



## Conferences and Events

# The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

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### Austmarr Network Updates: *Genius loci* and European Connections

“*Genius loci in the Prehistory of the Baltic Sea Region*”

29–30 May 2019, Institute of Baltic Region History and Archaeology, Klaipėda University, Lithuania

“*European Connections: Cultural Transfer to and from the Baltic Sea Region*”

6 November 2020 (Part 1) & 12 November 2021 (Part 2), University of Bonn, Germany

Kendra Willson, University of Turku

Since 2011, the Austmarr Network has promoted international and interdisciplinary cooperation among scholars interested in the prehistory and early history of the Circum-Baltic region and in particular in the role of contacts in shaping the cultures of Northern Europe. *Austmarr* [‘Eastern Sea’] is an Old Norse name for the Baltic, attested in the 9<sup>th</sup>-century skaldic poem *Ynglingatal* by Þjóðólfr ór Hvini. Participants in the network include archaeologists, folklorists, historians, linguists, philologists, and religion experts from Baltic, Finnic, Germanic, and Slavic-speaking areas. In addition to holding annual conferences and workshops, the network has produced the volume *Contacts and Networks in the Baltic Sea Region: Austmarr as a Northern Mare nostrum, ca. 500–1500 AD* (Bertell et al. 2019) and a special issue of *RMN Newsletter* with the theme of *Interdisciplinary and Comparative Method-ologies: Exploring Circum-Baltic Cultures and Beyond* (no. 14, Ahola et al. 2019). The network website is [austmarr.org](http://austmarr.org). In the future, the network hopes to expand its range of activities.

The last physical conference of the Austmarr Network to date was held at the Institute of Baltic Region History and Archaeology at Klaipėda University, Lithuania, on 29–30 May 2019, hosted by Vykintas Vaitkevičius. The theme was “*Genius loci in the Prehistory of the Baltic Sea Region*” (Austmarr IX). The concept of *genius loci* [‘spirit of a place’] is based on a supernatural being in Roman

religion, but has been extended to a more abstract meaning. What makes places significant, and how does this spirit adapt and renew over time?

Alexandra Sanmark (University of the Highlands and Islands) opened with a keynote lecture on “Norse Assembly Sites: A Case of *genius loci*?”, focusing on the example of Anundshög. Many assembly sites remain important over long periods even though the surrounding society may change in significant ways, for example through a change of religion. Jukka Korpela (University of Eastern Finland) discussed “*Genius loci of Cult Places – Place Names and Cult Places in East Finnic Forests*”. Place names can provide information about pre-Christian cultic sites, which may also show such archaeological features as cup stones, petroglyphs, and cairns. Sabine Walther (University of Bonn) presented examples of “Greek and Latin Authors on Religious Practices Performed in Natural Spaces in the Southern Baltic Region”. The passages from Classical authors describing the religious practices of Germanic tribes and other ‘barbarians’ that are presented in anthologies and textbooks are typically taken out of context. The same author may provide contradictory information within the same text and often has a political agenda. Turning to a modern-day example, Kendra Willson (University of Turku / Polish Institute of Advanced Studies) discussed the role of narrative in “Creating the Vörå Runestone Sites”. The discovery of runes in Ostrobothnia

around 1980 led to an authority crisis, expressed in competing narratives, about their age and about the prehistory of the region. Leszek Słupecki (University of Rzeszów) gave the second keynote lecture on “Three Capitals Where *genius loci* Works: Vilnius, Cracow, and Kiev”. All of these cities have foundational myths stemming from pagan times, with associated supernatural figures - iron wolf, dragon, and swan respectively - that continue to function as symbols of the cities.

The next set of papers were theoretical. In his keynote lecture, Joonas Ahola (University of Helsinki) considered “*Genius loci* and Ontologies of a Place”. Linguistic behaviors such as narration and cognitive factors such as cultural knowledge shape an individual’s experience of a place. Léon van Gulik (University of Leiden) talked about “Evoking the Spirits of Time and Place: Towards a Theory of Atmospheres as the Felt Properties of Human Experience”. He offered some conceptual tools for understanding the interaction between experience and memory. Bridging the connection between theory and practical applications, Rasa Čepaitienė (Lithuanian Institute of History) discussed “*Genius loci* and the Cultural Heritage Conservation Discipline”, asking challenging questions about the use of places and how being identified as heritage transforms a site. Frog (University of Helsinki) introduced the concept of “Otherworlding: A Theoretical Approach to the Mythologization of Place”. He considered the relationship among places that exist solely in mythology, places that are real but sufficiently far away that most community members have no firsthand knowledge of them, and local and familiar places that can become mythologized through ritual actions. The penultimate paper by Andrius Kaniava (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) presented “Story-Places: Phenomenological Approach to Lithuanian Sacred Sites”. Sacred sites in Lithuania are part of the natural landscape, understood through human experience expressed by means of stories. Finally, Eero Peltonen (Finnish Folklore Society) discussed “Sacred Encounters – Ancient Echoes of Painted Cliffs in Finland”. Archaeoacoustics combines archaeology and ethnomusicology. It turns out that the sites of cliff paintings over water in

Eastern Finland are characterized by distinctive echo effects; by experimenting with their acoustic potential, researchers explore possible prehistoric sacred soundscapes. Peltonen led the group in a sing-along of a piece in Kalevala-meter, a participatory end to an intense and stimulating day of lectures.

