Soviet Lithuanians, Amber and the "New Balts":
Historical Narratives of National and Regional Identities in Lithuanian Museums, 1940–2009

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Abstract

In the twentieth century Lithuania emerged from the crumbling Russian Empire as a post-colonial nationalising state. Its short-lived independence (1918–1940) featured attempts to assemble the material foundations for an imagined community of Lithuanians, however in 1940 this nationalist project was disrupted by Soviet occupation. However, this article argues that regardless of the measures taken against political nationalism by the Soviets, the material work of assembling the Lithuanians as a historical and ethnic nation was not abandoned. The study analyses the ways in which Northern and Baltic categories were used to regionally situate the ethnic identification of the Lithuanian population in Soviet and post-Soviet Lithuanian museums. The cases of the Historical-Ethnographic Museum and the Museum of Amber reveal that Northern and Baltic dimensions had to be reconciled with the Soviet version of the Lithuanian past. The resulting assemblage of Lithuania as a synchronic and diachronic community of inhabitants who defined themselves through shared Baltic ancestors and centuries-old uses of amber was transmitted to the post-Soviet museums. The most salient post-Soviet changes were, first, the rewriting of the relations between Lithuanians and the Nordic countries in positive terms and in this way reversing the Soviet narrative of Lithuania as a victim of aggression from the North. Second, the Soviet construction of amber as a material mediator which enabled Lithuanians to connect with each other as a synchronic and diachronic imagined community was somewhat pushed aside in favour of the understanding of amber as a medium of social and cultural distinction for the ancient Balts and contemporary Lithuanian elites.

Keywords: Baltic identity, Lithuania, amber, national museums, Soviet material culture

Introduction

During the 1990s the idea of a Baltic identity came to play an increasingly important role in official and public discourses in Lithuania. In 1993 the Lithuanian government programme declared that one of the goals of state cultural policy was "to ensure historical continuity of Lithuania's culture" and "to guard the Baltic identity of Lithuania's culture" (Lietuvos Respublikos... 1993). The year 2009 saw something of an apotheosis of Baltic-centred expressions of Lithuanian national identity as Lithuania celebrated the millennium of her name.[1] Countless exhibitions, publications and events sought to historicize and otherwise articulate the meanings of Lithuanianness. For instance, the catalogue for a widely advertised international travelling exhibition, *Lithuania: Culture and History*, placed Baltic identity at the centre of Lithuania's history. The history of Lithuania was narrated as a teleological process during which a centralized Lithuanian state emerged from the ancient Baltic tribes. The world of the Balts was contrasted with both the world of Christianity and the Slavonic, proto-Russian tribes (see Daujotytė 2009: 8). Although "Baltic" identity was claimed on linguistic grounds, it was rarely mentioned that the term "Baltic" originally emerged to describe Baltic Germans.[2]

Belonging to a family of supra-national categories, which are used to strengthen and amplify national identities, such as Slavs and Scandinavians, the development of a notion of Baltic identity as an amplified Lithuanian national identity presents a fascinating puzzle for historians. First of all, production of a Baltic identity, unlike Lithuanian national identity, remains underexplored. Often described as a quintessential case of ethnic nationalism, which is based on a myth of common descent, language and culture, Lithuanian national identity has been analyzed as a centripetal mechanism which was effectively mobilized to build a strong sense of distinction among the local population (Balkelis 2009). It was thanks to the ethnic identity of Lithuanians as a synchronic and diachronic community united by their unique language and folk culture, it was argued, that the people of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) maintained a vision of independence from the Soviet regime (Hiden & Salmon 1991; Vardys & Sedaitis 1997; Misiunas & Taagepera 2006). More sinister sides of Lithuanian national identity were also pointed out as the ethnic Lithuanian version of a history of the country failed to recognize its heterogeneity, particularly the contribution of Jews, Poles and even Russians.[3]

