LATE PREHISTORIC SOCIETIES AND BURIALS IN THE EASTERN BALTIC

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Abstract

The article deals with burial customs in culturally varied regions in the eastern Baltic, comparing them with an interpretation of Late Prehistoric society. Social analyses, which up to recent times were predominantly based on written sources and evolutionary ways of thinking, suggest somewhat different social systems for the culturally diverse regions of the eastern Baltic. However, at first glance, this cannot be seen in the archaeological evidence, including burials. The discussion in this article subjects some particular features of burial customs to closer consideration: representativeness, collective versus individual attitudes, and gender aspects. The results suggest that societies were hierarchical both in the southern and northern parts of the eastern Baltic, but power was arranged in different ways.

Key words: Prehistoric societies, burials, Late Iron Age.

Some theoretical aspects

The significance of graves cannot be overestimated in east Baltic archaeology. Especially in Estonia and Latvia, Late Iron Age cemeteries are abundantly supplied with grave goods, and have been quite thoroughly excavated. However, the archaeological evidence in these burial places has succeeded only to a limited degree in influencing the widespread interpretation of Late Iron Age societies in these areas. Most interpretations are still biased by a few historical writings from the 13th century.

Grave goods reflect mainly the ritual behaviour of a community, while still being indistinguishable from other social aspects, such as political and social organisation. The so-called 'wealth' or 'poverty' of graves, that is, the abundance or lack of preserved grave goods, is not directly associated with the economic situation of society, but rather with the prevailing ideology (e.g. Hodder 1982, especially p.119ff). On the other hand, it would also be biased to assume that the quantity and quality of grave goods in one burial ground and during a particular period cannot reflect the social position of the deceased at all. Ideology can prevent the social elite from demonstrating its position through the forms of graves or grave goods, with Christian burial rites providing the closest example for our geographical region. However, in societies where some of the population were buried with luxurious artefacts, and perhaps in grandiose grave constructions, these phenomena always indicate a certain social and economic

power. Artefacts and constructions tend to have an actual commercial value, besides the ritual significance, when they are deposited in a grave, which were not normally available to most of the population (Mägi 2002, p.8ff). We may conclude that the evidence from burials that are abundantly equipped with artefacts points to the existence of a social elite, while the absence of conspicuous burials, or, as occurs in the northern part of the eastern Baltic in several Prehistoric periods, the absence of any kind of archaeologically detectable burials, does not necessarily prove an egalitarian social system.

Although burial rites do not reflect the social structure directly, the two phenomena are connected to some extent. More can be assumed when taking into consideration aspects of burial evidence other than the quantity/quality of grave goods, or the size of the burial mounds. Concepts of individuality or collectivism behind burial rites, the selection of the artefacts chosen for expressing status or insuring welfare in the Beyond, the location of burial grounds in the cultural landscape, and the gender and age ratio of the deceased, can tell us much about the society. It is also impossible to overlook the importance of estimating the representativeness of archaeologically visible burials, which can embrace the whole population or just a part of it.

In accordance with the cultural-historical approach that dominated the writing of the history and archaeology of the Baltic states up to the middle of the 20th century, Prehistoric society has for a long time been
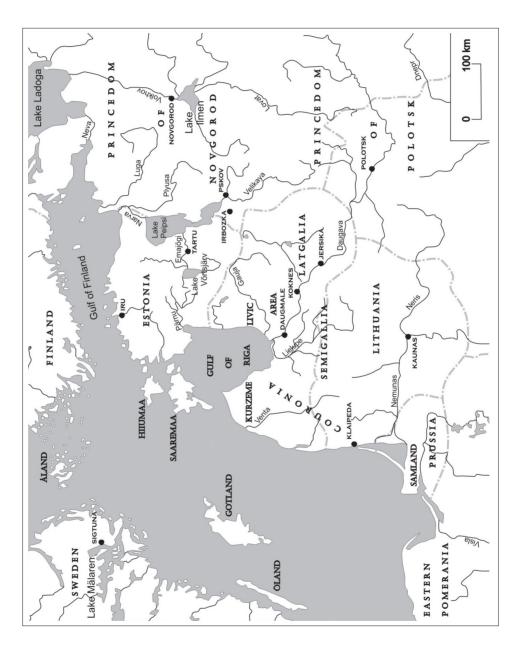
Fig. 1. A map of the eastern Baltic and the surrounding areas in the 12th century.

seen only through the lens of historical descriptions, and not defined through more theoretical concepts. In Latvia and Estonia, this meant predominantly the interpretation of 'Henry's Chronicle of Livonia', which was written down at the request of the Bishop of Riga in the late 1220s, in addition to what became the 'Older Rhymed Chronicle of Livonia', completed in the 1290s by an unknown writer who was in charge of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order. A somewhat larger variety of written sources characterises the early history of Lithuania, where the centralised state had started to take shape as early as the 11th or 12th century (Kuncevičius 2000a; Nikžentaitis 2001).

The interpretation of Prehistoric society in the eastern Baltic is rooted in travellers' writings from the Enlightenment period, and, especially in Estonia and Latvia, in early Baltic-German studies. In the conditions of ethnic segregation, scholars belonging to the Baltic-German upper class tended to depict local ethnicities as something primitive and underdeveloped. When national history writing was established in the east Baltic lands towards the end of the 19th century, this view was accepted with surprisingly few qualifications. In Estonia, however, the earlier interpretations have been turned upside down: now the presumed primitive nature of the locals depicted as something positive (Ligi 1995). However, general approaches to Prehistory took much more heroic forms in Latvia and Lithuania, based on the vision of their glorious and warlike past. In both cases, the archaeological facts have traditionally been used for illustrating concepts formulated on grounds of historical criteria, and only in the very last few decades has archaeological evidence started to be treated in its own right.

Archaeological thought about Prehistoric social systems has developed somewhat divergently in different countries to the east of the Baltic Sea (Fig. 1), being linked with the cultural background and history of each particular land. On the other hand, several ideas about Prehistoric societies have been so general that they can fit as easily with any pre-state European community, especially as they were envisioned in the 1930s.

A historical approach is still strongly influenced in places by evolutionary theories which claim that pre-state social systems can be categorised according to a certain hierarchy (about theories see, e.g. Ligi 1995; Šnē 2002). This makes it unavoidable to consider the Late Prehistoric northern half of the eastern Baltic as socially less developed when compared with the southern half of the area. However, this interpretation is not supported much by differences in archaeological material. Still, burial customs among the Finnic-speaking and Baltic-speaking inhabitants of the Late Iron Age

eastern Baltic are clearly distinct, but mainly in aspects that have not been discussed very much so far.

