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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF GROUP: FROM SITUATIONAL CONSTRUCT TO ETHNIC GROUP

Mindaugas Bertašius

In Lithuania there is a prevailing standpoint that equates groups of archaeological sites with historical tribes. Terms like "tribal" and "ethnic", which are common in our archaeological literature, are to a certain extent abstractions – they say nothing about the long process of the evolution of social structures from family to nation. In different times we discover different expressions of social identity. Eventually other forms of identity developed – for instance cultural and ethnic identity. The ethnic meaning is one but not the only meaning for many opportunities that suggest the diffusion of material culture, reflected in the archaeological material. The archaeological material mostly represents social identity, but not ethnic identity. Wealth, the objects of the elite – marks of value – all of these are components of social identity. Grave goods mostly represent the social identity of individuals, families or groups.

The example for the material under discussion comes from central Lithuania, where a group of archaeological sites appeared since the 2nd–3rd centuries A.D. Access to water and environmental conditions predetermined human activities. It was only from the Late Migration period that there developed some traits connected with ethnicity.

Key words: group, social, ethnic, identity, central Lithuania.

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Long theoretical discussions have continued for some decades in world archaeology, meanwhile they have left few perceptible traces in publications by Lithuanian archaeologists. It has aptly been remarked that Lithuanian archaeology could be referred to as "necro-archaeology", as its interest mostly concentrates on burial investigations, but any settlement was investigated completely (Žulkus 1997, 14). Burial grounds have been investigated by the same model, which I consider to be aged model.

This model is like philately – the gathering of archaeological items, mostly grave goods, remains the main objective. Such collection generates heaps of artefacts in museums, or a certain set of information – some descriptive texts in the proceedings of Lithuanian scientific institutions.

But what next? More collections of philatelic nature? Then frequent wars, (our East Baltic region is accustomed to centuries of war), empire-building or revolutions – and some archaeological materials are lost. Then a new generation of archaeologists hurries to gather a new collection…

Here one might discuss a broad field of theoretical discourse, but I would like to turn my attention to some details concerning the structure of social groups. In this case I have in mind the task of interpreting the archaeological material. There are many methods that can be used to solve this problem: theoretical discussions, analytical methods for precise dating, and statistical methods for the representative generalization of results – all of these can be applied for the dependable reconstruction of prehistoric communi-

ty (and as subsequent evolution the prehistoric society). There may, of course, be many aspects of that problem, but I would prefer to discuss only a few of them.

In Lithuania there is a prevailing standpoint that equates the groups of archaeological sites (so-called archaeological units) with terms of historical tribes (completely ignoring the theoretical problem of ethnicity – a term such as "tribe" always demands the ethnic "perspective"). As has been pointed out, the terminology of ethnicity is used by modern ethnographers, sociologists, folklorists, archaeologists, and historians in ways that often have little in common with each other, and possibly nothing in common with the use of similar terminology in antiquity or the Early Middle Ages (Daim 1983). Lithuanian archaeologists talk in a more generalized way about tribes, tribal systems or tribal combinations, but never about specific tribes and conditions of tribal life (compare, for example, Michelbertas 1986 – the Roman Iron Age, Tautavičius 1996 – the Migration period; only in the latest works is this problem discussed: Žulkus 1997; 2004; Bertašius 2002). Even in the most recent archaeological publications we see the same situation, for example in the article concerning the Bronze Age (Luchtanas & Sidrys 1999), such concepts as tribe or even ethnicity (!) are used. Virtually, this is easily comprehensible – it is very difficult to consider ethnicity if you have no ideas about the evolution of society, the broad range of changes that took place in a particular society over many centuries. Thus there is a significant gap in Lithuanian archaeology. This makes problems especially complicated when we talk, for example, about the Roman Iron Age and later periods. I would like to turn my attention to three cultural groups: central Lithuania (4), the delta of the Nemunas River (2) and the West Lithuanian group (1), (fig. 1). The establishment of these cultural groups could be interpreted

as a result of fundamental socioeconomic changes: any individual cultural group is known there earlier and the archaeological evidence is very sparse.