However, there is lack of knowledge about the ways in which constructions of an exclusive Lithuanian national identity were positioned in relation to broader regional categories. This is particularly true in the case of the Baltic component of Lithuanian national identity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Baltic, and occasionally Northern, categories came to occupy strong positions in Lithuanian foreign and domestic policy discourses. Interest in the history of the Baltic and

Northern dimensions of Lithuanian national identity is therefore first and foremost driven by recent geopolitical developments, such as the establishment of the Baltic Development Forum in 1998, and most recently the formulation of the European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea Region in 2009. To be sure, one must remain aware of the dangers of retrospective projections in history writing. Nevertheless, the recent rise of the importance of the Baltic and Northern dimensions is a good stimulus to revise the history of the conceptual and material construction of Lithuanian national identity in relation to these broader regional categories.

In doing so, this article aims to contribute to the expanding field of historical studies of region-building, which seek to transcend the prevailing nation-state centred historiographies. Kristian Gerner and Sven Tägil (1999) and Timothy Snyder (2003) attempted at writing a history of East Central Europe by incorporating the territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (henceforth GDL), Poland and Ukraine in one narrative. David Kirby analysed international relations, trade and cultural exchanges as region-building forces in the Baltic Sea area (Kirby 1995; Kirby 2000). Comparative studies of national historiographies, both globally and in European countries, including the Baltic and Northern European areas, have been recently undertaken in order to understand meaning-making mechanisms in the formation of states and regions (Berger 2007; Knell, Aronsson & Amundsen 2010). Other scholars, mainly political scientists, inspired by the geopolitical orientation of the governments of the Baltic states in the early 1990s, scrutinized the history and politics of the idea of a Baltic region,[4] which encompassed Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Loeber 1987; Motieka 1997; Žalimas 1998; Miniotaite 2003; Laurinavičius, Motieka & Statkus 2005) or focused on changes brought about by European integration (Lehti & Smith 2003; Smith 2005). Some went as far as treating the notion of Baltic identity as a given phenomenon and used it as an independent variable in their analyses of political processes in the area (Clemens 1994).

This study adds to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting pragmatic and material aspects of the formation of the Baltic Sea region through distribution of historical narratives to inhabitants of this area. Today history narratives reach populations through a variety of means which range from school textbooks to tourist guides and digital media. Nevertheless, an old institution of enlightenment, the national museum, can still be regarded as a particularly important mediator in this field of distribution (Bennett 1995; Aronsson 2010). Sanctioned and funded by the state, national museums are important agents in the public uses of history. It has been argued that nation-states actively create their nations or imagined communities. The imagination of the nation relies upon complex material conditions, such as technical publishing networks or material objects, which can be used as proofs of identity (Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1992). As they are dedicated to the collection, storage, preservation and investigation of material objects which provide foundations for historical facts (Pearce 1992; Bennett

2004), national museums arguably embody and materially perform the existence of the nation-state.[5]

The history of Lithuanian national museums is particularly instructive as a case of the construction of statehood as a process, one which relies upon historical narratives that both draw upon and actualize material objects. The case of Lithuanian nationalism clearly demonstrates the relational character of national identity: construction of the Lithuanians had to explicitly address both national and international dimensions. The relation between Lithuanian and wider regional identifications was revised as political regimes changed, and there was no shortage of such changes. Soon after Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1918, in 1920 Poland annexed Vilnius, the historical capital of the GDL. Vilnius was returned to Lithuania in 1939, but at the cost of incorporation of the country into the Soviet Union in 1940. In 1990 Lithuania seceded from the Soviet Union, but to a large extent maintained the same borders as the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR). These shifting political regimes did not only seek to create the country anew by redrawing maps and rewriting historical narratives, but also, as the case of amber demonstrates, attempted to ensure a sense of the continuity of the national community.

