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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-

nomic criteria of Marxism. Therefore this Marxist but dogmatic archaeology might be considered the first explicit application of social methodology in archaeology, although the understandings of society and power were developed within the framework of this particular ideology. Thus, since the 1960s–1970s, three main traditions of archaeological research can be distinguished in Europe, which apply different approaches to the study of past societies: Anglo-American and Western European (partly overlapping with processual and post-processual archaeologies), Central and Southern European (which retain the cultural-historical approach that originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) and Eastern European (including Soviet Marxist and post-Soviet archaeologies).

The influence of processual archaeology on later studies of social questions (including those rejecting this approach) cannot be overestimated. Much criticism was subsequently directed at this approach, but nevertheless it was the first time in archaeology when particular attention was paid to issues relating to social developments, and much of the methodology and terminology developed within this framework may still be, and indeed is, used in contemporary European archaeologies. Processual archaeology was very anthropological (Lewis Binford, probably the most active proponent of New Archaeology, stated that archaeology should be treated as anthropology; see Binford 1962) and explicitly evolutionary. Very detailed, albeit static and generalised, schemes and models of social development towards the state were elaborated. Among the most common models, widely used in archaeology, was that of American anthropologist Elman Service (1962; 1975), formulated in the 1960s and 1970s, which distinguishes four stages in social evolution – the group or band (characteristic of hunter-gatherers living in small-scale mobile societies and not possessing governmental fea-

tures, so the groups are not integrated into any larger political organisation); the tribe (emerging along with the establishment of a food-producing society, containing a larger number of members of local societies, with permanent and politically autonomous settlements as the basis of the settlement pattern, and with personal, not formal rulership); chiefdoms (settlements lose their autonomy and are integrated into a larger political system with a hierarchical and formalised organisation ruled by chiefs with real power and authority) and early states (due to the institutionalisation of power, centralisation of power and hierarchisation developed). In this as well as in other evolutionary models (for example, Fried 1967; Friedman & Rowlands 1977; Gibson & Geselowitz 1988; Johnson & Earle 1987; Sanders & Webster 1978), the trajectories of the development of societies were viewed in the light of progress due to gradual transformations from simple to more complex forms of social organisation.

Criticism of evolutionary thought attracted increasing attention in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, partly also reviving the ideas of American anthropologist Franz Boas, expressed in the early part of the century, on the importance of cultural relativism and historical particularism. Thus, considering social evolution as a myth, Anthony Giddens stressed that human history cannot be viewed as evolution (Giddens 1999). The criticism of social evolution was directed towards the decreased role of particular historical development, which in evolutionary schemes had been replaced by general criteria, the ignoring of diffusionism and the role of individuals and historical coincidences. Thus, instead of cross-cultural generalisations and similarities, this approach stressed the specific features and unique character of cultures. Also, a turn towards social theory (mainly to the cultural studies of Michel Foucault, particu-

larly Foucault 1977; 1980) led to the rise of questions concerning power as the central theme in social analyses. Alongside the topicality of power, new perspectives on the archaeological understanding of past societies and the interpretation of material culture were opened up through various sociological and anthropological approaches, such as the structuration theory and agency of Giddens, the interpretation of social status and authority put forward by Max Weber, gender theories, the collective and individual action and habitus construct of Pierre Bourdieu, etc. These new theories and methods in post-processual archaeology were mainly applied in studies of the Neolithic (see, for example, Barrett 1994; Hodder 1990; Thomas 1991; 1996) while, for example, the Marxist and Structural-Marxist approach dominated analyses of the Bronze Age archaeological evidence (see, for example, Kristiansen 1998; Sherratt 1993), and discussions on Iron Age and medieval archaeology only rarely involved theoretical standpoints (but see Hedeager 1992). Thus not all archaeological periods have attracted equal attention from the theoretically orientated archaeologists, but contemporary archaeology is nevertheless enriched by these new humanitarian perspectives and by the retention of the achievements of processual positivism and evolutionism, including a large variety of approaches and theoretical tools that have also changed our view of the social organisation of past societies. Such a synthesis of different approaches might be used and is very welcome in discussions of the material culture of different ages, since today we have some time distance that permits us to recognise and avoid the various shortcomings of what were previously opposing points of view.

Besides theoretical and critical thinking, however, contemporary archaeology needs material culture to raise discussions on prehistoric, medieval or post-medieval topics (and material culture is in an

indirect way also involved in the historiographic discussion of the development of archaeological thought, so there is no way of doing without material culture). Like other studies, discussions of topics relating to social organisation, status, power, gender, central sites, etc., might be developed on the basis of a wide range of archaeological evidence, obtained preferably from well-surveyed types of archaeological sites or from extensively researched (excavated) sites. In actual fact, it is the burial grounds and living sites and structures, and the artefacts recovered from them, that are the basic source material for social studies in archaeology (in discussions of some social questions, other types of archaeological sites are also very important, such as field systems, cult sites, hoards and deposits, fortifications, etc.). Thus living sites are a valuable source for calculating the number of local communities, the dynamics of demographic processes, the reconstruction of the organisation of the settlement pattern and social space, and the distinction of central sites/areas. Cemeteries represent a very widely used source in social archaeology, despite the many unsolvable questions relating to their origins, representativity and structuration. However, that section of evidence uncovered in cemeteries (including the organisation of the cemetery, the location of burials and grave goods) is important enough to be used in studying both horizontal and vertical social relationships in particular communities. Thus it is only the interpretative combination of all types of evidence that permits a more complete (although never total) picture of the structure of past communities and the actions of past individuals.

