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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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

During the last few decades, the reconstruction of societies, including Bronze Age societies, has been a very popular topic in Western archaeology. Numerous studies have been published in which different aspects of the society have been analysed (e.g. Bradley 1989, 11–20; Kristiansen 1989; Ehrenberg 1989; Hodder 1986; Earle 1997; Kristiansen & Rowlands 1998; Kristiansen 2000; Harding 2002).

The situation in Lithuania as regards the reconstruction of the East Baltic Bronze Age society is very poor. There are almost no archaeological studies on this topic. The few available articles are usually bare speculations without any argumentation or reference to archaeological material.

The situation in Latvia and especially in Estonia is completely different. As of the last decade, information about Bronze Age society in Estonia and Latvia can be found in a number of articles in which the reconstruction of the East Baltic Bronze Age society is based on archaeological data and solid interpretations (Ligi 1995, 264–265; Lang 1995, 180–181; 1996, 605–620; 2000, 317–319, 327–329, 347–351; 2002, 17–25, 163–168; Vasks 1994, 68–73, 121).

There are valuable studies of social organisation and other aspects of Bronze Age society in Scandinavia, which is especially important to the East Baltic area for many reasons, not just from the theoretical and methodological point of view (e.g. Bolin 1999; Larsson 1989; Kristiansen 1998a; 1998b; 1998c).

Social archaeology in Lithuania is still in an early stage; therefore this article is just a modest attempt to reconstruct the society of the East Baltic Bronze Age.

### Classifications of the societies, terminology and its definitions

During the last two centuries there have been various classifications of the socie-

ty, and different terms have been used to characterise societies at different levels of development. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, basically evolutionary models of the societies have been presented, starting from the least developed and simplest societies to very complex societies after the formation of the state. In the late 1950s and 1960s, a fourfold classification of societies was introduced (Feinman 1996). This classification was developed in “*Primitive Social Organization*” (1962) by American anthropologist Elman R. Service (see: Feinman 1996). According to this classification, the evolution of society underwent 4 basic stages: band, tribe, chiefdom and state. This classification of societies became widely, almost universally used, especially by Western archaeologists. Though this model of the development of society has recently often been criticised for its excessively broad range of variation (Milisauskas & Kruk 2002, 238; Kristiansen 2000, 44), it is still widely used. One can support the opinion that since the 1960s, the term “chiefdom” has been expanded to the point of meaninglessness (Milisauskas & Kruk 2002, 238). Some archaeologists believe that this model of societal development should remain the most general one. According to Kristian Kristiansen (2000, 44), “it remains a highly useful theoretical framework at a general level of explanation”. The model therefore continues to be followed, with an attempt to improve it, particularly with regard to chiefdom-type societies. This term is most often used to characterise the majority of Bronze Age societies in different European regions. Chiefdom-type societies are further classified and characterised. They are divided into various new types and stages. Andrejs Vasks (1994, 121) uses the term “low level chiefdom” to describe the Bronze Age societies of the Daugava region. Kristiansen and some other archaeologists divide chiefdom-type societies into *simple* and *complex* chiefdoms (Kristiansen 2000, 44),

some also use the term “highly stratified chiefdoms”, or group chiefdom-type societies into two types: *collective* and *individualising* (Kristiansen 1998b, 107; 1998c, 248). In some of his articles Kristiansen establishes three developmental phases of chiefdom-type societies: *an initial phase*, *an expansion phase*, and *a consolidation phase* (Kristiansen 1997, 29). Along with the new terms, new definitions are introduced. The chiefdom, according to Kristiansen “... should be seen as a tribal form of social organization. Economic and political processes are organized along lines of kinship (or kinship relations are defined along the lines of production and exchange). Control, embedded in kinship, has not yet transformed social groups into classes. Nevertheless, even within tribal structures hierarchy and exploitation may still be a major factor” (Kristiansen 2000, 48).