Archaeological evidence and interpretations of Prehistoric societies

The southern part of the eastern Baltic Historical Lithuania

Historical Lithuania, the southern and eastern parts of the present country, is the only region in the eastern Baltic where the consolidation of the state had taken place without doubt by the 12th century. The deep social stratification in these areas, especially from the fifth to the sixth centuries, is demonstrated in princely graves under big burial mounds (Kuncevičius 2000b). The 12th and 13th centuries saw the appearance of very large and sometimes multiple hill-forts, with adjusted open settlements. These hill-forts were political centres, sometimes already mentioned in written sources, which thus indicated the further stratification of society (Kuncevičius 2000a).

Ninth to 12th-century burial customs in central, southern and eastern parts of present-day Lithuania consisted of individual cremations, in the eastern part of the country mainly under mounds. The artefactual culture in these areas was in general quite homogeneous, with only infrequent impulses or imports from other areas. There are horse sacrifices, and even separate burials of horses, that refer to the emergence of a warrior elite, but the few graves with really princely equipment tend to belong to the periods before the Viking Age (Kulikauskas *et al*. 1961, p.392; Bliujienė 1992; Bertašius 2009; Kurila 2009). Artefacts in these cremation graves, which normally form large cemeteries, are quite homogeneous and not especially abundant, without clear indicators social differentiation (e.g. Bertašius 2005).

Still, as it is known from written sources, by the early 13th century, Lithuanian princes played a significant role at the top of the by then deeply stratified society. They were military commanders and rulers in peace time, who possessed much property and had accumulated considerable wealth. Written sources from the 13th century connect several of them with mighty centres, and mention their large military forces (Nikžentaitis 2001). Twenty-one Lithuanian and Žemaitijan princes mentioned in an agreement with Halich-Volhynia in 1219, five of whom singled out as senior princes (Nikžentaitis 2001). By 1245, one of

them, Mindaugas, was already called 'the highest king' in some documents (Ligi 1968, p.37ff; Kiaupa 2000).

Most of the population were, according to Lithuanian historians, free farmers united under territorial communities or fields. Written sources also mention a stratum of *meliores*, who sooner or later formed the stratum of feudal lords in the Lithuanian state (Kiaupa 2000).

Prussia

Somewhat similar lines seem to characterise the development of social systems in Prehistoric Prussia, which consisted mainly of the Sambian peninsula and the adjacent coastal areas. Abundantly equipped burials with weapons, horses and luxurious imported items appeared in this region in the fifth and sixth centuries, but the burial customs turned back to being more homogeneous in the Late Viking Age, and especially in the 12th century. Viking Age and 11th to 12th-century burial customs were mainly different sorts of individual cremation graves, while the 12th century indicated a turn to inhumations as a prevailing burial rite (Kulakov 1994, pp.32-40).

Basing himself on the decreasing number of female burials in the Late Iron Age, the Russian archaeologist Vladimir Kulakov believes that society became ultimately male-dominated, with the custom of *suttee* for the widows of warriors (Kulakov 1994, pp.144-160). Basing himself mainly on folklore, Kulakov reconstructed the development of Late Prehistoric Prussian society as that of a theocracy, that is, a social system ruled by priests (Kulakov 1994, pp.134-160). According to him, archaeological proof of the existence of a 'holy kingdom' is the occurrence of cemeteries with Scandinavian artefacts near trading centres in Kaup and Truso. He explains the lack of princely graves from this period with data from folklore, according to which chiefs and priests were buried in inaccessible places and without artefacts.

The graves with weapons near Truso and Kaup ceased at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries, which, as Kulakov believes, was caused by the fact that, as a result of a conflict with the priestly upper class, Prussian warriors abandoned their homeland and settled in eastern Lithuania and northwest Russia. The few graves in Prussia with abundant weapons and other goods dated to the period after the 11th century belonged to local feudal noblemen, the *Vitings* mentioned in 13th-century sources.

Central eastern Baltic lands: Curonia

Much less is known about Curonian Late Iron Age society. Latvian and Lithuanian archaeologists normally use the name Curonians only for the Late Prehistoric inhabitants of present western Lithuania and the southern part of western Latvia, while the presumably Baltic Finnic inhabitants populating the northern part of the region are often called Curonian Livs. The interpretation of Curonian society is based on the comparatively abundant evidence of the 'real' Curonians. The general attitude to the ancient Curonians and their society has been strongly affected by national romantic approaches. They are regularly called 'Baltic Vikings', and the bellicose side of their society has potentially been over-represented in the treatment of them (Žulkus 2000; Karlina 2006; Asaris *et al.* 2008, pp.129-137; Bliujienė 2008; for a somewhat critical point of view, see Šnē 2008).

The most common burial places in the Late Iron Age area of the Baltic Curonians were flat burial grounds, where the distribution of the cremation practice roughly from south to north could be considered to have been a clear tendency during the ninth to the 11th centuries. These individual burials frequently contained a great number of weapons, riding equipment and ornaments, the latter both in male and female graves (e.g. Stankus 1995; Žulkus 1991, p.11; 2000; Bliujienė 1999; 2008). In inhumation graves, as they still prevailed in the ninth century, opposite directions according to sex, which was common in Semigallian and especially Latgallian cemeteries, occurred sporadically, although it was more common to bury all the dead in one cemetery in the same direction (Kulikauskas *et al.* 1961, pp.380-381; Vaitkunskienė 1979). Exceptionally for the Baltic cultural sphere, collective graves with mixed remains of the dead were also in use, cremations in large burial pits have been recorded in Curonia south of the River Venta in the tenth century (e.g. Balodis 1940). However, the majority of cremations in Curonia from the 11th century onwards were found in small grave pits, only one burial in each, which resemble the ones in central Lithuania. In some cases, burials were found in the top layers of large collective grave-pits, indicating their later date (Kulikauskas *et al.* 1961, pp.387-388).

The introduction of cremations has been seen by several scholars as indicating the cultural impact either of Scandinavia or the Prussian area (Asaris *et al.* 2008, p.57). Since ninth to 11th-century cremations in several west Lithuanian cemeteries more artefacts, especially weapons, in comparison with inhumation graves,

archaeologists consider these to be the burials of members of military retinues who became politically influential in Curonian society in the eighth and ninth, and perhaps even in the seventh, centuries (Žulkus 2000; Bliujienė 2006).

