Latvia (Fig. 1). They were mentioned in many written sources of the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, firstly in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia. The chronicle mentions the Daugava-Livs, Gauja-Livs and Metsepole-Livs, and sometimes also Livs in a district called *Idumea*.<sup>1</sup> Archaeological evidence in those regions also demonstrates certain peculiarities. The chronicler does not distinguish in any way between the Baltic Finnic and the ethnic Baltic population in the Kurzeme peninsula, persistently calling them Couronians (*Curones*). However, Henry of Livonia was normally very precise in specifying ethnic differences and the Couronians are frequently mentioned in his accounts. It is logical to assume that the chronicler treated the Livs and the Couronians clearly as separate ethnicities and considered the Couronians to be one group (Tõnisson 1970).

The Livs known from ethnographic sources were people inhabiting the northern sandy coastal zone of the Kurzeme peninsula. This area was settled only as late as the 14<sup>th</sup> century since it is quite unsuitable for agriculture. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Livs barely made up a quarter of the population, while the rest were Latvians. A more or less complete ethnic group of (Coastal) Livs first took shape in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Tõnisson 1970). It seems logical to assume that they were re-settlers from the ancient Livian area, who assimilated a certain number of Latvians and

1 The archaeologist Evald Tõnisson came to the conclusion that late prehistoric *Idumea* was inhabited by an ethnic Baltic Finnic group, speaking a language similar to Livian. They were partly mixed with Livian and Latgalian inhabitants (Tõnisson 1966).

were finally assimilated themselves. In linguistic and folklore literature, primarily this ethnic group has been treated as Livs.

In archaeological literature, the Late Iron Age inhabitants of the Kurzeme peninsula are usually called Couronian Livs, to avoid confusion and to distinguish between the "real" Livs and the Livs of the Kurzeme peninsula. This term is still misleading in various ways. At the end of prehistoric times, the inhabitants of Kurzeme presumably were a different Baltic Finnic ethnic group, which has later disappeared from the historical scene. It is worth mentioning in this connection that, on the island of Saaremaa, the ethnographic Coastal Livs of Kurzeme were called Couronians (*kuralased*) and not Livs until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although similarities between the archaeological evidence of the Couronians and the Livs on the one hand and Saaremaa and western Estonia on the other hand have been pointed out before (Šturms 1936; Asaris 1996), a proper comparison was complicated because only a small part of Osilian archaeological data had been published until recently. However, the find material from Saaremaa holds quite a lot of features which suggest differences from mainland Estonia and points to similarities with the Livs, the Couronian Livs and the (Baltic) Couronians.

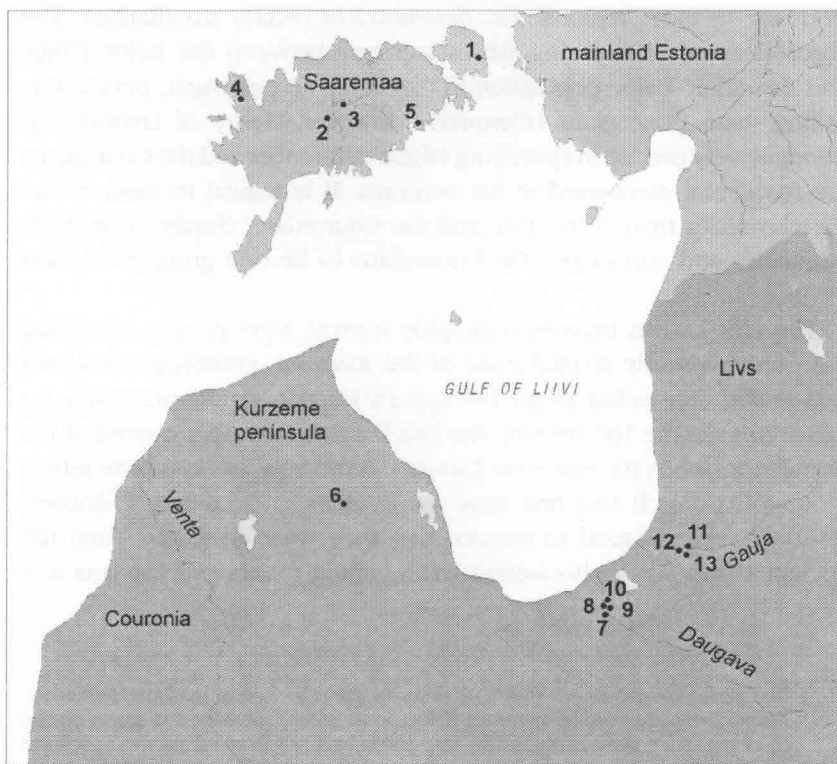


Fig. 1. Map of Saaremaa and neighbouring areas. Sites mentioned in the paper: 1 – Mäla; 2 – Kāku; 3 – Piila; 4 – Kurevere; 5 – Viltina; 6 – Sabile "Krievu kapi"; 7 – Daugmale; 8 – Dole (Rauši, Vampenieši I, II); 9 – Laukskola; 10 – Reznis; 11 – Turaida; 12 – Krimulda; 13 – Sigulda.

In this paper, specific similarities between the Estonian island of Saaremaa<sup>2</sup> and the two main groups of the Finno-Ugrians in the territory of present-day Latvia during the 10<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries are considered. The burial rites and artefacts found in graves will be treated as the main source of the approach. In addition to the scant published data, observations made when going through the (mostly unpublished) find material of the Livs in the stores of the Latvian Institute of History and the History Museum of Latvia in Riga are included.