In the 1960’s, Morton Fried proposed an alternative evolutionary scheme – a fourfold classification of societies, namely egalitarian societies, rank societies, stratified societies and states (see: Shennan 1999, 871). This system of social evolution is as widely used as the former. Service’s “tribe” and “chiefdom” categories roughly correspond to Fried’s “rank society” and, to a lesser extent, the “stratified society” (*ibid.*). These two systems of societies are quite often blended together, and terms from both systems are used concurrently. Following the appearance of Fried’s system of social evolution, corrections of his model began. Kristiansen (1997, 18–19) suggests two variants of stratified societies: *decentralised stratified societies* and *centralised archaic states*. According to him, “... between chiefdoms and fully developed states, stratified societies were an archaic form of state organization...” (*ibid.*). This classification merges two systems of social evolution into one. Renewed and corrected definitions of the stratified society are presented. According to Kristiansen,

a decentralised stratified society as a general type can be described in the following manner. “Subsistence production is decentralized, with village communities or individual farms scattered across the landscape. Chiefs and kings set themselves apart from the agrarian substrate and rule through a retinue of warriors. Freed from kinship obligations, the warrior chiefs and kings control, undermine, and exploit the farming communities through tribute and taxation. Ownership of land is formalized, and a landless peasant class develops. Regional and local vassal chiefs provide warriors and ships for warfare” (Kristiansen 1997, 19).

Some archaeologists use one or another social evolution system. Anthony Harding (2002, 325) prefers to use the term *rank societies* instead of *chiefdom* when referring to the European Bronze Age. What does “rank” society mean? According to Stephen Shennan (1999, 875), “... we have to use it in a generalized way as simply indicating societies in which there are status and power differentials, but social stratification is not marked, and the state form of organization is not present”.

In addition to the above, the terms *simple* and *complex* societies (Kruk & Milisauskas 1999, 317–318) are also used. Valter Lang opposes the idea of Bronze Age chiefdoms in northern and western Estonia, and has defined the social economic structure of that period as *the system of a central settlement and individual farms* (Lang 1996, 620). Various other terms are also used to describe Neolithic and Bronze Age societies, such as *hierarchical*, *differentiated*, *complex-kin-organised*, *transegalitarian* and others.

Not all archaeologists, however, use the evolutionary systems of society. Ian Hodder (1986) has criticised the use of the term *chiefdom*, and suggests the abandonment of evolutionary typologies, as all typologies simplify diverse data.

In this article I use all the terms that in

my opinion are appropriate for the characterisation of particular aspects of societies under examination.

### Some theoretical positions

The present article employs certain theoretical considerations with a view to reconstructing past societies through material remains.

(1) "Archaeology explores ancient peoples and societies through material objects left behind by them" (Lang 2002, 17). But material objects do not speak for themselves. "To study ancient social organization, archaeologists had to frame the right questions, and devise the meanings to address them" (Feinman 1996, 659), because "material culture transforms, rather than reflects, social organization according to the strategies of groups, their beliefs, concepts and ideologies" (Hodder 1998, 24). Thus I accept the theory of the non-linear and indirect relation between material culture and society.

(2) In studying a society, we must remember Feinman's statement that "some of the most broadly relevant and stimulating questions that archaeologists examine are social" (Feinman 1996, 659), as well as Lang's question "...what exactly should one study to know what ancient society looked like?" (Lang 2002, 17). One can agree with his own answer, that "... one should study everything, from the smallest piece of an ornament to the largest hill-fort, and from a single stray find to a whole pattern of antiquities covering entire regions" (*ibid.*).

(3) Nevertheless, for the investigation and reconstruction of societies archaeologists must select particular groups of material objects which maintain the most extensive social information, and employ appropriate methods for the study of these objects. In any case, according to Lang (2002, 18), "the main problem here lies in the correct interpretation of the relevant archaeological material".

(4) One can agree with Thomas B. Larson's statement that economy, ideology and politics are aspects of society (Larson 1989, 26). "... Relationships between the political, the ideological and the economic were of a highly determinist nature" (Rowlands 1998, 51). The economy, ideology and society are very closely inter-related. Economic and ideological changes generate changes in the society and its social structure.

(5) Data from settlements and cemeteries serve as the main archaeological sources for the reconstruction of the structure of a society.

(6) Social relations in the East Baltic Bronze Age can also be revealed through the examination of artefacts. Artefacts had their meanings and active functions. The quality and quantity of artefacts reflect social differences. Or, as noted by Harding, "Particular artefacts might then play particular roles or have particular meanings, and these meanings might change depending on context" (Harding 2002, 326).