A number of archaeologists and historians believe that state-like formations had developed in Curonia by the 12th century, even though no further consolidation of power could be traced. These early states are believed to have already existed in the ninth century, when five 'lands' were mentioned in Curonia by Rimbert the Chronicler (Asaris *et al.* 2008, p.139). The social structure of the Curonians, as it is envisioned by most Latvian and Lithuanian archaeologists, follows the same lines as that of the other Baltic peoples before the formation of the state. The upper stratum consisted of rulers whose power might, at least partly, have been inherited. They were followed in the social hierarchy by *seniors* or noblemen, the wealthy people, the free peasants, and dependent people. The most important decisions were taken at assemblies of the political and economic leaders of a district, which meant that the elders had to reckon with other strata in society, and even with the free peasants. The latter had to pay taxes, take part in building fortifications, and do military service in times of conflict and during raids. The stratum of dependent people was small, because they were not, in the belief of archaeologists, economically necessary. They could have their own property, but it was more advantageous to sell them into slavery (Asaris *et al.* 2008, p.139ff).

The main administrative units mentioned in written sources from the 13th century are believed to have been castle districts, comprising farmsteads, a village, or several villages, with a centre in a castle or a hill-fort. Several of these castle districts formed so-called lands or early states, the most central of them being Klaipėda (Asaris *et al.* 2008, p.140ff).

The northern part of Late Prehistoric Curonia is archaeologically poorly investigated, and only a fraction of the results have been published (e.g. Kiwull 1911; Śturms 1936; Mugurevićs 1970). Inhumations were common, as well as cremations under low mounds of sand, in stone graves or in flat burial grounds, and even burials in water bodies have been recorded in Lake Vilkumuiža at Talsi (Apals *et al.* 1974, p.187).

Semigallia, Žemaitija and Selonia

Semigallia and Žemaitija have often been taken together, in archaeological terms. Archaeological evidence in these districts is similar in many respects, although some differences can also be traced. Late Iron Age burial customs in Semigallia and Žemaitija were characterised by flat burial grounds with several hundred inhumations, laid out in fairly regular rows. Male and female graves occurred in these cemeteries together, without any spatial differences, but the direction of the graves of different sexes was always the opposite (Kulikauskas *et al.* 1961, p.383; Atgāzis 1992; Vaškevičiūtė 1992). From the 12th century, the custom of cremation spread into Semigallia (Zabiela 1998; Kuncevičius 2000b; Vasiliauskas 2001). The artefact material in graves was comparatively homogeneous, sometimes consisting of abundant grave goods, while graves without artefacts have also been recorded. In most cases, grave goods followed strict gender specification (Griciuvienė *et al.* 2005).

Despite the abundant archaeological evidence, very little special research has been conducted on the subject of Semigallian or Žemaitijan Prehistoric society. However, the Lithuanian archaeologist Laima Vaitkunskienė has published an article on changes in the fifth to sixth-century Žemaitijan cemetery at Pagrybis, where she pointed out the sudden militarisation of the social system during this period. She combined this phenomenon with the increasing male dominance and social hierarchisation of society (Vaitkunskienė 1995).

The general interpretation of Late Prehistoric society in Semigallia is apparently based mainly on written sources, which seem to indicate a deeply stratified system in a pre-state condition. Written sources mention seven lands inhabited by Semigallians in the early 13th century, with prominent hill-forts functioning as political centres for that kind of district. The most important hill-forts according to written documents, of Mežotne, Tērvete and Dobele, have also been thoroughly excavated (Jarockis 1998).

The Lithuanian archaeologist Romas Jarockis supports the opinion that, as a rule, a settlement was marked only by one cemetery, and cemeteries can therefore be used as indicators of habitation in a situation where very few settlements are excavated or even found. According to Jarockis, the settlement pattern in Late Iron Age Semigallia was comparatively even, with villages located along the River Lielupe and its many tributar-

ies (Jarockis 2009). The settlement pattern thus seems to have been moderately hierarchical, supporting the general vision of Semigallian Late Iron Age society as stratified, but without consolidating power.

However, some historians have suggested that the Semigallian princes Vestartus and Nameise mentioned in 13th-century chronicles could already by then designate centralised power. They were connected respectively with the powerful and large hill-forts of Tērvete and Mežotne, and Nameise seems to have succeeded Vestartus in his position ruling over more or less all Semigallian lands (Nikžentaitis 2001).

The Late Iron Age district of Selonia was culturally similar to Semigallia and Latgale, with the main difference being that the dead were inhumed under large collective mounds. However, archaeological sites in Selonia have been investigated less than in neighbouring areas, and nothing special about Prehistoric society there has been published.

Latgale

In the 19th and the early 20th century, Baltic German researchers introduced a somewhat naïve vision of pre-conquest society in Latgale: highly developed, state or state-like formations, of which the existence was violently interrupted by the Crusades. Their ideas remained valid among several Latvian archaeologists until very recent times (Šnē 2005). During the first period of the independent state of the Republic of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s, the main addition to this picture was an emphasis on the democratic character of Prehistoric society, even if at first glance it could seem to be a somewhat contradictory view. It was believed, for instance, that all Latvians were free and equal, both in terms of wealth and social position. However, there was an aristocracy (Henry of Livonia's *seniors* and *meliores*, folk-song *bajari*), who owned castles and large estates, and commanded the army. On the other hand, the historian Arveds Švābe during the interwar period and even later, formations like the principality of Jersika at least were already characterised by the inherited power of a local king in the 12th century (Šnē 2005, p.57, and references).

The interpretation that both early 13th-century Latvia and Estonia, but especially Latvia, could be referred to as being in the process of the formation of feudal structures, with inherited power, was also supported by the

Estonian historian Herbert Ligi (Ligi 1968, pp.4-26). Power in Latgallian society was believed to have been exerted through assemblies that were called for making decisions and passing laws. The upper strata were formed by elders (*seniors*), best men (*meliores*), and military leaders (*dux*, *princeps*). The chronicle mentions 'friends and relatives', normally understood as the retainers of some *senior*.

Jānis Apals and Ēvalds Mugurēvičs have concluded in the latest overview publication of early Latvian history that the territory of Late Prehistoric Latvia was arranged according to castle districts, which included several villages and parishes. They believe that hill-fort districts were called 'lands' (*terra*, *land*) in early 13th-century written sources (Apals, Mugurēvičs 2001).

Archaeologically, the Latgallians were characterised by large flat burial grounds with inhumations since the seventh century, and mound cemeteries with similar inhumations from the end of the tenth century. Often, several hundred graves can be found, especially in the first type of these cemeteries, and only a few of them do not contain at least some grave goods. Both male and female graves frequently contained abundant sets of jewellery, while the ornament types were normally strictly different for men and women. The orientation of Latgallian inhumations was fixed firmly with the head towards the east for a man, and the opposite for a woman. The percentage of male and female burials in one cemetery was seldom balanced, the number of male burials normally clearly exceeding the female ones; richly furnished female graves were also much less common than copiously furnished male burials (e.g. Šnore 1987; Apals, Apala 1994; Vilcāne 1996; Radiņš 1999; Šnē 2002, pp.178-201).

