

# Pre-urban settlements in Western Lithuania 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century

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## 1. Introduction

The question of the origin of towns in Lithuania is still subject to scholarly discussion. In the early literature of the history of European towns only a few Baltic trade and craft centres are mentioned, examples are Truso, Grobina<sup>1</sup> and Kaup (Viskiautai).<sup>2</sup> However, the latest research by Eastern Baltic archaeologists has shown that the problem of origin of towns and their location in the region inhabited by the Balts is far more complex, and the number of pre-urban trade- and craft centers much greater; than previously thought.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this contribution is, based on the latest archeological research, to establish the date of the foundation of pre-urban settlements in Western Lithuania (the Western Baltic cultural zone), to describe the structure of the settlements, and to locate their remains.

The formation of pre-urban settlements can only be investigated in the light of the rise of medieval society and the development of the country's economy and trade. As the only Lithuanian archeologist to deal with this problem A. Tautavičius, has attempted to analyze the development of the conditions under which the towns could develop.<sup>4</sup> He has reached the conclusion that favorable conditions for the formation of the towns were not present until 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> cen-

turies. Historians and some archaeologists extend this period to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, some scholars are of the opinion that there were towns in the Curonian region since the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> They find support in the mention of Apuole in Rimbert's Vita Anskarii.

Even the early scholars, who analyzed the distribution of grave goods of merchants and the imported goods of early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium AD, have claimed that Western Lithuanians (most importantly the territory of the Curonian tribe) differ from other Baltic tribes throughout the period treated here. The large quantity of such finds, and consequently the intensity of trade connections differ sharply from surrounding regions.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, it was deduced that the earliest and most important trade-centers of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium were situated on the Baltic coast or along the lower reaches of the river Nemunas.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is believed that the Curonians had a well organized federation of territories, in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> In Southeast Lithuania this process took place later, in the late 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, for the solution of the dating of the pre-urban settlements, it is necessary to make a distinction between the various Baltic tribes and their cultural zones.

## 2. Conditions for urban development in Western Lithuania

Developing medieval society changes in craft- and trade patterns and demographic changes are reflected on all archaeological sites, but archaeological material from grave sites remains central to these issues. For the purpose of statistical analysis six Curonian grave sites (Kretinga, Pryšmančiai, Gintališkė, Palanga, Laiviai, Lazdininkai) and three grave sites belonging to of their neighbours, the Žemaitians, (Paragaudis, Žasinas, Bikavėnai) were investigated. Demographic analysis of these grave sites has shown that the population grew steadily over the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century to reach a maximum in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century the population diminished. In Žemaitija (at least in the south-west part) the population grew markedly in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, compared with the previous period. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century it remained at the same level. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century a tendency towards a decline in population is discernible.

An analysis of the development of crafts and the dynamics of trade connections was carried out from the same statistical base (fig. 1). In Curonian grave sites the greatest number of finds (especially bronze and iron artefacts) is dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

A statistical analysis of the graves of merchants (fig. 2) has yielded the following results: graves with scales and weights appear from the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. Compared with late 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, 11<sup>th</sup> century graves with scales and weights make up the largest fraction of all hitherto-known merchants graves. An analogous tendency has been noted by Latvian scholars in the investigation of numismatically dated merchants graves.<sup>12</sup> For the analysis of trade connections another fact is important: in the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century the first silver hoards appear.<sup>13</sup> Until the begin-