### **Social and political structures of Late Iron Age societies in the territory of present-day Latvia: a historiographic background**

The last centuries of prehistory in what is today Latvia (from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, corresponding to the Late Iron Age in Latvian archaeological periodisation) may undoubtedly be considered the best-researched period of Latvian prehistory in archaeological terms, due to the number of extensive archaeological excavations. It is especially eastern Latvia (the present-day regions of Vidzeme, Latgale and Augšzeme, which in later prehistory were mostly inhabited by certain ethnic groups, the Latgallians, Selonians and Livs, associated with areas of particular material culture on the basis of later written records) that has been more extensively surveyed and investigated, and the archaeological sites here have been excavated on a larger scale than in other regions. Thus the evidence of material culture obtained from these centuries provides major opportunities for attempts at interpreting social dynamics. However, material culture has its limits too, since it does not contain information about verbal communication. Thus an individual with material culture of supposedly low social rank may in reality belong to the upper stratum of society.

Up to the present day, the constitution of societies, political structures and power relations in later prehistory cannot be included among the widely analysed and discussed topics in Latvian archaeology. Rather, the opposite is true: the study of these questions was until recently neglected, and answers to questions concerning social and political structures were replaced with general assumptions or clichés (for a survey of social archaeology in Latvia, see Šnē 1999). Accordingly, certain stereotypes may still be found as

relics of previous research in contemporary studies. Among the most common and at the same time also very stable assumptions is the idea of the presence of a stratified society and state organisation in the present territory of Latvia, mainly in eastern Latvia, in the last centuries of the Late Iron Age, and therefore in this article attention will be focussed on this region. The origins of this presupposition go back to the research tradition of the cultural-historical approach, which played a very important role in the emergence and formation of Latvian archaeology.

The development of Latvian archaeology reflected the tendencies of the cultural-historical approach ever since the emergence of archaeology in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to this, primary attention was paid to artefactual studies and problems of ethnic history. In fact, the first scientific discussion in the 1840s–1850s among certain Baltic German archaeologists and historians concerning the burials found in Aizkraukle cemetery involved the ethnic affiliation of these burials: whether they were Varangians or local people – the Livs (Bähr 1850; Kruse 1842). Working within the framework of cultural-historical archaeology, the Baltic German archaeologists of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did not deal much with social interpretations, so generally the Baltic German researchers can rather be regarded as antiquarians. Partly similarly, partly differently, but still within the same tradition, the first Latvian historians and archaeologists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and later also those of the first Republic of Latvia retained a very idealistic view of the pre-Crusade societies, emphasizing their high level of development.

As the consequence of the political changes in 1918 resulted in the establishment of an independent state, the necessity of re-writing the history of Latvia was

recognised. This re-writing was done in a national vein, but little can be revealed about social questions relating to prehistoric societies. Thus, for example, in the first general overview of Latvian archaeology published in 1926 under the editorship of Francis Balodis, we find no characterisation of prehistoric societies. Only describing the culture of the Late Iron Age, Balodis outlines some general features of these societies, stressing their democratic organisation. Thus, in his view, every Latvian was a freeman, and all the people were equal both in terms of wealth and social rank. They were governed by wise rulers, an aristocracy called the *labieši*, who owned larger fields and castles and exercised power; these were also the leaders of military retinues (Balodis 1926, 80–81). Concerning the political structures of late prehistoric societies, dominant in this and other publications of the interwar period (i.e. the 1920s and 1930s) was the view that state organisation had existed. Certain more detailed attempts to reconstruct the social and political organisation of societies in prehistoric Latvia were made by the distinguished Latvian historian Arveds Švābe in the 1920s–1930s, but these were based on evidence from folklore and medieval written sources (Švābe 1921; 1956). Švābe, like Balodis, followed the intellectual atmosphere of those years in recognising the existence of states in Latgallian societies, with inherited power held by a ruler/king. They distinguished Jersika as the main state, while two other formations, Koknese and Tālava, were considered to be some kind of buffer states formed by the King of Jersika with the support of the princes of the Russian principality Polotsk (Balodis 1936; Švābe 1936).