Two of the Latgallian cemeteries, Nukša and Kivti, were studied in the Soviet period and published as books (Šnore, Zeids 1957; Šnore 1987). The graves recorded at Nukša were divided into four social groups, according to the grave goods found in them. The basic ideas for dividing these groups was, however, taken from Henry's Chronicle of Livonia, defining them as graves of *seniors* and *meliores*, their retainers or other noblemen, free peasants, or slaves (Šnore, Zeids 1957). Based on the evidence from Kivti cemetery, Elvira Šnore concluded that the ninth to the 12th century was a time when social stratification deepened in society (Šnore 1987).

New approaches to Latgallian Late Prehistoric society were presented in the 1990s mainly by Arnis Radiņš. He suggested that five social groups could be distinguished in cemeteries other than Nukša; he added a group of very poor burials, representing the lowest stratum in society. He believed that the hierarchical structure of Latgallian society was rhomboid-shaped; that is, the percentage of people belonging to the highest and the lowest strata was very small (Radiņš 1999, pp.131-153, p.174ff; for similar ideas, see also Šnē 2002, pp.335-364). Radiņš has also presented a view that the social development from a military democracy to an early state took place as early as the 11th century. The 12th to 13th-century princes of Jersika and Koknes were probably already converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and their burial grounds are neither known nor investigated archaeologically.

Andris Šnē has criticised intensely the idea of the emergence of feudal relations and early state formations in the territory of present-day Latvia before the conquest in the 13th century (Šnē 2002; 2005). He himself uses the terms chiefdom and early state, and he believes that Late Iron Age Latvian societies fluctuated continually between these two forms of social development. According to him, these chiefdoms were barely stratified hierarchical structures, with power relations that resembled authority rather than political power. The social organisation in pre-Crusade Latvia could therefore not be considered as feudal, let alone defining some formations in it as states. It was instead quite an egalitarian 'militarised society', as he calls it (Šnē 2005; 2002, p.465ff).

Šnē uses predominantly archaeological evidence for proving his view of Latvian society. He claims that a settlement pattern expressed egalitarianism, as did burial customs, where nearly all the dead were equipped with at least some artefacts as grave goods. He presumes that excavated cemeteries represented the whole of the population. Since the Livs and the Curonians tend to have more weapons in their graves than the Latgallians, the latter probably had a less bellicose structure to their society. Still, military values and heroes, and also weapons as symbols, were glorified, and warfare principally meant obtaining economic values, organised by the ruling strata (Šnē 2007).

The northern half of the eastern Baltic: Livs

The Latvian nationalist view in the 1930s held to a picture of the Late Prehistoric Livs[1] as a poor, savage and disorganised group among the more developed Baltic tribes (Balodis 1938; see also Šnē 1997). However, later researchers have presented a somewhat more complicated vision of their Late Prehistoric society.

One of the most prominent archaeologists dealing with the Gauja Livs, but also with the Livs in other areas, was Evald Tõnisson, who in the 1970s published his interpretation of their Late Iron Age social systems (Tõnisson 1974). He believed that some Liv elders (*seniors*), those whose graves were marked by luxurious weaponry, ruled over a group of military retainers and were heads of districts. According to Tõnisson, social relations between *seniors* and commoners appeared which are still unclear, but he suggested a certain subservience, even a feudal relationship, especially in cases where some villages were connected with certain names of people in written sources. Based on burial customs, Tõnisson could also see that there existed a stratum of military retainers who were in one way or another dependent on the *seniors*. He believed slaves formed a considerable part of society, supporting the economy in the upper class estates (Tõnisson 1974, p.172ff).

The burial customs and artefact material of the Gauja Livs were relatively homogeneous. They practised both inhumation and cremation, but the remains of their dead were always covered with sand mounds. In inhumations, was the prevailing custom the direction was normally fixed with the head towards the north (Tõnisson 1974, pp.38-96; Šnē 1997).

Liv cemeteries in the lower reaches of the River Daugava demonstrate a diversity of artefacts and ethnic indicators unknown in any other east Baltic area. This phenomenon can probably be explained by their location in the neighbourhood of the Daugmale hill-fort which functioned from the Late Viking Age until the Early Medieval period as a prominent trade centre on the River Daugava (Mägi 2011). Cemeteries known in this area were flat burial grounds, or, to a lesser extent, they consisted of sand mounds with single burials under them. In inhumation graves, the dead were directed with their heads towards the north or northwest, both in male and female burials. Although inhumations pre-

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[1]   Only the inhabitants of the River Gauja basin and the lower reaches of the River Daugava are included here under the term 'Livs'.

vailed, cremation burials were also widespread, under mounds or in burial pits in flat burial grounds (Śnore 1996; Zariņa 1988; 1997; 2006; Spirģis 2008).

An attempt to use the burials of the Livs for defining their social system was made by Šnē in the mid-1990s. He suggested that female graves could be divided into five, and male graves into four categories, according to how many pieces of jewellery had been laid in the grave (Šnē 1997). However, the somewhat surprising result was that for women, the most abundant version was also the most common, a phenomenon that was explained by Šnē as indicating the generally high average level of incomes in Liv society.

According to Henry's Chronicle, in the early 13th century the Livs paid tribute to the princes of Polotsk, but no real principalities as in the Latgallian area described among them. In contrast to their ethnic Baltic neighbours, the chieftains of the Livs were mainly referred to as *seniors* and *meliores*; and although Kaupo, one of their rulers, was described as 'like a king and elder' (*quasi rex et senior*), his political influence seems to have been very limited (Vassar, Tarvel 1975, p.29).

Estonia

The interpretation of Estonian Prehistoric society is noteworthy for being characterised by derogatory attitudes towards local people, as was expressed by Baltic German and Russian 18th and 19th-century scholars. Even in later times, the national-romantic view of the Prehistoric past defined a vision of it as strongly egalitarian and more or less democratic, less developed than most of its neighbours, but pacific and harmonious.

The general ideas of the 1920s and 1930s suggested that the *seniors* and *meliores* mentioned by Henry of Livonia were no more than more sensible, perhaps also rather wealthier men than others, who had been elected as village leaders. However, a more fixed and hereditary hierarchy was already developing, especially among the leaders of larger districts (Moora 1926, p.50ff). Strongholds, even the mightiest ones, were considered district centres, and interpreted as purely military structures, built through the cooperation of the villagers of a district. Beside the district-level *seniors*, power was exercised through assemblies called *kärajad*, in which not all men but the village leaders participated. Society was strictly patriarchal, and polygamous marriages were practised. Slaves existed, but their numbers were small, and they were mainly

foreigners imprisoned during plundering raids (Moora 1926, pp.56-71; 1939; Moora *et al.* 1936, pp.197-200).