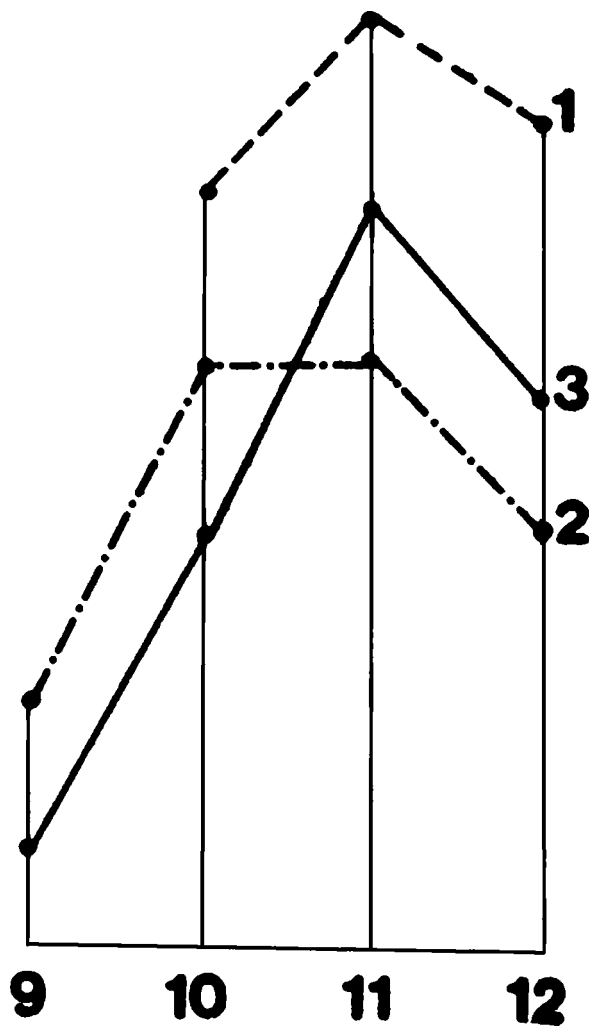


Fig. 1. The development of crafts in Western Lithuania: average figures for grave goods in the Curonian territory (1), Žemaitija (2), and changes in bronze weights in Mėguva territory (3) (after V. Žulkus). (horizontal axes Fig 1, 2 means centuries)

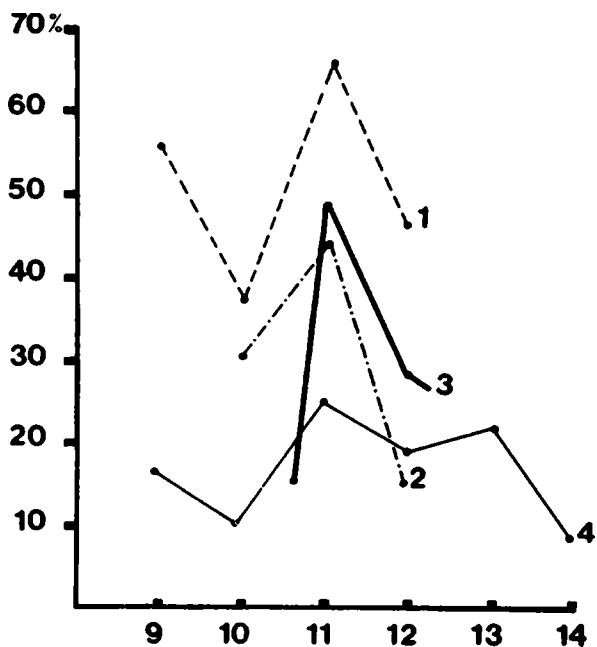


Fig. 2. The development of trade-connections in Western Lithuania: 1: the silver in the country of Mėguva. 2: Silver in the Žemaitija grave fields. 3: merchant's graves. 4: the extent of silver hoard, jewellery deposits and coins.

ning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, coins came to Lithuania from Orient; from the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century coins arrive from Western Europe.<sup>14</sup> Even though the total number of coins is low,<sup>15</sup> (compared with Gotland or even Latvia), these finds reflect general tendencies towards change and indicative areas with concentrated trade activities. The quantity of silver jewellery in the graves also reflects the quantity and changes of silver imports. According to the calculations of V. Žulkus there were less silver artefacts in the territory of Mėguva in the 10<sup>th</sup> century than in

9<sup>th</sup> century; however, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century the quantity grew markedly.<sup>16</sup> Also, in Žemaitijan grave sites a large quantity of these artefacts are found in 11<sup>th</sup> century.

As statistical analysis of larger numbers of finds (silver hoards, coins) is not available, it is only possible to comment on the characteristic changes of the monetary system of the whole of Europe (most notably Northern Europe), which, in Western Lithuania, took place approximately in the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century.

However analysis of other finds (merchants graves, silver artefacts or artefacts with silver inlays) forces us to pay more attention to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

In short, it could be argued that the most favourable conditions for the developments of pre urban settlements and the development of trade and crafts were present in the late 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century.

