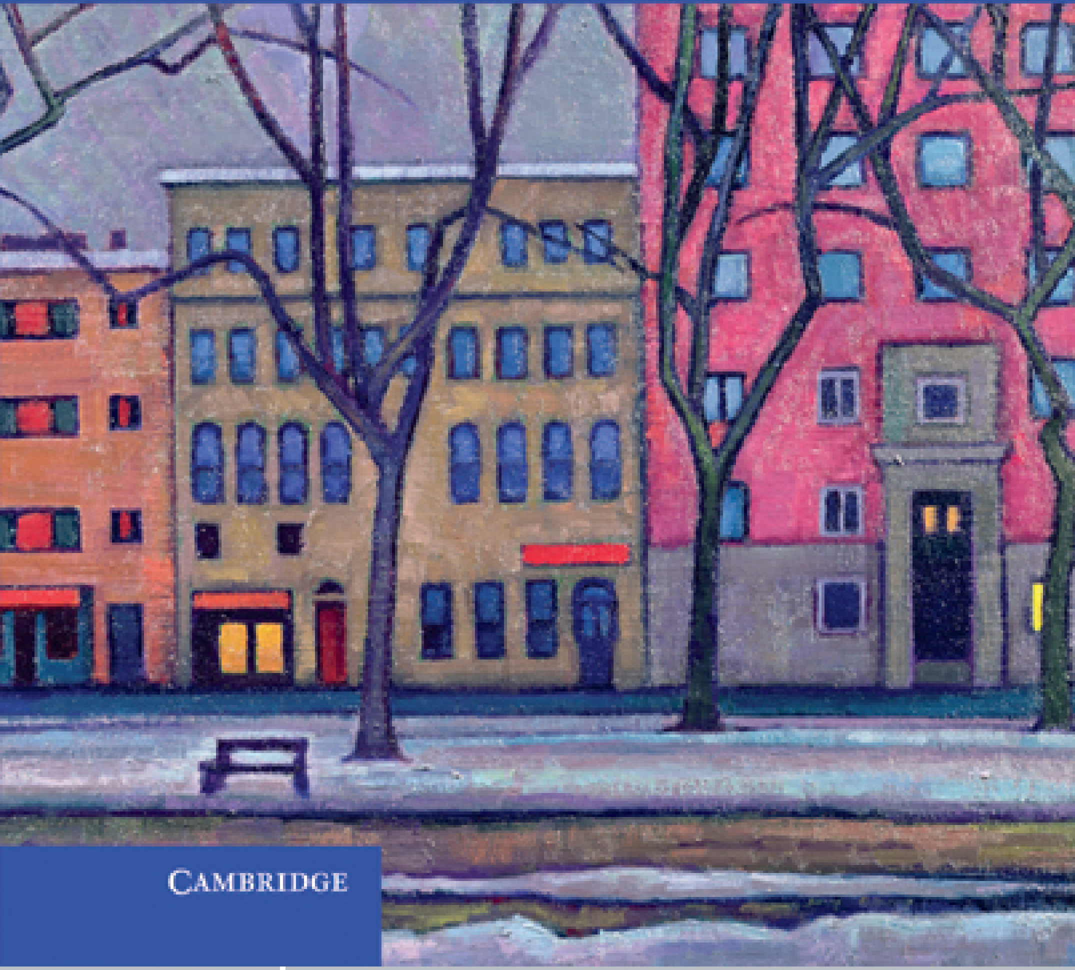
A Concise History of THE BALTIC STATES

Andrejs Plakans



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A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE BALTIC STATES

The Baltic region is frequently neglected in broader histories of Europe and its international significance can be obscured by separate treatments of the various Baltic states. With this wide-ranging survey, Andrejs Plakans presents the first integrated history of three Baltic peoples – Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians – and draws out the common threads to show how it has been shaped by their location in a strategically desirable corner of Europe. Subordinated in turn by Baltic German landholders, the Polish nobility and gentry, and then by Russian and Soviet administrators, the three nations have nevertheless kept their distinctive identities – significantly retaining three separate languages in an ethnically diverse region. The book traces the countries' evolution from their ninth-century tribal beginnings to their present status as three thriving and separate nation-states, focusing particularly on the region's complex twentieth-century history, which culminated in the eventual reestablishment of national sovereignty after 1991.

ANDREJS PLAKANS is Professor Emeritus at the Department of History, Iowa State University. His previous publications include *The Latvians: A Short History* (1995) and *Historical Dictionary of Latvia* (second edition, 2008).

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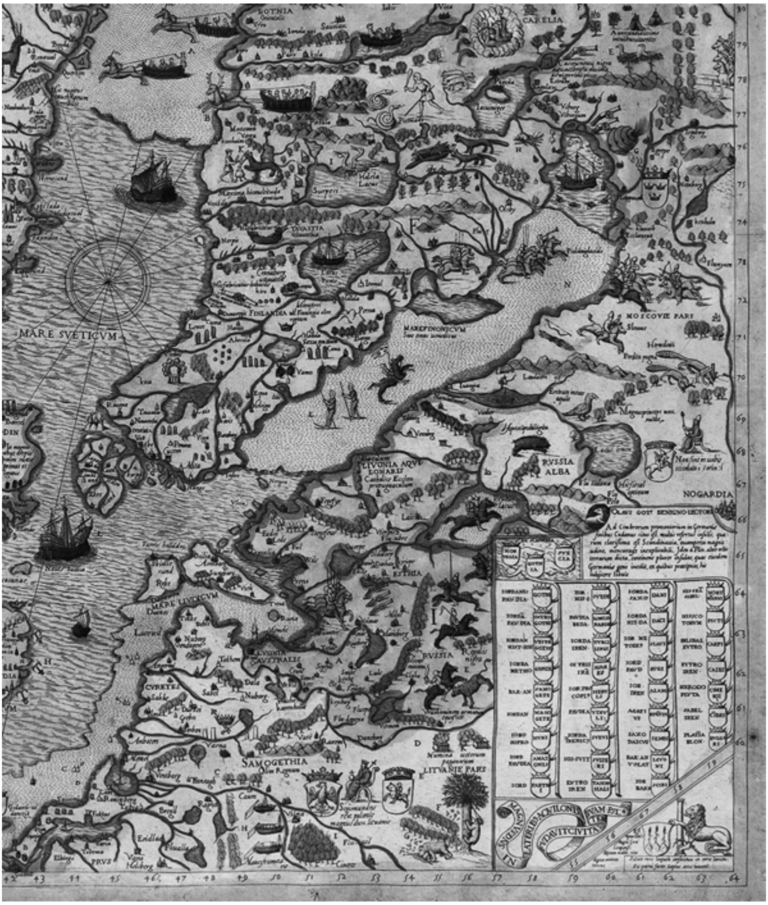

BOTNIA
CARELIA
MARE SVETICVM
FINLANDIA
TAVASTIA
MOSCOVIE PARS
LIVONIA ARVE
RVSSIA ALBA
NOGARDIA
MARE LIVONICVM
ESTHIA
RVSSIA
LIVONIA AVSTRALES
CVRETES
SAMOGETHIA
LITVANIE PARS
PRVS

Fragment of *Carta Marina*, 1576. This famous “sea map” of northern Europe, created in Rome by the Swedish cleric Olaus Magnus, uses no borders in its depiction of the eastern littoral of the Baltic Sea.