### *Saaremaa and the Couronian Livs*

The distance between the northern tip of the Kurzeme peninsula and Sõrve, the southern tip of Saaremaa, is merely 30 km. It is not surprising, therefore, that contacts between Saaremaa and northern Couronia were very close during the last centuries when the northern coast of the Kurzeme peninsula was inhabited by the Couronian Livs. A lot of similarities can be found in folklore gathered in these areas. What is more, the first inhabitants of Saaremaa have been considered to have been the Couronians (*kuralased*) in several legends. There are numerous microtoponyms on Saaremaa, referring to the Couronians or Couronia (Kallasmaa 1996), and *Kure Saar* (Kure Island) was a parallel name for the big Saaremaa island until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Hupel 1774: 301–302; Mellin 1798). The Estonian name for Couronia is *Kuramaa* (Kura Land), and this coincidence should indicate strong mutual connections between the two areas. The fact that the Osilians and the Couronian Livs considered themselves to be more or less one group during the last centuries nevertheless does not necessarily reflect the Late Iron Age situation, especially when taking into account the late re-settling of the Livs on the coast of Kurzeme. The late-prehistoric mutual relations of these areas, however, as demonstrated by archaeology, reinforce the toponymic evidence. In addition to this, intense military cooperation between the Osilians and the Couronians is repeatedly pointed out in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia.

As mentioned, Couronia was treated as a single unit in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia. Some reference to its division can be found in treaties concluded between the Couronians and the German conquerors in 1230

2 Late Iron Age (800–1200/1250 AD) Saaremaa actually consisted of several islands, many of which have become part of the “big” island by now as the result of land uplift. Even now, the name Saaremaa usually denotes also the island of Muhu and several other islands around the large one. Derived from the German name for Saaremaa (*Ösel*), and according to a widespread tradition in archaeological and historical literature, I have called the inhabitants of the island(s) *Osilians* and used the adjective *Osilian*.

and 1231, according to which the Couronians accepted Christianity, agreed to pay dues and help in fighting the enemies of Christianity. Nine districts mentioned in the treaties, together with some others, were named Peaceful Couronia (*Vredecuronia*), perhaps referring to the fact that those Couronians were not involved in conflict with the Germans. *Vredecuronia* embraced the central part of the Kurzeme peninsula west of Riga, a region which in the Late Iron Age was predominantly characterized by burial customs and artefact material defined as Couronian Livian.

The western part of the Kurzeme peninsula, with its administrative districts called *kiligunda* as on Saaremaa, was also mentioned in treaties of the early 13<sup>th</sup> century (Auns 2001). This region embraced the lower and middle reaches of the River Venta and neighbouring areas to the east. Archaeological evidence in this area was characteristic of both the Couronian Livs and the (Baltic) Couronians; therefore, the 11<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century inhabitants of this region have sometimes been referred to as “Couronianized Livs” in Latvian archaeology (Mugurēvičs 1972).

The ethnic composition of Couronia appears even more complicated because of an ethnic group called Vends (*Wendi*) in 13<sup>th</sup>-century writings. They inhabited the western part of the Kurzeme peninsula, the lower reaches of the River Venta, until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Since the archaeological evidence linked with the Vends is rather similar to the “real” Livs, the Osilians and the Baltic Finns in general, they have usually been considered to have been Baltic Finns (Mugurēvičs 1972; some earlier researchers have defined them as ethnic Baltic tribes, in times when the archaeological material of the Livs was not yet well enough known, e.g., Kiwull 1911). According to Henry of Livonian, the Vends were forced to abandon their former settlement area and they re-settled in the Old Castle (*Mons antiquus*) at the site of present Riga. They were soon driven away from there as well, and found a new settlement area by the Latgallians near Cēsis (*Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae* XIV:8; XV:3; XXII:5).<sup>3</sup> This data is supported by archaeological evidence: in the lower reaches of the River Venta, burial customs as well as material culture became fully characteristic of the Couronians starting from the 12<sup>th</sup> century at the latest (Mugurēvičs 1972).

Place names and other linguistic data clearly point to former Baltic Finnic habitation in the Kurzeme peninsula. *Vredecuronia* as well as the western part of the peninsula, including the former settlement area of the Vends, coincide with the Tami dialect area, which is characterized by strong influences from Baltic Finnic languages (Mugurēvičs 1972: map).

North-Couronia is archaeologically poorly investigated and very little

3 They have also given the Estonian and German names to Cēsis (*Võnnu*, *Wenden*).

of the material is published (e.g., Kiwull 1911; Šturms 1936; Mugurēvičs 1970). Archaeological finds demonstrate vast differences. Inhumations as well as cremations under low sand mounds, in stone graves or in flat burial grounds were common here during the Late Iron Age. At Lake Vilķumuiķa even burials into bodies of water can be observed (Apals et al. 1974: 187). Several researchers have tried to associate different burial customs in Couronia directly with different ethnic groups. That kind of approach is, nevertheless, very disputable and complicated, especially as often only archaeological data from the territory of present Latvia has been used for comparison. Thus the local inhumations have tended to be associated with a Baltic Finnic population, as inhumation burials were widespread among the Livs around the Daugava and Gauķa rivers, while cremations were normally linked with the (Baltic) Couronians moving northward from southern Couronia (Mugurēvičs 1970; Asaris 1996). Still, the tradition of inhumation burials among the Livs could rather be regarded as exceptional, considering the burial rites of neighbouring Baltic Finnic groups. Most likely, it can be interpreted as a direct influence from the neighbouring ethnic Baltic tribes. Additionally, the Livs practised cremation as well (Tõnisson 1974; Zariņa 1988; 1997; Šnē 1997). At the same time, cremation was prevalent among the neighbouring Osilians until the very end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Māģi 2002: 125-137).

It is even more problematic to associate artefact types with ethnic origin (e.g., Asaris 1996). In addition to theoretical contradictions, a large number of artefact types characteristic of both the Couronians and the Osilians, or of even a wider territory, may be pointed out. This phenomenon can rather be explained by similar circumstances where activities connected with the sea played an important role, and by intensive communication between these areas.