(7) In order to determine the characteristic features of the society, it is also necessary to analyse various society-related aspects, such as power, wealth, land ownership, control (over resources, wealth, long distance trade, people), domination, centre-periphery relations, the nature of tribute/taxation, labour mobilisation, settlement and other hierarchy, the organisation of production and distribution, the internal structure of the society, social strategies, military organisation, the specialisation of production and trade, prestige goods, demography, ecology and others.

(8) The development of societies is pre-conditioned by both internal and external factors. In the East Baltic region, the development of Bronze Age societies displays both continuity and innovation. The impact of external influences on the societies during the period under consideration is very significant.

(9) One can agree with the general evolutionary scheme of societal development used in processual archaeology – from band to tribe, chiefdom and state, or egalitarian society, rank society, stratified society, and state (Shennan 1999, 871), but this scheme is insufficient for the description of societies of a particular region and period. Various aspects of social development must be stipulated. Various specific terms should be used to characterise individual societies.

(10) The role of the individual in the society should not be overlooked, and this is especially emphasised by postprocessual archaeology (Johnson 2001, 104–105). Every single archaeological object is created by an individual or group of individuals rather than by the social system (Hodder, 1986). Single individuals, political and religious leaders in the society, as well as other charismatic, ambitious and talented individuals played an important role in the society (Milisauskas & Kruk 2002, 239–241). They can significantly modify certain "objective" processes that take place in the society.

(11) Not all of the processes that occurred in the society were "materialised". Some aspects of the society cannot be established on the basis of the evidence of material remains alone. Reconstruction of a past society is always subjective and depends on our theoretical approaches and research methodologies.

### Causes of social development in the Bronze Age

Societies develop and change for various reasons and as a result of different factors, including economic, social, ideological, ecological and others. Changes in a society are determined by internal developments and external influences. "A society can only continue to exist if it is internally and externally well adjusted" (Hodder

1998, 93). Unadjusted societies degenerate and break down.

Changes in the society in question were related to economic development, which was conditioned by the appearance of new technologies as well as the advent and increasing use of new types of artefacts, especially artefacts made of bronze. As a result of economic and social implications, the significance of farming and stock-breeding increased. Societal changes are also closely related to population growth and the construction of new settlements. New and more extensive territories were assimilated and used to satisfy economic needs. The size of arable land and pastures was also growing.

Economic and demographic changes are linked to alterations of ideology, religion, rituals and the political system. All of this leads to changes in the society. According to Michael Rowlands (1998, 51), the relationship between the political, the ideological and the economic were of a highly determinist nature.

The development of society in the East Baltic region displays a further internal development which was considerably conditioned by external factors. Changes in the society were forced by growing inter-regional exchange, as a result of which metal artefacts appeared and became increasingly common as very important symbols of the social status of some individuals. The society was changing, and its complexity grew also due to the intensifying specialisation of production (the rise of high-ranking specialised tradesmen and craftsmen), the concentration of wealth and power, property and political differentiation, the interaction and increasing dependency of certain groups of individuals, the construction of fortified settlements and barrow mounds, the need to protect property and increasing conflicts, as well as the growing importance of warfare.

The development of farming and stock-

breeding, the increase of population as well as the appearance and spread of metal artefacts were the main causes behind changes in the society. Kristiansen underscores the significance of the emergence of metal for the development of societies in the Scandinavian region. According to him, a new metallurgic tradition gradually developed into a highly stratified chiefdom in certain nodal areas, based on the control of production and exchange in metalwork (Kristiansen 1998b, 107). He also notes the significance of those regions from which metal artefacts were imported. The driving force in this development, according to Kristiansen, was the Únětice culture (*ibid*). In the East Baltic region, as in Scandinavia, the society was highly affected by the emergence of metalwork and also by influences from Central Europe, from whence most metal artefacts were imported, and from whence new different information, ideas, habits and technologies came. In addition to the Únětice Culture, a huge influence was exerted on the East Baltic society of the late Bronze Age by the Scandinavian societies, and particularly by the Central European Tumulus culture.