Another important question is the differentiation of settlements – identifying potential pre-urban sites from the general network of settlements. Mapping castle mounds, grave sites and fortified settlements points to dense but irregular settlement as characteristic of the lands inhabited by the Western Balts. What factors determine that some places have dense settlement while others have scattered settlements or none at all? Empty, unsettled areas are traditionally interpreted as inter-tribal wildernesses.<sup>17</sup> It is believed that the main factor determining the irregular settlement pattern is land fertility.<sup>18</sup> Plotting archaeological sites on a map of arable land (fig. 3) shows that 53% of all settlements from the period under investigation are concentrated on the most fertile land. Another 18% of the settlements are situated on the border between infertile and fertile land. The density of settlements on average ground



Fig. 3. The extent of settlements according to the fertility of the land :  
 1: fertile land. 2: infertile land. A: grave fields. B: hillforts and settlements.

were lower, but more regular. This principle of mapping thus shows the direct dependency of settlements on the nature of the soil. Considering the central role of farming in the Balts' economy through time, this dependency is understandable.

It could also be argued that the nature of the soil determined not only the irregular pattern of settlement but also the borders between the tribes and their territories and the natural development of inter-tribal territorial wildernesses. The remains of these inter-tribal wildernesses, stretching up to 10-

15km, are even clear on maps of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>19</sup>

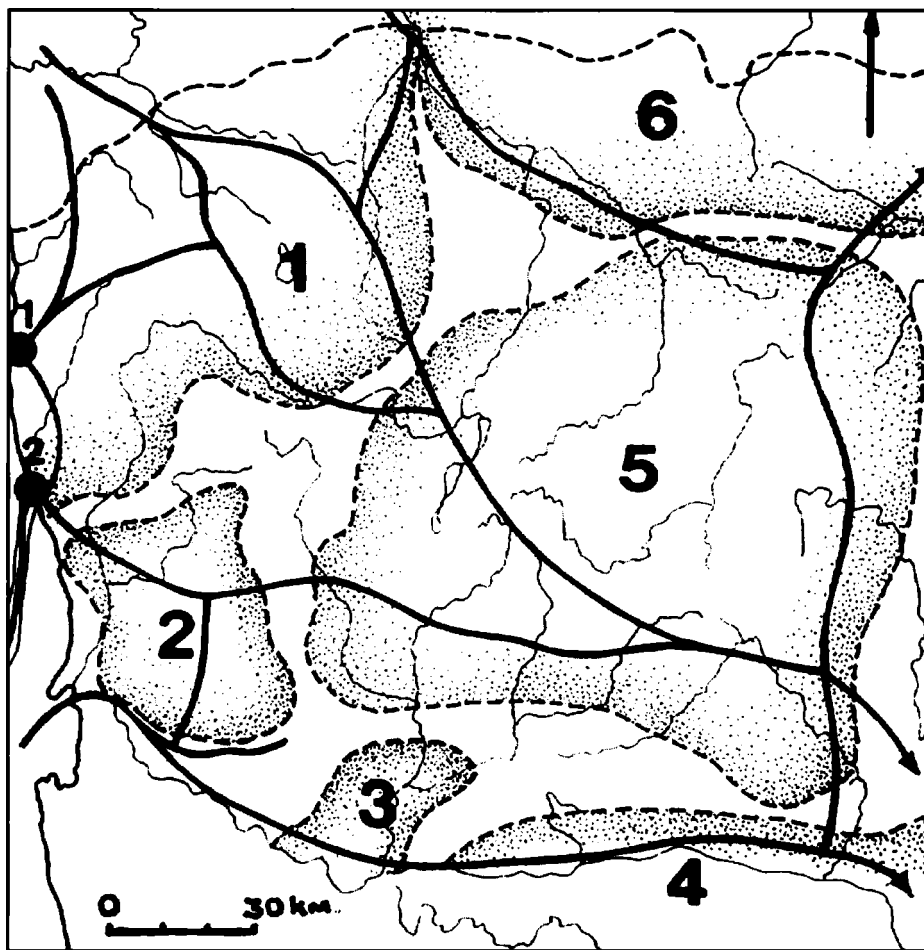
The density of settlement in some territories is rather high on average a settlement has a dependent area of 12,4km<sup>2</sup>; in Pilsotas 7, 5-8,5km<sup>2</sup>; in Lamata 12-13 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>20</sup> In the territory of the Skalvian tribe on the left bank of the river Nemunas one settlement has a dependent area of 18,1 km<sup>2</sup>. The highest concentrations of settlements are found in two territories on the Baltic coast, in the South-Curonian territories of Pilsotas and Meguva. In territories further east the density of settlements is notably lower.