Focusing on the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, this article explores the ways in which the categories of Balticness and the North were connected with Lithuanian identity in two of the most important LSSR museums. The Lithuanian SSR Historical and Ethnographic Museum (henceforth HEM), the largest and arguably the most important museum in the LSSR, was established by uniting several collections shortly after the Second World War. Renamed as the National Museum in 1992, HEM should be understood as no less than a sensitive litmus case which reveals the work of political negotiation about the past. The organization of HEM's displays inevitably oscillated between meeting political demands, the material conditions of museum work, and the norms of professional historiography. The second case study concerns The Museum of Amber, which was founded in the 1960s, a period of economic growth and increasing interest in the welfare of the population. The Museum of Amber had actively contributed to establishing amber as a material medium which tied in the natural history of the territories of contemporary Lithuania, the Soviet Lithuanians and the ancient Baltic tribes into both a synchronic and diachronic national community.

The Lithuanian National Museum, Vilnius. © Photo: Eglė Rindzevičiūtė

The Museum of Amber, Palanga. © Photo: Danutė Mukienė.
Courtesy of the Lithuanian Art Museum.

Printed museum catalogues and guides constitute the main primary sources for the analysis of narrative explanations of exhibits at HEM and the Museum of Amber. The conclusions drawn, to be sure, should not be considered as representative of all Soviet Lithuanian museums. The Soviet museum scene was quite heterogeneous and it can not be excluded that other museums produced different narratives of the Balts, Lithuanians and the North. A study of the reception of museum displays, surely a very important aspect of the distribution of historical narratives, was beyond the scope of this article. Despite these limitations, the cases analysed demonstrate that there were several different narrative and material techniques which, depending on the profile of the museum, were used to construct national and regional identifications under the Soviet regime and which did not lose their power during the post-Soviet transformation.

The Making of Authoritarian Museums

The introduction of the Soviet museum system in Lithuania is inseparable from the story of occupation and the building of an authoritarian regime (see Bagušauskas & Streikus 2005). It has to be recalled that Soviet cultural policy was not limited to censorship and control. Lenin's government espoused a strong belief that a cultural revolution, which involved both fine arts and culture as a way of life, was an intrinsic part of the building of communist society (Fitzpatrick 1970). Heritage, first and foremost the royal palaces and noble estates, were nationalized; all cultural organisations were transferred to the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*), headed by Anatolii Lunacharsky (Gardanov 1957:12, 14–15). Echoing political rationales of the French Revolution which contributed to the opening of the Louvre as a national gallery in 1793 (Duncan 1995), the Communist Party programme described the nationalisation of art collections and heritage as an act of social justice. Museums were to play an important part in this cultural revolution:

> Besides natural treasures, working people inherited large cultural treasures: buildings of distinctive beauty, museums, full of rare and beautiful things, which are educational and uplift the soul, libraries, which store great spiritual valuables etc. All of these now genuinely belong to the people. All of these will help the poor man and his children to quickly exceed the former ruling classes in their education, will help him to become a new man, an owner of the old culture and a creator of a yet unseen new culture. Comrades, it is necessary to be alert and protect this heritage of our people! (Narkompros, "To Workers, Peasants, Soldiers, Sailors and All Citizens of Russia" (3 November 1917), cf Gardanov 1957:10)[6]

The Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940 brought an already quite settled system of centralized museums. Existing Lithuanian museums were "nationalized" or centralized under the new communist government, a process which entailed looting, destruction, firing or executing the staff, and placement under the direct administration of the Agency for Art Affairs and, since March 1953 of the All-

Union and union-republic Ministries of Culture.[7] Putting violence aside, centralization came as a shock to local museum workers who had been relatively independent of both national and local governments (Mačiulis 2005).

Perceived as instruments for popular education and ideological instruction, the Sovietized museums had little choice but to drastically revise interwar narratives about the geopolitical orientation of Lithuania.[8] Any positive references to the interwar statehood and cultural forms that were classified as Western capitalist, such as the modernist style in the fine arts, or abstract painting, were carefully eliminated. Although this censorship constituted a strong blow to professional artists, it has to be remembered that professional arts were not perceived by the interwar government as an especially important instrument in nation-building. In the context of the decline of the world economy and the complicated local geopolitical situation, the Lithuanian government made little commitment to heritage protection. At the same time, many interwar professional Lithuanian artists found their inspiration in folk culture and folk culture objects were chosen to represent Lithuania internationally, for example, in the world fairs. (Mulevičiūtė 2001; Jankevičiūtė 2003; Mačiulis 2005).