### East Baltic society

#### *Transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age*

According to various archaeological data, Mesolithic European societies were simple egalitarian. *What made the European societies change, and when?* The main changes took place in the Neolithic period. These changes are associated with the development of farming and stock-breeding, and the appearance of metalwork, as well as changes in ideology and religion (Milisauskas & Kruk 2002). Though the Neolithic period in western and central Europe, as Shennan claims, was based on

hoe cultivation, it was egalitarian in the area of social relations, and ritually defined in communal relations and ideology (Shennan 1982a, b). Such a general characterisation of the Neolithic in central and western Europe in general corresponds to the situation in the East Baltic area. But even in the Middle Neolithic, as was noted by Sarunas Milisauskas and Janusz Kruk in a recent study (2002, 238–239), various archaeologically observable changes point to increases in social and political complexity in some parts of Europe. Larsson, with reference to some British archaeologists, claims that "... the egalitarian structure seems to undergo a radical change during the third millennium BC, when certain areas of Europe move towards more hierarchical forms of organization – this is visible in the archaeological record, especially during the Early Bronze Age" (Larsson 1989, 35–36).

The East Baltic region, however, differs from other European regions, and we cannot automatically transfer and apply the model of other regions to the area under consideration. *What, then, was the situation in the East Baltic region?*

According to Rimutė Rimantienė, changes in the society in what is today Lithuania are observable in as early as the Middle Neolithic. Exchange with other regions located northwards and southwards began. Such exchange, as pointed out by Rimantienė, covered luxury items, and in particular ornaments, which were not essential for these communities. Such exchange demonstrates that a tier of individuals emerged in the society who needed prestigious foreign articles (Rimantienė 1995, 101). Residents of the East Baltic regions offered amber artefacts and raw material for exchange. Amber workshops in the East Baltic region were being established from the end of the Middle Neolithic and especially in the Late Neolithic. The majority of these were located in the coastal area, in the settlements of Šventoji

and other Lithuanian and Latvian coastal settlements. As the demand for amber grew, the establishment of amber workshops in the East Baltic area began even in settlements that were far from the sea. They were found in settlements in eastern Latvia, at Lubāna Lake and elsewhere (Rimantienė 1995, 102). The East Baltic peoples exchanged amber for artefacts of greenish and blackish slate found in the northern part of the East Baltic region, including axes, gouges, spearheads and even ornaments (Rimantienė 1995, 101).

The first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC witnessed a further novelty that was especially important for economic development, i.e. the ard. Three ards were found in settlement 6 at Šventoji. According to Rimantienė (1995, 81–82) they were pulled by men. A fragment of a further ard pulled by oxen, was found in settlement 4A at Šventoji (Rimantienė 1995, 83). Thus, arable farming in the East Baltic region, which was especially important for economic growth, began in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. The beginning of arable farming, the increasing importance of farming and stock-breeding, the growing number of settlements and their population, interregional exchange, including the exchange of prestigious articles, the emergence of large settlements with specialised amber workshops, the local manufacturing of prestige items (some of which were imitations of metalwork), demonstrate enormous economic and social changes.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC a new burial practice, i.e. burial in barrows, began in the south-eastern Baltic region (Kaup and other barrows on the Sambian peninsula) (Gimbutienė 1985, 46–48). Only high status persons were buried in barrows. The emergence of barrows is believed to display religious changes and the appearance of high status individuals, all of which institutionalised leadership. Economic growth and ideological transformations

changed the society. All of this shows that the social and economic development of the society had reached a sufficient level and led to disintegration of the simple, egalitarian society. Formation of a non-egalitarian, complex, differentiated, rank-ordered society began. The differentiation of the society was further stimulated by the appearance of the first copper and bronze metalwork at the very end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.

#### *The Bronze Age*

In one of his articles Kristiansen (1998b, 106) raised an important question: *Why was bronze adopted, especially in areas without copper and tin? Was it primary for social or economic reasons?* The answer to this question can be found through the analysis of the first imported bronze articles. At the beginning of the Bronze Age, metal articles were scarce; therefore they could not be very important from the economic point of view. In addition, apart from axes, only ornaments and prestige weapons such as halberds were imported (Gimbutienė 1985, 56–63; Merkevičius 1994, 2–3), which leads to the incontrovertible conclusion that the first bronze artefacts were imported to the East Baltic region for social rather than economic reasons. Such imported artefacts indicate increasing inequality and the existence of individuals with a very high status, which are very distinctive within the society in the East Baltic area at the beginning of the Bronze Age.