Is there reason to speak of tribal units here at that time, i.e. since the Roman Iron age? Can we refer to a tribal aristocracy or chiefs? Even in historical times, in the 12th century, the situation was much more complicated and very far from what we (archaeologists) like to call a chiefdom. The kinship and the system of kinship, both at the higher social level and in every-day life, was similar to that in Scandinavia, where the base consisted of *aett* – a small unit of kinsmen, which was main social group in the society (Rowell 2001, 312; Lebedev 1985, 47; Drevneisyje 1979).

A group of archaeological sites situated in a definite territory and arranged in a system (a group of certain types of sites) – a so-called "territorial unit" – does not offer sufficient justification to refer to it as a tribal unit, even if the group of archaeological sites is characterized by the same burial rites. In the Lithuanian archaeological literature, common terms like "tribal" and "ethnic" are to a certain extent abstractions – they say nothing about the long process of evolution of social structures that developed from family to nation. One could only make a distinction between "tribe" and "not tribe", but when "the tribe" appears, what was before it? There are no answers. Meanwhile, archaeologists from other countries apply different terms to characterize the primary group of families or settlements (family group, social group, group of communication, cultural group, and situational construct) and different terms to characterize new and larger units with signs of ethnic identity (such as territorial unit, tribe, ethnic group).

Sometimes it looks like the different archaeological schools (processual or postprocessual, for instance) may find the solution to this problem. The problem,
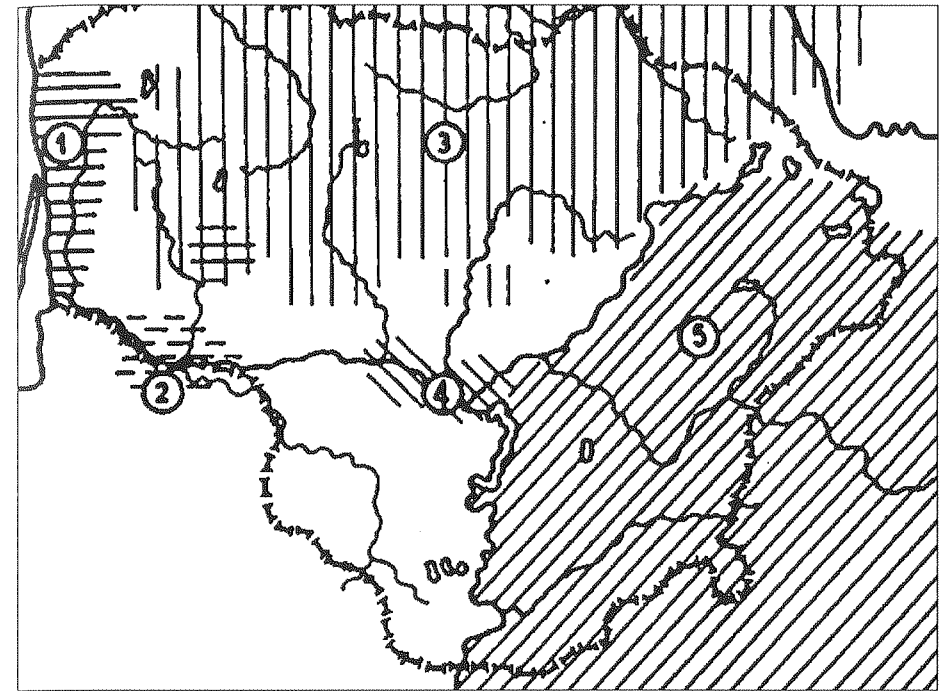

Fig. 1. Cultural groups from the Roman Iron Age in Lithuania (by Tautavičius 1996).

however, lies elsewhere. Different schools of archaeology embody different subjects of research. As has been shown in analytical research, different archaeological schools are hardly comparable, as they deal with different problems and never construct one firm structure of theoretical archaeology. Whereas the processual archaeologists work mostly with the needs of man's body, the post-processualists work with social and spiritual interests (Bernbeck 1997, 347; Siegmund & Zimmermann 2000, 182–183). It is possible to compare on another level, namely, transferring the question from "what happened" to "why it happened" (Hamerow 1998). Thus, in investigating prehistoric social structure – a defined cultural group – it is not the collision of different schools of archaeology, but more of standpoints and bases of sources.

