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Book Review: A SURVEY STUDY OF THE ANCIENT BALTS

Morija Gimbutas. The BALTS. New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1963 ("Ancient Peoples and Places" series.). 286 pp.. 75 photographs. 47 line drawings, 11 maps.

Inquiries about the history of the Balts have been made by a number of Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Swedish, German, Polish, and Russian archeologists, linguists, and historians; despite this, so far there has been no summarizing study dealing with the Balts. Dr. M. Gimbutas, presently a professor of archeology at the University of California, made an attempt to provide such a highly needed study in the English language. She has subdivided her work into eight main chapters, which will be discussed individually.

I. *Linguistic and Historic Background.* This chapter surveys the findings of linguistic and historical studies, particularly as they bear on the question of boundaries of the area inhabited by the Balts. The name 'Balts' refers to a group of people belonging to one linguistic group of the Indo-European family, including the present-day Lithuanians and Latvians, and the Prussians that existed before 1700 A.D. However, the name of these people has not come down through either linguistic or historic channels. The neologism 'Balts' prevails in scientific literature and is derived from the Latin name for the Baltic Sea — *Mare Balticum*. A Lithuanian linguist, K. Buga, has suggested the name 'Aistians', taken from the Roman historian Tacitus, who in the book *Germania* (98 A.D.) mentioned *gentes Aestiorum*, residing on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. This name, however, did not meet with general acceptance. Further in the chapter, M. Gimbutas mentions where and when the separate Baltic tribes come into the light of history. She ascribes to the eastern Balts the *Neuri*, first mentioned by Herodotus in the 5th century B.C. (unfortunately, the question of their nationality is not settled beyond doubt). Moving through the centuries, she mentions the two Prussian tribes known to Ptolemy in the second century A.D., the *Sudovians* and *Galindians*; the *Curonians* noted in the Scandinavian sagas of the 7th century; *Prussians*, whose name appears in the 9th century in the writings of the so-called Bavarian Geographer; *Semigallians* in 870 A.D.; *Lithuanians* and *Lettigallians* in the 11th century; and, finally, *Galindians* (Goljad'), mentioned in Russian sources in 1058 and 1147 as living to the west of Moscow. However, these early sources are of little help in understanding the culture of the ancient Balts. The geographic area inhabited by the Balts can be much more fruitfully determined by the distribution of river-and place-names of Baltic origin. M. Gimbutas has drawn a map Of the Baltic territory (Fig. 2, pp. 30-31); this map is quite accurate and only needs some slight adjustments along the Warsaw- Kiev- Kursk- Moscow line, since the Balts did not reach as far east at all points as indicated. Whether the river Desna may be rightfully related to the Lithuanian word "dešinè" (the right side) and Volga to "ilgas" (long) should be decided upon further study by linguists.

II. *Baltic Origins.* The question of Baltic origins is inherently tied to the question of the Indo-European homeland. After mentioning those places where the Indo-European- homeland has been previously sought (north Pontic area, Central Asia, Lithuania, Eurasiatic steppes), M. Gimbutas argues that around 2300-2200 B.C., there was an expansion of an entirely new culture from the steppe zone north of the Black Sea and beyond the Volga into the Balkans, the Aegean area and Western Anatolia and, soon thereafter, into Central and Baltic Europe. These were the Eurasiatic 'Kurgan' culture people, who possessed vehicles and knowledge of animal husbandry, farmed on a small scale, and were organized into small patriarchal communities. These Indo-Europeans, although closely related at first, resolved into a number of separate groups once they left their homeland and mixed with the local European cultures, forming in the first century of the second millenium B.C. the nuclear units of the later Balts, Germanic, Slavic, and other peoples. The specific group of Indo-Europeans that evolved into the proto-Balts proceeded from the lower Dnieper basin in the direction of Central Europe and up to the Baltic Sea. Some of them even reached southwestern Finland; A second, related group moved from the middle Dnieper to the upper Dnieper, upper Volga, and the Oka river area in central Russia (Fat'janavo culture). In all these areas, the new settlers, the so-called Corded-Ware or Battle-Axe culture people, found hunter-fishers, known in archeological literature as the Comb-marked Pitted-Ware culture people. The new settlers appear to have been Eoropoid in physical

type and seem to have engaged in farming, raising cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, horses, dogs, sowing wheat and millet grains. Archeological excavations in Pomerania and East Prussia (Rzucewo, Succase) indicate that these people lived in permanent villages and buried their dead uncremated, in burrows.

III. *The Bronze and the Early Iron Age of the Maritime Balts.* Around 1800 B.C., the Balts became acquainted with metal. From the very beginning, the Balts became divided into two zones of influence. During the entire Bronze Age, the western zone was under the influence of the Central European metallurgical center, while the eastern zone retained its archaic character, with only slight influence from its southern neighbors. This cultural differentiation was maintained throughout the remaining prehistoric times. The western Balts, i.e., the ancestors of the Prussians, were culturally similar to the inhabitants of central Europe (Illyrians, Celts) and to their western neighbors, the Germanic peoples; the eastern Balts, (Lithuanians, Letts) were in close association with Finno-Ugrians, Cimmerians, proto-Scythians, and early Slavs. The Maritime Balts developed a lively trade in amber with central Europe, the people of Uneticean culture (amber has been found even in Mycenaean graves in Greece). Amber was also shipped to northern neighbors, to northwestern Russia, even to the central Ural region. Toward the end of the Bronze Age, amber spread even to the eastern shores of the Adriatic, and is especially prevalent in the Etruscan graves in Italy. The dead continued to be buried in burrows, surrounded by two or three stone rings. However, around the 12th century B.C., cremation of the dead became an established custom. House-urns penetrated into the western Baltic culture around the 7th century B.C., while the so-called Face-urns appeared around the 6th-5th century B.C., spreading from central Europe.

