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Excerpt

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## I

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## The peoples of the eastern Baltic littoral

A survey of the history of the peoples of the eastern Baltic littoral could start with the first mention of them in written sources, which would permit subsequent events to be described according to a recognized chronology. To begin much earlier requires that in this chapter we use a different time scale from that common among historians, reckoning the passage of time in tens and hundreds of thousands of years. The decision to start earlier was in part based on the desirability of underlining that the Baltic region was not empty space at the time major civilizations appeared, flowered, and declined in the Near East and in the Mediterranean basin; and in part to establish that human movement was from the beginning an integral part of long-term Baltic history. In the centuries when they began to appear by name in written historical sources – roughly starting in the first century AD – the peoples of the littoral were only the latest of hundreds of generations of migrants, some of whom left behind identifiable fragments of material culture while others disappeared leaving barely a trace.

All these comings and goings no doubt had turning points of various kinds about which we are unlikely ever to know very much. The one that was crucial for connecting the continuous human history of the Baltic littoral to the history of the rest of the European continent, however, came when writers in the existing civilizations began to assign names to the littoral peoples, imprecise and largely uninformative though these names were. The naming process was recognition of economic connections that already

existed between the littoral and other parts of Europe, but at the same time the use of specific designations for these northern peoples piqued a curiosity about them that was never to subside again; with each century after about AD 800 sources about the Baltic littoral provide increasingly more detailed information that can be combined with the findings of archeologists to reduce guesswork.

No written sources from the littoral itself challenge descriptions written by outsiders because the littoral peoples did not record information about themselves in any fixed form or medium. Consequently, anything said about life in these preliterate centuries will always sound a note of uncertainty. Such descriptions rest on sparse mentions in the written sources of other peoples, on inferences drawn from surviving artifacts of material culture, and on contestable interpretations of the thought that lay behind identifiable customs and practices (e.g. the position of bodies in excavated burial sites). Thus, the littoral is no different from many other regions of the European continent, indeed of other continents, yet in some respects the painstaking reconstructions by modern-day archeologists of the living patterns of the littoral peoples are based on more reliable material than is available for other regions. Still, caution should be the watchword until the time in the past when the peoples of the Baltic littoral begin to testify about themselves directly.

#### ORIGINS

The thick sheet of ice covering most of northern Europe began to recede 14,000 years ago, leaving behind the physical features of the eastern Baltic littoral that have remained largely unchanged to the present. The withdrawal was slower than a snail's pace, uncovering first the territory now occupied by Lithuania, then that of Latvia, and finally that of Estonia. The ice retreated to somewhat north of the Arctic Circle in what is now Finland, and by the time it stopped moving, northern Europe had already become host to human settlements. What had begun as a large lake in the middle of this new territory eventually became what later would be called the Baltic Sea, and the fingers of ice on the southern edge of the receding ice sheet left behind very different landscapes. In the eastern littoral, however, these landscapes did not vary greatly overall: there were

large river systems containing many smaller tributaries, medium-sized and small lakes, swampland, large areas of flatland and a few highlands (though not mountains), and porous soil interspersed with rocky patches. The post-glacial vegetation included large forests of fir, oak, birch, and beech; the climate finally settled to be rather damp and moderately warm, with somewhat harsh winters and a relatively short growing season.

Judging by skeletal remains, the first large animals of the eastern littoral were probably an early subspecies of reindeer that had migrated northward from areas on the southern shore of the Baltic Sea and from regions southeast of the littoral. These animals were followed by human beings probably from the same locales, whose remains attest to the first human settlements in the area (in what is now Lithuania) starting at about 11,000 years ago. These pioneering settlements, not surprisingly, were established on the banks of rivers and lakes; and from these very ancient remains, archeologists have surmised that early in-wanderers moved in bands of around ten to twenty persons. In this era the human settlements were not permanent; initially these hunter-gatherers followed the reindeer and moved on after the food supply in their immediate vicinity was exhausted. Most of what we can surmise about these early human populations comes from several dozen archeological sites scattered around the littoral, the earliest of these – in Lithuanian territory – yielding the oldest evidence from about 11,000 years ago and the most recent from about 10,000 years ago.

Among these early peoples, constant movement was characteristic, but relatively permanent settlements increased in frequency during the period archeologists designate as the late Neolithic (about 6,000 to 4,000 years ago). Physical evidence suggests that they became more numerous as time wore on, and were located close to either flowing or stable bodies of water. For a very long time, these settled communities, probably composed of farmers coming from the area around the Vistula River in Poland, shared the littoral with the hunters and gatherers. No doubt there was friction. The hunter-gatherers practiced their age-old traditions of moving over large territories, while settlers defended the locations in which they had invested time and effort.