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to political changes and the Soviet occupation, the explanation of the development of prehistoric societies was set within a dogmatic Marxist framework. Thus in Latvian archaeology Marxist archaeology was the

first social archaeology, since prehistoric transformations were now explicitly connected with the relations between production and social questions. It was a study by the famous Estonian archaeologist Harri Moora (1952) on primitive and early medieval society in Latvia that became the cornerstone of Soviet Latvian archaeological theory and interpretations. The study by Moora actually represents the first application of the Marxist approach in Latvian archaeology and prehistory, arranging the archaeological evidence according to the different stages of social development. Thus, the Mesolithic and Neolithic was the period of the matriarchal kin community; the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age saw the transition to the patriarchal kin community; the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age represented a patriarchal kin society; the Early Iron Age saw the disintegration of the kin community and the formation of a territorial community; the Middle Iron Age is characterised by the transition to a class society; and the Late Iron Age saw the emergence of feudal relationships. This scheme of prehistoric socio-economic and political development elaborated by Moora became the dogma and axiom in archaeology, repeated in every scientific monograph, as well as in general overviews of Latvian history. Unfortunately, we must recognise that the influence of this fossil scheme can still be felt in contemporary Latvian archaeology (see, for example, Mugurēvičs & Vasks 2001).

The Marxist methodology of the study of social organisation (like the scheme of Moora, later likewise very often repeated) originated in the social analysis of Nukšas cemetery by Elvira Šnore (Šnore 1957, 40–47). Šnore, in her research on this Late Iron Age Latgallian cemetery, made an attempt to reconstruct the social structure of society on the basis of the uncovered graves. Four social groups were distinguished, which were retrospectively con-

nected with different social strata and positions mentioned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Heinrici Chronicon*. The first category consisted of elders of villages and lands, reflected in male burials with rich grave goods, including decorated coats and headdresses, a large number of weapons (a sword, 1–2 spears, an axe), armbands, fibulae and finger-rings. The second category consisted of male burials with expressly military grave goods, who were accordingly regarded as members of retinues and/or noblemen, their political status being very close to that of the elders. The largest was the third group of burials, those of the free peasants of the territorial community. They were provided with a less rich grave inventory, consisting simply of an axe, a knife, a penannular brooch and sometimes also a spear, an armband and/or a ring. It was considered that these people participated in popular assemblies, bore arms and formed a people's army. The last group represented servants, generally buried only with a knife. These were unfree people like slaves. The social model of late prehistoric society was based on 218 burials from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century excavated in the cemetery. As a matter of fact, there were only 20 burials from the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century, 84 burials from the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century, 81 graves were dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century and only six burials represented the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century. Thus the model was created on the basis of the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century burials, not taking into account the chronological dimension of social development. Also, the community (-ies) using Nukšas cemetery was not large at all; it has been calculated that the average number of members of this hypothetical Nukšas community was about 16–24 people per generation, i.e. only a few households (Šnē 2002, 187).

Thus the Marxist approach, based on evolutionary thought, involved a search for the gradual development of social complexity towards state societies and

viewed primitive society, as it was called, as a sequence of different stages of social evolution. In Soviet historiography, the emergence of states and the development of feudal society in the present territory of Latvia, mostly in the Latgalian lands, was regarded as having taken place in the 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries. And in accordance with the generally expressed ideologised view, which stressed the importance of eastwards contacts and denied the role of western influences, the emergence of feudal relationships was connected with the direct positive influence of the Russians, so that these political structures were held to have been formed according to the example of the Russian principalities (as examples, in addition to many others, we may mention Auns 1982; Moora 1952; Mugurevich 1965; Zutis 1948). Some researchers considered these 'state-like formations' as they were called in the Soviet tradition, to be the outposts of Russian principalities and ruled by the Russian princes, regarding their centres as Russian settlements (for example, see: Kolchin 1985).

The so-called Third National Revival of the late 1980s and the re-establishment of the independent Republic of Latvia stimulated attempts to escape the ideological framework of Marxism in the social and humanitarian sciences, including history and archaeology. The study of social questions became topical in Latvian archaeology and, starting from the middle of the 1990s, several archaeologists and historians have devoted attention to various questions relating to the socio-political development of prehistoric societies. In 1992, the first critical article was published on the socio-political organisation of the Gauja Livs around the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Ābelnieks 1992), and this was the first attempt to break with the previous tradition and the social model established by Moora. Since the middle of 1990s, certain new research topics such

as social space (Bērziņš 1997; Šnē 2000a), early towns (Caune 1992; Rādiņš 2002; Šnē 2000a; Zemītis 1993), sources of power (Šnē 2000b), social symbols (Zemītis 1994; 1995; 2002), etc., as well as some contemporary terminology, have been introduced in Latvian archaeology (for discussions of social terminology, see Vasks 1994; Vasks et al. 1997). Thus, among the newly-coined terms is the Latvian version of the term 'chiefdom' – *vadonības sabiedrības*. The use and application of this Western term might raise doubts as to its usefulness, but we must recognise that the use of such general terms for characterising social development from the Early Bronze Age to the Late Iron Age are useful only in order to place the material in some general framework on the basis of certain cross-cultural similarities. When the discussion proceeds further, with consideration of how society was constituted, how it worked and lived, then general terms will not be sufficient. Thus, the establishment of the framework forms the beginning of the study, but not the end and the conclusion. Accordingly, there is no necessity to invent new terms alongside those that have already been invented and used. Nevertheless, with regard to the understanding and interpretation of socio-political circumstances and their development, not very many new features were introduced, and generally the study of questions relating to power is not yet common in Latvian archaeology. Actually, most of the current research in Latvian archaeology concerning social questions in past societies reflects the ideas and influence of the approach of processual archaeology, while many interpretations are also being developed in the way they were stated during previous decades.