But what kind of social identity is expressed in small cultural groups set-

tled near the banks of a river (the central Lithuanian group and the river delta group)? Could this be identified as a situational construct, or a group of communication? They have no special (individual) characteristics that could be interpreted as ethnic traits. Eventually other forms of identity developed – one could consider cultural and ethnic identities (Brather 2000). These, however, only developed later. Ethnic identity is acquired within the time frame of long historic processes. It is something like an "ethnic practice" that could be re-created through the reiteration of the ties that joined the members of the community (Pohl 1991). The reality of that connection must be re-created (restored) by ritual activity in the community's everyday life. The ethnic meaning is one, but is not the only meaning for the many opportunities suggested by the diffusion of material culture reflected in the archaeological material. The archaeological mate-
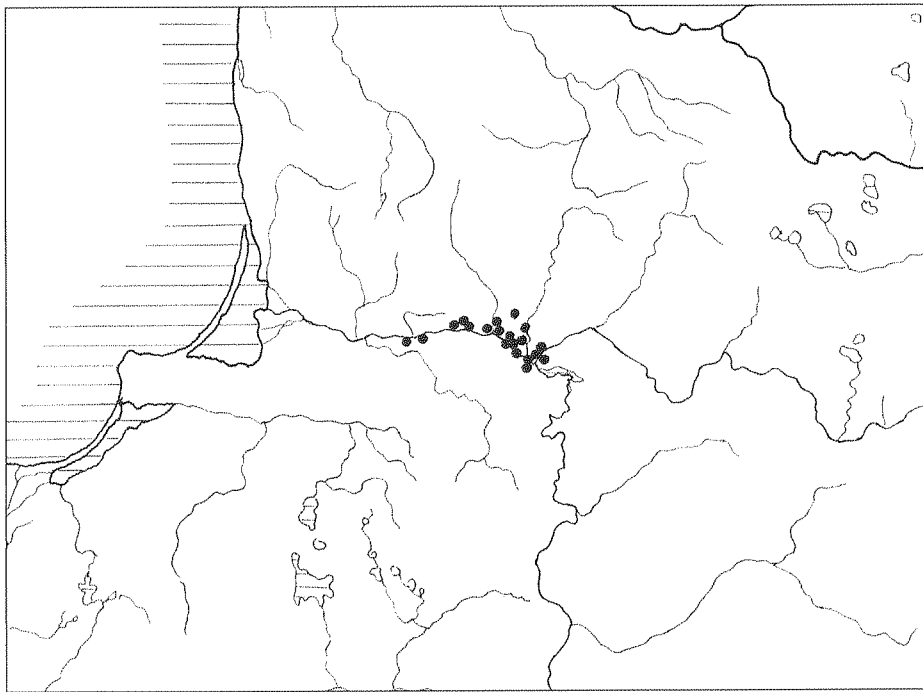
Fig. 2. Central Lithuanian group of archaeological sites (cemeteries) concentrated near the banks of the Nemunas River.

rial mostly represents social but not ethnic identity (it is not the tribe with traits like common language and territory, economy and rites). Wealth, the objects of the elite, signs of value – these are all indications of social identity. Such objects become very meaningful in graves from the Migration period. Thus they form a general cultural horizon that is known over a broad part of central Europe. At best, grave goods represent only the social identity of individuals, families or groups (Brather 2000:168). The disparity in grave equipment and the diversity of grave goods was predetermined by the internal standpoint of the family or group. According to Hans Eggers: "graves do not contain an "objective" sample of all (artefact) types current at a particular time and in a particular region, but an entirely subjective selection from the range of (artefact) types of the respective living culture (Eggers 1959, 265; translated by Härke 1997, 23). Thus we must