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ANDREJS PLAKANS

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To

Eamonn and Alexander

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PREFACE

The story of present-day Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania must begin not at the time when countries bearing those names appeared on the European map, but when a group of stateless peoples settled permanently on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea during the fifth and sixth centuries AD. At that time, to the south, the Roman Empire had already dissolved and, in what was to become France, the Merovingian and Carolingian kings were trying to form a successor state. Much later, in the medieval period, only one of the Baltic seacoast peoples – the Lithuanians – succeeded in creating a state of their own; the other two – the Estonians and Latvians – lost such political leaders as they had by the end of the thirteenth century and until the twentieth remained subordinated to German- , Swedish- , and Russian-speaking landowning aristocracies. The Lithuanians too lost their medieval state through a voluntary union with Poland that created a commonwealth in which the Poles became the dominant force politically and socially. Only after World War I did cartographers redraw their maps of Europe to include Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as independent nation-states. Twenty years later, they had to rework them again because the three countries were absorbed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and became soviet socialist republics. The redrawing exercise was not repeated until 1991, when the USSR collapsed and the three Baltic states resumed their independence. The political history of the eastern Baltic littoral thus contains far more discontinuity than continuity, many more years of war than years of peace, many more regime changes than periods of stable governance, and much more destruction than uninterrupted growth. The task of forming a coherent story from this fragmented history is a difficult assignment, and the achieved coherence is more likely to reflect the viewpoint of the historian writing the story than a coherence inherent in the past itself. Others would synthesize the history of the region differently.

Although political discontinuity appears to be the single most important facet of Baltic-area history, several themes recur throughout all periods and together provide some degree of continuity. These themes are location, language, statehood, leadership, and fragmentation; they appear in different variants and guises throughout the entire thousand-year period covered in the book. They will not be explored in equal detail in every chapter, and the chapters closest to our own day will do them greater justice. The book is a survey of limited length of a very long stretch of historical time, and the recent centuries contain more usable and reliable information about the peoples who in the twentieth century established the three Baltic states. As will be seen, for most of their history the Estonians, Latvians, and, considerably less so, the Lithuanians, remained, as individuals, mostly hidden from view. They themselves left only a sparse written record, and contemporary accounts written by the scribes of the political rulers of the region referred to the subordinated littoral peoples most often with various collective nouns (for example, peasants, serfs, non-Germans). Thus, for many centuries only a few of the subordinated emerged as unique individuals with names and fully documented life experiences. The "democratization" of the historical record began in the eighteenth century; by the nineteenth, evidence about people on the lower rungs of the social scale became a flood; and by the twentieth, people of all backgrounds – of high birth or low – could potentially be part of the historical narrative as full-fledged historical actors. The later chapters of the book thus cover a shorter time span because these centuries contain more usable and detailed evidence about all the inhabitants of the littoral.

The first chapter of the book deals with a long stretch of historical time from the end of the ice age in the eastern Baltic littoral and the first appearance of human settlements to about the year 1000, when the populations of the region had stabilized enough to be mentioned by chroniclers as permanent residents. Chapter 2 takes up the arrival into the area of crusaders and merchants from western Europe, intent on Christianization and territorial conquest in a process some historians have referred to as the area's "europeanization." In these medieval centuries the region became bifurcated, with its northern part (the later Estonian and Latvian territories) becoming the Livonian Confederation governed by German-speaking political elites and the southern area (the Lithuanian territories) emerging as a unified and expansionist state governed initially by Lithuanians themselves. Chapter 3 considers the eastern Baltic littoral in the early modern period (1500–1800) as it experienced the secularization of the remnants of the crusading orders, the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, and the changes wrought by the littoral's becoming a component of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Swedish Empire, and the Russian Empire, in chronological order. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 deal with the region as a "western borderland" of the Russian Empire from the mid-eighteenth century to World War I. Various features of modernity – agricultural reform, urbanization, industrialization, nationalism, and population growth – arrived here through the opportunities and the constraints created by Russian imperial policy, as the empire sought to bring itself up to western levels. Chapter 7 examines the political, economic, and cultural consequences of the national independence that the three peoples acquired during the period of World War I, as a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics replaced the Russian Empire. It was during the interwar decades (1920–1940) that parliamentary democracy in the Baltic republics lost out to authoritarianism, as similar political transformations affected nearly all of the new states of the European east. Chapter 8 surveys the Baltic republics as constituent parts of the USSR (1940–1991) after their occupation and annexation by the Soviet Union during the course of World War II. Here the short-lived occupation of the region by the Hitlerite Third Reich during the war will also be considered, this episode having as one consequence the simplification of the nationality composition of the Baltic region through forced emigration and genocide. Chapter 9 describes the post-Soviet years after 1991 when political independence returned to the Baltic littoral following the collapse of the USSR and as

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became members of the international structures of a new Europe. A listing of suggested readings primarily of English-language materials forms the last section of the book.

The author would like to express his gratitude to the many people who helped in the creation of this book. Barbara S. Plakans not only provided insightful counsel about the contents but also reshaped and improved the book's first draft with her considerable editing skills. The Interlibrary Loan staff of the W. Robert Parks Library at Iowa State University helped obtain materials from other libraries. The gathering of the many illustrations characteristic of the "Concise History" series in which the book appears was facilitated by the following colleagues and friends: Toivo Raun of Indiana University; Vita Zelče of the University of Latvia; Alfred E. Senn, Professor Emeritus of the University of Wisconsin; Jānis Krēsliņš, Jr. of the National Library of Sweden in Stockholm; and Peter Wőrster of the J. G. Herder-Institut of Marburg, Germany. The author thanks them all. In Riga, Latvia, welcome assistance with illustrations was also provided by Uldis Neiburgs of the Occupation Museum in Riga; Viesturs Zanders of the Baltic Central Library; Guntis Zemītis of the University of Latvia's Institute of History; Anita Meinarte of the Latvian National Museum; and Z. Ciematniece of the Riga City and Maritime Museum. The book would have been poorer without their help. Finally, I am particularly grateful to my editors at Cambridge University Press, Michael Watson, Helen Waterhouse, and Chloe Howell, for their guidance and especially for their patience over the several years during which the book took shape.

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Ames, Iowa

I

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.