These previously undiscussed questions of social development in prehistory have also been raised in archaeological studies in the other Baltic countries. Thus, in the last decade, the socio-political organisa-

tion of prehistoric societies has attracted attention among Estonian archaeologists. On the basis of a wide range of Western theoretical archaeological literature, but under the very strong influence of the structuralists, Priit Ligi (1995) created a model of the development of societies in Estonia in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, a period which lasted 2000 years. He distinguished several phases of social consolidation and legitimisation of power, succeeding one another in societies with increasingly complex social organisation. Contrary to the previous views, which emphasised economic development (but which in modified form had nevertheless survived in archaeology also), he stressed the ideological aspect as the primary source of transformations in the material world. Other Estonian archaeologists have also considered that the socio-political organisation of late prehistoric societies has so far been understated. Marika Mägi has very actively defended the idea of higher social stratification than previously assumed on Saaremaa, with increasing stratification from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards and the emergence of political centres on the island, as on Gotland (see, for example, Mägi 2002). At the same time, Valter Lang (2002) has studied territories of power and has recognised a two-level hierarchy of power (hillfort power territories, consisting of several *vakuses* mentioned in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century written sources) in northern Estonia, which allowed him to speak of early feudal relations prior to conquest. He also suggests that the situation would have been similar in other parts of Estonia and in Latvia. Thus, social studies in Estonian archaeology have generally been influenced by various approaches in Western social archaeology (contrary to the situation in Latvian archaeological thinking), looking for socially stratified societies and the emergence of feudal power before the Crusades, while in Latvian archaeology similar but previ-

ously held beliefs have been retained.

Thus these are the questions concerning power structures and the existence of states in later prehistory, in the centuries before the Crusades, which have been the focus of some archaeological debate in Baltic archaeology. The predominant view among contemporary historians and archaeologists in Latvia is that Jersika and Koknese were states of the indigenous people, the Latgallians, under the rule of local kings, although they were dependent as vassals on Polotsk (Vilcāne 1997, 6–7). This, essentially, is the same opinion as expressed 50 years ago by Moora. Nevertheless, in the studies published in recent years, the development of prehistoric societies in Latvia has been seen as a straightforward and progressive evolutionary trajectory ending with the emergence of the states at the end of prehistory (states are seen as having existed among both the Couronians and the Latgallians) (Mugurēvičs & Vasks 2001; Vasks et al. 1997). Actually, the idea of the presence of states (or state-like formations) in Latgallian societies was borrowed from the previous tradition of national archaeology that existed before the Second World War, while also showing remnants of the Soviet tradition. This question was so politically and ideologically important that even the representatives of different political views have expressed essentially similar views on socio-political organisation in later prehistory, assuming the presence of the states there. The only difference was that of purpose: pre-war national archaeology used this idea to strengthen national identity and pride, while Marxist archaeology tried in this way to prove the formation of feudal relations and a class society. This idea, mainly based on medieval written sources, had already long since become a myth reflected in studies by both professional specialists and non-professional enthusiasts. A crucial role was played here by the *Heinrici Chronicon*, written in the

early 13<sup>th</sup> century under the conditions of the Crusades. The critical study of archaeological remains, however, and both evidence and contemporary archaeological methodology and theory allow us to create and put forward quite a different picture of the socio-political development and constitution of Latgallian and other societies.

### **Late prehistoric societies in eastern Latvia: chiefdoms or early states?**

The general anthropological and archaeological evolutionary schemes of social evolution have described complex societies as chiefdoms and early states. Of course, these very general terms do not describe social relations in practice, so they can only be used as a point of departure and a general framework that must be followed through investigation of the way in which societies existed. Nevertheless, these terms provide a framework allowing the researcher (and also the reader of social studies) to orientate himself/herself both in the social trajectories of past societies and in the criteria for interpreting material culture.

The understanding of the term 'chiefdom' has changed a great deal since it was invented and introduced in Western anthropological and later archaeological literature in the middle of the last century (see Yoffee 1993, 60–63). Some researchers have included chiefdoms among intermediate societies (Arnold 1996), while others have considered them to be a kind of tribal form of social organisation (Heidegger 1992; Kristiansen 1991; 1998). Overall, this term is widely used to characterise a very broad range of societies somewhere between segmentary societies and early states, and this very broad range has led to very different classifications of chiefdoms (see Earle 1991; 1997,

209–210). In these evolutionary schemes, the chiefdom is used as a description for complex pre-state and pre-industrial societies that are regional polities with a prestige goods economy, monumental buildings, redistribution, a political hierarchy of sites and persons, economic specialisation, a high level of production and other characteristic features. During recent decades, one can trace a transition from economic to administrative and decision-making elements in the characterisation of chiefdoms. Nevertheless, the main features of chiefdoms are defined on the basis of kin-based social and political structures and the personal character of the power of the political leaders, who can achieve a higher social and political position in the community due to particular personal skills. These leaders were considered to be *primus inter pares*, and the commoners had the option of not following their rules and demands.