### 3. The features of pre-urban settlements in Western Lithuania

The investigation of individual ancient settlements in these two most densely populated areas concentrated two notable settlements-Palanga and Žardė – bearing clear signs of trade and craft centres (fig. 4). They were without doubt pre-urban settlements of notably importance for trade and the local economy, but hardly of any considerable political or administrative significance, despite the fact that they wielded considerable military force. According to the typology recognised by European scholars, these two pre-urban settlements could be identified as *wiek*, trade stations, being the embryonic phase of early towns or at least one of the ways leading towards the rise of towns. Characteristically, they differ from other Baltic settlements in a number of aspects:

1. Most importantly they are located on the main European and local trade routes (fig. 4). They were centres on the Baltic sea, uniting distant European tribes. Curonian seafarers are mentioned in several written sources.<sup>21</sup> Of course, the sea brought other

Fig. 4. Baltic tribes and trade roads in Western Lithuania. 1: Curonian. 2: Lamata. 3: Skalvian. 4: Aukštaitija. 5: Žemaitija. 6: Semgallia. Pre-urban settlements. 1: Palanga. 2: Žardė.



peoples into this Baltic region. Furthermore, the Curonian area was crossed by an important land route, running from Sambia (Prussia) over the Curonian Spit towards Grobina and Dauguva. The settlements of Palanga and Žardė, lying on this important route, both had an ideal geographic location for trade with

the Western Slavs, the Germanic tribes, and other more remote areas.

2. They were large settlements, which, at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium A. D. covered approximately 10-12ha, the largest in Western Lithuania.

3. The settlements consisted of 2-3 separate parts

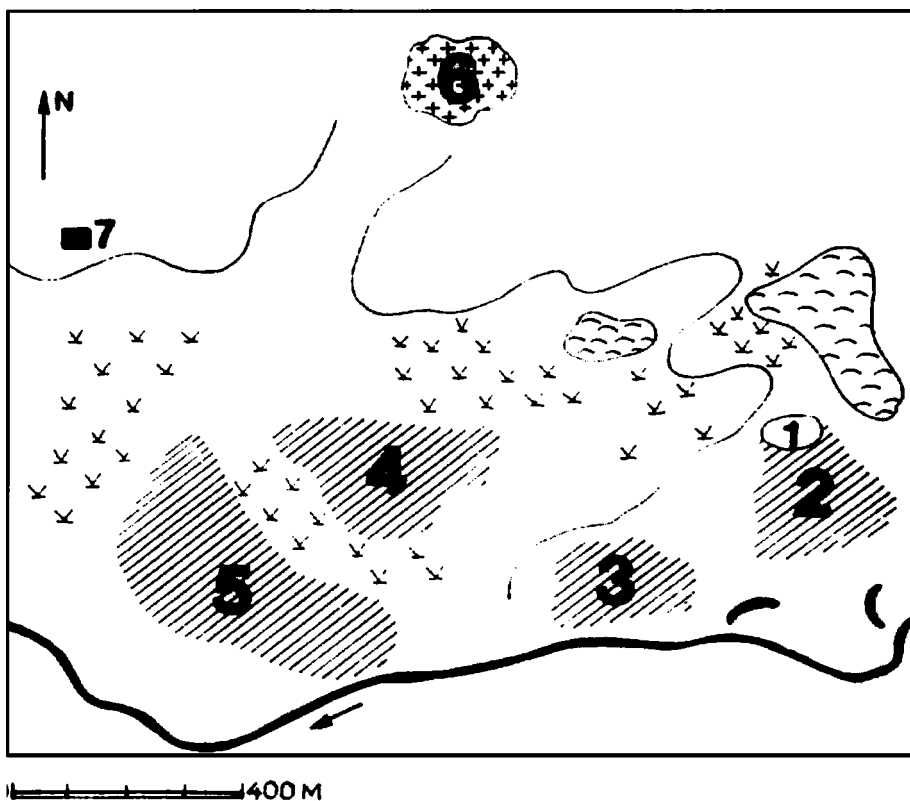


Fig. 5. Žardė settlement. 1: hillfort. 2-5 settlements. 6: cemetery. 7: melting furnace.

