

A SIGNIFICANT ANNIVERSARY

Enchanted by the Baltic:
On the 80th Birthday of Professor,
Habilitation Doctor and Academician Vladas Žulkus

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The land of Žemaitija (Samogitia) has nurtured more than twenty Lithuanian archaeologists, while the town of Telšiai alone has produced seven, among them Mykolas Eustachijus Brenšteinas (Michał Eustachy Brensztein 1874–1938), Vitas Valatka (1927–1977), Adolfas Tautavičius (1925–2006), Adomas Butrimas, the author of these words, and Vladas Žulkus.

The archaeology of Lithuania and of the Baltic Sea region cannot be conceived without reference to the works of Vladas Žulkus. He is a pioneer in the field of underwater archaeology, an investigator of the western Baltic tribes and an author of studies on the history of Klaipėda, Palanga and Plateliai. In Europe, he is recognised and highly regarded as an authority on Baltic–Scandinavian cultural relations and as a scholar who has made a distinguished contribution to research on the evolution of the Baltic Sea.

Investigations in the Old Town of Klaipėda

The Klaipėda Castle site, now regaining its original form, could not have been reconstructed with such precision without the archaeological excavations initiated there by Vladas in 1975. His interest in the old town of Klaipėda most likely began in 1977, when he published the article ‘Problems in the Development of the Old Town of Klaipėda in the 13th–17th Centuries’, in which he discussed approaches to the investigation and reconstruction of the castle site (Žulkus 1977). This topic has remained among his research interests to the present day.

Without the work of archaeologist Vladas, the history of Palanga – as well as of other towns in western Lithuania

– would be considerably poorer. His investigations have provided a solid basis for our understanding of the pre-history of the western Balts, the Curonian Vikings, the underwater cultural heritage of the Baltic and Curonian Lagoons, and the developmental history of the Baltic Sea.

For almost two decades, I had the opportunity to know Vladas closely – as a scholar, an academic teacher and the rector of Klaipėda University. In brief, his personality could be characterised as quiet and reserved, yet he inspired his colleagues to new undertakings, endowed with a profound natural insight, and tireless in his intellectual pursuits. I also discerned in him traits of an idealist – particularly in his selfless devotion to the study of the Baltic Sea’s evolution. To this day, Vladas remains the only Lithuanian archaeologist-diver who, by his very nature, has immersed himself completely in the Baltic Sea.

Research in Lake Plateliai

Although born in Telšiai, Vladas did not reside there long; at the age of three, he moved with his parents to Palanga. His Samogitian (in Lithuanian ‘Žemaitija’) temperament reveals itself not only in his work but also in his speech – we always converse in the Samogitian dialect when we meet. It was in Samogitia that his path as an underwater archaeologist began.

His first object of investigation was Lake Plateliai, to which he devoted a significant portion of his research time. In the 280 m section between Šventorkalnis and Plateliai Castle Island, together with scholars from the University of Toruń, he conducted investigations of a former bridge and surveyed the Nalija shoal of the lake. In addition to

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Vldas Žulkus dives into the Baltic Sea during the 2011 implementation of the 'Submerged Prehistoric Archaeology and Landscapes of the Continental Shelf' project. (photograph by R. Pletkauskas).

underwater research, he carried out archaeological excavations on Castle Island in 1997 and 2001–2005, during which the 14th–16th-century castle site was explored, and in 1996–1997 he investigated the Šventorkalnis manor site.

In 2003, I had the opportunity to observe the methodology employed in the investigations of the Plateliai Castle Island and in underwater archaeology when Vldas, alongside University of Toruń researchers Andrzej Kola and Wojciech Szulta, examined the wooden constructions of the Plateliai Castle bridge at a depth of 10–11 m. I was impressed by the strict organisation of work, the precision of planning and the formulation of subsequent tasks; by the evening preparations for the following day's activities; and by the discussions of the obtained results. Vldas also pointed out promising locations for the prospective survey of Stone Age sites.

Distinctiveness in Simplicity

The saying that 'genius lies in simplicity' is old, perhaps somewhat worn, and possibly unremarkable to some, yet it is particularly apt in the case of Vldas and his team in their investigations of the evolution of the Baltic Sea and the seabed of the Curonian Lagoon.

The work began in 2002, when, aboard the Swedish vessel *Altair*, Vldas – then head of the Underwater Research Laboratory of Klaipėda University – together with professional diver, combat swimmer commander and underwater archaeology instructor Valerijus Krisikaitis, undertook dives in the Baltic Sea near Juodkrantė in search of a sunken ship. At a depth of 27 m, they discovered three tree stumps (0.4–1 m in diameter) with roots intact and situated 6–8 m apart. Nearby, they identified a terrace approximately 1 m in height, adjacent to moraine deposits – a cluster of boulders. Radiocarbon dating determined that the stumps dated to 8550–8276 cal BC.