I selected some groups of material objects for the reconstruction of the Bronze Age society in the East Baltic area, in order to reveal the level of the society, its tendency towards alteration and the social structure, namely the data about settlement sites, burials and artefacts.

### Settlement sites

Settlement data are extensively used for the reconstruction of societies (e.g. Lang 2002, 17–25; Milisauskas & Kruk 2002, 239). This article will not touch upon the distribution of settlements. It will discuss the emergence and different types of settlements, as well as the formation of settlement hierarchy.

More extensive studies of Early Bronze Age settlements are relatively scarce. Judging from the available data, they were small, comprising a few little houses for families. One nuclear family is supposed to have consisted of 4–5 persons (Lang, 1996, 619). All of the settlements represented one major type, i.e. unfortified settlements. Nevertheless, the Early Bronze Age and especially its second half seem to have been the *initial phase* in the emergence of fortified settlements (Merkevičius, in press). With reference to the above, however, we can assume that settlements displayed only one administrative level. Though the settlements represented one major type, they were not, however, of equal value. Unfortified settlements differed in terms of size, as well as in the quantity and quality of retrieved finds and location. Some settlements were built in locations well “protected” by nature, on hillocks, at the confluence of rivers, etc. On the basis of these data, we can claim that settlements already had a different significance in the Early Bronze Age, and especially in its second half. There were two main levels of settlements, i.e. small ones, with “ordinary” finds, representing small poor communities and larger ones, with imported artefacts and amber workshops, housing richer communities. It is difficult to assess to what extent the smaller communities were “subjugated” by the larger communities and their chiefs, though a certain dependency was most likely already present. It is quite probable that richer communities displayed a certain communal level,

while the poorer ones were of local level.

In the beginning of the Late Bronze age, fortified settlements were already used in the East Baltic region along with unfortified ones (Lang 2002, 23; Vasks 1994, 120–121; Grigalavičienė 1995, 22–40). In addition, there were palafitic settlements constructed on water. In recent years such settlements have been investigated in eastern Lithuania, on Luokesai Lake. Several palafitic settlements dating from the Late Bronze Age were found on this lake (Baubonis et al. 2002a; 2002b). Thus, from the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, i.e. the last quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, settlements of different types and significance appear, which doubtless reveals the existence of settlement hierarchy. The hierarchy has at least two, or even three levels of permanently occupied sites, which may represent at least two, or even three organisations on the decision-making level: local, communal and regional. The hierarchical structure of settlements shows the existence of a hierarchical society. Fortified settlements in the East Baltic region, as well as in other regions, were multi-functional central places of power and wealth for the entire region, and had special functions: political-administrative, defence-related, economic (production and trade) and religious. According to Lang (2000, 319), fortification is a distinctive feature of centres of social, economic and political power, and I would also add religious power. Artefacts indicating bronze casting and trade were only found in fortified settlements (Grigalavičienė 1995, 102–107). Fortified settlements were inhabited by the chief of the region, his family and maybe his kinsfolk, as well as people who were subordinate to or dependent on him in one way or another. The use of unfortified settlements, villages or hamlets continued. Unfortified settlements were smaller and poorer. During excavations, not a single one of these revealed traces of bronze processing. Different levels of set-

tlement indicate a certain subordination of the societies. It also indicates the presence of a certain centralisation. Some of the fortified settlements were established close to important rivers and controlled trade routes. According to Lang (2002, 23), fortified settlements in the East Baltic area were established in places with good transport routes. As a matter of fact, all of the fortified settlements had control over a certain territory with a number of unfortified settlements. During this period the situation in many other European regions was very much the same (Kristiansen 2000, 111). As mentioned above, Lang refers to this socio-economic structure as “the system of a central settlement and individual farms” (Lang 1996, 620).

### Burials

Ancient, especially monumental, graves primarily reflect the ideology and social strategies of certain social groups (Lang, this volume). Analyses of grave types, constructions and grave goods help to define certain social groups of people of the period, to reconstruct the social status of individuals and sometimes even to establish their occupation. The burial sites of the East Baltic region can be divided into two types, i.e. cemeteries with pit graves and above-ground barrows. In the region under consideration, barrows appeared in the Late Neolithic (Gimbutienė 1985, 46–56). During this period they were still scarce, while their arrangement and burial items attest to the high status of the buried individuals. Only a few barrows in the region are known from the beginning of the Bronze Age.