This traditional emphasis on Lithuanian folk culture resonated with the Soviet encouragement of expressions of ethnic cultures. The Soviet definition of ethnicity was limited to language and folk culture, which was "national in form, socialist in content" (Suny 1991). Conceived in such a way, ethnicity was not perceived by Soviet ideologues as politically dangerous. The Soviet approach to ethnicity as a cultural and strictly non-political phenomenon allowed museum workers to continue the assembling of Lithuanian identity on linguistic and archaeological grounds. For example, even in the politically uncertain 1950s, the hard-line communist historian Juozas Žiugžda criticized the former Vytautas the Great Military Museum in Kaunas because they integrated a section "The formation of the Baltic tribes" into the department of ideological and social relations. The Baltic tribes, wrote Žiugžda, actually belonged to the narrative of ethnic development ("čia yra aiškiai etnogenezės klausimas"). Moreover, he further advised the museum to organize a separate section called "The Balts" ("Atsiliepimas..." 1953).

Beginning with the temporary relaxation of ideological control in the 1960s the interest in the pre-modern Baltic past of Lithuania started to gain momentum (Rindzevičiūtė 2008: 187). Regional historical studies started to appear; for example, a collaborative book *The Routes of the Development of Capitalism: Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia and the Baltic Sea Region* (in Russian, *Pribaltika*) was published in Russian in 1972. In 1977 the first conference for the study of Baltic ethnic history was organized in Riga; the 1980s saw an explosion in studies of the pre-history of Baltic tribes from the Mesolithic period to the tenth century A.D.[9] These explorations of pagan culture were tolerated by the Soviet ideologues, probably as part of their anti-Catholic policies. On the other hand, a cautious writer could rather easily combine the history of pre-Christian cultures with

the Soviet historical narrative of the Germans as historical enemies by emphasising that "pagan Lithuanians" fought "German" crusaders (Weiner 2001; also Wendland 2008; Rindzeviciute 2011). Similarly, explorations of Lithuanian folk culture were integrated with a Marxist approach as historical studies of the working class. Articulations of relationships with the North, however, remained difficult, because now Northern countries lay beyond the Iron Curtain and belonged to the hostile capitalist West.

This, to be sure, is not to suggest that Baltic studies thrived in Soviet Lithuania, because this was clearly not the case (see, for example Švedas & Gudavičius 2008), but rather to point out that the Baltic component could be retained and cultivated as part of officially legitimate expressions of Lithuanian ethnicity. Nevertheless, as the case of HEM details below, the choice of whether to articulate the Baltic and Northern dimensions strongly depended on the situation in a particular museum.

Soviet Lithuania at the Mercy of Foreign Powers: the Case of HEM

In 1941 and just before the outbreak of the Second World War, a newly established LSSR Academy of Sciences (LAS) organized a historical museum under its history department.[10] Collections from the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities (est. 1855) were joined with collections accumulated by Vilnius's societies of Lithuanian Science (1907–1938) and the Friends of Science (1907–1941). At the same time the LAS ethnography department organized an ethnographic museum. In 1952 the Museum of Ethnography was merged with the Museum of History and renamed the LSSR Museum of History and Ethnography (henceforth HEM). A cultural historian, Vincas Žilėnas, was appointed as director and, typically of Soviet leadership, remained in this position for more than two decades as he retired only in 1973. Organized in archaeological, ethnographic, history, iconography and numismatic sections, in 1963 HEM was transferred from LAS to the LSSR Ministry of Culture.