The relationship between chiefdoms and early states has been understood quite variously, stressing the similarities in the social dynamics of these two kinds of societies or, on the contrary, emphasising the crucial differences between these kinds of social and political organisation. Some decades ago, on the basis of world-wide comparative studies, a group of features were singled out that were held to be characteristic of early states, such as a sufficient population to provide social stratification (involving at least three social strata) and economic specialisation, centralised government with the power to maintain rules with the help of authority, military force or threats, independence from the state territory, production providing a regular surplus used to maintain state institutions, and a collective ideology that legitimises the ruling power (Claessen 1978). Above all, however, the emergence of the state is characterised by the institutionalisation of power, inequality in the access to resources and the decreasing importance

of kin ties, replaced by territorial and political relations among the representatives of the state. Thus the formation of the state cannot be regarded as the intentional and wishful aim or target of any society. This is actually the most essential transformation from a kin-based society to a society with institutionalised government. In addition, this transformation is not a long-lasting process, although various circumstances and preconditions may prepare the groundwork for the formation of a state society even over a period of several centuries. The transition from a pre-state kind of social and political organisation to the state (always taking into account and keeping in mind the limitations of such general terms!) is quite brief, and might end successfully with the creation of state structures or it may equally likely fail, and then society returns to the previous model of organisation, or even a simpler one. It is also possible that this transition never occurs, and societies remain in self-sustaining existence in a chiefdom organisation, for example. In any case, it is not acceptable to try to find and identify state organisation at the end of prehistory as if they had gradually followed on from the chiefdoms. Rather, societies fluctuated continually in terms of social dynamics. Chiefdoms may form a strong alternative developmental trajectory, which may not involve a transition into states. Thus chiefdoms and states should instead be regarded as forms that are equal and able to coexist, at the same time avoiding placing them into stadial sequences.

During recent decades, archaeologists and anthropologists have worked hard to establish various criteria for recognising particular types of social organisation on the basis of material culture. Features have been found that are characteristic of different social and political structures and positions in settlement patterns and structures, grave inventories, the structure of the sites of economic activities, etc. In

the late prehistoric societies on the territory of present-day Latvia, social status and power positions are evidenced by material from living sites and cemeteries, since other kinds of archaeological sites have been either poorly surveyed or rarely subjected to research.

Social structures and relations are realised only in the spatial dimension and vice versa; control over space lies at the centre of social power. Thus, the relations between space and society are closely linked, reflexive and mutually dependent. Spatial organisation reflects social organisation and social relations; it also regulates social relations by forming the space for human existence (for a theoretical discussion of social space see Grøn 1991; Hillier & Hanson 1984). Analyses of social space consider the presence or absence of particular social areas, as well as areas used for different activities, public improvements, the proportion of different buildings, the distribution of buildings and their layout, access to buildings, the proportion of built and non-built areas, etc. (Chapman 1990; 1991; Hamerow 1995).

On the territorial level, the study of social space is connected with the identification of centres (or rather central areas) and their hinterland. Concerning late prehistoric Latvia, hillforts are very often viewed as centres. In prehistoric Latvia, hillforts were the main and most important defensive structures. The emergence and rise of hillforts was already closely connected with warfare and militarism during the Bronze Age, while during later prehistory these sites would have also had different meanings. The existence of hillforts cannot be reduced only to their military aspects. Impressive fortification is more a feature of military weakness than of power, while at the same time also a symbol of prosperity. At the beginning of the Late Iron Age, impressive rebuilding and extension work was organised at many hillforts and settlements, including the strengthening or

construction of fortifications, the extension of hillfort plateaux, etc. Thus at several hillforts, the fortification system consisted of more than two (up to four or five) banks and ditches. However, it should be remarked that the only difference between hillforts and settlements lies in the geographical location and impressive fortifications of the hillforts; otherwise the two kinds of sites are similar, and both could have served as centres for some particular function.

Intrasite spatial organisation at late prehistoric dwelling sites in eastern Latvia is quite difficult to study, since the structures are often not preserved, or else have been disturbed or destroyed by later rebuilding or medieval activities. One can observe a tendency towards the increasing density of buildings on hillforts near the end of the study period, so that by the end of the Late Iron Age, buildings were usually also situated in the central areas of hillfort plateaux (for example Daugmale Hillfort). An intensive, but not so dense layout of buildings is also visible in the settlements where there was no shortage of open space. Thus in Laukskola settlement, which covers about 5 hectares, the buildings were located in several (four or five) groups along the banks of the River Daugava, with a distance of 8–10 metres between them. About two or three such groups of buildings, consisting of up to 50 houses, including both dwellings and out-buildings were in simultaneous use. Over the centuries, a slight restructuring of space can be observed, since the inhabited area shifted eastwards at the end of the Late Iron Age (Zariņa 1973).