This demonstrated that the terrace had formed during the Ancylus Lake transgression. The distinctiveness of this discovery lay precisely in its simplicity: the trees growing along the terrace (as indicated by their radiocarbon age) reflected a stable stage of the Baltic shoreline. The subsequent research on the evolution of the Baltic Sea, based on this simple methodological premise, refined even the geological data obtained by marine geologists.

The documentation of relict shorelines of the Baltic Sea continued into the early decades of the 21st century, culminating in a synthesis of data concerning the relict coasts, underwater landscapes and patterns of human habitation along the shore during the Final Palaeolithic and the Early and Middle Holocene. These results were published in 2022 in Oxford in one of the volumes of the *British*

Archaeological Reports series (BAR 3089). Between the first discoveries and the publication of the synthesised findings on the relict coasts of the Baltic, two decades had passed.

European Projects

I became more closely acquainted with Vladas's research on the Baltic Sea in 2005, when I began working at the Institute of Baltic Region History and Archaeology of Klaipėda University. Until 2008, I had observed Vladas's work on the Baltic Sea from a distance. That same year, he invited me to collaborate with him on issues concerning the development of the Baltic Sea. Together, we implemented three major projects: 2009–2013 – within the framework of the scientific and technical research programme COST: 'Submerged Prehistoric Archaeology and Landscapes of the Continental Shelf'; 2011–2012 – the project 'Natural and Cultural Studies of the Submerged Landscape of the Baltic Sea during the Early Holocene' (JOLDIJA); and 2018–2022 – under the European Union Structural Funds Investment Programme 2014–2020: 'Mesolithic–Neolithic People and the Baltic Sea: Relict Coasts and Settlements Underwater and on Land' (Re-Coasts & People).

These projects differed in scope and complexity, yet all were led by Vladas. They clearly reflected his organisational skills, scientific intuition and focused dedication to work. This was most evident in the preparation of scholarly articles and monographs published both in Lithuania and abroad – sixteen of which we co-authored. We would begin by discussing the research problem, the objectives of the article or monograph and the key questions to be addressed, followed by consideration of the publication's structure. Our collaboration was always systematic and timely – Vladas valued punctuality and adhered strictly to research schedules.

The outcome of the first project was the monograph *Baltijos jūros krantai prieš 10 000 metų 'Yoldia'* (The shores of the Baltic Sea 10,000 years ago 'Yoldia'), in which a reconstruction of the Yoldia Sea shoreline was presented, based on studies of the Baltic Sea floor at depths of 25–30 m. Radiocarbon, palynological and dendrochronological analyses of trees growing along the ancient coast showed that this shoreline existed during the Preboreal–Boreal period. Our findings required revision of certain geological interpretations: some geologists had claimed that the Yoldia shoreline had re-emerged as dry land during the Ancylus stage, while others argued that it had been exposed between the Ancylus and Littorina stages. Acceptance of either view would have meant that no trace of the Yoldia coastal forest could have survived – it would have decayed long ago. However, the well-preserved re-

lict forest remains along the coast demonstrated that, after submersion, the water level throughout the subsequent evolution of the Baltic Sea had never fallen below –24 m.

Later seabed investigations, employing side-scan sonar, echo sounding, bathymetric measurements and the extensive diving data collected by Vladas and his team, revealed that relict shorelines in the Baltic Sea are far more widespread than previously assumed. The discovery of multiple submerged coastal forest areas made it possible to expand the developmental framework of Baltic relict coastlines beyond the Yoldia Sea stage alone. Under the European Union-funded project, it became possible to identify the major transformations in the Baltic Sea during the transgressive and regressive phases of the Ancylus Lake and during the transgression of the Littorina Sea. These data were correlated with genetic studies of the earliest appearance of pine in the coastal zone, and the formation of palaeodeltas, relict lagoons and submerged terraces – both in the current depths of the Baltic and in its modern coastal zone. Together, these investigations clarified the main characteristics of the Baltic Sea's underwater landscape and patterns of human habitation along its relict coast.

Like a Fish in Water

The recent underwater investigations of the Baltic relict coasts demanded both the precision of Vladas's team and the energy of its leader. Already before departing from the port of Klaipėda, the expedition leader would assign tasks – even to the ship's captain – defining precise research coordinates. In his field diary, he meticulously recorded the data of each voyage to the investigated areas of the Baltic seabed, supervised the divers' work and frequently joined them underwater himself. He often carried out measurements of discovered features, filmed them and personally collected samples for laboratory analysis.

Before departure, Vladas's demeanour would visibly change: he would become deeply focused, carefully check every detail of his and the team's diving equipment, sometimes crack a brief joke, and then dive into the depths. Given his age, both diving and organising underwater expeditions were a considerable physical challenge – one could only admire his endurance and vitality.