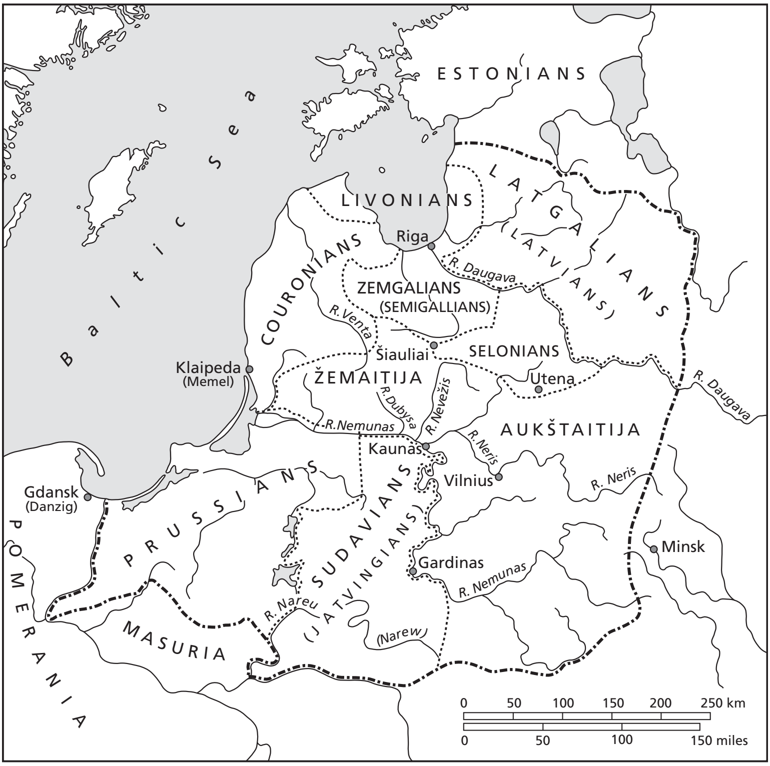
Many centuries later, particularly during the twentieth century, scholars writing about the Baltic littoral reached a kind of consensus about how to refer to the peoples of this period by using terminology coming from two different academic disciplines: historical linguistics and historical ethnography. 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 identity 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 Livs) – 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


Baltic Sea
ESTONIANS
LIVONIANS
LATGALIANS
(LATVIANS)
Riga
R. Daugava
COURONIANS
ZEMGALIANS
(SEMIGALLIANS)
R. Venta
Šiauliai
SELONIANS
Klaipeda
(Memel)
ŽEMAITIJA
Utena
R. Daugava
R. Dubysa
R. Nevežis
R. Nemunas
AUKŠTAITIJA
R. Neris
Kaunas
Vilnius
R. Neris
Gdansk
(Danzig)
PRUSSIANS
SUDAVIANS
(JATVINGIANS)
Minsk
Gardinas
R. Nemunas
POMERANIA
MASURIA
R. Nareu
(Narew)
0 50 100 150 200 250 km
0 50 100 150 miles

Map 1 The tribal societies of the Baltic littoral, twelfth to thirteenth century. The tribal names come from contemporary chronicles, but the internal boundaries have to remain educated guesswork.

bank of the Daugava. To their west, and directly below the lands of the Livonians around the Gulf of Riga, were the Semigallians, whose territory reached into present-day Lithuania. West of the Semigallians, with the western borders of their territory being defined by the Baltic seacoast, were the Couronians (or Kurs), who in the south also reached into present-day Lithuania. South of the Couronians and Selonians and still in the Baltic-language area lived the Žemaitians, whose territory occupied most of present-day northern Lithuania. Southeast of the Žemaitians there lived the Aukštaitians, with their territory lying around the upper Nemunas

River. Just west of these lived the Skalvians (around the lower Nemunas River); and south of these the Jatvings (or Sudavians), whose territory lay between the lower Nemunas and the Mazovian Lakes. Just west of the Jatvings were the Prussians (sometimes referred to as "Old" Prussians), whose territory centered on modern-day Kaliningrad and who also spoke a Baltic language. On the other side of the Prussians (in modern-day northern Poland) there began the territories of Slavic-speaking tribes. Slavic speakers, in fact, defined the southern borders of the Jatvings and the southern and eastern borders of the Aukštaitians. Judging by place-names and other similarly slowly changing direct evidence in the first centuries of these population movements, the territories of Baltic-language speakers extended far into present-day Russia, but the Slavic tribes who came later had pressed westward, compressing the residence of the Baltic peoples to the area around the Baltic Sea.

Several comments are in order about this inventory of peoples. First, in the centuries under discussion (fifth to tenth centuries AD), what we refer to here as the "Slavic speakers" could also be disaggregated into smaller units, each with its own unique name. But since we are concerned with the Baltic and Finnic speakers of the eastern Baltic littoral, we will not do so here. Second, the names used for some of the peoples of this era in later centuries became the official names of entire modern countries (Estonia, Lithuania) or sections of countries (Latvian regions: Kurzeme, Zemgale, Latgale). We should not assume from this naming history, however, that the premodern people who bore these names gradually expanded to absorb everyone else in their vicinity. The history of territorial naming in the eastern Baltic littoral differs greatly from the history of changes in the population makeup of the area. Third, the question remains as to what exactly these populations were – peoples, tribes, ethnic groups, language groups, nationalities, nations? The use of collective designations varies tremendously among scholars dealing with the area, and there is good reason to maintain some distance from designations that imply a great deal of collective consciousness of unity among these peoples, largely because of the nature of the available evidence. The "boundaries" indicated on Map 1 are inferences from the distribution of archeological findings and linguistic evidence and do not necessarily demarcate precisely a territory that the people living in it were willing to defend as "theirs." Terms such as "peoples" or "tribal societies" are therefore more defensible than others because they are more neutral on the central question of group consciousness.