The size and appearance of buildings is determined by both economic and social factors. The sizes of houses were similar in all of the settlements of the Livs or the Latgallians, generally varying from 15–22 m<sup>2</sup> (2–4 x 3–5 metres; see Šnē 2002, tab. 2). Thus no major differences can be seen in terms of the size, appearance, function-

al separation, etc., of buildings on different sites, as well as within sites. (It should be noted that the only exception among building remains in late prehistoric Latvia is a building uncovered on Tanīskalns Hillfort with an area of more than 230 m<sup>2</sup> (Balodis et al. 1928), but this is probably a question of faulty methodology). Thus the construction of social space reflects the relatively egalitarian society that existed during later prehistory, changing slightly in the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries towards a more complex organisation. It is impossible, however, to detect any social group of particular status manifested in the spatial dimension.

The absence of hierarchical spatial organisation does not necessarily mean the absence of social leadership, so this evidence must be viewed in conjunction with the material obtained from burials. The obvious and quite banal statement that the deceased cannot bury themselves should be the starting point in the interpretation of the social context of burials (on the archaeology of death and burial see Carr 1995; Chapman et al. 1981; Pader 1982; Parker Pearson 1999). The deceased is prepared for the funeral by his/her contemporaries, taking into consideration the context of the death, the interests of society and the individuality of the deceased. Thus the funeral is a realisation of sociopolitical decisions, manipulating the body of the deceased in the interests of the community. Both the social position of the deceased and the status of the participants of the funeral determine the burial ritual. Three levels of relations can be followed in burials: the social context, the way of life of the deceased (which at the time of the funeral is already past) and the ideological relationships between the deceased and living people (Schulke 1999, 96–97). Although religious and social aspects are closely interconnected in burial rites, some funeral traditions are more concerned with one area or another. Thus, for

example, burials in the cemeteries of the Livs were arranged quite strictly following a north-west orientation, so this feature of burials seems to be connected with religious aspects and tradition. The burials of the Latgallians show different orientations for male and female burials. Male burials are oriented eastwards, while those of females face westwards (of course, with considerable variation, but essentially different practices are observed quite rarely, only in about 6–8% of cases; Radiņš 1999, 25, 41–42). Thus this feature of burials seems to be connected with religious aspects and tradition, and may only have been connected with gender differences in particular cases. Similar conclusions apply to the grave layout, which in late prehistoric cemeteries is quite uniform.

From the perspective of social inequality, it seems useful to look at two elements of burials: the way the dead are buried and the composition of grave goods. The practices of cremation and inhumation, as well as flat and barrow burials, were all in use during later prehistory. At the Liv cemeteries, cremations comprise up to 1/3 of the burials (sometimes, particularly in the Gauja Liv cemeteries, the figure is higher, up to 50%), and they date mostly from the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries. At Latgallian cemeteries, cremations are very few, usually up to 8–10%. Judging from the artefacts found in the cremation graves, the proportion of these deceased towards the end of the Late Iron Age. Both cremations and inhumation graves can be found in flat as well as barrow cemeteries. It seems that, in view of the expenditure of time and material and the effort put into organising the cremation burials, they may be regarded as connected with some particular social position of the deceased and its ideological manifestation, while the barrows instead reflect a cultural tradition.

A great deal of attention is devoted to grave goods as indicators of people's social position and wealth, often to the ex-

clusion, in social studies, of other aspects of the burial and cemetery. Major differences can be observed among burials in terms of grave goods, and these were influenced by many different factors. The character of grave goods is determined, among other circumstances, by regional differences, and in contemporary research we must also take into account the conditions of preservation of the grave goods. It is usually the opposite poles that attract the attention of researchers, namely burials with rich grave goods and burials without this feature. Burials with rich grave goods have been interpreted quite variously, being regarded as indicating the burials of honourable and/or wealthy people, or as an expression of fear, so that people presented to the deceased the very best of everything, in an attempt to protect themselves from his or her return. Thus, every case probably incorporated different aspects of relations between man and society, but there is no rule for the interpretation of these burials, and both the symbolic value of artefacts placed in burials (but which is unknown to us today) and the relativity of the term 'rich burials' (the rich burials may differ between central and peripheral cemeteries) are both factors to be considered. Burials without grave goods are also not a very widespread phenomenon in late prehistoric cemeteries in Latvia. Usually at least a knife and some beads were placed in the grave. For example, at Laukskola cemetery, only very few burials belong to the group of unfurnished graves, where the burials have not been disturbed. Sometimes these graves are located in the periphery of the cemetery. It does not seem reasonable to connect these graves with Christian burials on the basis of the assumption that burials of Christians would not contain (or include only very few) grave goods. Rather, these are burials of slaves or persons who had lost the support of the family and ended their lives in solitude. Another small

group of graves is that of cenotaphs (symbolic burials), which occur in the present territory of Latvia during the Viking Age, so they might have had a direct connection with the increasing frequency of military activities. Cenotaphs were probably intended as burials of people whose bodies had been lost due to the circumstances of their death. There were also various reasons for arranging graves with several (usually two) burials. There are many combinations of burials of different sexes and ages buried in different ways and with different amounts of grave goods in collective graves. Some of these graves might contain the burial of a master and a slave, but in some cases human sacrifice or self-sacrifice is also a possibility. In any case, a more obvious reason for burying several people in a common grave seems to be simultaneous death.

