

BALTIC SEA AND UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY AT KLAIPĖDA UNIVERSITY

ALGIRDAS GIRININKAS

There are few archaeologists in Lithuania whose scientific interest in Prehistoric times is so precisely focused on the issues and objects of his studies, in this particular case, on the archaeology of the Early Middle Ages, as Professor Vldas Žulkus. It would be no exaggeration to claim that, thanks to Žulkus' studies, Prehistoric times and the early history of the Western Balts have become widely known within the entire Baltic Sea region, and the first archaeological underwater research in the Baltic Sea started at his initiative has created the conditions for the development of a new concept of underwater cultural and natural landscape studies in the east Baltic region.

From the very start of his systematic archaeological and historic-cultural studies on the heritage of Klaipėda and its region in the 11th to 17th centuries, Professor Žulkus focused his scientific research on the Curonians in Late Prehistoric and Historic times.

In his main research work, entitled *The Curonians in the Baltic Sea Space*, devoted to the development of Curonian society and culture from the formation of the tribe to its decline, the geopolitical importance of the Curonian tribe in the Baltic region is discussed for the first time: 'At a very early stage, the Curonians became members of and participants in the history of an inter-tribal cultural community called the Baltic Sea basin. From a geopolitical point of view, in the Early Middle Ages, the Curonians were a link that connected Western cultures, first and foremost Scandinavian, with the world of the Eastern Balts further from the sea and the main inter-tribal trade routes'. During the quarter of a century that he has devoted to studying the 11th to 13th-century Curonians, he defined the boundaries of their individual lands, defined and determined agrarian and non-agrarian settlements, that is, the evolution of the formation of proto-towns, the nature of trade rela-



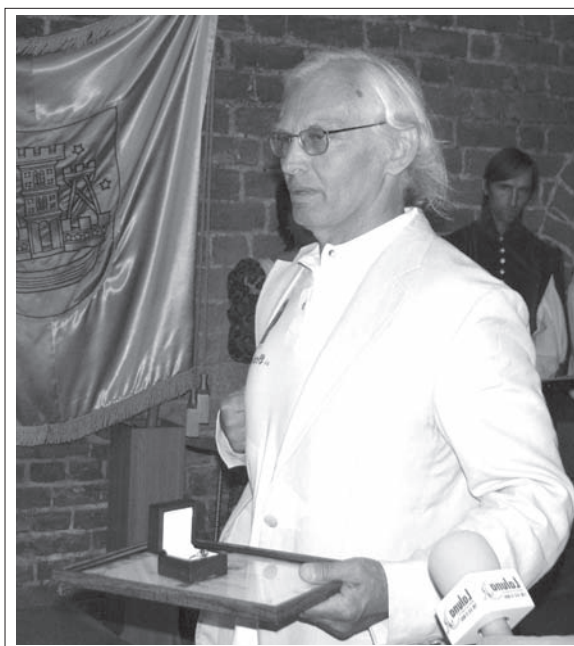
Vldas Žulkus during the exploratory archaeological expedition in the vicinity of Plateliai in 2003 (photograph by A. Girininkas).

tions between the Curonians and the Scandinavians, the causes and consequences of conflicts with the Scandinavians and neighbouring Baltic tribes, characterised the evolution of the Curonians' world view, studied objects of the spiritual culture (the temple observatory on Birutės Hill), defined inter-tribal wastelands and related them to the world view of the Balts of that time, and singled out the main economic and cultural centres of the Curonians. His detailed studies on Palanga, one such centre, resulted in two monographs. Thanks to these fundamental studies, the Curonian Baltic tribe has become better known to both Lithuanian and foreign researchers. This is what he says about the prospects for future studies:

‘As far as the studies of the Palanga settlement are concerned, I have made some mistakes, and these are positive mistakes. Writing about the settlement in the 11th to the mid-12th centuries, when it reached the peak of its prosperity, I claimed that the population might have been about 800, and in other works I mentioned the figure 600. There were five known settlements, and we estimated their approximate sizes, but we made certain mistakes. For instance, this year's finds in the park at Palanga next to the palace have indicated that the entire area of the park between the ponds and Birutės Hill was built up. Consequently, it used to be much larger, because homestead-type buildings dating from the same period have been discovered. This means that large areas of Palanga were populated in the second half of the 12th century. This assumption is supported by studies of the compact settlement of Birutės Hill and its defensive ramparts; the studies have not yet been completed. Further studies might support the fact that even larger areas of Palanga used to be populated. I believe that the studies are definitely still incomplete, and studies of the settlement should be continued. The research should be extended to Žemaičių Hill, which is also known to have been built up in the second half of the 12th century, and there might be individual homesteads nearby. A partially or, most likely, completely destroyed ancient settlement might have been situated by the Roužė rivulet. There, in the present-day Žemaičių gatvė, the cultural layer of a settlement up to 40 centimetres thick was uncovered during the construction of a building. During the survey work, we discovered, among other things, stone-filled postholes, which were parts of buildings, and pressed weights intended for a weaving loom and dating from the second half of the 12th century, some pottery and the remains of the fortifications of the former set-



During the Doctor Honoris Causa inauguration at Immanuel Kant University (Kaliningrad) on 29.4.2009 (photograph by R. Pletkauskas).



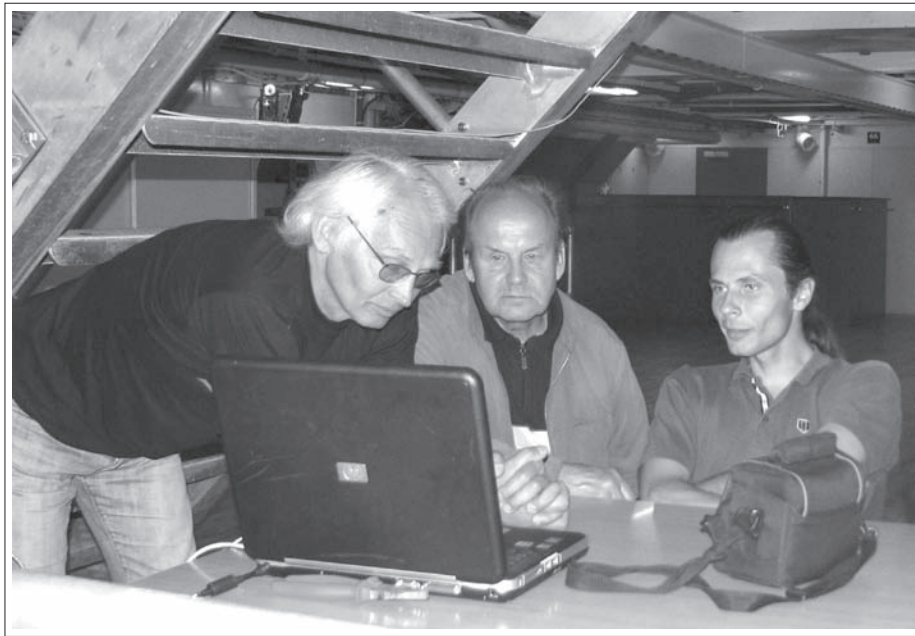
Vladas Žulkus is presented with the ring of the Master of Culture of the city of Klaipėda at Klaipėda Castle on 1.8.2009 (photograph by R. Pletkauskas).



Vladas Žulkus with his wife Eleonora in Kaliningrad on 29.4.2009 (photograph by R. Pletkauskas).

I

A PIONEER OF UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY IN LITHUANIA



Aboard the naval vessel *'Jotvingis'* during the search for the naval vessel *'Prezidentas A. Smetona'* on 21.8.2009. Vladas Žulkus with Vello Mass, an underwater archaeology scientist from Tallinn Maritime Museum, and Erikas Visakavičius, a geophysicist from Klaipėda University (photograph by R. Pletkauskas).

tlement, that is, a defensive barrier and the remains of a tower. This settlement must have extended further to the north and northeast. There must have been another settlement that bordered the Roužė rivulet, but on the other side. Furthermore, we need to search for a port. If boats entered the Roužė rivulet, there must have been a port too.