Evidence about the activities of human beings is sparse in these earlier millennia, and analysis of the relics of material culture, no

matter how carefully undertaken, involves a great deal of scholarly inference. Take the example of a burial site. Can the presence of certain kinds of seeds in it really lead to general statements about crop preferences? Or in grouped burial sites, does the slight physical separation of the grave of a man from those of women really point to the existence of a patriarchal system? The move from things to the thoughts behind things remains very difficult, verging on the impossible, in this long period of the past: it is simply educated and informed guesswork.

In the millennia before settled agriculture became dominant (that is, just before the era that began about 5,000 years ago) archeologists have differentiated the mobile inhabitants of the eastern littoral by reference to cultural features manifested in artifacts and especially burial practices. In the littoral these variously named “cultures,” as archeologists refer to them when using the names of the places where artifacts were found, are the “Kunda” culture in the northern reaches of the littoral and the “Nemuna” culture to the south, with considerable overlap of the two in the middle. Moreover, the eastern boundaries of these “cultures” were located well within what is now Russian territory, and the southern boundary of the “Nemuna” culture reached into what is Poland and Belarus nowadays. Somewhat later, these “cultures” were joined by another – the so-called “Comb-marked/Pitted-ware” culture, a name derived from pottery decorations. Still later, carriers of the “Stringware” culture (again, from pottery decorations), also sometimes called the “Battle-axe” culture (from the weapon design), arrived on the scene without, it seems, completely displacing or replacing the others and bringing with them new agricultural practices. The postulated external boundaries of these “cultures” at no point followed the political boundaries of the present-day Baltic states, so their carriers can only figuratively be considered “ancestors” of the later Baltic-area populations. These “cultures” were separated in time from later eras by many millennia – by hundreds of human generations – as well as by the byproducts of the incessant in-wandering of other peoples from outside the littoral. It would be misleading, therefore, to think of these “cultures” as beads strung together at regular intervals on the string of time. There must have been chronological overlaps and cross-cultural penetrations, lending and borrowing of practices, since they all existed in a relatively small corner of Europe.

Still, after its first appearance in the eastern Baltic littoral human presence was continuous. Adaptation to local environments was evidently successful much of the time, and a good deal is known about how these peoples coped. When they stayed in one place, they built either small wooden houses with vertical walls and a roof, or structures (resembling the teepees of Native Americans) with thin tree trunks leaning against one another as a framework for an outer covering of hides and bark. They fished and hunted with tools made of bone or wood, adorned themselves with amulets of the same materials, and produced pottery with geometric decorations. The frequency of jewelry and the pottery designs suggest the presence of an aesthetic sense among the anonymous artisans who produced them, since decorations in and of themselves did not improve the efficiency of the artifacts in question. Weaponry was used for both hunting and self-defense, though there is very little direct information about actual conflict, territorial or otherwise. Perhaps population density was so low that destructive conflict arose only in the most extraordinary circumstances.

Thus, change of all kinds was ever-present but for the most part it was not cumulative in the technological sense. Small improvements in weapons, tools, and living quarters no doubt took place, but most such improvements made little difference to overall standards of living in the long run. The one type of change that was a true transformation and had the greatest consequences was the arrival and diffusion of settled agriculture: the cultivation of field crops and the raising of animals. These practices are associated with the carriers of the “Stringware” culture and date from the late Neolithic period. The dominant tool for these farmers was the wooden hoe. There followed a thousand years during which the old hunting-and-gathering practices coexisted with stable agriculture; but starting around 4,000 years ago evidence exists of the use of metals – bronze and iron – primarily in jewelry and weapons. Where knowledge of these technologies came from is not clear, but it is evident that in the course of time the use of metals and settled agricultural practices became mutually supportive. Fields measuring about 60 by 120 feet have been found; these were established on open land or after trees were cleared. Livestock was mostly of the multipurpose kind – sheep, goats, cows, and pigs – supplying milk and meat and yielding

also large, strong bones, wool, and hides. The usefulness of this agricultural knowledge evidently diffused throughout the eastern Baltic littoral, leaving a great deal of archeological evidence. The instrument of diffusion must have been human beings, attesting to the fact that geographical movement of various kinds continued even in populations in which the advantages of being settled had become widely accepted.