In the early Iron Age, the Balts began to subdivide: slowly they split into Galindians, Sudovians, Sembian-Notangians, Curonians, Lithuanians. The Baltic expansion is depicted in two maps (Fig. 10, p. 63 and Fig. 24, p. 83). The first map shows the maximum spread of Baltic culture during the Bronze Age. The extension of boundaries to the lower Oder, Carpathians, Kiev, Kursk, and especially for 400 km. along the Urals in this map requires more substantial evidence based on archeological findings. This criticism also holds true for the northern boundary. It is still uncertain whether the Fat'janovo culture people belong to the Baltic culture group or are only related to it. The question of the assignment of the Face-urns culture group to the Balts has not been archeologically settled either (Fig. 24), and the Neuri correspondence to the eastern Balts is also questionable.

IV. *The Bronze and the Early Iron Age of the Eastern Balts.* Unfortunately, insufficient archeological evidence exists about the culture of the eastern Balts. Systematic archeological excavations have been started in those extensive lands only recently. Consequently, the author was able to describe the culture of the eastern Balts only in general terms, and her account will eventually have to be filled in with greater detail. As long as the archeological material of this period remains inadequately studied, the question of the eastern limit of the Baltic culture remains unsettled, especially since the question of the Slavic expansion into the lands of the eastern Balts remains open.

V. *The "Golden Age".* This age refers to the period from the 2nd to the 5th century A.D., which saw developments in agriculture and local metallurgy in connection with the extensive amber trade, especially with the provinces of the Roman Empire and Free Germany. In the map on pp. 110-111 (Fig. 36), M. Gimbutas shows a well-consolidated area of Baltic culture within more conservative boundaries; the Balts are portrayed as reaching only the lower Vistula in the West and the Narew-Bug confluence in the southwest; the Pripet swamp area is rightfully excluded from the Baltic lands in the south, so that they reach only the confluence of Berezina and Dnieper rivers; the boundary follows the rivers Sozh, Desna, and the Oka basin, extending almost to Moscow in the east, reaching the upper Volga in the north, then follows approximately the present Latvian - Estonian border. Unfortunately, in the key, No. 2 is interchanged with No. 5, interchanging the eastern Slavs with the Finno-Ugrians.

During this period, ornaments and jewelry types were especially varied. In connection with the amber trade with the Roman Provinces and with Rome itself, many imported articles found their way into the Baltic lands: bronze and silver Roman coins, *fibulae*, glass beads, bronze vessels, *terra sigillata* pots, oil-lamps, etc. The author provides well-selected illustrations of the more characteristic ornaments, mentioning finds from graves of the wealthy, such as the double graves of Veršvai (near Kaunas) and Upytė (Near Panevežys), and the princely burials of Sz wajcoria (near Suwalki).

VI. *The Baltic "Middle Iron Age".* In this period (400-800 A.D.), the Prussians and Curonians played a leading role among the Balts. The continuity of culture among the various Baltic tribes is clearly discernible; however, burial rites become differentiated. The material culture evidenced new forms: an abundance of silver articles stems from this period, although the ornamentation slowly becomes somewhat less fine. Knowledge of the eastern Balts again suffers due to lack of excavation in those areas.

The middle iron age is marked by two important developments: the Slavic expansion into the eastern Baltic states around 400 A.D. and the Scandinavian-German expansion to the East Baltic coast around the middle of the 7th century. The Balts lost much eastern territory to the Slavs. A map on p. 150 shows that in the 10th - 12th century the Baltic boundaries ran almost along a straight line from Pskov to Minsk in the east, reaching Narew and lower Vistula in the south. The eastern Baltic areas were occupied by Vjatichi, Krivichi, Radimichi, Dregovich, etc. Shortlived Scandinavian colonies were established in Grobin, Sauslau-kas (in Latvia), Viskiauten (in Samland), Truso near Elbing, and so on.

VII. *The Balts Before the Dawn of History.* In the period between 800 -1200 A.D., the Baltic culture lived through a resurgence, especially in the western sections. Graves from this period yield many ornaments, weapons, and other

implements, variously designed. Trade relations were established with Scandinavian countries, Kievan Russia, and western Europe. However, at the dawn of history, the Prussians met their unhappy fate; and between 1231 and 1288 they were conquered by the Order of the Teutonic Knights. The Curonians, Semigallians, Selonians and Lettigallians also fell under their control. Only the Lithuanians, having established an independent state in the 13th century were able not only to withstand the onslaught of the Order of the Teutonic Knights, but also to expand their boundaries in the east (see map Fig. 57, pp. 174-175).

VIII. *Religion*. The last chapter is devoted to the Baltic religion. Using written sources, folklore, and to some extent even archeological findings, M. Gimbutas tries to reconstruct the main Characteristics of the Baltic religion. She assigns the sanctuaries excavated in the Smolensk area in 1955-57 to the eastern Balts. The role of *Krivis*, or the chief priest, burial rites, *vélés*, various deities, sacred woods, etc. are discussed. The discourse provides a reasonably accurate picture of our knowledge of the Baltic religion, at the same time leaving many questions still unanswered.

Short Evaluation. In general, the study provides a good summary work on the Balts, their origin, culture, and territories. The author had to tailor her work to fit the format of the series on Ancient Peoples and Places. Consequently, she was able to only touch upon many questions; a more definitive study on the Balts would require several such volumes. Many questions still remain unanswered, some (like the problems of eastern boundaries, eastern Baltic culture, Slavic expansion) awaiting further findings. The illustrations in the present book are well-chosen and the maps are technically well-executed. Only the bibliography at the end of the work could have been more extensive.

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