A full day of papers was followed by a full-day excursion around western Lithuania to view places of diverse and lasting significance, with expert guidance by Vykintas Vaitkevičius. The first stop was the hill dedicated to St. Birutė in Palanga, which has been a ritual site since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Vykintas Vaitkevičius presented a “talk on the spot” about the history of the hill. The second location was the Eršketynė holy spring, which has been a ritual site since pagan times. After a picnic lunch at Eršketynė, we proceeded to Šilalė, a complex of sacred stones. The Apuolė hillfort boasts the oldest Lithuanian name known from written records, mentioned by Rimbert in the *Vita Sancti Anscharii* in AD 853. The site is also used for an annual gathering of recreational and experimental archaeologists. The late spring weather showed off the eastern Baltic coast at its finest.

The tenth symposium was to be held in 2020 in Bonn, hosted by Sabine Walther at the University of Bonn. Due to the global pandemic, the symposium was split into two parts. Rather than simply postponing the meeting, a concentrated, one-day online event was held on 6 November 2020 as Austmarr X.1, with the hope that a physical meeting could be held in the following year, although it also proved necessary to hold Austmarr X.2 online on 12 November 2021. The theme was “European Connections: Cultural Transfer to and from the Baltic Sea Region”, broadening the Austmarr perspective to look at contacts between the Baltic region and other regions. The online format was meant for presentation of work in progress, and virtual spaces were set up to facilitate further communication among participants.

The first Bonn event started with an archaeological session. Torun Zachrisson and Cecilia Ljung (Stockholm University) opened with a presentation of “The Maritime Network Realm of the Svear and One of Its Major Hubs: Sigtuna”. Sigtuna lay on the border between

districts, a different type of location from other Viking Age emporia, and includes some features that predate the Viking Age. Analysis of grave finds from the 10<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> centuries show significant changes over time and a cosmopolitan population. Leszek Gardela (National Museum of Denmark) presented joint work with Kamil Kajkowski (West Cassubian Museum in Bytów) under the title “Around the Baltic and Beyond: West Slavic Warriors in the Viking World”. West Slavs were present in Scandinavia not only as slaves but also as warriors. Indications of their presence include T-shaped axes and winged snake motifs. Focusing on the unique island society of Gotland, Matthias Toplak (University of Tübingen) discussed “Equestrian Burials on Viking Age Gotland: Between Mounted Warriors and Women on Wagons”. A total of 62 graves from the Late Vendel Period and early Viking Age Gotland have been identified as containing either a horse skeleton, some horse bones or related artifacts, or a single horse bone or tooth; these different types correlate with other features. The horse was clearly an important animal for the Scandinavians, but the symbolic meanings of its presence in graves are hard to recover. Sebastian Wärmländer (Stockholm University) discussed the “Origins of Wire-Drawing Technology in Viking Age Scandinavia”. Wire-drawing has been practiced by the Sámi at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and drawn tin wire has been found in older Sámi deposits. Wire was also drawn in Central Sweden during the Viking Age using tools made of antler. The oldest evidence for the technique in Europe comes from Scandinavia, but the directions of cultural influence and its ultimate origin are not known.

The focus then shifted to connections between the Baltic and the Mediterranean. Sabine Walther (University of Bonn) presented “Classical Authors and the Baltic Sea Area: Contacts and Perceptions”. She proposed a program to gather Greek and Latin sources that mention the Baltic and reevaluate previous research. For example, it appears from Xenophon of Lampsacus (ca. 100 BC) and Philemon (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) that the Greeks had some knowledge of the Baltic prior to the Roman expedition of Tiberius, contrary to a claim in Otto Kunkel’s (1941: col. 1694)

handbook. The next two talks concentrated on specific motifs from Classical traditions and their manifestations further north. Grzegorz Bartusik (University of Silesia, Katowice) focused on “The Cultural Transfer of the Conceptual Metaphor ‘The Ruler is the Father of the Fatherland’ as a Marker for Latinization in the Nordic and Baltic Regions in the Middle Ages”. The conceptual metaphor in question disseminates from the Roman tradition into both Latin and vernacular texts from the Nordic and Baltic regions. Leszek Słupecki (University of Rzeszów) posed the question “Did Otto of Bamberg Like Walnuts? The Motif of the Mediterranean Walnut Tree in St. Otto’s Lives, in the Reality of Monastic Bamberg and Pagan Pomerania”. The lives of St. Otto describe his encounters with pagans in Szczecin, where he ordered the destruction of sacred trees. However, a miracle demonstrated that the tree in question was innocent and should be spared as long as the locals ceased to worship it. While this narrative draws on a Mediterranean legend featuring a pine tree, the tree is described as a nut tree, most likely the European walnut. Walnut trees were also associated with the monastery he founded.