'I believe that there must be other burial grounds in Palanga, because the settlements mentioned above, and the new ones discovered in 2010, had quite a large population of migrants, migrants from the vicinity of Holstein, I believe, as is suggested by the archaeological material. Their graves must have been different, but we have not yet been able to find graves. A fortnight ago, I received a call from Donatas Butkus, a museologist and archaeologist from Palanga, who told me that as he and Vytautas Aleksejūnas, a numismatist, were walking in the park, they found a bracelet at the point where ditches had been dug out next to the entrance to the park; the bracelet was apparently burnt and made of brass. The first question that comes to mind is: is it related to graves perhaps? It happens that bracelets are found in settlements, though I believe that such objects are found in settlements, but only seldom. It turns out that one can also come across surprises of this kind in Palanga. In this, I was wrong, but wrong on the right side: Palanga used to be larger.'

Another very important aspect of Žulkus' research is the study of the town of Klaipėda and the castle of the Teutonic Order, which have helped to determine and single out individual stages in the development of the

town; these stages are directly related to the use of the castle site. Along with defining the individual stages of the evolution and the development of the town, Professor Žulkus determined the stages of the economic development of the town, from the time it was founded until the 17th century, on the basis of historical sources and archaeological material he collected. The definition of the development of the topography of Klaipėda linked to information about the site of the Order's castle obtained through his own studies should be considered another important achievement of his research. Thanks to his research into the town and the castle site at Klaipėda, the city as a contact point of different ethnoses has become known to everyone engaged in studies of towns situated on the Baltic Sea.

This is what Professor Žulkus tells us about the prospects for the studies of Klaipėda castle and town:

'Studies of Klaipėda castle site should undoubtedly be more comprehensive, scientific and wider in scope. It goes without saying that there is no need to carry out research on the entire castle site. The studies should be related to projects to be implemented in the course of the reconstruction of the castle. The extent of the castle may be determined at a later date; however, such studies should be scientific and result in a maximum amount of information, because right now we do not know yet where the wooden 13th-century castle was, or where the brick 13th-century castle was, or what they looked like, or only fragmentarily at best. So far, this is a total mystery. Thanks to archaeological studies, we know about the castle at Klaipėda from the mid-14th century and onwards. But even this image is



Aboard an Estonian Baltic Sea research vessel on 23.8.2009 (photograph by R. Pletkauskas).

far from clear. These are the main objectives of the future study of the Klaipėda castle site.

‘At the same time, the study of the old part of Klaipėda should continue. By employing the latest technologies for investigation into individual objects and studies of archaeological material, we should collect information which will eventually help to correlate the evolution of individual stages in the town’s development. There was a time in the past when we thought that we could still discover some important things about Klaipėda. However, the studies carried out in the last decade have not rejected the model we created earlier, but most likely have added to and corrected it.’

The third object of Professor Žulkus’ studies is underwater archaeological research, the beginning of which is related to the identification of the bridge leading to Plateliai Castle Island in 1967, and later research in Lake Plateliai and the River Šventoji. The range of underwater research grew in scope, thanks to his initiatives. His first work related to underwater archaeological research in the Baltic Sea was published in 1999. This underwater research in the Baltic Sea does not imply the search for or study of just individual archaeological objects. In Lithuanian waters, he conducts more complex research related to the study of cultural and natural underwater landscapes, and analyses issues pertaining to shipping, cultural, trade and communications links in the Baltic Sea region.

This is what he writes about the beginning and the development of underwater archaeological research:

‘We started underwater archaeological research as early as 1967. That was the first amateur expedition to Plateliai, in which several archaeologists and a historian took part. We went to Plateliai with amateur equipment, and inspected the site of the surviving ancient bridge that led to Castle Island. We carried out the initial provisional measuring: tied a buoy to the base of the bridge poles, and then carried out the measuring from a boat. This way, we measured the length and the width of the bridge leading to the island. We could say that it was still an amateur expedition.

‘On my initiative, I surveyed the Šventoji rivulet in Šventoji using an aqualung; I checked whether there were any remains of structures (port or building structures) from the times of the colony of English merchants. I was nevertheless lucky to discover the remains of a collapsed building: we recovered roof tiles and Dutch tiles dating from the 17th century. When the Šventoji rivulet was surveyed at a range of one kilometre from the mouth of the rivulet on the Baltic coast, we can attribute this work to underwater archaeology, too.