Various attempts have been made to calculate the values of grave goods, using different statistical methods. We must recognise the identification of the burials of the upper social stratum as those with the highest number of grave goods as outdated and overly simplified. Another way in which to examine social standing is to establish groups of complexes of artefacts recognised in the burials (for example, see Solberg 1985) or the values of artefacts (for example, see Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, 37–44). Such approaches actually identify the social position and wealth of the persons in society and exclude the influence of the society of the living in the organisation of the burials.

A more fruitful method in social reconstructions seems to be the approach based on the comparison of the NAT (number of artefact types) of different burials. This number is the sum of types of artefacts recognised in a burial, so it makes no difference how many artefacts of any particular type are represented (for the method, see Hedeager 1992). A shortcoming of this method is the necessity to use only evi-

dence obtained from undisturbed graves, which, unfortunately, usually represent less than half of the burials in cemeteries. The sum of types of artefacts has been calculated for several well-researched Liv and Latgalian cemeteries (for a more detailed account, see Šnē 2002, 250–273). The late Middle Iron Age cemeteries show a society of equals that actually also continues in later centuries. The cemeteries of the Livs demonstrate a very high number of graves with medium NAT values, as well as the highest NAT figures, while at some Latgalian cemeteries, chronological development can be seen in manifestations of social position. Thus these calculations show societies with a large middle-stratum and only certain persons deserving higher or also lower social position.

Although very important, it is not easy to distinguish material symbols indicating status, wealth and power. These positions were not identical, however, with some artefacts reflecting power and status, while others indicated wealth and status, etc. We will not go into a discussion of this here, but it seems that among status symbols it is possible to consider double-edged swords, battle-axes and neck-rings for males, exchange items, and certain pendants and brooches (see Šnē 2002, 283–334). In different centuries, these artefacts had different meanings, and this also depended on the location of the site of inhabitation (as those sites situated close to the waterways had more opportunities to obtain prestige imported items). It seems, however, that the use of virtually all imported artefacts, or those mentioned above, was not strictly limited to a narrow circle of people, since these occur among burials with different NAT values, and not only among the burials with the highest NAT. Thus status was not institutionalised and/or inherited – everybody had some possibility and/or opportunity to change his/her position.

Therefore the construction of social space at dwelling sites and social manifes-

tations in burials show that late prehistoric societies in Latvia were largely organised on egalitarian principles, while differences in social position and wealth were demonstrated by the type of burial and the artefacts. Individuals had to compete intensively for status positions and work hard to maintain them, since it was easy to lose status. Small and relatively egalitarian societies are, however, also open to socio-political changes that depend on both objective circumstances and subjective individual agents who aim to obtain authority and power in different ways. Status and power were personal attributes; they could be earned as well as lost in competition. In addition, neither ethnic nor individual social identity was of highest importance in prehistory; people belonged to a particular family, and this was the cornerstone of the identity of any person, upon which he or she could rely. Late prehistoric societies seem to have been stable and strong enough, and there were probably only particular individuals – agents – who attempted to overcome the traditional limitations and framework of society in order to obtain a position that would increase their power. Such attempts during the Age of the Crusades are described in the written sources of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and several similar phenomena can also be recognised in material culture evidence from later prehistory.

Thus, for example, on the basis of the locally-produced replicas of western European coins probably made at Daugmale Hillfort (Berga 1993), it seems possible that in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century some chief of Daugmale (who, of course, remains anonymous to us) attempted unsuccessfully to enlarge his individual power. In spite of the foreign symbols used on the coins, this local coinage might be regarded as an indicator of attempts to gain control of trade, or at least to control long-distance trade. Such control would provide some economic resources and a base for political ambitions.

But the life story of these innovations was very short. Local and/or regional society and its chiefs may have interrupted the activities of this agent by a variety of means, which may have included burning down Daugmale Hillfort. (Of course, this is only speculation, but why not?) It is also worth noting that in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century the first written records do not distinguish any particular, strong political figure in the region of the lower reaches of the Daugava, and instead indicate relatively explicit equality in this area.

One cause of confusion may be the issue of whether positions of power were inherited or achieved via personal skills and characteristics. *Heinrici Chronicon*, for example, gives some kind of evidence about the inheritance of power, when describing the crusader attack on Jersika in 1209 (HC XIII, 4). Looking back at the town of Jersika, which had been set ablaze by the crusaders, Vissewalde, the chief of Jersika, who is referred to in the chronicle as *rex*, or king, expresses his emotions, crying with grief, and the author also attributes to him the words that he had inherited Jersika from his fathers, and that his people had lived there. Thus it seems that Vissewalde, who was born and grew up in Jersika, had been successful enough in politics, warfare, etc., to be able, when faced with the circumstances of the Crusades, to form some kind of a coalition of local societies under his leadership. Thus this power would instead have been based on his own personality and kinship relations with the Lithuanians for, as we have seen above, there is no archaeological evidence proving the presence of strong and inherited power in the lands of the Latgalians. Of course, the remains of material culture say nothing concerning inheritance, and there are only indirect indications, such as the ideological egalitarianism represented in burials and living sites, described above. Hillforts have often been cited as evidence of the centralisation of