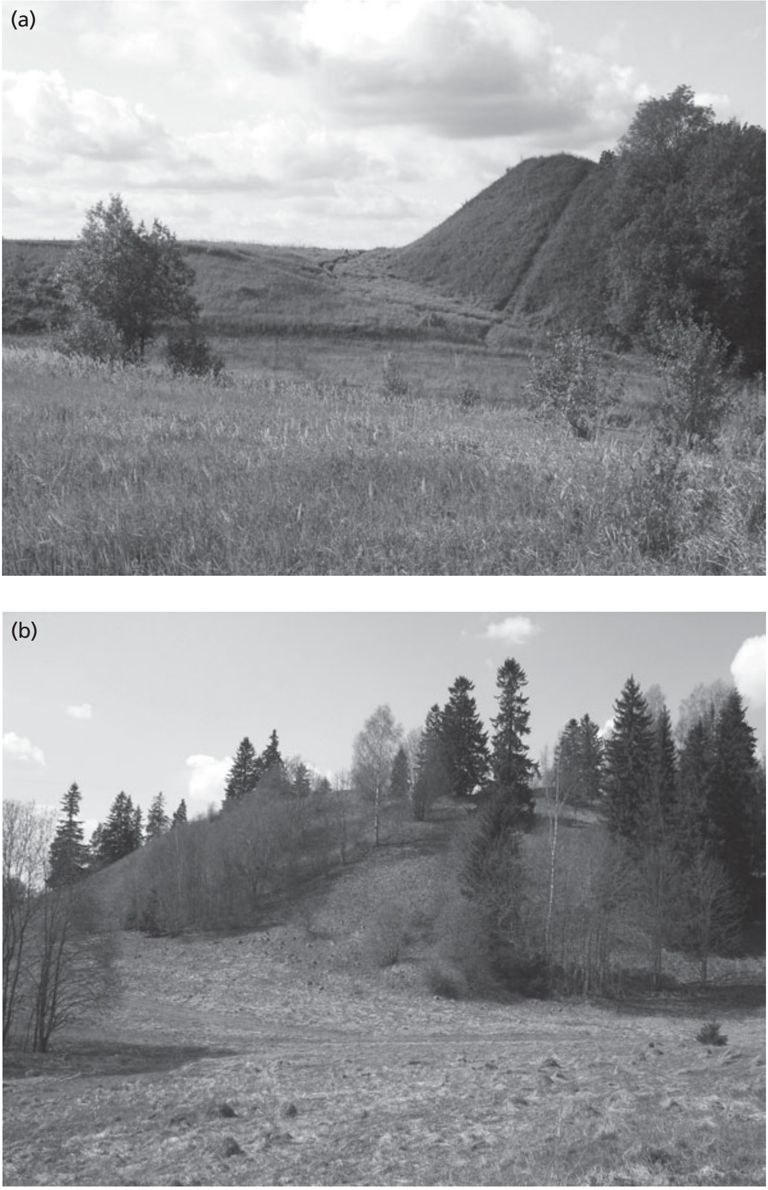
The problem of how to refer to the littoral peoples has an important variant: can they be thought of as political entities – as states? The difficulties are compounded by the fact that present-day historians of the three Baltic countries sometimes use even finer distinctions in describing the territory of the littoral. It is said that "ancient Estonia" consisted of forty-five "parishes" forming eight distinct "regions": Virumaa, Rävala, Järva, Harju, Läänemaa, Saaremaa, Ugandi, and Sakala. Latvian historians speak of the lands of the Latgalians, Selonians, Couronians, Semigallians, and Livonians, and, referring to later documents, claim that each of these "lands" contained numerous separately governed or administered territories. Lithuanian historians refer to "four traditional ethnographic regions" – namely, Džūkija, Aukštaitija, Žemaitija, and Suvalkija – and hint at the existence of yet further subdivisions. The earlier existence of these entities and sub-entities is sometimes deduced from a bare-bones mention of a place-name later. Sometimes the place-name is buttressed by archeological evidence, and sometimes the source contains considerable description suggesting that the writer had something like a state formation in mind. Scholarly debate continues over the exact nature of these entities in the period before AD 1000, and about how centralized and powerful they really were. Often historians resort to developmental language by using such terms as "proto-states" and "proto-nations," implying that it was only a question of time before these entities became full-fledged and well-defined political actors with governing elites, central administrations, recognizable boundaries, and rules about membership. With the addition of ethnicity to the mix of defining characteristics, this kind of speculation stops just short of the belief that before AD 1000 the littoral peoples were well on their way to becoming the kind of nation-states that emerged elsewhere in Europe only many centuries later. Available evidence, however, is too meager to demonstrate firstly the existence of developmental processes of any kind. One conclusion that can be drawn with some certainty is that the eastern littoral of the Baltic Sea after AD 500 was becoming an area of substantial internal differentiation and, as such, deserved to be described with a much more variegated nomenclature than outsiders, such as the classical writers and later travelers, were inclined to use. What this differentiation would lead to several centuries later is a question that must be answered by sources from that later period.

BALTIC-AREA TRIBAL SOCIETIES: OVERALL CHARACTERISTICS

The available population figures for the eastern Baltic littoral during the century just before AD 1000 are all estimates based mostly on a calculation of persons per square kilometer. The approximate tenth-century populations of present-day areas are as follows: Estonia 150,000, Latvia 220,000, and Lithuania 280,000. There is no methodology for disaggregating these numbers for the subpopulations – the tribal societies – of each area. The three areas then had the same position in a comparative hierarchy as they do today: the Estonian area was the smallest, and the Lithuanian area the largest. These societies were entirely rural with no urban centers in the true sense of the term, though the predominant settlement pattern was village-like concentration interspersed with single-household settlements. Overall population density was low, and large forested stretches covered the unpopulated territory.

Food was obtained through cultivation of crops, hunting, beekeeping, and fishing, and the proliferation of tools, weapons, jewelry, and woven cloth suggests the presence of artisans of various kinds. Dwellings continued to be constructed of wood as in earlier times, and protective stockades surrounding them suggest a persisting fear of raids by neighbors and outside marauders. Hillforts had become a common and hardier form of protection, some of them being large enough to accommodate many people in times of trouble. Some fortified settlements were built on lakes with the surrounding water serving as a barrier against outsiders. The clearing of forest land was a continuous activity and yielded new farm fields for cultivation. No wheeled vehicles of any kind were in use, and roads were for the most part tracks created by continuous use. The fastest and most efficient internal movement took place on navigable rivers.

To gain a sense of population development over time, we must resort to models offered by historical demographers for societies of this kind, since there is no direct evidence. Natural population increase in these



1 Hillforts at (a) Lielauce, Latvia, (b) Otepää, Estonia, and (c) Daubariai, Lithuania. Several hundred such hillocks dot the eastern Baltic littoral, most of them sites of pre-Christian hillforts and most still untouched by the hands of archeologists.

1 (cont.)

tribal societies was slow: both infant and adult mortality were high; periodic epidemics, warfare, and food shortages wiped out most of the population gains during a preceding longer period of peaceful development. As a consequence, life expectancy at birth would have been rather low, in the range of 35–40 years. Survival beyond infancy, however, meant that adults could live into their sixth and seventh decades. Rapid population increase in any given area within one generation could come only through in-migration, if new settlers were accepted and integrated into the existing population.

Since archeologists have sufficient confidence in their findings to propose boundaries for these tribal societies, the question arises of whether these "boundaries" were in any sense fixed in the modern sense. It is likely that they were not, since the people living within them had neither standing armies nor border guards to defend them. Boundaries are the creation of scholars looking backwards in time, rather than realities with which contemporaries had to reckon. More than likely these demarcated territories had core settlements, but the regions lying beyond the core, populated or not, were always open to raids and possibly to permanent occupation by strangers. Such dangers are testified to by the proliferation of fortifications of various kinds throughout the littoral, as well as by the fact that the mention by name of these societies in contemporary sources almost always takes place when they are being raided or are themselves raiders. The residents of these demarcated areas lived in constant danger from "outsiders," who were not necessarily people who spoke a different language. There was, in other words, no absolute guarantee against depredations by aggressive bands speaking the same language as those people they attacked. These dangers of everyday life should not lead to the conclusion that the tribal societies of the littoral were unusually warlike; in fact, only a few of them are noted in contemporary sources as being particularly belligerent. The Couronians used the Baltic Sea for piracy and long-distance raiding of settlements on the island of Gotland and mainland Sweden; and in Russian chronicles Lithuanian tribes are described as fierce. But the us/them dichotomy was flexible. Speaking a Baltic language was no safeguard against being raided by other Balts, and the Balts did not exhibit any particularly marked animosity toward Finnic-speaking peoples or Slavs. Prowess, might, and avarice were demonstrated not along language lines but against neighbors whoever they happened to be.