### *Burial Customs*

In reviewing common features in the archaeological evidence of Saaremaa and the Baltic Finnic population of northern Couronia, the Viking Age grave form of round stone barrows deserves first mention. Unfortunately, only very few of them have been investigated in the northern part of the Kurzeme peninsula. On Saaremaa, such graves have been uncovered in the cemeteries of Māla, Kāķu, Piila, Kurevere and Viltina, where they were dated mostly to the 7<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fig. 2; Māģi 2002: 38-62). In both areas, the stone barrows formed cemeteries, consisting normally of dozens of such graves. Still, entirely cremation burials have been found under cairns or circular stone constructions on Saaremaa while both

*Fig. 2. The Piila cemetery on Saaremaa. Photo Marika Mägi.*



cremation and inhumation graves were detected in these grave forms in northern Couronia. The archaeologist Eduards Šturms has already drawn attention to the correspondence between Couronian stone graves and contemporary stone circle graves on Saaremaa (Šturms 1936: 33–34). Nevertheless, excavations of graves of this type in Couronia were carried out about 100 years ago, and the evidence of inhumations in them is somewhat problematic since unburnt bones can hardly survive in the sandy local soils. Stone graves in Couronia were typical of the Viking Age, and they occurred only seldom in later periods.



Another Late Iron Age grave form, widespread in northern Kurzeme, was individual burials in sand barrows, where both cremations and inhumations have been detected. Sixteen cemeteries of such mounds are presently known from northern Couronia, and some of them have been archaeologically investigated. The grave form itself, as well as the grave goods in these burials, mostly resemble the burial customs of the Daugava Livs (Šturms 1936: 34-36).

There are no sand barrows either on Saaremaa or elsewhere in coastal Estonia. Another question is whether we can consider sand barrows to be a grave form completely different from stone cairns. Šturms (1936: 34-36) has already drawn attention to the phenomenon that sand barrows were widespread in areas where there were few stones. On Saaremaa, there are sandy areas only in the western and northern parts of the island while the rest of the island is a stony moraine area. Burial mounds were made of convenient material, and the ideology behind these grave forms can be similar, irrespective of the material used for them.

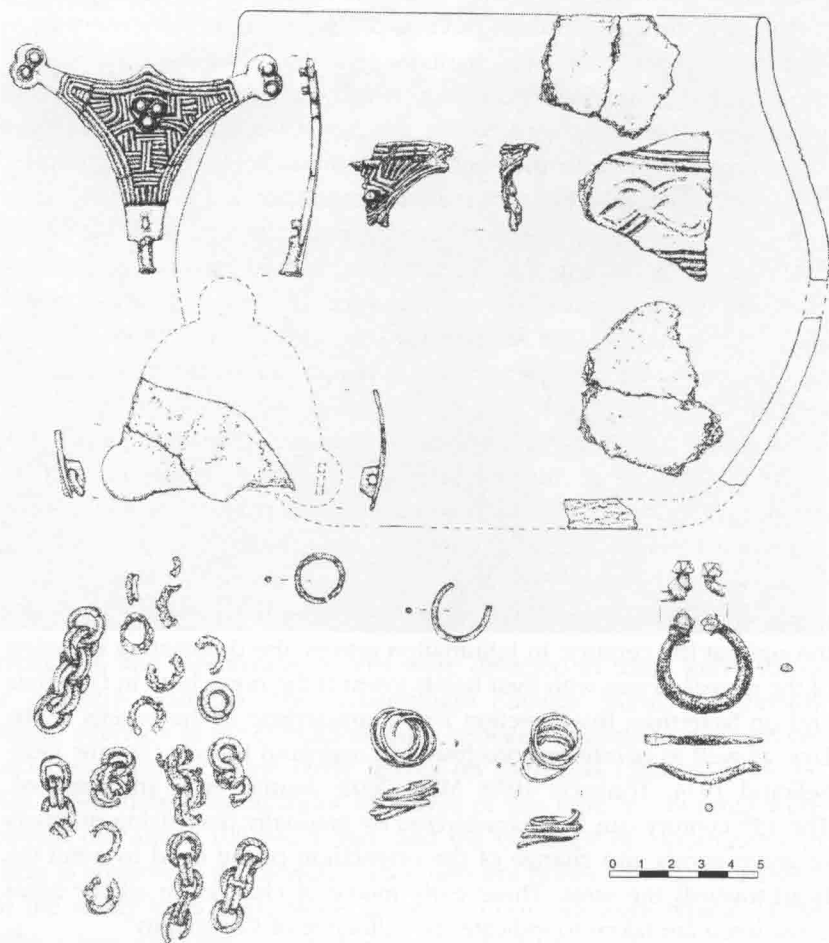
Details of finds at Sabile "Krievu kapi", an excavated cemetery near Talsi in Couronia, have been partially published (Šturms 1936: 34-35). The cemetery consisted of sand barrows, where both cremations and inhumations were represented. In the first case, cremation deposits were recorded beneath the sand heaps. Accordingly, the structure of the graves, except the building material, corresponded to contemporary cairns and/or stone circle graves on Saaremaa. Study of the finds in the History Museum of Latvia indicated that the find material of "Krievu kapi" also had analogues in burial complexes of 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup>-centuries stone graves on Saaremaa (LVM AA 109, 198). Not only artefact types but also the character of find complexes were strikingly similar (for analogues on Saaremaa see Mägi 2002).