As he often remarks, 'It all pays off at the scientific level.' Indeed, Vladas has by now accumulated the most comprehensive dataset on the underwater cultural landscape of the Baltic Sea – not only on its developmental history but also on the locations and preservation of shipwrecks and other underwater heritage. His research is recognised internationally, and his concern for the protection of Lithuania's underwater cultural heritage has been evident in his active participation in the Scientific and Technical Advi-

sory Body of UNESCO's Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. There, he put forward the idea that the underwater relict zones of the Baltic Sea, from the perspective of both safety and cultural heritage protection, should be integrated into maritime spatial planning (ports, offshore wind farms and other facilities). He vividly demonstrated this concept in his presentation during EXPO 2012 in South Korea, where the main theme was 'The Living Oceans and Coasts'.

A Scholar and an Intellectual

Due to his extensive experience in shipwreck research, Vladas was invited by Estonian colleagues to participate in the investigation of the sunken warship *President Smetona* in the Gulf of Finland.

A distinct area of his scholarship concerns Baltic–Scandinavian relations in the 7th–12th centuries. While excavating Birutė Hill in Palanga and the nearby fortified settlement – which can be regarded as a multi-ethnic trading centre frequented by Vikings since the 9th century – Vladas was the first to determine how and when Scandinavian Vikings not only raided but also engaged in trade (Žulkus 2004; 2007). In the adjacent Curonian settlement and its burial ground (approximately 400 graves dating to the 8th–13th centuries), he discovered Scandinavian artefacts. Near Birutė Hill, he identified Viking merchants' log-built houses with domed clay ovens and hearths.

Vladas was also the first to establish that, by the 10th–12th centuries, Palanga exhibited all the characteristics of a coastal town of the Baltic region and may have been the site of the first church in Lithuanian territory. By analysing corresponding archaeological material from Scandinavia, he demonstrated that sustained commercial links existed between Palanga and southern Scandinavia, particularly Schleswig-Holstein, alongside military contacts. Moreover, he was the first to discuss the social structure of the Curonians, identifying the presence of a princely stratum that organised seafaring raids – Viking expeditions – in the Baltic Sea.

These Baltic–Scandinavian studies, widely published in Vladas's monographs and articles, were made possible through his deep familiarity with western European archaeological sources and scholarship. His proficiency in German, French and English was of great assistance in this regard.

Vladas has successfully combined his research on the evolution of the Baltic Sea, the western Balts, and cultural heritage with active public service and academic leadership at Klaipėda University, as well as with the training of young archaeologists, historians and researchers. Energetic, industrious and demanding, he led the Centre for

the History of Western Lithuania and Prussia (later the Institute of Baltic Region History and Archaeology) with great dedication, and his leadership was acknowledged by the academic community – he was repeatedly re-elected as rector of Klaipėda University for nearly a decade.

From the very inception of the journal *Archaeologia Baltica*, dedicated to the prehistory of the Baltic Sea region, Vladas served as its editor-in-chief and a member of the editorial board. Published by the Institute of Baltic Region History and Archaeology at Klaipėda University, the journal has a broad readership across northern Europe. Its growing academic reputation owes much to Vladas and the editorial team he assembled.

A Modest Leader

During more than fifty years of academic work, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with many leaders – directors, rectors and others – and I have often observed that those who reach such positions tend to become proud and demanding. Vladas, by contrast, became even more modest, always ready to listen and consult with others. During expeditions or fieldwork, one never felt the presence of a 'rector'; he worked as an ordinary member of the team – whether with a shovel, at a computer or alongside the divers.

Under his leadership, Klaipėda University experienced its 'golden age': international cooperation with universities in Germany, Poland and other countries was strengthened markedly; joint research and academic teaching programmes were expanded. Vladas also devoted considerable energy to the development of the university campus: the renovation of former barracks into classrooms and laboratories, and, in collaboration with local entrepreneurs, the creation of the Studlendas complex, which significantly enhanced the university's environment.

And this is still not the full measure of what a person devoted to his ideas can accomplish. The list of Vladas's archaeological projects is extensive. Many of his studies have focused on the archaeological investigation of settlements along the Lithuanian coast – Klaipėda, Palanga and others. Today, the Klaipėda Castle site has been restored, housing a museum where visitors can explore the rich history of Klaipėda, Palanga and Plateliai. All this is vividly portrayed in director Justinas Lingys's film *Archaeologist Vladas Žulkus* about the archaeologist, historian, pioneer of underwater archaeology and honorary citizen of Palanga.

As an archaeologist, Vladas has worked at numerous types of sites – Iron Age, Middle Ages, and urban archaeology – including Švėkšna Manor, Slengiai Cemetery, Laistai Settlement, the castle and Jesuit College of

Kražiai, Šventoji Port (also known as Heiligen Aa), the Palanga Cemetery and Birutė Hill (hillfort, sacred site and settlement), among others.

As Vladas once remarked in conversation, ‘One cannot discover any new Americas alone. What truly matters is the team you build and the people who surround you.’ And indeed, this is true. From his earliest archaeological investigations, Vladas has been accompanied by people who believed in his ideas and, under his leadership, achieved remarkable results in studies of the evolution of the Baltic Sea and the prehistory and early Middle Ages of the western Balts.

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