situated on hills in wet moorland (fig. 5). One of these parts, founded around the turn of the second millennium on a hitherto unsettled area, displayed a unique polyethnic culture. Other parts of the settlement were inhabited already in the earliest times. Both the archaeological artefacts and the peculiarities of building techniques indicate a significant cultural input from other ethnic groups. In Palnga buildings are found with spherical clay ovens, stone ovens and clay floors, which are features peculiar to

Western and Eastern Slavs.<sup>22</sup> The most unequivocal evidence for wide spread cultural connections and trade-connections are found in the grave sites associated with these settlements. Here a large collection of West Slavic ceramics, Scandinavian jewelry (such as small Thor's hammers and bird-form ornaments) are found.

4. Both settlements enjoyed favourable conditions for the buildings of port (something that has not yet been the object of study).

5. One characteristic trait is the extreme density of the parts of the settlements build around the turn of the millennium. The streets of Žardė were probably timber-buid.

6. These settlements were well protected by natural features. Even if archaeological evidence is not sufficient to prove the case, it should be noted that the place-name »Žardė« indicates a fortified area or a cattle pen in Prussian and Lithuanian.<sup>23</sup> This justifies the assumption that these settlements were fortified by means of a palisade.

7. Both settlements were characterised by a large diversity of crafts. Žardė housed metalworkers, smiths, jewellers, amber-workers, weavers etc. A similar diversity was the case in Palanga. From the grave sites at Palanga and the Bandužiai grave sites at Žardė it can be deduced that, particularly in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, not only artisans but also merchants were well represented in the settlement. (in Palanga c. 11-12%,<sup>24</sup> in present Žardė 4-6% of population). A strong military group was also.

All of these characteristics of Palanga and Žardė reveal these settlements as strong trade- and craft-centres, accumulating their socio-economic wealth not only in the territories of Pilsotas and Meguva, but also in neighbouring areas.

#### 4. Conclusions

1. An analysis of artisanry, trade and demography in the ninth-twelfth centuries allows us deduce that the most favourable conditions for pre-urban development existed at the turn of the tenth-eleventh centuries.
2. Population density was determined by soil fertility and the quality of agricultural land.
3. At the beginning of the second millennium A.D.

in the most densely populated areas were the pre-urban settlements near the Lithuanian coast: Palanga and Žardė.

#### Notes

1. Herrmann 1982 fig. 82.
2. Kulakov 1989 p. 80-104.
3. Tynisson 1987 p. 86-92.
4. Tautavičius 1977 p. 19-30.
5. Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė 1970 p. 270; Gudavičius 1991 p. 65.
6. Matusas 1939 p. 24; Nerman 1958 p. 186.
7. Kuncienė 1981 p. 51-56.
8. Kuncienė 1981 p. 76-78.
9. Žulkus & Klimka 1989 p. 61.
10. Gudavičius 1984 p. 28.
11. Žulkus & Klimka 1989 p. 61, fig. 29.
12. Berga 1988 p. 60.
13. Duksa 1981 p. 100-103.
14. Duksa 1981 p. 89, 97.
15. Duksa 1981 p. 91-98. Total for Lithuania: sites with Orient coins: 13; West European coins: 4, Byzantine coins: 1.
16. Žulkus & Klimka 1989 p. 60, fig. 28.
17. Tautavičius 1977 p. 30; Žulkus & Klimka 1989 p. 4-7.
18. Genys 1989 p. 130.
19. Jäger 1982 fig. 3, 22.
20. Žulkus & Klimka 1989 p. 8, 15, 23.
21. Herrmann 1987 s. 32; Latvis & Vartbergē 1991 p. 34, 66.
22. Žulkus & Klimka 1989 p. 45-56/
23. Vanagas 1981 p. 398.
24. Žulkus & Klimka 1989 fig. 25.

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