Flat burial grounds with inhumation burials began to spread in northern Couronia at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, while the earliest inhumation graves found on Saaremaa can be dated only to the very end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The 12<sup>th</sup> century on Saaremaa was characterized by stone cemeteries without formal structures where cremation burials prevailed. The custom of cremation also persisted in North Couronia throughout the century. In inhumation graves, the dominating direction of the deceased was with their heads towards the north both in Couronia and on Saaremaa; this direction was characteristic of the burials of the Livs, as well as of inhumations found in mainland Estonia (Šturms 1935; Selirand 1974; Tõnisson 1974; Mägi 2002; Asaris verbal information). The 13<sup>th</sup> century can be characterized by gradually decreasing numbers of grave goods and change of the orientation of the dead to point the head towards the west. These early medieval changes in all the areas considered are taken to indicate the influence of Christianity.

North Couronian 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup>-century inhumation graves contain artefact material that is similar to other Livs, but also to Saaremaa. Metal finds of this period have been reported mainly in female graves, but it was primarily women who were supplied with ornaments and metal accessories or bronze decoration belonging to their costume.

### Artefacts

Common features in artefact material are complicated to assess, since prehistoric Couronia and Saaremaa definitely belonged to the same culture sphere. Finds of even the southern part of Couronia and of the island of Saaremaa often represent, therefore, the same artefact types. Most of these common types have certainly been recorded also in northern Couronia.



*Fig. 3. Part of the grave goods of a female burial at Kurevere, Saaremaa (Mägi 2002: Pl. 27).*



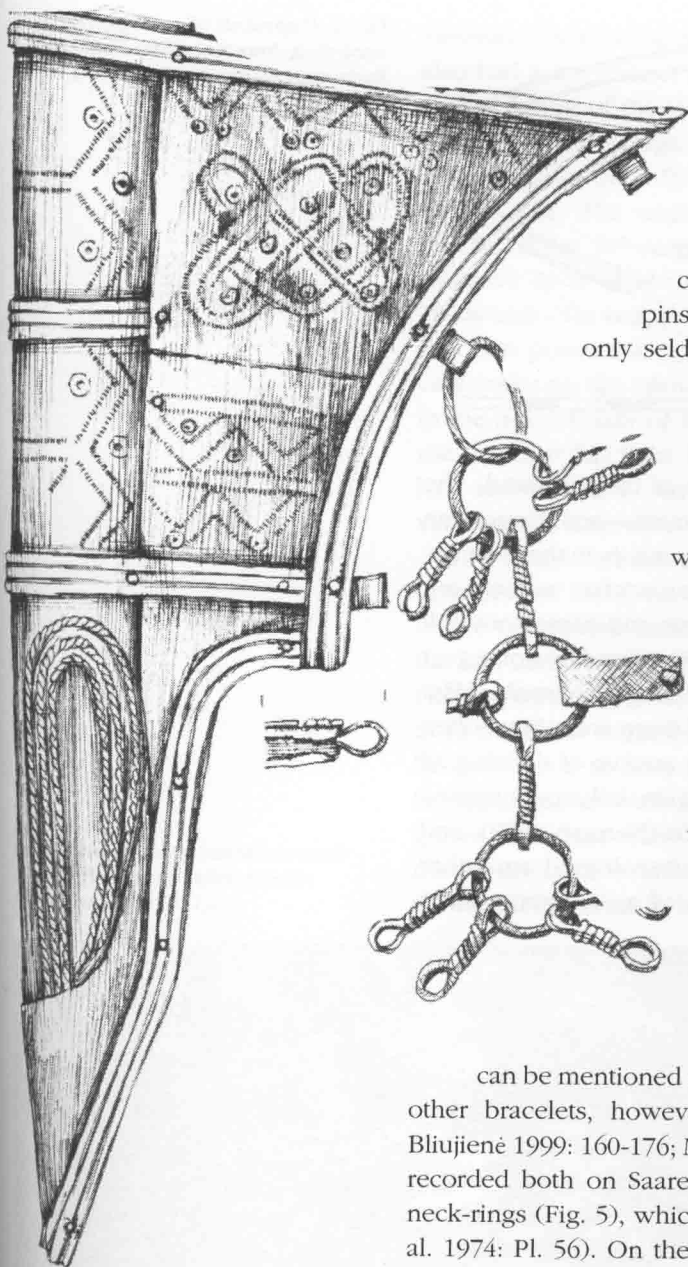


Fig. 4. Saaremaa-Livian type of knife sheath, found at Randvere, Saaremaa (Mägi 2002: Pl. 40: 1).

Particularly penannular brooches with funnel- and star-shaped terminals and with poppy-shaped terminals, and certain types of triangular-headed pins can be cited as common jewellery types. These last normally had the same shape both in Couronia and Saaremaa while their decoration usually carried clearly local traits. Triangular-headed pins of so-called Saaremaa type were, nevertheless, only seldom found outside the islands or western coast of mainland Estonia (Fig. 3; Mägi 1997). On Saaremaa, this type of pin was almost the only one used until the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Mägi 2002: 104).

A female artefact type widespread over the whole of Saaremaa, the Livian area and North Couronia, is a knife sheath with a special broadening, and covered throughout with ornamented bronze plates (Fig. 4). Bronze-plated knife sheaths belonging to the festive attire of women were also common in Late Iron Age mainland Estonia and Finland, where their shape was different – these sheaths were of even width (Selirand 1970; Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982a: 48-50). No mainland type knife sheaths have been found on the Estonian islands (Mägi 2002: 91-92). Female knife sheaths were rare among the ethnic Baltic tribes.

The frequent occurrence of spiral bracelets can be mentioned as characteristic of both Saaremaa and Couronia; other bracelets, however, represent local types (Mägi-Lõugas 1995; Bliujienė 1999: 160-176; Mägi 2002: 105-107). Peculiar items of ornament, recorded both on Saaremaa and Couronia, were so-called compound neck-rings (Fig. 5), which were also worn by the Semigallians (Apals et al. 1974: Pl. 56). On the Estonian mainland, pieces of these neck-rings have been found only in the part of West Estonia which is the closest to Saaremaa.