This vision of Estonian Prehistoric society remained nearly unchanged up to the late 1990s. In the 1960s, Moora and Herbert Ligi classified Estonian Late Iron Age society as being in the stage of 'forming feudal relations', with moderate social and economic stratification (Ligi, Moora 1964; Ligi 1968; see also Ligi 1968; Selirand 1974; Jaanits *et al.* 1982, p.412ff; Kahk, Tarvel 1997, p.26ff). The great majority of Late Iron Age Estonians were believed to have been free peasants, and a small group of *meliores* and *seniors* were essentially defined as wealthy peasants.

Archaeologically, Late Iron Age Estonia was characterised by collective cremation cemeteries, where the bones of several dozen deceased were scattered among stones, without individual burials being marked. Individual cremation graves could sometimes be differentiated in Saaremaa graves, a custom that was probably rooted in Viking Age burial customs, with individual cremations. There were also individual cremations under mounds in some parts of eastern Estonia, and in the 12th century single inhumation cemeteries spread over the whole mainland part of the country. In these, both men and women were predominantly buried with their heads towards the north or the northwest. Female burials were normally supplied with a considerably larger amount of metal grave goods.

In the 12th century and up until Christianisation, the prevailing burial custom was, however, intermingled cremations in stone graves without a formal structure. The artefacts studied in these cemeteries were usually mixed and often badly burnt fragments, and thus without further thought believed to support the vision of 'poor' graves of egalitarian village inhabitants (e.g. Kustin 1962; Selirand 1974). However, the modern interpretation of Late Iron Age stone cemeteries is that these were the burial places of some selected families, while the majority of people were buried in a way that did not leave archaeological traces (e.g. Mägi 2002, pp.125-137).

Single burial complexes and inhumation graves indicate that a large part of the jewellery and dress accessories were non-gender-specific, and attributes normally associated with the other gender sometimes occurred in both male and female graves (Mägi 2009).

In the 1990s, the archaeologist Priit Ligi put forward new ideas of Prehistoric Estonian society as being deeply stratified as early as the Late Bronze Age, and reaching the state-making stage of development in the

Roman Iron Age (Ligi 1995). All further arguments in his approaches proceeded from this initial statement, and features that did not fit his new theory were left aside or pushed in with often somewhat questionable methods. For instance, the lack of princely or even individual graves was explained by the well-established political structure, or it was simply presumed that such graves would be found in the future.

The archaeologist Valter Lang pointed to a possible dual power division in Late Iron Age Estonia, which can be traced, as he believed, in taxation units of mid-13th century written sources. He interpreted Estonian hill-forts as elite residences and taxation centres of castle-districts, and not entirely as military constructions, as was widely expressed in earlier discussions (Lang 2002; 2011).

In the early 2000s, Marika Mägi, the author of the present article, depicted the society on Saaremaa as similar to Viking Age Gotland or Sweden, and accordingly defined it as a chiefdom in terms of political anthropology. The 12th-century cremation cemeteries on Saaremaa where individual burials could sometimes be followed probably indicate a deepening stratification and consolidation of power, especially towards the end of Prehistory. I believe that the social system was pyramidal, with the top consisting of elite families who were the only ones buried in stone graves. The stratum of free peasants and people without landed property might have been much broader. There is no data on how many slaves there were in Late Iron Age Estonian society, but their number might have been considerably larger than what was believed earlier (Mägi 2002, p.145ff). The position of women was estimated as being comparatively high, and society, although belligerent, could have practised a matrilineal descendant system (Mägi 2002, p.146ff; 2009).

Family burials with a considerable amount of grave goods, together with some other aspects, enable us to suggest that the social system on Saaremaa, but probably also in other parts of Estonia, had strongly collective features. It was a society with a weak or non-existent central power, probably divided into clans. The clans consisted of extended families, and some clans or families dominated others (Mägi 2011)

Finland

The first picture of Late Iron Age Finnish society was presented in the late 19th century on the wave of romantic national visions by Johann Reinhold Aspelin.

In accordance with his times, he believed that there had existed kings, magnates, the peasantry and slaves, but that the kings were actually just heroes who were more powerful than ordinary people. Important shared problems, like defence or other military action, were discussed in assemblies of all free men (Aspelin 1885, pp.63-95). In the 1930s, Aarne Michaël Tallgren suggested that Late Iron Age Finnish society was egalitarian, with common ownership of land, and without any clear stratum of an aristocracy (Tallgren 1931, pp.245ff). The vision of Prehistoric Finnish society as egalitarian and even primitive was supported by Helmer Salmo (Salmo 1952, pp.458-464). A more hierarchical picture, characterised by chieftains, a large stratum of free peasants, and a small number of slaves, was suggested by Alfred Hackman and Ella Kivikoski (Hackman 1938, p.180; Kivikoski 1939, p.250; 1961, p.292).

Late Iron Age burial customs in Finland were dominated by cremations in stone graves without a formal structure, a grave form similar to contemporary Estonia. Especially in the southwest of the country, inhumation, both pagan and Christian, was already widespread. In one district, Eura, at least three inhumation cemeteries dated to the fifth to the 12th centuries are known, and most archaeological analyses of society are based on them.

These inhumation cemeteries are considered to represent a common village community. The society that is buried there has been depicted as comparatively egalitarian, although some burials were equipped with clearly more abundant find assemblages than others (Cleve 1978, p.204ff). Pirkko-Liisa Lehtosalo-Hilander has interpreted the society buried in the Luistari inhumation cemetery as being of 'peasant traders', associating it with a possible fur market in the neighbourhood (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, p.77ff). The importance of weapons to the society buried in the inhumation cemeteries at Eura was estimated to have been essential, since many times more weapons have been found in them than, for instance, in the Birka cemeteries, which altogether contain approximately the same number of burials (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, p.63).

Burials equipped with significantly more goods than others are nevertheless absent in Late Iron Age archaeological evidence in Finland. Lehtosalo-Hilander has interpreted it this way: there did not exist real chieftains in Late Iron Age Finland, and the highest stratum of society was formed from powerful peasants and tradesmen (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984, pp.346-351). This vision was supported by most Finnish research-

ers until the 1980s. The largest stratum in society was assumed to have consisted of free peasants of varying wealth. The main decisions were made in assemblies called *käräjät*, in which all free men could participate. There were slaves as well, but not in large numbers (e.g. Huurre 1983, p.215ff). Lehtosalo-Hilander also pointed to the important role of women in Late Prehistoric Finnish society, which was indicated by the abundant grave goods in women's burials (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, p.78; 1984, pp.300ff, 346ff).