Evidence from the centuries of the late Neolithic period shows clearly that building practices improved, since permanent fields necessitated residence for the long term and allowed time for learning by trial and error. Wood remained the principal material for the construction of housing, and stone was put to other uses: fields were often separated by fences of piled-up stone, and stone was also used for grave coverings, sometimes arranged in geometric designs. Occasionally one can find fortified places built to guard domestic animals, and this period – the late Neolithic – also provides the first evidence of the construction of wooden hillforts: village-like groups of residences surrounded by a high wooden stockade. Hillforts, however, became much more prominent in later periods. The desirability of metal implements of various kinds apparently translated into more frequent contact with outsiders, since eastern littoral gravesites from the period frequently contain crafted metal pieces of central European and Scandinavian origin.

The continuing use of metals eventually led to iron replacing bronze. This transition took place when far to the south in the Mediterranean basin the Roman Empire was becoming the largest polity in the European world of the time. Some evidence suggests that even before Roman expansion reached its zenith (in the third and fourth centuries AD) there were occasional trading contacts between the Baltic and Mediterranean worlds: Baltic amber was a desired good among the Romans, as were hides, and the peoples of the Baltic littoral were always in the market for metal goods. Probably the most active populations in these trading relationships were the peoples of the *southern* Baltic littoral, whose various metal objects made their way into the *eastern* littoral as well.

If processes of change in the littoral in earlier eras have to be measured in thousands of years, then starting about two thousand years ago economic and social change became more frequent and

easier to date. One can speculate that settled agriculture improved the food supply, which in turn reduced infant mortality and increased life expectancy, and thus increased the population density of the region. A denser population put greater pressure on agricultural producers, which meant the clearing of more fields and the expansion of existing fields as well as more rapid diffusion of innovations. Similar dynamics of change in the regions surrounding the eastern Baltic littoral piqued the interest of neighboring, numerically larger peoples, who were looking for places into which to expand.

#### ACHIEVING RECOGNITION

We assume that during the same centuries when the Roman Empire to the south ruled the known civilized world, the peoples of the eastern Baltic littoral lived their lives in an orderly fashion, establishing rules of personal, social, and political conduct consistent with their values of what was right and proper. What these rules of life were is not known. Accounts of these centuries put forward much later in time by archeologists, however, use language suggesting that the population distribution of the Baltic region had achieved greater stability than ever before. These descriptions do not preclude the existence of movement, but the new context of movement had become a collection of peoples identified with specific areas within the littoral. This shift of descriptive language among later scholars looking backward draws in part on geographic accounts produced by writers of the classical world: it is in the early centuries of the “Christian era” of the Roman Empire that the very first written references to Baltic littoral peoples can be found. These references are vague, suggesting no deep knowledge of the area, but at the very least they signal a recognition by contemporaries that the peoples beyond the borders of the empire were not being thought of as an anonymous and interchangeable mass of barbarians.

The Roman historian Tacitus in the first century AD, for example, made reference to the *Aesti*, a people said to be living on the southern shore of the “northern sea.” Similar references, carrying along the term *Aesti*, appeared in the writings of Cassiodorus and Jordanus in the sixth and Einhard in the ninth century AD; still other Greek and

Roman writers earlier and later than these four gave names to places and rivers around the Baltic Sea and referred to the sea itself as the “Svebian Sea”. Such references were used by these writers as much to satisfy the desire to describe exotic European places as to point to the source of amber, which was valued by the Mediterranean peoples and imported from these northern lands. Though the term *Aesti* always appeared in these writings together with similar designations of other little-known northern peoples, the very fact that they were named at all was significant and indicated the growth of more specific knowledge about them.

Unfortunately, the terms used by the classical authors do not help very much in understanding the situation on the ground in the littoral. We can lay aside the practice of referring to these peoples by using such archeological terms as “makers of Cord-ware” and “the Battle-axe culture,” but the question then becomes what to put in their place. In using such terms as *Aesti*, Tacitus and other classical authors were more than likely drawing on second- or third-hand travelers’ accounts circulating among the learned of the time or borrowing them from earlier writers. It was recognition of a kind, yet there is no evidence that the people thus recognized called themselves *Aesti*, or of what they did call themselves. This really was an encounter between a literate and a non-literate people, with the former prevailing at least for a time. In addition, collective terms connoting peoples-in-place carry with them a strong suggestion of the cessation of population changes. It would be more sensible to assume that processes characteristic of numerically small peoples jostling each other for territory – assimilation, amalgamation, extirpation, expulsion, replacement – continued in some fashion even if we know nothing about them and the results of their workings. After about the year AD 500, however, references to the littoral’s peoples-in-place began to grow in number: Scandinavian sagas of the ninth century contain descriptions using collective nouns, and Russian chronicles of the period include similar statements. From the growing frequency of these references, we can infer that population stabilization of some kind was occurring.