We cannot properly speak of "decentralization" of power in the littoral because that concept implies an earlier initial condition in which the opposite was the case. The littoral had never had a King Alfred (as in England) who in any sense united the tribal societies against an "outside" foe; the area was fragmented from the time its components began to be named. There were, however, political leaders and some degree of social stratification. In the chronicle sources of the thirteenth century these facts emerged in the use of such Latin terms as *seniores* (elders) and *rex* (king), making it plausible that similar differentiation among people existed even before the start of the second millennium. The chronicle sources used such terms most often in describing negotiations and warfare, and they generally do not dwell on what rights and responsibilities these leaders had among those they led. Nor do the sources describe any specific instruments through which leaders exercised their power or the geographical extent of their authority. Such information must be inferred from their structural positions. Also, in the last centuries of the first millennium, such leaders remain nameless; leaders are referred to by name only in the chronicle sources several centuries later. Thus, leaders remain something of a mystery; they existed, but whether they were elected (as among Germanic tribes to the south) or rose to prominence through lineage membership or intimidation is impossible to say.

Direct evidence from archeological findings in gravesites attests to the social strata in these societies. Some corpses were buried with many more material possessions than were others, some graves were set apart from other graves. Somewhat less direct is the evidence about the placement of housing: some homes in a community were built upon hills while others were concentrated at lower levels. Since the word "stratification" implies an ongoing process, even if available archeological evidence is from points in past time, it is plausible that differentiation by wealth was continuous. Strictly speaking, the evidence from burial sites – with some individuals having more and better quality weapons and jewelry buried with them – tells us only that at the moment of death they had more material possessions than others did, but that practice was common enough elsewhere for the inference to be drawn for the Baltic littoral as well. The evidence about housing is ambiguous because not all uncovered sites had the higher/lower distribution of residences; some of these tribal societies were likely to have been markedly stratified while others remained less differentiated.

Social distinctions based on material wealth could not have been great, because there is no evidence that in these societies, which operated close to a subsistence level, there was much accumulated wealth of any kind. Since the population was not divided between urban and rural, no urban places existed where wealth could be generated faster. Wealth differences among individuals do not immediately suggest social strata, because high status – the position of chieftain, or shaman, or elder, or rich person – could have lasted for only the lifetime of the particular person. We do not know about inheritance practices in these societies, and therefore whether wealth and prestige could have accumulated over several generations in a single family. Also, fixed and long-term social strata would have been vulnerable to sudden changes of fortune in societies as numerically small as these, where misfortune could plunge an entire society into relative poverty.

Such quibbles about social stratification, however, are not an argument for an undifferentiated social life, because there is plenty of evidence for considerable specialization of skills and for the presence of persons with special talents in metalworking, construction, and jewelry making; in short, those with the skills necessary to create the caches of material goods found in gravesites. These were skills that could be taught within families to the next generation. Extensive occupational differentiation, however, would have been something of a luxury for societies of this size; most individuals had to be successful farmers as well as, for example, skilled metalworkers, excellent beekeepers, and, when the situation required, good soldiers or even military leaders. The extent to which such markers of high status as titles were recognized throughout an entire population is also unknown, as well as whether the authority of, say, a military leader persisted over any length of time.

Finally, can change in these tribal societies be discerned to have a distinct trajectory? The available archeological evidence is at the individual case level from moments in past time: a skeleton with all his or her trappings buried at a specific moment in a specific place; a collection of unearthed wooden building materials that may have comprised a hillfort; the mention in a chronicle of a collective name of a people. To identify change as having taken place, each of these items has to be given an approximate date and be arrayed according to a timeline. All in all, the evidence for constant change is considerable because we can make a fairly educated guess about what the members of these societies ate and what they hunted, how large they were, what they built their homes from, how they decorated themselves, what tools and weapons they used, with whom they traded, what crops they grew, and whether they moved from place to place. Using the longest possible frame of reference, we can identify a long-term pattern of change that transformed these populations from hunter-gatherers to settled agriculturalists, from wood users to users of bronze and of iron. The shorter term is the more serious problem as we seek to discern a direction of change within the two or three hundred of years around the year AD 1000. Change in these centuries appears to have been more accumulative than developmental: more people and hence greater population density, more hillforts, more of the same kinds of weapons and decorations, of the same kinds of crops, and of trade in the same kinds of goods. Generally speaking, at some point quantitative socioeconomic change can become qualitative and a society can turn into what it had not been before. Had that happened or was that happening in the centuries surrounding the start of the second millennium? The evidence is ambiguous, and we may never know. What we do know is that change of the qualitative sort had happened a long time ago in other parts of the European continent, producing there societies that were developing in distinct ways. They had become more populous, more organized economically and politically; they had adopted belief systems in which territorial largeness and possession of land were considered absolute goods; these belief systems also encouraged expansion for various purposes: adventure, domination of others, conversion of others to new beliefs, the accumulation of wealth through trade and rivalry. These societies had a certain kind of militancy that went beyond mere exploration, commerce, and robbery; sometimes heavenly rewards were promised to those who carried out their mission successfully.

The tribal societies of the eastern Baltic littoral held few such beliefs, or at any rate beliefs that would have introduced into their behavior any major expansionist motives. They might have raided their neighbors, but only to return to their home settlements with booty; some might have moved to new areas and thus transgressed against understandings about such borders as did exist. But unending repetition of these activities did not result in the territory of these tribal societies growing in size. In the centuries surrounding AD 1000, however, the eastern Baltic littoral became increasingly an object of interest to those European societies in which expansion had become normal behavior.

BELIEFS AND BELIEF SYSTEMS

The recurring problem of lack of sources is only slightly less troublesome in the search for direct evidence about the belief systems of the littoral's tribal societies in the time around AD 1000. By definition, beliefs do not leave material traces when they lose their hold over the imagination; they simply disappear. Belief systems also change over time. What is known about the beliefs of the littoral peoples has had to be extracted from later chronicles by writers who were Christians intent on demonstrating the absurd ideas of the previously pagan peoples now under their tutelage, and by clergymen writing even later in time and complaining about "survivals" of paganism in their congregations. All this then has to be projected backwards in time.