The latest attempt to define Prehistoric society using the evidence of Finnish stone graves was made by Sirkku Pihlman. Her point is that only members of families of the upper stratum were buried in stone graves, while the majority of the population were buried in a way that did not leave archaeological traces. Pihlman believes that the inhabitation of Late Iron Age Finland was much broader than has been believed so far, and stone graves only marked sort of central points in settlement, no more than about a third of all the villages that existed in the Late Iron Age. Society as such was hierarchical, but, as Pihlman expresses it, the top of the hierarchical structure was broad. In one district, there could have been several leading households, although some of them could have dominated the others from time to time. She believed that slavery played an important role in the Late Prehistoric Finnish economy, similar to 11th-century Norway, where from a fifth to a third of inhabitants were believed to have been slaves (Pihlman 2003; 2004 and references).

Comparing different societies in the eastern Baltic

Up to quite recent times, the view of Late Prehistoric or Early Medieval society has been shaped according to the same mould in various countries on the east coast of the Baltic Sea, with views of the early state of Lithuania as the exception. The ideas were similar to those in several other countries in the first half of the 20th century. The interpretation of the pre-state society was not based on real analyses of existing evidence, let alone any theoretical constructions, but rather on the assumption that human society must develop everywhere along similar lines.

However, evidence of social relations based on Medieval writings is contradictory, and should only be used in combination with other sources, first of all archaeology. Foreign society, 'the Other', has in most cases been seen through the prism of the observer's own society. Chroniclers assumed that pagan societies, with

leaders and their retainers, were organised in the same way and possessed a similar sort of power as potentates in the writer's own society. That way, Henry the Livonian, the most prominent informant of the early-13th century east Baltic, expected to find a hierarchical and individualised social organisation, of the sort found in Christian Europe, among the inhabitants of the eastern Baltic. This was obviously easier for some ethnic groups. He attributed titles of princes (*dux*, *princeps*) or kings (*konic*, *rex*) to Latgallians, Semigallians, Curonians and Lithuanians. The social organisation of the Estonians and the Livs was obviously much more confusing to him. In addition to the general *seniors* and *meliores*, the title *nobiles* was used only once, and even the only known high-ranking social person, the Livonian chieftain Kaupo, was called 'a kind of king and elder' (*quasi rex et senior*) (Vassar and Tarvel 1975, p.29).

Interpretations of Late Prehistoric society in different east Baltic areas vary as to the exact degrees of state-making features. We cannot help noticing that the areas inhabited by ethnic Balts have traditionally been seen as reaching a pre-state stage, while the Baltic Finns were believed to have been 'less developed'. The opposite view has been proposed by Šnē, but it is somewhat blurred by the fact that he chose to consider ethnically heterogenous inhabitants in the territory of present Latvia as one entity (Šnē 2002), thus intentionally or unintentionally supporting the evolutionary point of view of all human societies developing along similar lines.

Regarding certain respected people mentioned in written documents and chronicles, cultural background and possible affiliation with a favourite ethnic paradigm seems to influence the interpretations. At least some ethnic Balts, the Lithuanians, did manage to establish an early state, as it appears without any doubt in written documents from the early 13th century. The general idea seems to be that, without foreign intervention, other ethnic Baltic groups could soon have reached a coherent social organisation, and the same could have happened with Baltic Finnic groups in a later period.

Archaeological burial material in east Baltic countries has traditionally been treated either by emphasising the lack or the abundance of grave goods. Surprisingly enough, no obvious clusters appear in this respect. In all lands considered in this overview, 12th-century burial customs characterised by a number of cemeteries, and by comparatively abundant grave goods, including lots of weapons. No princely graves have been recorded in any of these areas. Still, a more theoretical approach to burial rites, with an emphasis on aspects other than merely the number of grave goods, enables

us to present a somewhat more complicated vision of the society that is buried in these graves.

Representativeness

When comparing Late Iron Age east Baltic archaeological material in the northern and southern parts of the region, the different characters of burial customs creates a certain psychological bias in the assessment of the finds. Ethnic Balts had individual graves, in large areas even inhumations, where grave goods of preservable materials were placed intact and subsequently often very pleasing to the eye. On the other hand, the Finnic inhabitants in the northern half of the eastern Baltic used to bury their dead cremated, and the grave goods were intentionally destroyed before being gathered on a pyre, and thus only too often melted in a fierce fire. Only a few pieces of such distorted artefacts were deposited in stone graves, probably following a sort of *pars pro toto* principle when picking them up from the pyre site (e.g. Selirand 1974; Karvonen 1998; Mägi 2002; Mandel 2003; Wickholm, Raninen 2006). Although the artefact types, as end products after these ritual ordeals, may frequently be recognisable, these finds were never considered as attractive as intact artefacts, thus easily creating a thoughtless interpretation of 'poor' graves, and, by extension, of a 'poor' culture.

The interpretation of social relations mirrored in burial customs depends very much on the estimation of a given community using a particular burial ground. In the southern half of the east Baltic region, cemeteries, often consisting of hundreds of graves, are normally considered to represent an entire village community. Similar interpretations prevailed earlier in the northern half of the eastern Baltic as well, but here they have changed during recent decades. Both in Estonia and in Finland, it is now presumed that members of only selected families, probably those forming a broader upper stratum in their societies, were buried in stone graves, frequently equipped with abundant grave goods throughout the 12th century. How the rest of the population was buried is not known, but this degree of post-mortal treatment suggests quite a considerable social difference between the elite and everyone else. The number of stone graves, and even more so of the artefacts found in them, increased considerably in the middle or at the end of the tenth century, and the 11th and 12th centuries formed the period of the most conspicuous grave furnishing. This phenomenon can be explained by the deepening social stratification which took place within the frameworks of old and already existing social structures.

Collectivism versus individuality

The most conspicuous difference when comparing burial customs in the east Baltic regions is the shortage of individual graves in the northern half of the region. However, the 12th century in Estonia is characterised by an increasing number of individual, mainly inhumation graves, while the great majority of elite families were still buried in stone graves, where the remains of family members were completely mixed. The increasing number of individual graves might refer to changes in social systems that gradually simulated those of their western and southern neighbours. More individual graves were known in Finland, predominantly in the coastal zones, where overseas contacts with Scandinavians had always been close. An exception among the Baltic Finnic ethnic groups was the Livs, who, at least at the end of Prehistory, never used to bury their dead in collective stone graves.

With the exception of a few periods and areas, the Estonians are throughout Prehistory strongly expressed by collective burial customs, where the remains of the dead mixed in one big grave. On the contrary, the Scandinavian and Baltic neighbours of the Estonians practised individual burials with abundantly equipped warrior graves, starting from as early as the end of the Stone Age. Close mutual ties between individuality, expressed in burial rites, warrior ideology, and the stratification of social systems, have been noticed in many countries, but appear much earlier than the 12th century AD (Mägi 2007, and references).