Female chain arrangements, fixed on the shoulders with pins, were widespread in the Late Iron Age, having been used on Saaremaa, in the Daugava Livian area and mainland Estonia, as well as in Couronia and in the areas of several ethnic Baltic tribes. In Couronia and Saaremaa, they were mostly simpler and with fewer chains than those of the Daugava

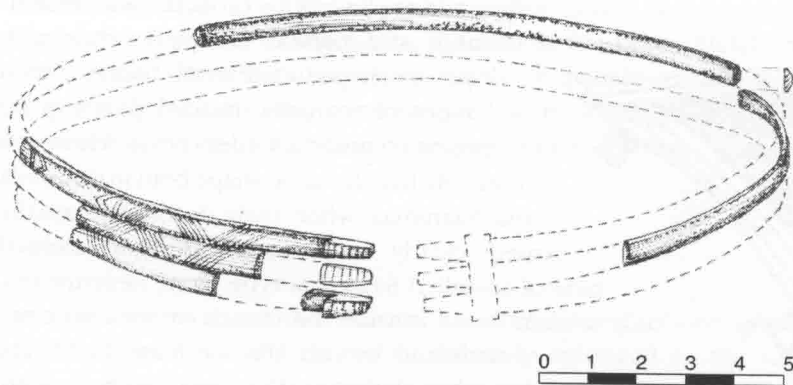


Fig. 5. Fragments of a compound neck-ring, found at Kāku cemetery on Saaremaa (Mägi 2002: Pl. 15: 1).

Livs, the Gauja Livs or Estonians in some parts of the mainland. The aforementioned triangular-headed pins of Saaremaa and Couronian types were often used for fixing the chain arrangements in these areas.

Several parallels between Osilian and Couronian artefact material can be drawn on the strength of weapons, horse gear and sometimes belt fittings. In the territory of present Estonia and Latvia, abundant horse gear in graves is particularly characteristic of Saaremaa and Couronia (Mägi 2002: 95-96). Common weapon types in both of these areas have often been explained by Scandinavian influences. The custom of defining all common features in local regions as Scandinavian influences started in Estonian and Latvian archaeology in the 1920s (Nerman 1929), and became a long-lasting tradition in East Baltic archaeology. I am rather inclined to regard this phenomenon as a sign of a common culture sphere.

#### *Saaremaa and the prehistoric Livs*

The Late Iron Age Livs inhabited large areas around the lower reaches of the River Daugava and around the River Gauja, and were assimilated by ethnic Baltic tribes during the Middle Ages and early modern times. As a result of this, we know almost nothing of their folklore and very little of their ethnography. We also know very little about the language they spoke, despite the fact that it was a Baltic Finnic language similar to Estonian. The geographical position of this people at the meeting point of different ethnic groups and culture spheres, around big rivers essential for international trade, is significantly demonstrated by rich and variable finds in their graves.

The chronicler Henry of Livonia distinguished two major groups of the Livs: the Gauja Livs and the Daugava Livs (*Heinrici Chronicon*

*Livoniae*). According to the archaeological evidence, the two groups also had some distinct features.

The region of the Daugava Livs embraced the areas along the lower reaches of the Daugava River around the present town of Riga and east-southeast of it. By 1974, nineteen Livian cemeteries were known in this area. The earliest of them were, however, dated only to the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Several burial grounds on the banks of the Daugava River were uncovered in the course of rescue excavations in 1960s and -70s, before the water level was considerably raised because of a new power station built on the River Daugava. Late Iron Age Livian cemeteries on the island of Dole and on the northern bank of the river, in the near vicinity of the hillfort and market place of Daugmale, were excavated at this time. Most of the abundant and variable find material has, unfortunately, remained unpublished, or is published only on a very general level (Šnore 1996; Zariņa 1988; 1997; Šnē 1997).

The burial customs as well as the grave goods of the Daugava Livs demonstrate extensive contacts with their neighbouring areas. Fifteen of the cemeteries known in their area were flat burial grounds while the rest consisted of sand mounds with single burials under them. The custom of inhuming the dead in flat burial grounds differentiates the Livs from the other Baltic Finns in surrounding areas, and can presumably be considered to be a direct influence of their closest neighbours, the Semigallians, as well as of the Latgallians. In the Livian inhumation graves, the dead were directed with their heads towards the north or northwest, both in male and female burials. The direction towards the northwest could easily have been inspired by the course of the Daugava

River, which flows towards the northwest. Children, and especially boys, were usually buried with their heads towards the north. The custom of burying men and women in opposite directions, as was normal among most of the ethnic Baltic tribes, does not occur in the Livian burial rites. Although inhumations prevailed, cremation burials were also widespread, under mounds or in burial pits in flat burial grounds.

The Gauja Livs around present Turaida, Krimulda and Sigulda used to inhumate their dead or bury the cremated bones under small mounds of sand (Fig. 6). The earliest graves

Fig. 6. Gauja Livian burial mounds in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After Aspelin (Tõnisson 1974: Pl. 1).



excavated can be, nevertheless, dated only to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Sixteen cemeteries with ca. 800 mounds are known from this area, but most of these have been investigated in the 19<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The size of the mounds could vary greatly, their diameters remaining between 3-15 m, heights between 0.4-2.5 m. In most cases, no stone constructions have been recorded inside or around these barrows; this phenomenon can, in any case, be explained by sandy local soils with few stones. Under every mound, usually one deceased and seldom two or three were buried. The direction of the body was in most cases, both in male and female graves, fixed with the head towards the north. Cremation graves occurred especially on the coast and were comparatively rare but not quite unknown (Tõnisson 1974: 38-96).

Both the burial customs and artefact material of the Gauja Livs were relatively homogeneous compared to the Daugava Livs. It is obvious that different geopolitical positions can be seen behind these differences. Although the River Gauja was presumably an essential trade route, its importance could certainly not be compared with the Daugava. The lower reaches of the latter probably formed the most crucial area of what is now Latvia, where the interests of surrounding ethnic and political regions crossed.