Many centuries later, particularly during the twentieth century, scholars writing about the Baltic littoral reached a kind of consensus about how to refer to the peoples of this period by using terminology



coming from two different academic disciplines: historical linguistics and historical ethnography. Linguistic methodologies contributed general terms concerning language development and diffusion through the use of evidence from the language itself, but in this discourse what is said about the social history of the human carriers of the languages comes from cognate disciplines such as ethnography. Historical ethnography is concerned primarily with the nature and development of actual human groupings; it looks to evidence other than linguistic and seeks to identify differences among groups that might not be visible in the language domain alone. In the Baltic littoral, both disciplines have converged to offer a variety of names, some pointing to language groupings and others to population groupings. In neither case is complete direct evidence available, and such grouping terms are always to some extent speculative and at best hypothetical.

The categories of the historical-linguistic tradition are the most general, and therefore it is appropriate to start with them. Historians of European languages identify two broad categories relevant to the present discussion – the Indo-European and the Finno-Ugric – each category containing many different languages. The speakers of these language groups moved into European space from the southeast. Each group had an earlier version designated as either proto-Indo-European or proto-Finno-Ugric. By AD 500 each large grouping had already become associated with a location in the littoral: speakers of the Finno-Ugric languages were situated north of those speaking Indo-European tongues. Population movement was continuous in the central European regions during the middle centuries of the first millennium AD (sometimes this is referred to as the “wandering of peoples”), and others, particularly the Slavic groups (Indo-European language carriers), moved in from the east and south and pressed the existing populations northward. In response, Indo-European language speakers who had preceded them northward, in the process pushed speakers of Finno-Ugric languages ever more northward. These processes led to the latter occupying the territory of present-day Finland and Estonia, while the Indo-European speakers occupied the rest of the eastern Baltic littoral (the areas of present-day Latvia and Lithuania), as well as areas in the southern Baltic littoral (present-day northern Poland and Kaliningrad) and, judging by hydronyms (names

of bodies of water), substantial portions of what is now Belarus and western Russia. When referring to these centuries, modern historians of European languages commonly use the term “Baltic” to refer to the Indo-European tongues on the eastern and southern shore of the Baltic Sea, and “Finnic” in reference to the languages farther north.

The terminology of historical ethnographers writing about the same period now commonly describes these Baltic- and Finnic-speaking groups by using a more differentiated nomenclature that frequently draws upon the names offered by Roman writers, Scandinavian bards, the compilers of early Russian chronicles, and the authors of later chronicle accounts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These ethnographers write with considerable confidence that in the centuries from about AD 500 to 1000 the peoples of the eastern and southern littoral of the Baltic Sea lived in territories sufficiently well defined to be depicted with boundaries when the region is mapped (see Map 1).

We shall be using, of course, the English-language versions of all these terms. The northernmost people of the eastern littoral were the Estonians, who occupied roughly the area of present-day Estonia, including the myriad islands off the Baltic Sea coast. Estonians used a Finnic language related to the language of the Finns who had moved northward across the Gulf of Finland, as well as to that of a number of smaller Finnic groups in the interior of what is present-day Russia. They were also related linguistically to the Setus, whose living space was southwest and south of Lake Peipus in modern-day Estonian territory and extended into modern-day Russia. The Livonians (or Līvi) – also a Finnic grouping – lived in the lands immediately adjoining the now-named Gulf of Riga; their language was evidently somewhat different to those used by the Estonian or Finnish populations. Other Balto-Finnic-speaking groups – such as Ingrians, Karelians, Vepsians, and Votes – living in Russian regions outside the eastern littoral will not be considered here.

South, east, and west of the Estonians, Livonians, and Setus lay the territories of the peoples who spoke Baltic languages. Adjoining Estonian and Livonian lands lived the Latgalians, whose territory started on the eastern bank of the Daugava River and appears to have extended well into modern-day Belarus. West of them lived the Selonians, with the eastern border of their territory being the western