There is no doubt that in the 11th and 12th centuries, weapons possessed a significance as status symbols, and warriors were held in high esteem in all areas in the eastern Baltic. Nevertheless, the aforementioned differences in burial rites tend to indicate that the actual way the warriors could practise their powers might have varied from strong individual-based and hierarchical social organisations in the south, to somewhat limited powers within frameworks of collective clan-based organisation in northern areas. The latter probably meant that even warlords, who appeared as 'proper' leaders to their southern neighbours, or, for instance, Henry the Livonian, did not actually possess real power, apart from personal authority to force wished-for solutions through in assemblies of area or clan representatives, and particularly not in questions that remained outside the limits of their power, such as military activity. Although kings and princes in deeply hierarchical, pre-state or early state societies always had to deal with magnates as well, their personal influence in decision

making was presumably many times greater, as well as being supported by ideology. A somewhat exceptional form of society probably marked the ancient Prussians, if we believe Kulakov's interpretations of a one-time warrior aristocracy ruled by priests.

Gender relations

Gender roles are embedded within any given social organisation in a manor, reflected in one way or another in burial rites, particularly in the composition of grave goods and the ratio of male and female burials. Comparing different east Baltic regions in this respect, the conspicuous differences between the southern and northern areas cannot be overlooked. Considering society in a broader context, these differences tend to correlate with other aspects of burial customs, differentiating these two major regions.

When the percentage of gender-specific artefacts among grave goods is high, it refers to differences in male and female dress, and therefore probably points to a polarisation of roles played by men and women in the particular society. Although it cannot be pointed out as a rule, strictly differentiated genders commonly refer to a male-dominated society where women are subordinate to men (e.g. Kent 1999). In the east Baltic areas, this phenomenon characterises mainly the ethnic Balts, but it can also, to a somewhat smaller extent, be applied to other neighbouring peoples, such as the Scandinavians (e.g. Jørgensen 1990; Rundkvist 2003). Men in Late Prehistoric east Baltic areas wore abundant jewellery, which, for the ethnic Balts, always seems to have differed from female ornaments. The number of unisex artefacts, if they modest (e.g. Bliujienė 1999; Radiņš 1999; Šnē 2002).

The completely intermingled burials in Estonian and Finnish stone graves do not in most cases enable us to differentiate individuals, let alone define their gender. The phenomenon suggests that similar attitudes also dominated the society from which the funeral parties drew their attitudes. At the very end of the Prehistoric period, when more inhumations appeared on the scene, the great number of unisex artefacts in these graves stands out from the rest: multiple jewellery and types of accessories, as well as tools, can be found both in male and female burials.

Cultural-anthropological parallels have demonstrated that numerous non-gendered artefacts in graves characterise societies where gender roles are balanced (e.g. Fagan 1991, pp.305-426). When more different

artefacts, associated unexceptionally with the male or female gender, were put in burials, and were therefore probably used in real life, it shows how less egalitarian gender roles presumably were. Drawing parallels with phenomena that are closer and more familiar to us, differences in male and female dress compared to gender roles now and hundred years ago can be enough.

However, gender-specific artefacts are not completely absent in Late Iron Age Estonian burials. Some jewellery, such as chain arrangements and spiral bracelets, occur predominantly in female graves, while weapons are more characteristic of male graves. The lack of specific male jewellery is one of the features distinguishing Estonia from its closest neighbours: all the abundant jewellery that local men wore belonged to similar types as what was used by local women. We can conclude that, for instance, Latgallian or Lithuanian men probably considered it undignified, or at least improper, to decorate themselves with jewellery similar to that of women, but this attitude did not characterise ancient Estonian society.

In Estonia, as well as in some neighbouring countries (especially Baltic Finnic), attributes associated with one gender have sometimes occurred in graves that included items that were normally associated with the other gender, and where even bones were sometimes biologically determined for the other gender. A female chain arrangement, or parts of one, can, for instance, sometimes be found in male graves, and weapons are recorded in some female graves (Mägi 2002, pp.77ff).

The custom of putting weapons in women's graves, which are otherwise abundantly equipped with female jewellery and other attributes, seems to characterise predominantly Baltic Finnic burials, but it has also been recorded sporadically in other north European areas, such as Birka or in Norway (Arwidsson 1986; Thålin-Bergman 1986). In Latgale and Semigallia, one example of such a burial is known in each (Radiņš 1999, p.83; Vaškevičiūtė 2007).[2] Pirkko-Liisa Lehtosalo-Hilander has reported some weapons, including one of the most luxurious swords in Finnish archaeology, in abundantly equipped female graves in Finland (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984, p.402ff), but this custom seems to have been particularly widespread in Kare-

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[2] I find it important to differentiate between the occurrences of weapons in graves that are otherwise equipped with abundant female-specific attributes, and in graves that, according to most of the grave goods, belong to a man, but where the skeleton has been biologically identified as female. The latter cases probably illustrate completely different social phenomena (for some possible explanations, see e.g. Simniškytė 2007).

lia (Kochkurkina 1981, p.92ff). Several Liv women were buried together with a weapon, normally an axe or a spear (Tõnisson 1974, p.109, tables II, VI; Mägi 2002, p.79; Zariņa 2006, tab. 191, 1). Weapons are quite widespread in female cremation complexes on Saaremaa (Mägi 2002, p.77ff),[3] but because of specific problems concerning the analysis of these graves, the weapons' attachment to the complexes can always be counter-argued.

Weapons in female graves do not necessarily indicate female warriors, although this possibility cannot be excluded either. Weapons were commonly used as symbols of power, which can also be the most reliable explanation for their presence in the aforementioned graves. It is obvious that weapons in Baltic Finnic graves indicate, as a rule, only these female burials, where abundant grave goods suggest the high social position of the deceased woman anyway. Female jewellery in abundantly equipped male graves may, for instance, following a similar line of reasoning, symbolise family affiliation. The phenomenon may also be explained in several other ways, but to sum up the most essential deduction, it was not considered improper in a particular society to supply the dead with items that referred to the other gender. That the ethnic Balts almost never practised such a custom probably mirrors a different ideology, and therefore also a diverse social system. The engendered polarisation of grave goods, up to a complete lack of jewellery (except for buckles), in male graves, and a lack of weapons in female graves, also characterises the Late Prehistoric Scandinavians and several other Germanic societies (e.g. Härke 1992; Jesch 1991, pp.10ff, 21).