‘The first joint underwater archaeological expedition with Polish colleagues took place in 1995. We organised it with the Underwater Research Centre of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of Toruń Nicolaus Copernicus University, represented by Professor Andrzej Kola. We met each other in 1994, at the international conference “The Balts and their Neighbours in the Baltic Region in 800–1200”, held in Nida. He asked me, “I’ve heard that there is some kind of bridge

I

A PIONEER OF
UNDERWATER
ARCHAEOLOGY
IN LITHUANIA



Prof. Vladas Žulkus, Rector of Klaipėda University, during the Doctor Honoris Causa inauguration of President Valdas Adamkus at Klaipėda University on 12.9.2009 (photograph by R. Pletkauskas).

in Lake Plateliai, do you know anything about it?" I answered, "Yes, there is." And they came the same year. We surveyed the bridge site under water, and checked the locations of the piles. Our colleagues from Poland were very surprised, mostly at the visibility under the water, which is up to 80 metres there (the visibility is poorer in their lakes), and at the fact that the condition of the surviving bridge that led to the island was quite good. Even today, the remaining poles protrude to a height of nine metres from the bottom, and due to the fact that the depth of the lake at that spot is up to 11 metres, the piles did not pose any serious hindrance to the local population; therefore, the piles are still there. That was the year when joint underwater archaeological expeditions by Toruń and Klaipėda universities began, with simultaneous student practice. It occurred to us that we could form a team of three students who would be able to carry out underwater surveys, train them in diving during the winter, and then work jointly with Polish underwater archaeologists. Actually, we learned about underwater archaeology in Plateliai, and we succeeded. During later years in our research, we discovered sunken canoes and stones with markings.

'From 2000, we began little by little working in the Baltic Sea. In 2001 we organised the first ever underwater archaeological expedition in Lithuanian territorial waters, jointly with the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology research vessel the *Altair*. We worked

with them for three years. With this vessel, the *Altair*, which was equipped with a side-scan sonar, an electronic echo sounder, GPS, an underwater camera and a magnetometer, we began searching for sunken objects, mainly for ships. That year, we discovered two sunken vessels from the Second World War in the vicinity of Klaipėda, and in 2002 we discovered another

'The Swedish vessel the *Nils Strömcrona* joined the expedition, and we could survey the sea from the Lithuanian-Latvian border to the Lithuanian-Russian (Kaliningrad region) border. At that time, we discovered shipwrecks off Palanga, Nemirseta, Kunigiškė and Šventoji; at Juodkrantė we found trees that used to grow on the coast of the former Yoldia Sea. This was how the first studies of cultural and natural underwater landscapes began. From 2003, the Lithuanian navy vessel *Lokys* and the vessel *Varūna* of the Hydrography Service assisted in the research conducted by Klaipėda University; then we used the research boat *Putā* of Klaipėda University (formerly a Swedish coastguard vessel) and the expedition/training vessel *Brabander*. In 2007, we started exploratory underwater archaeological research in the Curonian Lagoon, where the remains of a wooden boat were discovered not far from the mouth of the River Nemunas. So this was how underwater archaeological research began.'

Since quite a large group of researchers trained by Professor Žulkus already work at Klaipėda University and

in other places in Lithuania, we asked him about the future of archaeology at Klaipėda University:

‘I believe that the university should form a robust three-stage structure of archaeological studies, from BA to doctoral studies. The study of landscape archaeology relating to the Baltic Sea region should be given priority, because it corresponds with the existing and future status of research. These studies should also cover underwater archaeology, the basis of which, I dare to claim, we have already laid. The main problem is, of course, people and the training of young specialists. One doctor of sciences already works in the field; there is another candidate for a doctoral degree, but that is not enough. We have already created the technological basis for studies, a basis that is closely connected to the project for the Marine Valley now in development. On an international level, we are also visible in this respect. Therefore, we must meet the expectations of the scientific community in terms of joint international projects, joint inter-disciplinary studies, and so on, because this is what people expect of us.

‘Since our institution is a university, our study programme in archaeology should be an “export” one: there should be a study programme in archaeology prepared in the English language, for an MA or a doctoral degree, I’m not sure yet. And ... why couldn’t our programmes be implemented at other universities?’

I

A PIONEER OF
UNDERWATER
ARCHAEOLOGY
IN LITHUANIA