From the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC and later, the number of barrows in the East Baltic region increased significantly due to the influence of the Central European Tumulus culture. They were different in terms of size, the complexity of the grave structures, the number of

stones circles, the furnishing of the graves, the burial items, etc. Some of the burials were arranged on a stone paving in the centre of the barrow. The dead individuals were placed in wooden coffins. There is no doubt that individuals buried in barrows were regional chiefs or representatives of the elite. The types of barrows, the arrangement of the graves and the analysis of burial items makes it possible to distinguish at least two groups of individuals buried in barrows, i.e. graves of regional/tribal chiefs and graves of the broader elite. The few exceptionally rich burials are attributable to chiefs of the region. Such a burial was found in the huge Rantau barrow (Sambian peninsula). It revealed a male buried in the centre of the barrow, deposited in a log coffin placed on a stone paving, furnished with a bronze sword, amber and faience beads, a double-edged Nortican type axe, a bronze bracelet and a pin (Gimbutienė 1985, 69–71). This burial definitely belongs to a regional level chief. The burial items imply that he was both a military chief and a religious leader with enormous wealth and power. Some burials in barrows were not as rich but nevertheless revealed numerous metalwork items, e.g. the Šlažiai barrows in western Lithuania (Grigalavičienė 1995, 64–65). Here dead individuals were found buried with diverse bronze burial items, particularly ornaments. The size of the barrows was also impressive, ranging from 2 to 4 m, but the arrangement of the graves and especially the burial items attest to the lower rank of the buried individuals. There is no doubt that representatives of the elite, mostly females, were buried here. The growing number of barrows and the burials of rich individuals of different rank in barrows manifest the formation of the layer of “rulers”, i.e. tribal/regional chiefs and the elite, in the middle and second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

Most members of the society, farmers and stock-breeders who did not have ex-

ceptional riches and power, were buried in burials much less monumental than barrows, i.e. cemeteries. Their graves were not as elaborately arranged, while the burial items are much more modest and even non-metal.

Thus on the basis of burial types, at least two or three hierarchical layers of the society can be identified, i.e. the "ruling" layer, comprising chiefs and the elite, and the communal, comprising farmers and stock-breeders. People buried in the cemeteries, or even in the settlements without burial goods, or with a very few non-metal items, may belong to the category of "dependants".

After the introduction of cremation practices in the region, not very many burial items were found. Nevertheless, the differences in burial types and even the limited burial items remain. In addition, the quality of the urns, the arrangement of graves and other features are also different.

### Artefacts

The quality and quantity of artefacts reflect social differences. Artefacts had their meanings and active functions. Artefacts can be assessed not only in the light of quantity and quality, but also on the basis of their value, origin, function, accessibility and other features.

The analysis of finds from the social point of view must have a specific methodology. In this aspect, the specifics of the East Baltic Bronze Age lies in the fact that bronze finds are relatively rare. In the course of the whole period, stone and bone artefacts prevail. Nevertheless, the situation in some micro-regions is conspicuously different. Thus, bronze artefacts in the region under consideration were rare, truly valuable and intended only for exceptional individuals. I would classify all the finds into items of bronze, amber and other materials, such as flint, stone, bone, antler, clay, etc. Bronze artefacts can be di-

vided into imported and local ones, and both groups can further be divided into prestige and "simple" articles. Artefacts made of flint, stone, bone and other materials can be divided into two groups, i.e. "copies" of metal articles and simple articles made from the above-mentioned materials. I believe that this classification of artefacts to some extent reflects certain social groups of the East Baltic Bronze Age society. *What do these classifications imply?*

(1) The first group comprises individuals who used imported and local prestige artefacts of bronze, and sometimes imported, simpler articles. What articles were these? Early Bronze Age halberds, swords, faience and amber beads, double-edged Nortican type axes, daggers and some types of imported ornaments, etc. Finds of these artefacts are very scarce. In cases when they were found in graves, these were very rich and exclusively arranged barrow burials. The holders of these artefacts were conspicuously outstanding members of the society. They may have been regional/tribal chiefs.