look for the reasons that influenced the selection of a particular grave set. Those reasons could be very different. As referenced by Heiko Steuer twenty years ago: "all burial items – whether they found their way into the grave as property by the right of inheritance, by right of decease, under ownership, or they were placed in the grave as offerings in accordance with the burial rituals – all of those items form a whole that cannot be divided into separate groups (Steuer 1982, 53; translated by M. B.). Otherwise, in looking for the social structure of the community, we would need to do something impossible – to separate groups of these items. There could, however, be more such groups. All that we have found in the graves and defined as burial items are remains of different worldviews. Near the grave there were rituals before, during, and after the cremation and/or burying. Some of these rituals will never be able to discover by archae-

ological means, e.g. a wake, processions, funeral service, etc. (Härke 1997, 22). We will never be able to determine the way in which burial items got into the grave. Perhaps it was predetermined by personality, maybe by the pattern of family life or the model of the social group, or maybe it was influenced by historic traditions that affected the rules of burial and determined the composition of grave goods. What did they want to express: status, wealth, and the deceased's place in real life or, ideally, heroism in youth, ethnicity before marriage, or what? (Jensen & Nielsen 1997, 34)

The above-mentioned example of evidence comes from central Lithuania. There is a group of archaeological sites concentrated near the banks of the Nemunas River (fig. 2). The group of cemeteries appears in the 2nd–3rd centuries A.D. Access to water and profits earned from the river valley's environmental conditions determined human activities. The central Lithuanian group had not been kept separate from the events related to the amber trade route in the 2nd–3rd centuries. The great number of imported items could be represented as an argument for this thesis (the greatest concentration of golden glass beads, profiled fibulas and other imported finds in Lithuania was found there). The control of communication by river was the basis of economic life. Thus we could consider that some geographical and economical conditions predetermined the settling of that group. There is, nevertheless, a conflict – how should one refer to this type of group? In my opinion it is a situational construct that in its first phase lacks any ethnic features. Archaeologists are accustomed to accept the extent of an archaeological culture (and – Lithuanian archaeol-

ogists – often the extent of archaeological sites that form an enclosed cultural group) as the representation of a tribal territory. They are accustomed to appreciate an archaeological culture (or cultural group – M. B.) as a closed entity with clearly defined boundaries, representing a "zone of mutual fear" between groups (Barford et al. 1991, 156). The situation in central Lithuania, however, demonstrates another point of view. By appreciating the archaeological material from Marvelė[1] cemetery, we are interfering with a so-called "mixed" or "fuzzy" group. For the Roman Iron Age there are characteristic different burial rites (flat inhumation graves, graves with cairns, barrows with stone circles and other stone constructions, graves in coffins, differences in the composition of grave goods, differences in social treatment). Archaeologists usually work with complete disregard for mixed cultural groups that exist in different prehistoric situations; meanwhile, the formation of clear cultural boundaries representing "zones of mutual fear" appears somewhat later. In the first phase of its existence, the central Lithuanian cultural group (defined as a situational construct) was closely connected with neighbouring groups of western Balts (Šimėnas 1994; Bertašius 2002; in print). Interfering with the problem of group and ethnicity and operating with material like grave goods or (sometimes also) burial rites, we must emphasize the phenomenon of "life stile". This may help us to realize that lifestyles (or their symbols) do not always respect ethnic, political or social barriers, and the imitation of fashions led to the development of the cultural assemblages identified in the archaeological material (like Coca Cola today; see: Barford 1991, 87). In many cases, we can recognise the lifestyle of the western

[1] The Marvelė burial ground (located within the Kaunas city) material was collected in the expedition of the years of 1991–1998 headed by Audrius Astrauskas and Mindaugas Bertašius, and expedition of 1999–2004 headed by Bertašius. It is the greatest investigated central Lithuanian burial ground.

Balts from the archaeological material.

We can discover different expressions of social identity in different times. From time to time it may be more or less strongly expressed. It could be a good example of that kind of expression – a horizon of well-known warrior graves, or in other words – the horizon of weapon graves. This situation is characteristic of an extensive region of central and east-central Europe. Thus there is no ethnic construct, but only a very expressive pattern of social identity. Warriors' graves are characteristic of the Migration period. But how does migration actually work? Is there a movement of certain groups of population, as often described in Lithuanian archaeological literature (Šimėnas 1994), or is it a process for which there is a great deal of geographical and sociological information that archaeologists have almost entirely ignored (Shennan 1991, 31)?