Another layer of information of somewhat dubious value came from the enthusiastic nationalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see chapter 6). These authors replaced the condemnatory description of the earlier Christian commentators with celebratory accounts of pre-Christian belief systems, complete with pantheons of gods and a priesthood whose center was supposed to be a place called Romove in the Lithuanian lands. These extravagant nationalistic imaginings were particularly marked among some Latvian and Lithuanian intellectuals, who were also greatly impressed by the size of the territory over which traces of Baltic-language place-names and hydronyms were to be found. They thought that it was only logical that this far-flung Baltic cultural space also must have had a mighty philosophical and religious system within it. The oral tradition – containing the Lithuanian *dainos* and Latvian *dainas*, both being types of folk poetry – was mined for pure examples of what the "ancient" Balts had believed. Few such claims, however, were made by Estonian nationalists during and after the nineteenth century; even in the earlier Christian centuries commentary about the paganism of the Estonian population was much more muted than for the Baltic-language regions of the littoral.

A decision to avoid anachronistic claims thus leaves relatively little direct evidence about the religious-philosophical beliefs of the littoral inhabitants in the centuries before AD 1000. Yet we have to assume they did exist. These tribal societies, which had identifiable occupations, an organized economy, and the capability of defending themselves, would have been strange indeed if these features were not accompanied by notions about the great dualities of all societies: good and evil, sacred and profane, life and death, justice and injustice, nature and the supernatural, sickness and health, justice and injustice, self and other, friend and enemy.

Looking backwards, specialists agree that such beliefs and belief systems were probably suffused with animism: the conviction that each visible and invisible object contained a unique spiritual force that added to its nature a dimension that was imperceptible to the human senses. Animism contained a reverential attitude toward the natural world and manifested itself in diverse acts of placatory worship of natural objects – trees, animals, rivers – with the use of foodstuffs and other small and sometimes valuable offerings. The spirits of nature could be made less threatening by such acts of obeisance, which would make the efforts of human beings less likely to fail. The spirit world was omnipresent in the natural world and through that in the world of human beings as they interacted with the natural world. These approachable spirits were sometimes likened to human parents: before plowing, the plowman thanked an "earth mother," to protect the home from destruction in storms, one called upon the goodwill of the "thunder father." A worshipful attitude toward the fathers and mothers of the natural world evidently led to cults for some of them, because the spirit world was understood to have its own hierarchy. Spirits could be disembodied, but could at times take corporeal form as well. There were guardian spirits of the home and hearth, and some animals – such as snakes – could embody a spiritual force. Spirits departed when the body died, and some anecdotal evidence in chronicles tells of dismemberment of enemies to ensure that their spirits could not return to their bodies.

Later chronicle sources also tell of special persons who had the power to intercede with the spirit world on behalf of other human beings, but it is unlikely that these persons were anything like the organized priesthood that was portrayed by nineteenth-century nationalists. People thought to have special powers were venerated as individuals but not as a caste. The presence of shamans, magicians, and healers of various kinds is an entirely credible assumption; other societies with animistic beliefs had them. There were also special places for worship and sacrifice – sacred groves and large stones in the fields. These groves were sometimes believed to be the permanent homes of certain kinds of spirits. There is, however, no evidence from archeological sites that these venues for worship and sacrifice ever became enclosed structures such as churches or temples, or that worship as such ever assumed a permanently communal form.

At the highest reaches of the supernatural world there were gods, some of whom retained a connection to particular natural phenomena while others embodied more abstract notions such as fate and fortune. These deities with interventionist capabilities could be persuaded by appropriate rituals to affect human affairs positively or at least refrain from damaging them. But such interventions evidently left plenty of room for human decision and exercise of will. It is very much an open question whether the belief in "gods" included a belief in a single supervisory figure or was polytheistic. Folk beliefs in Lithuanian communities much later in time apparently did include a supervisory god – *Dievas* – while in the Latvian territory, again much later, there was a similar figure with a similar name – *Dieviņš* – who was almost always referred to by the diminutive form of his name and was believed to take human form as a beneficent and stooped old man looking over the fields. Though ninteenth-century nationalists conjured up a "Baltic pantheon" of gods – a veritable Olympus – there is no evidence that the gods of the littoral peoples had anything like the natures of the rollicking deities of ancient Greece. The peoples of the Estonian areas may not have had any such gods at all, and the one Estonian-area "god" mentioned in the later chronicles – *Tarapitha* – remains a somewhat shadowy figure of uncertain function.

How exactly belief in the spirit world and in gods of various kinds translated into moral codes, at either the personal or collective level, also remains an open question. Rules laying down what constituted good or bad behavior may have been anchored in the world of spirits and deities, or they could have been generated by social experience over time: which of these was the case, or whether both of these domains were a combined source of behavioral norms, we do not know. Nor is anything known about sanctions visited upon transgressors of common morality. Although the concepts of "hell" or "eternal damnation" do not appear to have existed, burial customs do testify to a belief in an afterlife of some kind. Graves frequently contained material objects – weapons, jewelry, and foodstuffs – meant to be used in the hereafter. In the Baltic-language areas (as distinct from the Finnic ones), the gods do not appear to have a frightening or judgmental aspect. Even though they are portrayed as being "in charge" of various parts of the natural world, their responsibilities evidently did not include direct supervision of human relationships. Perhaps behavioral norms at the personal and collective level arose principally from the recognition of what was needed for individual and collective survival in a relatively harsh world.

Among the many unclear questions concerning beliefs around the year AD 1000 are those relating to their distribution and generational transmission. In other words, they have to be placed squarely in the changing social context of beliefs among believers about whom we also know precious little. Most frequently, beliefs and belief systems of the littoral have been investigated as generalized features of two large culture-complexes – the Baltic and the Finnic – with these complexes conceptualized as standing above the fray of everyday social life. As a research strategy, this approach has the advantage of simplifying the task, but it does not go far in explaining how beliefs informed action. The Baltic-area littoral was a region of many different tribal societies, human groupings in a constant process of change, some of which may have been transformatory and some not. There was no doubt communication between and among the peoples of these societies; they were not hermetically sealed against outside influences.

Does that mean that they drew from a common stock of beliefs and a common set of behavioral norms – the Balts from theirs and the Finnic peoples from another? This does not seem likely, given the absence of a littoral-wide priestly caste to systematize beliefs and of religious institutions to disseminate them across the land. The existing information from chronicle sources later in time suggests that beliefs were highly individualized, though perhaps not unique to each location. Some trees, such as the oak, appear to have been venerated by the Balts generally, but many other natural objects had sacred qualities attached to them in some places but not in others. The Balts, as noted, had a panoply of gods, while the Finnic peoples seem to have had relatively few. Later sources also leave the strong impression that the tribal societies fought against each other more for material purposes, such as territory or booty, rather than in order to impose their beliefs on neighboring societies.

We assume that these beliefs and belief systems changed as they moved through historic time, which poses the problem of the generational transmission of information and knowledge in non-literate societies. The littoral had no collections of sacred writings from which each new generation could continue to draw beliefs, which means that there must have existed some mechanism for transmitting such information orally. Undoubtedly this was so, otherwise we have to believe that each generation invented new gods and new beliefs. The world of nature staying the same suggests that characterizations of natural forces and explanations for them would have also remained more or less unchanged over the generations. But later chronicle sources also depict sacred knowledge as being the monopoly of special individuals; such knowledge, in other words, was not public knowledge. Some beliefs therefore were passed on through the normal processes of socialization: children learned from parents about the spirit world that existed within each visible or audible phenomenon, and about how to behave in concert with it.