(2) The second group comprises individuals who used bronze artefacts which were much simpler and "cheaper", and which were most often manufactured locally. These were simple flanged or socketed axes, spears, ornaments, etc. The holders of these articles can be identified as the elite of the society. They include communal chiefs, semi-professional warriors, wealthy craftsmen engaged in metalwork processing or merchants in metal artefacts or amber.

(3) The third group comprises individuals employing artefacts which were "copies" of metalwork, made of flint, stone or bone. As they were not wealthy enough, and/or did not have the befitting status that enabled them to use metal artefacts, they chose to use articles imitating metalwork. It seems, however, that they did have a certain "right" to use artefacts re-

sembling the metalwork used by the elite. This means that they had a certain special status which was higher than that of the ordinary members of the society, but one rank lower than the elite. Quite a lot of such non-metallic imitations of metal artefacts have been found. They mainly include ornaments, especially pins, and also weapons, although working tools have also been found. This group of artefacts may have been used by a special group of society, perhaps chiefs of small impoverished communities, or wealthy community members, some farmers/stock-breeders, warriors, craftsmen and merchants.

(4) The fourth and largest group of artefacts includes simple flint, stone and bone artefacts. These finds are most common. They doubtless belonged to most members of the community engaged in farming, stock-breeding, hunting, fishing, gathering and the manufacturing of "simple" articles. They may also have been used by individuals from the third rank of "dependants".

### Structure of the East Baltic Bronze Age society

According to Hans Bolin, Bronze Age "society" should be understood as a group of "families" or lineage groups sporadically or continually acting together very closely, occupying a territory and simultaneously producing/reproducing a common social structure (Bolin 1999, 43). This definition of society is somewhat applicable to the East Baltic Bronze Age society.

"Societies can be differentiated vertically, in terms of hierarchical levels, and also horizontally, in terms of the division of labour" (Shennan 1999, 871). In the East Baltic region, Bronze Age societies were based on kinship. According to the archaeological data, which mostly come from settlements, the small nuclear family consisted of 4-5 members (Lang 1996,

619; Vasks 1994, 120). A group of kindred families comprised a community, and a few communities comprised a tribe, the chiefs of which had control over a certain territory, including settlements, burial grounds (cemeteries), forests, rivers/lakes, fields, ritual places, etc.

In as early as the beginning of the Bronze Age, society was non-egalitarian, complex and ranked. As witnessed by the archaeological data, the society already had exceptional individuals, or chiefs, and an arising elite. The majority of people, i.e. the ordinary members of the society, engaged in farming, stock-breeding and hunting/gathering. Hierarchical layers, however, had not yet developed.

Hierarchical layers in the society arose in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, following the appearance of fortified settlements, burials of chiefs and the elite in barrows, and the increase of imported prestige artefacts as well as the growing local manufacture of bronze and prestige articles.

One can agree with Lang's statement that in the Late Bronze Age, "... the social structure had three hierarchic layers: the chief or king with his/her lineage at the top, free farmers in the middle and dependants at the bottom" (Lang 1996, 620). One could call the first hierarchical layer the "ruling", or chief and elite families' layer, the second layer of the society - the communal, or farmers/stock-breeders' layer, and the third - the dependants' layer". Each layer consists of sub-layers.

The "ruling" layer consisted of several sub-layers. The society was headed by the chief of the region/tribe. He lived in a fortified settlement with his family. His burial was exclusive, arranged in a huge Rantau-type barrow, furnished with abundant metalwork burial items, both imported and prestigious local ones. He was most likely not only a political and military, but also a religious leader who to a certain extent controlled economic activities in the

region (interregional exchange of metal artefacts and amber as well as the processing of metal. He had a platoon of semi-professional warriors with whose help he secured control of the ordinary members of the society – farmers and stock-breeders. One rank lower was the tribal elite, consisting of communal chiefs, semi-professional warriors, traders of metalwork, amber and other artefacts, as well as craftsmen who specialised in metal articles.

The second and most numerous communal layer included farmers and stock-breeders. They were more or less wealthy. For most farmers and stock-breeders, hunting, gathering or fishing was not less important.

The last category comprised dependants. These were impoverished, degraded individuals who had no or almost no property, war prisoners, personal servants, and the like.