The perspective of cultural transmission could explain the way the cultural uniformity can emerge: it was advantageous to take decisions based not on individual learning but on the imitation of existing practices and a result of this will tend to be the generation of areas of cultural uniformity (Shennan 1991, 35). Examples of such cultural transmission might be adduced. The concentration of battle knife-daggers in a definite region dated to the 5th–6th centuries suggests not "an association with a distinct ethnic group" (Šimėnas 1996, 71), but rather an area of cultural uniformity, as they were distributed in Baltic sites along a coastal zone from Elbląg to Liepaja and along the banks of the Nemunas up to Kaunas. Another example of the distribution of crossbow brooches with a long narrow foot can be found (Dollkeim/Kovrovo brooches; see: Bitner-Wróblewska 2001, 33–48). They were distributed in the same region and expressed the same cultural uniformity. Dress and weapons seem to have had particular significance as a sign of belonging to a specific group. The social group consists of persons who in a particular time had acquiring some common symbols and might have developed a system of rules (Angeli 1991, 193).

The central Lithuanian cultural group is distinguished by its warrior graves, which were more expressive than those of other regions. The horizon of warrior graves was dated to phase D/D–E (4th/5th cent.), and demonstrative militancy is found in two places in central Lithuania – near Ariogala (sites of Plinkaigalis, Kalniškiai) and Kaunas (Marvelė) (Bertašius 2002, 39). In that case we are detecting small groups of population whose members are often related to one another. By this time, newly emergent groups of warriors pass into the long process of developing; in the first stage those groups were a nodus (embryo) of new tribal units, (or, a bit later, ethnic groups). It was like in central Europe, where the military structures that existed at that time were the germ of new ethnic structures: tribes and tribal units (Brachmann 1997, 24). Eventually, by this horizon, one could see expressive social identity, desperately conveyed through special sets of burial items. What kind of phenomenon was characteristic in a period of social mobility, when the position of the deceased was not stable and every family sought to express its newly acquired position in the society (or sought to express a desirable and not yet acquired position). That led to another situation, namely – to the establishment of a new social structure: a social structure that was expressed through the graves of the warrior elite (compare the well-known grave from Taurapilis (Tautavičius 1982); in central Lithuania similar graves have been found at Kalniškiai and Marvelė; see: Kazakevičius 1996, Bertašius 2002, 43–45). This phenomenon was referred to as a first stage in the formation of a retinue with chieftain – distinguishing for his authority and wealth some persons were able to round up a hierarchic companionship
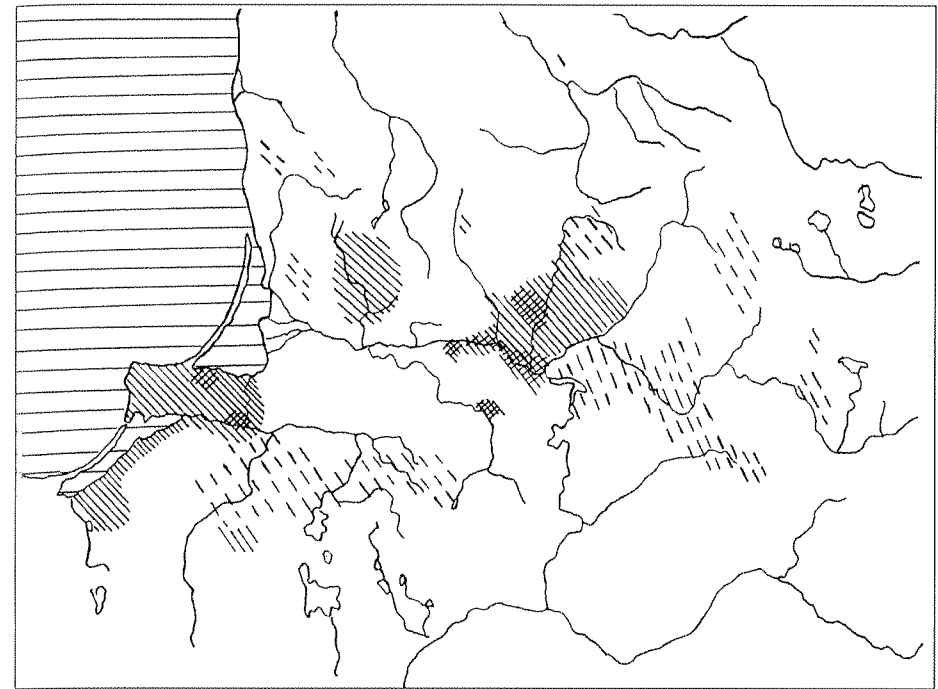