power, but this widely held view of hillforts as the seats of chiefly power (shown in pictures to resemble castles) should be abandoned. Hillforts functioned in different ways; they were household residences, military fortifications, sites of refuge, economic centres close to early towns, etc. But impressive fortifications gradually and collectively built and maintained by the whole local community were more a symbol of the might and prosperity of the whole community than of strong individual power, and, as we have mentioned above, no indications of some higher status sites within the hillforts can be distinguished (see Šnē 2000a for a detailed discussion of the meaning of hillforts). Thus any chief was considered as one of a number of equals, despite his particular influence or sources of power.

It was the Age of the Crusades that led to new transformations influencing every sphere of life in eastern Latvia as well as in the whole Baltic Sea region in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Crusades introduced into the region new social, economic and ideological organisation in the central European sense, while many features of late prehistoric social relations remained in force during the medieval period. This also influenced the formation of a dual structure in the society of medieval Livonia. It is impossible to find features of state organisation before the Crusades, since there is as yet no archaeological evidence that any centralisation of power towards state organisation occurred in the present territory of Latvia during the Late Iron Age, contrary to what has generally been suggested, believed and expressed in archaeological and prehistoric studies. Instead, the opposite was the case: the chiefdom was retained here as a potent alternative organisation to the state. Achieving changes in the constitution of society and power relations requires the presence of both favourable objective circumstances, including the capacity of society to un-

dergo such transformations, and certain agents – active individuals working for their own subjective interests. It is certain that late prehistoric societies involved at least certain ambitious agents, and both the Viking Age and the post-Viking Age provided major opportunities for them to show their fortune and skills in military and economic spheres of life. Actually, it may be supposed that by the end of the Viking Age, in around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, these opportunities decreased. In any case, however, the general situation and circumstances did not favour the ambitions of agents for power and authority. Military means probably allowed particular individuals to distinguish themselves (in that sense we might refer to the late prehistoric societies in eastern Latvia as 'militarised societies', see Šnē 2002, 350–355), while economic aspects also played some role, and among these control over long-

distance trade or at least participation in these activities would have been significant (as was the case with the chiefs of Daugmale, for example). Neither military nor economic power, however, is enough to maintain and consolidate power: it is necessary to change ideology and control it. This aspect was still strong enough to prevent attempts to change the social order. It seems that society itself was not ready to break with traditional relations based on the ideology of collective egalitarianism. The inability to break this ideology did not perhaps allow the formation of new power arrangements. Thus it is not surprising that in the early stage of the Crusades, certain individuals, active agents, turned to Christianity (for example Caupo, whose life-story is evidenced by some remarks in *Heinrici Chronicon*), in the hope of using this new and quite different ideology for their own purposes.

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## INTERPRETING THE EAST LITHUANIAN BARROW CULTURE

Vykintas Vaitkevičius

In this article the origins and development of the East Lithuanian Barrow Culture (from the early 3<sup>rd</sup> to the late 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) are discussed, and the necessity of paying greater attention to the archaeological evidence is stressed. Correspondingly, various social and religious manifestations within this culture, relating to its formation, existence, and transitional periods are examined, and some new approaches are proposed.

*Key words*: Iron Age, East Lithuania, burial rites.

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### Introduction

In the basins of the Nemunas and Neris rivers there are many archaeological sites from the Roman, Middle and Late Iron Ages that are treated as monuments of the East Lithuanian Barrow Culture. This conception is highly important in order to obtain an objective understanding of the history of both Lithuania and Belarus.

At this point I would like to discuss a statement prevalent in the historiography and related to the interpretation of the East Lithuanian Barrow Culture. It has been stated that the roots of the Lithuanian nation are already evident in the early period of the East Lithuanian Barrow Culture (cf. Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė 2001, 113). The development of this culture during the 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium AD did not undergo any significant interruptions. This cultural formation became a form of the feudalistic organization in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a direct result of the gradual development of the institutions and relationships between

the members of the community. Almost all archaeological studies in the former Soviet Union were conducted according to such a pattern. The investigations of these cultures are actually much more sophisticated and should be verified in greater detail.

I would like to add some significant material to the investigation of East Lithuanian Barrow Culture, and interpret it as a much bigger complex of interdependent features including material culture, religious features, burial rites and peculiarities of lifestyle. This article is devoted to two aspects of the East Lithuanian Barrow Culture, namely its origins in the late second and early third centuries and the changes that followed in the middle of the fifth century (fig. 1).

### Origins of the culture

Researchers only observe closer contacts between western Baltic tribes and Striated Ware Culture during the final period of its existence. Quite a number of rough-

200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 1100 1200

Fig. 1. Presumed stages of the East Lithuanian Barrow Culture (drawn by the author).