Both HEM's physical location and self-identification in narratives of its origin aptly spoke about the national significance of this institution. Situated at a complex of buildings called the New and the Old Gunpowder Houses (these buildings dated to the 1500s–1700s and were also known as the Arsenal), HEM found itself at the foot of Gediminas Hill, near the castle and the Cathedral at the heart of Vilnius Old Town. Although first established in the early 1940s, HEM celebrated its 125th anniversary in 1980 and in this way affirmed its genealogy from the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities (1855). Indeed, the word "national" (in Lithuanian *tautinis*, *nacionalinis*) had already been carefully introduced into the notion of HEM in 1970:

> The Lithuanian SSR Historical and Ethnographic Museum (HEM) is a "*national museum*" because it is first and foremost concerned with collecting, storing and displaying those cultural monuments which are directly and indirectly related to the past and present of our nation. (Bernotienė, Mažeikienė and Tautavičienė 1970: 7, original emphasis – E.R.)

HEM's curators described the museum as the key site for assembling the history of the Lithuanian nation. The curators acknowledged that this was not an easy task and complained that it was "close to impossible" to organize HEM's permanent display in such a way that it would be able "to speak the history of our nation to our visitor". This actually was a hint at the crucial importance of written commentaries, the key instrument of propaganda.

In the Soviet Union geopolitical narratives intended for public distribution were formulated in the disciplinary frameworks of political economy and history. Although universities played an important role in dissemination of these narratives, the key producers were ideological secretaries at the All-Union and Republic Central Committees and their departments (Bumblauskas & Šepetys 1999; Bagušauskas & Streikus 2005). By way of the Ministry of Culture these secretaries provided museum workers with methodological guidelines which, often in minute detail, specified which historical periods and narratives to include in museum exhibitions ("Dėl respublikos..." 1952). Being clearly top-down, this process of ideological regulation of public history did not run smoothly. Indeed, there was little agreement and often quite a lot of friction between the ideological requirements channelled from Moscow and local historians (see Bumblauskas & Šepetys 1999; Švedas 2009). The centrally shaped Soviet ideological version of history was often translated, modified and subverted by local actors.

Local translation was a risky project, especially from 1944 to the early 1950s, which were marked with anti-Soviet resistance fights in Lithuania (see Statiev 2010) and, following the death of Stalin in 1953, political destabilisation. Soviet Lithuanian historians were understandably careful to avoid any ideological errors. Although the first conference about the periodization of the history of Lithuania was organized in 1952, it seems that Lithuanian historians opted to wait for political stabilisation and clarification of ideological guidelines: the first official history *The History of the Lithuanian SSR* was published only in 1957.[11] Museum workers were similarly cautious. HEM opened its first permanent exhibition surprisingly late: on the threshold of the end of the Thaw, November 1968. Although this exhibition was retrospectively described as a "non-ideological" display (Būčys 2008:44–45), obligatory dues were paid to the Marxist-Leninist narrative and political risks were carefully balanced.

The first permanent HEM exhibition was cautiously limited to a period between the settlement of Lithuania's territory, 10 000 BC, and the October revolution in 1917. This display was located in seven halls; the eighth hall was reserved for temporary exhibitions. The first hall was dedicated to 10 000 BC-1300 AD, at the end of which the first Lithuanian state was formed. Besides the dominant narra-

tive about economic and political progress from the natural to the feudal system, and from the capitalist to the communist system, the exhibition guide featured a narrative about Nordic and Baltic connections.[12]

The northern dimension was introduced into the history of Soviet Lithuania through accounts about natural history, material exchange and, most predominantly, military conflict. According to the guide, the geological history of "Lithuania" began with the ice age when glaciers came from "Scandinavia".[13] Featuring the modern names of cities and rivers, the ice age map directly connected pre-history with the post-1944 territory of the LSSR. This diachronic connection eliminated all the sweeping changes that the territory inhabited by historical and modern Lithuanians underwent.[14] Besides moving glaciers, the LSSR's connection with "Scandinavia" was assembled through the medium of archaeological findings. Although the majority of archaeological exhibits were used to emphasize Lithuania's trade relations with the Roman Empire, from the eighth century the name "Scandinavia" started to appear in the material history of Lithuania. The objects of Scandinavian origin were military in function, such as swords, spurs, spearheads, sheaths, and decoration (brooches) (Bernotienė, Mažeikienė & Tautavičienė 1970: 18, 22, 25). These Scandinavian findings were interpreted as proof of material exchange between Nordic people and "Lithuanians". No attempt, however, was made to compare Lithuanians with Scandinavian or Viking people. Indeed, the exhibition catalogue did not specify the ancestor population as "Baltic tribes". The pre-modern inhabitants of the Lithuanian SSR were simply referred to as "the people living on the Baltic shores".