No direct parallels can be drawn between the Late Iron Age burial customs of Saaremaa and the prehistoric Livs. Nevertheless, some similar features in burial rituals can be pointed out. Firstly, the custom of supplying the dead with donations or additional complexes of grave goods should be mentioned. At the edges of the Laukskola mounds, collections of finds – ornaments, tools or other items – have sometimes been found and usually interpreted as donations (Zariņa 1997). Similar find complexes can be found in 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century cremation graves on Saaremaa, and sometimes in West Estonia (Mandel 2002; Mägi 2002: 125-132).<sup>4</sup>

In the cemeteries of the Daugava Livs, collections of grave goods, especially weapons or other typical male items, but no traces of bones, have sometimes been found under mounds. These graves have been usually assessed as monuments erected for warriors who had been killed far away from home (e.g., Šnore 1996). A weapons find at Viltina Kāo-Matsi in southern Saaremaa, which contained items characteristic of Osilian 11<sup>th</sup>-century male burials but with no bones in their near vicinity, can be mentioned as a direct parallel to the Livian deposits (Mägi 2000). According to some data, another similar collection of weapons was found nearby in earlier times, and deposits of artefacts without bones have also been reported in other late prehistoric stone cemeteries of

4 It is quite possible that similar donations could also be distinguished in other Estonian stone cemeteries with cremation burials; the find material of most Estonian Late Iron Age burial grounds has, nevertheless, not been closely analysed.

Saaremaa (Mägi 2002: 38-63). A collection of female artefacts, recently found at Keskvere in West Estonia, can be considered to have been a deposit similar to the aforementioned finds (Mandel 2002).

Donations in graves were widespread not only among the Livs and the Osilians. This custom was particularly characteristic of the burial customs of Baltic Couronians (Kulikauskas et al. 1961: 382-383), and could sometimes be observed in the burials of the Latgallians (Radiņš 1996). In the last case, the donations normally consisted of female ornaments and tools, occurring both in female and male graves. Sporadically, donations in graves have been recorded in Karelia (Saksa 1998: 29), and probably also in other areas. This phenomenon is clearly observable in inhumation graves where the exact position of grave goods is fixed. In cremation graves, especially in stone cemeteries without formal structures, similar donations could probably easily have failed to be distinguished among other grave goods.

The most obvious characteristic linking the burial rites of the Livs with those of Saaremaa and Estonia in general is the appearance of graves with artefacts only in the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In Latvian archaeological literature, the sudden appearance of Livian graves has been sometimes explained by immigration of the Livs, originally inhabiting the peninsula of Kurzeme, to the lower reaches of the River Daugava only in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In the following hundred years, they have been believed to have widened their settled area to the region around the River Gauja where the earliest graves appear in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Šturms 1936: 36-37; Mugurēvičs 1970; Šnore 1996). A similar phenomenon in the area of present-day Estonia has, nevertheless, been explained by a change in burial rites in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Not only the first half of the Viking Age but also the centuries preceding this period lack cemeteries or are represented by single burials only. Only a small number of secondary burials into earlier, mainly Roman Period stone graves are known from this era (e.g., Selirand 1974; Jaanits et al. 1982; Mägi 2002).

### *Burial complexes and artefact material*

In comparing Osilian and Livian artefact material, it is important to bear in mind that the Livian find material in their inhumation graves is pretty well preserved while the grave goods in the cremation burials on Saaremaa are badly burnt. What is more, normally only small fragments of each artefact were brought into Osilian stone graves.

Late Iron Age burial customs and artefact material of Saaremaa differ quite clearly from those of mainland Estonia, except the part of West Estonia which is the closest to Saaremaa and where Osilian influences

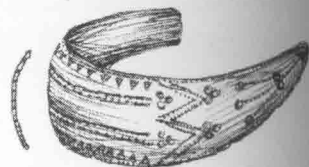
became obvious, especially in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Drawing parallels with the archaeological material of the Livs, one can rather assume that contacts between the Osilians and the prehistoric Livs seem to have been closer than between the Osilians and most people inhabiting the mainland of present-day Estonia.

Differences in artefact material between the Gauja and Daugava Livs can be followed mainly in female personal ornaments while items in male graves normally belong to international and widespread types. In the grave goods of Daugava Livian women, strong influences from neighbouring areas are conspicuous. The large chain arrangements of the Daugava Livian women were fixed on the shoulders with pins of different types or with tortoise brooches, while women in the Gauja Livian area used entirely tortoise brooches for this purpose. The Livian tortoise or oval brooches were an artefact type originally devised in Scandinavia but then developed locally (Tõnisson 1974: 120-121; Spirgīs 2003 and in this volume).

Osilian women evidently wore chain arrangements simpler than those of Livian women. Single burnt fragments in cremation graves on Saaremaa make it difficult to estimate how long the Osilian chain arrangements originally were and how many rows they had but both finds in the earliest inhumation graves, appearing on Saaremaa at the very end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and the small number of pendants found in Osilian burial complexes imply that the long multiple-rowed chain arrangements, peculiar to the Livian women, were not very widespread on Saaremaa. Excluding single stray-finds, tortoise brooches have not been found on the islands.

Common artefact types for Osilian and Livian women were knife sheaths with bronze plating and often special widening, sometimes fixed to the belt (or the chain arrangement) with a special rod-chain network, and relatively narrow concave bracelets with tapering ends, so called Livian-type bracelets (Fig. 7; Tõnisson 1974; Zariņa 1988; 1997). On Saaremaa, the latter often occurred together with so called Saaremaa-type bracelets and spiral bracelets (Mägi 2002: 91-92, 105-106).