One more aspect can be noted when comparing burial customs in different east Baltic areas. The ethnic Balts seem generally to have surrendered more grave goods to male graves, while Late Prehistoric Baltic Finnic female inhumations tend to show more metal objects than graves of men in the same cemeteries. This phenomenon does not nevertheless point to anything final about gender roles: the status of a male may, even in very male-dominated societies, be expressed through the jewellery of his wife.

Several researchers have suggested that gender roles tend to be in correlation with social systems (e.g. Kent 1999). Gender polarisation in ethnic Baltic societies thus hints at a strongly male-dominated or warrior-centralised society, which fits with the interpretation of their society as hierarchical. The archaeological

evidence of Baltic Finnic burials, on the other hand, seems to indicate comparatively balanced gender roles in their societies. This assumes that women fulfilled a role in these societies that somehow compensated for the supremacy of warrior status, which is reflected in other sources. Some particular features in Medieval legislation and folklore, and parallels with cultural-anthropologically studied and archaeologically similar societies, suggest that this role could, in most probability, be provided by a matrilineal descent system in extended families (Blomkvist 2005, pp.182-191; Mägi 2002, p.146; 2009).

Different societies in different cultural spheres

An overview of burial customs in different areas demonstrates the possibility to distinguish two major spheres of culture in the eastern Baltic, characterised by somewhat different social structures. The areas inhabited by the ancient Livs formed a kind of transformation zone between these two spheres, where the burial rites possessed features characteristic of both the northern and the southern half of the eastern Baltic. The Latgallian and Curonian areas also to a certain extent showed a blend of cultural characteristics, especially if we take into consideration the ethnic situation in the latter.

The Late Prehistoric societies of the Semigallians, Žemaitijans, Latgallians and the (southern) Curonians were characterised by the dominance of the male and a warrior-based social hierarchy, which probably resembled that of the early Scandinavian kingdoms, or generally most contemporary West European countries. These kinds of social relations were familiar to chroniclers like Henry the Livonian. In these societies, early-13th century Germans knew exactly which powers to appeal to, and could accordingly also call them by their names.

The large percentage of gender-specific artefacts in graves might be considered an indication of strong male dominance in these societies, and therefore presumably show that ancestral descent was traced through the paternal line. Although family affiliation was probably relevant to all people, power relationships were mainly individual by nature. A strong relationship with a particular chieftain or prince was most relevant in a warrior's life. The prince, even though he definitely had to deal with mighty representatives of his aristocracy, took decisions himself that were relevant to the entire society.

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[3] From the distinguishable complexes, about 30% of all the cremation burials of Saaremaa women and girls contained some type of weapon.

Warriors and the hierarchies based on them were certainly important in northern east Baltic societies as well, but positions of power there seem to have had much more collective characteristics. Society as a whole was undoubtedly hierarchical and not egalitarian, as was imagined and presented by scholars in the first half of the 20th century. Members of the dominant families were elected as representatives of their clans, chieftains in peaceful times as well as warlords. Power structures might have been duplicated, as often happened in that kind of society, and women might have had access to some of them, for example, to some kind of council for clan representatives. Some dominant families were probably more influential than others, but this authority rested upon collective, or family-based, property and power, and was not directly associated with particular individuals.

Although power in such political and social organisations can be characterised as collective, there were certainly chieftains elected to administer it. However, they could rotate, come from different ruling families, and their authority was presumably limited. When communicating with potentates from countries with an inherited political and economic hierarchy, such as Estonian southern neighbours or 13th-century Crusaders, this difference in social structures probably caused serious misunderstandings and much talk at cross purposes. The chronicler Henry of Livonia at least, as well as other Crusaders, was clearly unable to determine who ruled such societies, or who took the ultimate decisions.

Although it is perhaps incomprehensible to some of its neighbours, a society which had collective power structures could function successfully, and from time to time could cooperate with neighbouring regions, certainly no less effectively than societies with inherited hierarchical structures, when they were fragmented into smaller political units. Neither were their technological or economic levels necessarily lower than those of more individual-based hierarchical systems; these aspects were heavily dependent on factors other than power structures, even though the latter also played a role. A social organisation with strong collective traditions should definitely not be considered to be at a lower stage of social development, but as a cultural peculiarity. If we draw parallels with Scandinavia, societies on Gotland and Iceland, for example, were somewhat different to those in Central Sweden or Denmark (e.g. Randsborg 1980; Sawyer 1982; Hyenstrand

1989; Carlsson 1990). It is also not correct to believe that societies with collective power structures should necessarily develop towards more individual hierarchies over the course of time. On the contrary, the same collective attitudes were obvious in Estonian and Latvian societies after the conquest: the role that vassals or the landed gentry played in the political systems of Medieval Livonia was remarkable, especially in the northern part of Estonia and on the Estonian islands.

Conclusions

The overview presented in this article on Late Prehistoric or early Medieval, that is, mainly 12th-century, burial rites and their interpretation suggests at first glance a quite similar view of these societies. However, it is obvious that the tradition of history writing in Latvia and Lithuania tends in most cases to see early states in areas inhabited by ethnic Balts, while Estonian and Finnish archaeologists, at least up to the 1990s, have talked mainly of egalitarian social structures even as late as the 12th century. Although different cultural backgrounds and varying national identities can be seen behind these assumptions, it would be difficult to deny that 12th-century societies in the east Baltic area really seem to have been different in several respects. This standpoint can only be supported by a comparison of the archaeological evidence. Still, this variation could most likely be explained by cultural differences, and not by different stages in some kind of development hierarchy of human societies.

We can assert that, at least partly, the varying interpretations of Late Prehistoric societies might be caused by the different research situations. In Estonia and Latvia, Late Prehistoric society has been discussed intensely in archaeological literature over the last two decades. These questions seem to have attracted much less attention, at least in publications on archaeology dealing with ancient Semigallia, Žemaitija or areas that were ruled by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in later centuries.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

Arch. Baltica – *Archaeologia Baltica* (Vilnius since 1995, Klaipėda since 2006)
Lietuvos arch. – *Lietuvos Archeologija* (Vilnius since 1979)

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II

SOCIETIES OF THE PAST: APPROACHES TO BURIAL CUSTOMS AND GRAVE GOODS

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visuomenės raidos struktūra buvo intensyviai apta-
riama paskutiniais dviem dešimtmečiais. Straipsnyje
autorė teigia, kad jos keliamos problemos nepatraukė
tyrinėtojų dėmesio, bent jau publikacijose, kuriose ar-
cheologiniais metodais tyrinėjami senovės Žiemgalos,
Žemaitijos ar kiti regionai, kurie vėlesniais laikais pri-
klausė Lietuvos Didžiajai Kunigaikštystei.

Vertė Algirdas Girininkas