Cures, incantations, proper forms of obeisance and propitiation, however, were more specialized forms of information and had to be taught directly by one individual to another. There is no mention in later chronicle sources of these processes of learning; even if some wise persons were accredited with special powers, it is not at all clear that these folk had apprentices. Orally transmitted information and knowledge, as a corpus, undoubtedly changed somewhat in the process of reaching a new generation. Some beliefs fell by the wayside as outmoded, some were simply forgotten, some were learned in altered form. New beliefs could be created when the necessity arose and new phenomena had to be explained in terms of existing understandings. Thus, the beliefs of the Baltic littoral peoples reported in chronicles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries cannot stand unquestioned as the beliefs they had eight to ten generations earlier.

INTEREST IN THE EASTERN BALTIC LITTORAL

The growing frequency of references to the Baltic littoral in classical and postclassical writings as well as archeological finds attest to a growing interest in the Baltic Sea region among contemporaries during the centuries after AD 500. Roman coins were brought from the empire to the Baltic shores either by traders from there or by intermediaries; the largest hoards, however, have been found in the *southern* littoral – in the region that later became East Prussia – rather than in the *eastern*. The southern shore was the source of Baltic amber, a commodity highly valued by the Greeks (who called it *electron*) and by the Romans and the Byzantines. The "amber routes" of traders stretched over land, through what later became Russia and Poland, but also up rivers to the seacoast.

To portray these trading activities as absolutely the first contact between the littoral and the "outside world," however, would not be precise, because the peoples of the Baltic littoral by AD 500 must have been used to incursions by "foreigners" from every direction, given the migrations characteristic of the area. Traders were simply one of many different kinds of in-wanderers, with the main difference being that some in-wanderers came and stayed while the traders came and left. It is probably also an exaggeration to talk of systematic "trading relationships" between the littoral and the "outside," because the arrival of the traders was sporadic and unpredictable rather than regular and systematic.

If traders became an unremarkable part of littoral life as the millennium wore on, so did armed raids for the purposes of plunder and pillage. The sagas of the Scandinavian Vikings of the ninth century mention incursions affecting mainly the peoples whose territories lay along the Baltic coast – Couronians, Livonians, Estonians, and to a lesser extent the land-bound Semigallians. Even though the saga stories describe some raids as aiming permanently to subjugate the defeated localities, it was primarily plunder and not long-term Viking settlements that resulted. Moreover, territorial conquest – an early form of colonization – would have necessitated subsequent administrative structures, for which the Vikings had neither the taste nor the manpower. A much more profitable arrangement was the payment of tribute, which was the aim of incursions from the early Rus' principalities lying to the east. From these statelets – Polotsk, Pskov, and Novgorod – raids were made into the territories of the Estonians, Latgalians, and Livonians, with longer-term tributary relationships developing between the rulers of these littoral territories and the Rus'ian states. Trade was not precluded, of course, but these relationships were a substitute for annexation and the need for subsequent administration. In the west, however, the Vikings appeared to have had no such plans. They did, however, use the rivers of the eastern Baltic littoral as pathways to points farther east, which was easily done without engendering conflict with the tribal societies whose territories bordered the rivers. By contrast, the Rus'ian peoples had no interest at this juncture and perhaps insufficient resources to try to penetrate to the very shores of the Baltic Sea from an easterly direction.

A precise chronology of these diverse trading and raiding events is difficult to establish, but it is fairly certain that their frequency grew with every century after the mid-millennium. By the ninth and tenth centuries, the peoples of the eastern littoral had to have incorporated into their view of the world the knowledge that their own societies existed among many other similar entities populated by practitioners of different customs, who venerated different gods and spoke different languages. It was also quite evident that these "foreigners" were much more intent on extending their influence to the littoral than the littoral peoples were on expanding theirs. Though Couronians launched raids against Gotland in the Baltic Sea and even against seacoast settlements on the Scandinavian peninsula, and Estonians sent raiding parties into Slavic territories to the east, none of these adventures entailed using a military strategy as a stepping-stone to territorial control or stepwise further incursions. The favored pattern for the littoral peoples was incursion–plunder–withdrawal, whereas the surrounding societies – especially those to the west and southwest – showed clear signs of wanting to convert incursions into something more by the end of the millennium.

To understand why this was so, we need to have a brief look at what had transpired in Scandinavia and western Europe during the centuries after AD 500. The "time of the Vikings" had come and gone in the Scandinavian lands by AD 1000. Their raids and exploratory voyages had taken them to North America, the western European seacoast, and across the eastern Baltic littoral into the Rus'ian lands. The causes of their "sudden" appearance were numerous and they certainly included internal conflicts and the love of adventure and plunder. But above all there was a rapidly growing population, which meant that the Viking departure from their homelands had more the character of an expansion. Viking ships from the Norwegian territories took the so-called outer passage, raiding Scotland, Ireland, and France and even reached North America. The Danes followed the middle passage, raiding the British Isles, France, and the Low Countries; the Swedes headed across the Baltic Sea (the "eastward passage"), through the Baltic littoral into lands farther east and eventually into the Byzantine Empire. The end product of these excursions from the sixth to the tenth century was mixed: new territories were settled (especially in the Rus' lands), considerable fear was instilled in the affected indigenous peoples, but colonies did not develop in the sense of conquered territory administered by and beneficial to the various Viking homelands. Where the Vikings settled, they eventually merged with the indigenous population. By the tenth century, the population pressures in the homelands had eased, and the outward movements ceased.

The influences flowing from these adventures were not unidirectional, because through them other European peoples became increasingly acquainted with the northern lands from whence the Vikings had come. These were pagan lands, arousing the keen interest of the church; the first strong ties with Christian Europe were established in Swedish lands in the ninth century. By that time, politics in the Scandinavian kingdoms also had become more stable, and local dynasties produced a series of strong rulers who were able to defend their homelands against predators and develop something like national policy. Christian conversion in the Danish lands made substantial headway under Harald II (Bluetooth) and Sven I (Forkedbeard) in the tenth century, and the conversion of Canute II (the Great) in the first half of the eleventh century completed the process. In the Swedish lands, Olaf Skutkoning, whose reign spanned the late tenth and early eleventh century, was the first Christian ruler, and all his successors stayed in the faith. Full Christianization came to Norway only in the eleventh century, when Olaf II (St. Olaf) completed the task.