Numerous bronze spirals and little rings used for decorating garments have been found in 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>-centuries cremation graves on Saaremaa. More exact data of the bronze decoration on textiles and of costumes in general appear, however, only in inhumation graves at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> and during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Features similar to those of the Livs are conspicuous in this material. Veil-like female head-dresses, decorated with bronze spirals and small rings, should be mentioned first in this connection (Fig. 8; Zariņa 1988: 37-40, Fig 18; Mägi 2002: 111-113, Pl. 97). Similar head-dresses were also widespread in Couronia. Chain arrangements for head-dresses, characteristic for instance of the Estonian



*Fig. 7. Livian-type bracelet, found at Randvere cemetery on Saaremaa (Mägi 2002: Pl. 37: 1).*





Fig. 8. Head-dress decoration of a woman buried in the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century at Loona, Saaremaa (Mägi 2002: Pl. 97: 2. For Livian parallels see Zariņa 1988: Fig. 18).

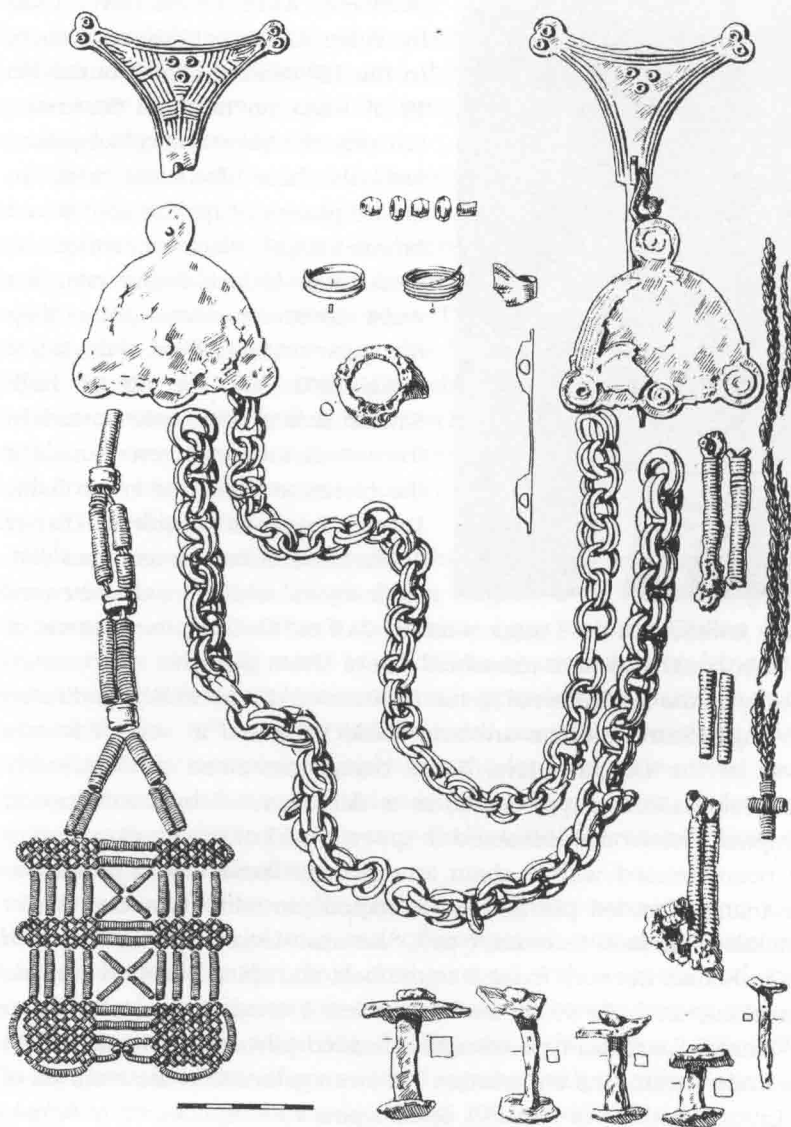
mainland, were almost never used by either Livian or Osilian women. In the 13<sup>th</sup>-century child's burial No 19 at Karja on northern Saaremaa, remains of a short smocklike jacket, with the hem decorated with an ornate pattern of bronze spirals and bronze rings, were unearthed. A penannular brooch found near the waist obviously relates to a deep triangular cut in the front of the jacket (Mägi 2002: 112, Fig. 30, Pl. 120). Similar jackets were widespread in the women's and children's burials of the prehistoric Livs and in the Baltic Finnic areas of Couronia (Zariņa 1988; 1999). It can be assumed that, since several similarities characterized

female jewellery of the Daugava Livs and of the Osilians, the costume of the latter could also have resembled that of Livian women.

Study of the find material in the Institute of History in Riga indicated that single Saaremaa-type artefacts could be found in several female graves of the Daugava Livs. Some burials contained predominantly or entirely Saaremaa-type items, as is demonstrated by the following examples. The woman inhumed in grave No 67 at the Rauši cemetery had been dressed with a chain arrangement fixed with a Saaremaa-type triangle-headed pin and cross-shaped pin with connected lower terminals (mainland Estonian type), Saaremaa-Livian-type knife sheath with rod-chain network fixing it to the belt, and spiral bracelets. Female cremation burial No 99 at the Vampenieši I cemetery contained two 10<sup>th</sup>-century Saaremaa-type triangular-headed pins and Saaremaa-Livian type knife sheath (the information has been gathered at the archives of the Latvian Institute of History). Similar pins were uncovered in female inhumation grave No 60 of the same cemetery. Pins and chain holders of Saaremaa types had decorated a woman buried in grave No 483 at Laukskola cemetery (Fig. 9; Zariņa 1988: Fig. 26). In grave No 2 under VI barrow at the Reznes cemetery, a woman had been inhumed in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> or the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, supplied with ornaments characteristic of contemporary Saaremaa (Berga & Graudonis 1983).<sup>5</sup> Other examples of female burials in the Daugava Livian area

5 There can possibly be even more examples but the majority of the find material of the prehistoric Livs is not published and so far the author has only been able to study the finds of the burial grounds of the Island of Dole in the archaeological collections of the Institute of History, Riga.