Fig. 3. Distribution of horse graves in the territories of the Balts from the 6th to 11th centuries.

or rank-society (*Rang-Gesellschaft*; see: Steuer 1982). In Lithuania the retinue was organized by familiar relatives (Žulkus 1997, 22–23). The process persisted for a long time. It appears that second attempt in social mobility was made to gaining the new position for families with high social status – the first phase of the rite of horse burials, which was newly implemented in central Lithuania in the 7th–8th centuries, was relative to the said social mobility (Bertašius 2000). This may be related to some kind of posturing, when every family was seeking to display its high status in society.

The Migration period in Lithuanian archaeological literature is definable mostly as some territories with definite tribes having indications of ethnicity, or ethnic regions and tribal unions (Tautavičius 1996). For others it is an expression of warrior retinue, or sometimes it is interpreted (M. B.) as a community of equal families that have a strongly (firmly) expressed identity of man. In order to answer this question, we must state that weapons are tools *and* potential symbols of violence. They may have been put into the graves of armed smiths, hunters (hunting is connected with weapons), or weapons may have been symbols of real or potential violence, and in ritual projects they display an image of martial prowess and/or power – and they have been used as such throughout history (Härke 1997, 120). Thus the horizon of graves with weapons from the Migration period tells us nothing, or nearly nothing, about ethnicity or tribe.

It was only in the late Migration period and the early Viking Age that some traits (fig. 3) that are closely connected with ethnicity developed. That is a deliberate action – the selection of some rituals that build up the tradition. In central Lithuania there are very uniform (institutionally formed) cremations and very expressive horse offering rituals. From that time one can consider the use of expressions of eth-

nic identity.

At that time, horse graves become one of the distinctive markers of a warrior grave. By the early Viking age one can detect a well-developed retinue with formalized horse graves and a specific set of grave goods (Bertašius 2002, 220).

According to Frederick Barth (1969, 13), ethnicity is a way of organizing interaction between groups. By concentrating on what is socially effective, the ethnic groups are conceived as a form of social organization, and the primary emphasis is then given to the fact that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves (Olsen & Kobylinski 1991, 11). Thus, an important criterion distinguishing ethnic groups is the distinctness of ritualized behaviour. As every social formation, an ethnic group exists only to the extent that it exists in the consciousness of those who include themselves within, and those who exclude themselves from this group (Olsen & Kobylinski 1991, 12). In comparing archaeological material from the Migration period and Viking Age, it is possible to detect considerable differences relating to ethnic consciousness. From the Migration period, the situation in society determined as including/excluding could be characterized by highly individual expression (different burial rites, high variety in sets of burial items). The situation looks like the process of including/excluding happened between individual families very intensively (Bertašius 2000). But only in the Viking Age it could be considered about the process of including/excluding in the territorial level. There are known unified burial rites and very expressive horse offering rituals in central Lithuania from that period (Bertašius & Daugnora 2001). This is very closely connected with warriors' retinue, since burial grounds with horse graves as marks of prestige weaponry are located in accordance with some pattern – they create a regular network of strategic points (Bertašius