Frog (University of Helsinki) discussed “Cultural Transfer in the Interaction of Systems in the Symbolic Matrix: Perspectives on the Early Spread of Christianity through the North”. The symbolic matrix is a conceptual tool for discussing religious contacts and their influence on mythology. It consists of the mythic symbols available in a particular milieu and their potential to be viewed from different perspectives. Vykintas Vaitkevičius (Klaipėda University) traced the development “From Universal to Local One: The Case of Baltic Swastika”. The swastika is a widespread symbol that appears in many different variants. It is found on Baltic artifacts already from the Iron Age but appears more frequently from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, where it is thought to have symbolized the sun or fire and offered the local vernacular religion an alternative to the Christian cross. Tõnno Jonuks (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu) showed pictures of “Dragons and Griffins in Eastern Baltic: First Conveyors of Christian Europe” – fantastic beasts with Mediterranean roots that appear in 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> artifacts from Estonia, predating

documented conversion. Finally, Jakub Morawiec (University of Silesia, Katowice) showed how “Miles Christi Goes North: Emergence and Development of a New Concept of Knighthood in Medieval Scandinavia”. The Scandinavian warrior ideal shifted in the Middle Ages towards a model akin to that of the Crusades. This influence is visible, *inter alia*, in the depiction of the Jómsvíkings as a warrior-band. The formal program was followed by general discussion and online socialization.

The 2021 symposium Austmarr X.2 offered a new line-up of speakers and topics, balanced among archaeology, folklore and mythology, and runology. Elena Mel’nikova (Russian Academy of Sciences) opened with a survey of “Runic Inscriptions of the Scandinavian Diaspora in the Baltic Lands”, discussing characteristics of the inscriptions concentrated in two areas: Pomerania in the west and northwestern Russia (Ladoga, Gorodishche, Novgorod) in the east. Kendra Willson (University of Turku) opened the question of “Language Contact Reflected in Runic Inscriptions”, outlining ways in which such contact might appear. The focus was on contact with Latin at the time of the invention of the runes and again in the Middle Ages, as well as memorial stones from the Isle of Man which contain Celtic names and even combine runic and ogham inscriptions.

Three talks were devoted to folklore and mythology. Jesse Barber (University of Helsinki) presented “Óðinn and Väinämöinen: A Comparison of the Archetypal Ritual Specialist in the Nordics”, pointing out striking similarities seen in three pairs of myths from Norse and Finno-Karelian tradition. Olle Möllervärn (Mid Sweden University) discussed “Bear Transformation in Scandinavian Folklore”. He argued that being a bear was seen as a social status with somewhat fluid boundaries, rather than there being an absolute species difference between humans and bears. He distinguished three categories of transformation into a bear: a spell cast by others, self-transformation by magic, and the effect of prolonged contact with bears. Frog (University of Helsinki) built on the previous year’s discussion with a presentation on “Migration Period Christianity Spreading

through the North? Or, is Old Norse Mythology a Creolized Christianity?”. Long-noted parallels to Christian myths are sufficiently central to Norse mythology that they are unlikely to reflect a superficial layer of late borrowings, but rather religious hybridization through contact with the Roman Empire.

The remaining four talks focused on archaeology. Anneli Sundkvist (Societas Archaeologica Upsaliensis) introduced “The Context of Amulet Rings: An Overlooked Type of Artefact?”. Small rings of poor-quality metal, often with pendants of cutting implements, have been found in large quantities at a number of sites around Sweden, but their function is unknown. She compared several sites with concentrations of such rings, and asked about appropriate comparanda from outside Sweden. Andris Šnē (University of Latvia) presented the “Grobiņa Archaeological Complex: A Melting Point of the Baltic and Scandinavian Cultures in the Pre-Viking Age”. Excavations in Grobiņa on the west coast of Latvia reveal Scandinavian settlement from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, coexisting and hybridizing with the local Curonians. Adam Engvall (Uppsala University) discussed “The Puzzling Towers of Gotland: Some Thoughts Regarding 12<sup>th</sup> Century Towers from Gotland”. Ten known towers distributed around Gotland vary in shape; most have not been systematically excavated. It is unknown who built them or for what purpose, although they are generally regarded as defensive structures. Finally, Jhonny Therus (Kalmar County Museum – Linnaeus University) presented “Small Finds and Large Networks: Using Beads and Knife Sheath Fittings to Trace Networks in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Century Baltic and beyond”. The distributions across Scandinavia of a particular elite style of bead and of a type of knife sheath fitting identified as ‘Slavic’ illustrate different types of networks. After the academic program on Zoom there was a ‘wine hour’ using the platform Wonder.

Sabine Walther is organizing a volume on the topic of cultural exchanges between the Baltic Sea region and other parts of Europe, with contributions solicited for the spring of 2022. If you wish to propose a paper, please contact [swalther\[at\]uni-bonn.de](mailto:swalther[at]uni-bonn.de).

### **Literature**

Ahola, Joonas, Frog & Kendra Willson, eds. 2019.  
*Interdisciplinary and Comparative Methodologies:  
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