### Conclusions

In the Late Neolithic, i.e. the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, the material remains of the East Baltic region display changes indicating the emergence of inequality in personal status. The transition from a simple, egalitarian society to non-egalitarian, complex societies began. At the end of the Neolithic, a differentiated complex society, which can be called a rank-based society, was formed. High-status individuals, who used exclusive imported and expensive local personal items corresponding to their high status (especially weapons and ornaments), stand out in the society. They were buried in exclusive burials, i.e. barrows. These outstanding individuals controlled the sources of raw material (amber), extraction, production and trade. They took part in inter-regional exchange. They must have been the political, military and religious leaders of the society, who also had

a certain control over the economy.

In the beginning of the Bronze Age, i.e. in the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, imported bronze artefacts, including axes, daggers, halberds and other especially expensive and prestigious articles appeared in the East Baltic region. Single barrows with rich burial items arose. This shows that some members of the society had become very wealthy and acquired an exceptionally high status and power prior to the appearance of metal artefacts. It was more from social than economic causes that metal artefacts appeared in the region.

The emergence of metalwork in the region considerably accelerated differentiation within the society. This differentiation increased even further due to trade in metal artefacts, the manufacturing of metal articles and economic growth.

The second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC witnessed the appearance of fortified settlements – regional centres and very rich burials, attesting to the presence of regional/tribal chiefs. The trade in metal artefacts and amber grew, as did the manufacturing of local metal artefacts, including prestige items. Due to the influence of the central European Tumulus Culture, economic growth, communal differentiation and the increase and concentration of wealth and power, the sub-layer of the elite was formed. This comprised communal chiefs, semi-professional warriors, metal and amber merchants and craftsmen specialised in metalwork. Regional chiefs partly controlled quite a large territory and members of the society from fortified settlements – tribal/regional centres where the trade and manufacturing of metal artefacts was concentrated. A hierarchic, low-level centralised and stratified society was formed. It had three major layers: the “rulers” (chiefs and the elite), “communal” members (farmers and stock-breeders) and “dependants”.

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## Understanding Power: On the Study of Late Prehistoric Social and Political Structures in Latvia

Andris Šnē

Although there is a long history of social reconstructions of past societies, including Marxist interpretations, more extensive archaeological research on social questions began with the rise of new or processual archaeology in the 1960s–1970s. Until recently, social archaeology was on the margins of archaeological research in Latvia. Prehistoric societies were usually described by applying general assumptions concerning the power of princes and kings, early feudalism, state-like formations, etc. The article offers a brief overview of the development of ideas about the social organisation of Late Iron Age societies in present-day Latvia, stressing the similarities that exist in spite of the different political contexts. The social and political structures of late prehistoric societies are examined on the basis of evidence from material culture, challenging the idea of statehood in the pre-Crusade centuries in eastern Latvia, emphasising egalitarianism, with only occasional attempts at centralisation of power within the framework of chiefdom organisation.

*Key words*: social archaeology, power, Latvia, Late Iron Age, historiography.

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### Archaeological studies of past societies: the varieties of social archaeology

Already more than 30 years have passed since David Clarke (1973) announced, in a very influential article, “the loss of innocence” of archaeology. And despite the still widely retained image of archaeology as a science of digging, today archaeology has become more complex (some have even labelled it a megascience; see Bogucki 1999), so that archaeological excavation is no longer regarded as the only or favoured part of archaeological research. A very important new development in archaeology during recent decades has been the increasing role of interpretations of and reflections on material culture, based both on scientific methods and approaches developed from humanitarian and social theory.

Although there is a long history of so-

cial reconstructions of past societies, the thorough archaeological investigation of questions such as social organisation, social status, etc., with extensive use of exchange models, settlement patterns and burial analyses, for example, began in Europe, and especially in America, with the rise of New or processual archaeology in the 1960s–1970s. Some decades later, in the late 1980s and 1990s, the processual approach was discussed by the advocates of post-processual archaeology, who, under the influence of contemporary social theory, included questions of agency, social action, ideology, gender and also power in the archaeological agenda of Western archaeology. It should, however, be noted that due to the development of the Marxist approach since the 1930s in the Soviet Union and later also in Eastern Europe, archaeological studies approached the interpretation of changes in societies and material culture using the socio-eco-