2002). It is then possible to consider how the including/excluding process encompasses the whole region of central Lithuania. Thus, following Richard Wenskus, we could emphasize the importance of territorialization as the basis of ethnic identity (Geary 1983, 17). Then the ethno-genetic process finds a new basis, and relations based on a personal rank and prestige were accordingly replaced by social groups that began to organize on the territorial level (Brachmann 1997, 32). At that time, the terminology of ethnicity was a military and not a cultural, legal, or linguistic designation (Geary 1983, 24). In the Viking Age in central Lithuania, the structure of hill-forts with warriors' retinues was established. The hillforts were regularly located near river valleys, and formed a network of administrative points (Bertašius 2002, 61). There are some places where artefactual evidence of traded goods has been found (the artefacts used as media of exchange were lost in the process of trading – hack-silver, coins, weights and other objects of trade, namely precious metals, decorated metalwork, weapons, cauldrons and others). In this case, strategic control of trade subordinated political control of the region. It seems likely that the early rudimentary Lithuanian state developed in central Lithuania.

It appears that the present day has influenced our opinion about the past. The lack of information, particularly in connection with intuition, compels us to search for prehistoric society through imitation or foresight, in that the intersection of past and present are unavoidable. I and we, here and beyond, person and group – the archaeologist investigating the graves and the world of the deceased is confronted with all of these concepts. The archaeological data are only a shade of prehistoric reality. The surviving evidence and past reality can never be identical, and therefore the archaeological material will al-

ways be fragmentary (Härke 1997, 22). We are studying only allusions to a past world – the world of ambitions, wishes, myths, and indefinable competition. Every society and every community makes its choice of certain indicators to define social or ethnic identity.

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MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE EAST BALTIC BRONZE AGE SOCIETY

Algimantas Merkevičius

The aim of this article is to try to reconstruct the basic features of the East Baltic Bronze Age society from the evidence provided by material remains. The article also raises the following questions: To what extent can we reconstruct the East Baltic Bronze Age society? Which particular data can one use? Theoretical and methodological aspects are also analysed. An attempt is made to find the "proper" terms to describe the society of the period under consideration. The conclusion is reached that changes indicating the emergence of inequality in personal status can be noticed in the material culture of the East Baltic area in as early as the 3rd millennium BC. The transition from a simple, egalitarian society to a non-egalitarian, complex society began. At the end of the Neolithic, a differentiated society, which can be called a "rank" society, was formed. At the beginning of the Bronze Age, bronze artefacts appear in the area, witnessing the existence of individuals with exceptional status, wealth and power. The population growth, economic development and increasing imports of metal artefacts, as well as the rise of local metal processing and other factors resulted in a further differentiation of the society. In approximately the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, or a little later, a hierarchical, stratified, partly centralised society developed as a result of internal developments and even more of external influences. This is witnessed by the appearance of especially rich burials in mounds and fortified settlements, which become the political, defensive, economic and religious centres of the area. It was then that the elite appeared to consist of community chiefs, semi-professional warriors, merchants trading metal artefacts and amber, as well as specialised metalwork craftsmen. Political and economic power became more and more concentrated in the hands of chiefs and the elite. Labour mobilisation becomes more evident, and dependency and interaction within the society increase. The centralisation of the society is growing. Economic growth triggers the relocation of fields away from the settlements. There are signs witnessing the appearance of tribute and taxation. A kin-based society consisted of three hierarchical layers: the "rulers" or chiefs and the elite, "community" members or farmers and stock-breeders, and "dependants".

Key words: material remains, East Baltic area, Bronze Age, society.

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to try to reconstruct the basic features of the East Baltic Bronze Age society from the evidence of material remains alone, as almost no other data is available. The article also raises the questions *To what extent can we reconstruct the East Baltic Bronze Age society? Which particular data should be used, and what methods are most appropriate for the reconstruction of East Baltic Bronze Age society? Which terms best characterise the East Baltic Bronze Age society and its social structures?*

The Bronze Age in the East Baltic area is a specific phenomenon compared to other European regions. There is no non-ferrous metal ore in the region, but large quantities of amber are deposited along the East Baltic coast. Another specific feature of the region is the rather limited use of bronze artefacts during the period under consideration.