Fig. 9. Female burial No 483 at Laukskola, Daugava Livian area (Zariņa 1988: Fig. 26).



could be adduced in which the find material was linked to mainland Estonia.

Weapons, ornaments and other accessories belonging to male costume have normally been more international than the ornaments of women, which makes it more complicated to define influences or contacts, let alone the ethnic background, from the artefacts in male graves. In Livian male graves, weapon types were mostly international and occurred also on Saaremaa. Swords or fragments of swords, as well as folded scales and weights, were common male grave goods both

on Saaremaa and in the Daugava and Gauja Livian area. Belt fittings in the graves of the Gauja Livs resemble very much those from Saaremaa (Tõnisson 1974: 115-116; Mägi 2002: 96-99); similarities can be detected also in comparison with the material of the Daugava Livs. On the other hand, horse harnesses occurred in the graves of the prehistoric Livs only seldom while on Saaremaa they were widespread especially in male but also in female graves. In this, the finds on Saaremaa could better be compared with the grave goods of the Couronians.

Considering the similarities between the burial rites of the Osilians and the prehistoric Livs, some aspects of particularly female burials may be pointed out. Both in the areas of prehistoric Livs and on Saaremaa, women were sometimes buried with weapons or other so-called "male attributes". In male burials, in turn, single "female" ornaments or even boxes with female jewellery were recorded. Weapons as well as other "male attributes" occurred mainly in those female burials that had also been furnished abundantly with specific female jewellery. This phenomenon is, nevertheless, not peculiar for Saaremaa and Livia alone but also occurs in other regions of Baltic Finnic settlement (e.g., Kochkurkina 1981: 93; 1982: 46; Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984: 402-403; Mägi 2002: 78-79).

For instance, the female burials No 38 at Rauši and No 115 at Vampenieši both contained, in addition to rich female jewellery, a spearhead placed beside the head of the deceased (information gathered from the archives of the Latvian Institute of History). The abundantly furnished female inhumation No 120 at the Laukskola cemetery contained an axe, which, however, can also be defined as a tool (Apals et al. 1974: Fig. 118). In the Puteli barrow No 36 at Turaida a woman wearing a Livian-type chain arrangement, tortoise brooches and bronze-decorated leather belt had been buried, accompanied by both an axe and a spearhead (Tõnisson 1974: Tab. VI). In the territory of the Gauja Livs, in turn, some chain-holders, tortoise brooches and (usually female) pins have been found in male burials, individually (Tõnisson 1974: 120, Tab. VI; Šnore 1996: 123). The sporadic occurrence of women's jewellery in male graves has also been reported in Finland (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982b: 18 and notes).

In cremation burials on Saaremaa, axes and javelin heads were sometimes found in female graves while spearheads occur sporadically as the border markers of female cremation graves, being found at the borderline of the cremation deposit or right outside it in the findless zone. In some cases, single items of female jewellery have been recorded in male cremation graves (Mägi 2002: 77-83).

Among the prehistoric Livs and Osilians, as well as in surrounding areas, the occurrence of weapons in graves can be considered as an indication of status. In cases where women were able to achieve a similar status, they were also buried with weapons (e.g., Jakobsson 1992: 143-

147). In any case, the occurrence of individual weapons in wealthier female graves points to the presumably good position of women both in Livian and Osilian Late Iron Age society.

Written sources do not offer much information that would help to determine gender roles in society in Late Iron Age Saaremaa. Some remarks concerning Livian women in early 13<sup>th</sup>-century texts, nevertheless, also seem to refer to a comparatively high position of women. The chronicler Henry of Livonia pointed to the attention that was paid to the opinion of women in the Livian area when women forbade the baptism of a dying Livian man though he himself had requested it (*Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae* I:10). The Swedish historian Nils Blomkvist, who has studied peasant legislation of medieval Livonia, has come to the conclusion that at least in part of the Eastern Baltic region, land was before the conquest inherited chiefly through the female line. Livonian-Latgallian legislation of the early 13<sup>th</sup> century also stated that when a man married a woman, his property, including arable lands, was to be given to the wife (Blomkvist in press; on the text of the legislation, see Nazarova 1980: 171-175).

### Conclusions

Close contacts and similarities in the archaeological record of Saaremaa, Couronia and the area inhabited by the Livs can be observed throughout the whole of prehistory. The northwestern and western parts of mainland Estonia could have belonged to the same culture sphere. In the northwestern part of the country, only some Viking Age or 12<sup>th</sup>-century sites are known or excavated. In West Estonia, burial customs and artefact material became more similar to Saaremaa in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The similarities of the archaeological evidence in these regions can be explained by a similar economic and socio-political background in areas closely connected to the sea.

An intriguing question is, who were the women buried in Daugava Livian graves with more or less entirely Osilian equipment. Were they Osilian women married to Livian men? Although this supposition seems most logical, it is also necessary to bear in mind that it is impossible, owing to similar and often international artefact types, to differentiate Osilian and Livian male graves. Accordingly, the possibility of Osilian colonization close to the region's most important trade centre, Daugmale, cannot be excluded.

The Livs in the lower reaches of the River Daugava and the areas around the River Gauja inhabited the key-areas of important trade routes between the East and the West. Considering their geographic position,

it could be expected that they had imported influences from different neighbours. The common features with the Osilians were just some of them.

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### Abbreviations

LVM – Latvijas Vēstures Muzejs (the History Museum of Latvia), Riga.

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## RITUALS AND RELATIONS

STUDIES ON THE SOCIETY AND MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE BALTIC FINNS

EDITED BY SARI MÄNTYLÄ