Two things should be noted: first, the Scandinavian lands joined Christian Europe without experiencing the occupation of foreign armies and the armed imposition of a new faith; and second the christianization of Scandinavia, from the point of view of the existing Christian states and the church, represented a successful expansion and heightened their interest in the remaining "pagan" peoples of the European north. The inclusion of the Scandinavian lands into Christian Europe, however, did not engender pacific behavior, but just the opposite. The Scandinavians themselves, particularly the Danes and the Swedes, continued their earlier interest in the eastern Baltic littoral, but now they had additional motives for their expansionist efforts. Also, with internal consolidation and strong monarchical leaders, the Scandinavian lands continued to push against each other, as they sought to enlarge the territories under their control. They also had to ward off the efforts of the western Europeans who pressed northward as they followed christianization with attempts at political control. By the end of the eleventh century the Scandinavian states resembled the rest of Christian Europe: internally consolidated, with monarchical dynasties struggling to raise revenues to expand national governments and to retain their positions against power-hungry nobles; and with economies that were in the process of developing continuing long- and short-distance trade.

The christianization of the lands of western Europe, of course, had taken place much earlier; Gaul, for example, had been a part of the Roman Empire and had converted to Christianity when the empire became Christian. The collapse of the Roman Empire, which had been the most successfully expansionist power to date in the classical world, did not diminish the attractiveness of the idea that expanding control over new territories was an absolute good. The western European successor states, most notably the Carolingian Empire, continued their expansionary ways, but by the end of the ninth century Charlemagne had died and his empire had become divided into three parts among his sons, producing smaller though still energetic states. The royal dynasties in these states were to form France and the Holy Roman Empire of the Germans. Though nominally Christian (embracing the western variant of Christianity) these states competed fiercely with each other, and both were growing increasingly resentful of the efforts of the Roman papacy to be the overlord of all secular rulers.

Their development, however, did not follow a smooth path in the century approaching AD 1000. From the north, the Viking raids instilled fear, while in the east the empire of the Byzantines (the eastern half of the old Roman Empire) remained a rival of the western powers until it was overrun by Muslim armies. After considerable territorial gains that carried them into the Iberian peninsula, the Muslims succeeded to some extent in transforming the Mediterranean Sea into a "Muslim lake." By the tenth century, the European west had entered what was truly the "dark ages" by comparison with what had come before and what would come afterwards, and in sharp contrast with the admirable civilization of the Muslim territories. Domestically, the royal dynasties increasingly had to devolve authority to the powerful families in their realms: these were forming landowning nobilities whose support monarchs needed for governance and military adventures. The overall victor in this decline of secular power was the papacy, which, as an international institution, was concerned less with the territorial success of particular dynasties and more with the territorial spread of Christianity. The efforts of the church in the Scandinavian territories had been just one manifestation of this concern.

The eleventh century witnessed the beginnings of a reversal in the fortunes of the European west. A century of weak (though never totally absent) economic activity was replaced by growth, and population increase became a constant. In those regions where they had gone into a decline, cities and towns began to revive, with their associated economic and trading activity. Royal dynasties started to reassert themselves against their own landowning nobilities, against the encroachments of papal power, and against each other. Several centuries of decentralization were difficult to overcome quickly, but the trend was quite clear. The feudal bond – which tied powerful landowners to the king and to each other in a hierarchical fashion – remained strong but was not inviolable; and the seemingly eternal manorial system with its enserfed peasants could not be changed overnight, but could accommodate new forms of economic activity, especially long- and short-distance trade.

Even though commercial activities continued to expand, control of land (and of the incomes deriving from land) remained the principal motivating force in the affairs between states. Such control could be obtained directly by conquest or indirectly through dynastic marriages, and the monarchs of the new burgeoning Europe used both methods. Since the papacy could not use either means directly, it sought to enlarge its control by employing its monopoly over the salvation of souls – those of kings, nobles, and commoners alike. It had had to accept the presence of an infidel Muslim empire to its immediate south, but it did not have to accept the continued existence of pagan peoples elsewhere on the European continent.

Then there were the Slavic peoples who resided south and east of the Baltic littoral territories. They had taken up permanent residence in these regions in the two centuries immediately following the collapse of the Roman Empire (traditionally dated at AD 476), and not much more is known about their political history in the subsequent period than is known about the Finnic and Baltic peoples to their north and west. At that time the Slavs were not unlike the peoples of the Baltic littoral: small tribal societies jostling for territory, some with strong leaders and others with weak. One strong leader emerged in the ninth century from among the Scandinavian Vikings, who had been making their way into this Slavic territory by means of the rivers crossing the Baltic littoral. Termed the Varangians in later chronicles of the area, some of them settled and came to dominate the existing populations; among them, the most successful leader was Rurik, who appears to have ruled the principality of Novgorod in the 860s and is considered the founder of the strongest of the Rus' dynasties. Rurik's dynasty supplied the Novgorod area with a series of strong and active rulers: Oleg in the early tenth century and Sviatoslav somewhat later, Vladimir in the decades straddling the year AD 1000, and Yaroslav later. None of these rulers, however, succeeded in uniting the eastern Slavs into a single state, though each brought something to the development of the lands they ruled directly. Under Oleg, the center of Rus' political activity moved to Kiev; Sviatoslav was perhaps the most successful militarily, expanding his power to the south; Vladimir was responsible for establishing Christianity among the eastern Slavs, patterned on the church of the Byzantine Empire. Generally, the Rus' principalities oriented themselves toward the Byzantines and thus grew in strength out of the reach of the western European powers and the western papacy.

The similarities between the Baltic littoral peoples and those of the Rus' territories, however, were less important than the differences. First, the Rus' principalities were larger territorially, and in the centuries around AD 1000 may have been experiencing considerable population growth. Second, their leaders were expansion-minded and hungry enough for new territory to do almost constant battle against each other and against peoples living to their east and south. Third, they managed to establish dynasties within which political power could be passed from one generation to the next, thus perpetuating legitimacy of domination. Even so, unifying statehood evaded these peoples; dynasties were no more than individual families who had achieved power for a time but could be replaced by others when weaknesses developed. Even the strong rulers had to attend constantly to the plotting of relatively wealthy and power-hungry rivals within their own territories who were beginning to form a permanent class of *boyars* always ready to challenge sitting rulers. A unified Russian state did not develop naturally; it had to be fought for and in fact did not form until much later in time.

It is puzzling why the Rus' principalities adjoining the lands of the peoples of the Baltic littoral did not try to move westward in a determined manner. Perhaps a simultaneous three-front expansion (east, south, and west) was beyond their power, and perhaps the three Baltic littoral peoples directly across the western borderlands – the Estonians, Latgalians, and Lithuanians – appeared too ready to defend themselves. Thus, the Rus' principalities (and the littoral peoples in turn) settled for the status quo that involved periodic raids against one another (some looking initially like, but proving not to be, expansionist efforts). The Latgalians for a while paid tribute to the *kniaz* (ruler) of Polotsk. Relationships of other kinds continued throughout this period of military skirmishing: the Latgalians, for example, had their first experience of Christianity through missionaries from the Rus' principalities, and trading activity, while interrupted periodically, was never entirely extinguished. When at the end of the twelfth century more determined foreigners arrived from the west, the peoples of the Baltic littoral initially had no reason to think of them as anything other than yet a further troublesome group of in-wanderers.