Besides archaeological findings, a manuscript was displayed to illustrate the difficult connections with the Nordic countries. As very few written sources from 10 000 BC-1300 AD had survived it is quite significant that one of these rare sources referred to the aggression of "Sweden" against "Lithuania". In the mid-ninth century the Swedish king Olaf attacked and took power over the Curonian castle Apuolė (in Latin *Apulia*) (Bernotienė, Mažeikienė & Tautavičienė 1970: 8). This hostility, according to the guide, was an example of the Northern peoples as a negative factor in Lithuania's history.

The concessions to pro-Russian ideology were made in the HEM guide's account of Lithuania's regional position in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the interwar historiography this period was defined as the peak of Lithuanian statehood and power, as the GDL stretched quite far into Muscovy and encompassed the Western part of Ukraine. The guide, however, was very laconic about this period during which Russia was weak. Much more information was provided about Lithuanian and Russian relations in the sixteenth century when Russia started to emerge as a significant military power. At the same time, this was the period of Lithuania's decline. The guide described the Vasa rule (1587-1648) of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (PLC) as "the most miserable for Lithuania", because Lithuania was entangled in war with Sweden and Russia. The Swed-

ish occupation was described in emotionally charged terms: "a marching army of foreigners" which "looted and destroyed the country" swarmed through Lithuania. In relation to these events the exhibition displayed a picture depicting the 1656 Lithuanian-Swedish battle and Swedish money.

The anti-Nordic stance was further articulated in an account of the Northern War (1700–1721) and the partition of the PLC, presented together in one display "The Period of the Northern War and Partition" (Bernotienė, Mažeikienė & Tautavičienė 1970: 42–43). Explanation of the partition, which ended the GDL's statehood, was a difficult puzzle for Soviet historians and museum workers. Partition was described as the most negative event in interwar historiography, however, Soviet ideologues required that incorporation of the GDL into the Russian Empire be presented as a "progressive event". This, as Mečislovas Jučas retrospectively noted, was resisted by Lithuanian historians. Instead of openly glorifying the incorporation of the GDL into Russia, historians used intentionally vague phrases to narrate the partition such as "Lithuanian and Russian feudalism found some points of agreement" or that "Lithuanian people joined the all-Russian fight against imperialism" (Jučas 1999: 18–19).

By the early 1970s a consensus about the official narrative of modern Soviet Lithuanian history was already established and could be institutionalized in the museums. In 1972 HEM reorganized the display of Lithuania's history to reflect changes in the historical interpretation of socialism introduced by Leonid Brezhnev's doctrine of "mature socialism". A new display "The History of the Soviet Society, 1940 to the present" was opened later in 1976 and included several themes: "The Victory of the Revolution and the Beginning of the Creation of Socialism in the LSSR (1940–1941)", "Lithuania during the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945)", "Creation of the Basis of Socialism and Completion of Socialism (1945–1961)" and "LSSR National Economy and Culture under Mature Socialism (1961–1975)" (Žilėnas 1980).

The reformed HEM systematically Lithuanian-ized the history of the LSSR and in this way resembled the 1940s' strategy of Sovietization, as it exclusively focused on Soviet Lithuanians and minimized visibility of non-Lithuanian ethnic groups, such as Poles and Jews (Weeks 2008) . The new exhibition catalogue strikes the reader with the absence of any regional categories in relation to Lithuanians. The term "Baltic" appeared to be abandoned and the guide only made reference "Lithuanians" and "Lithuanian tribes". Spatial categories were abandoned in favour of a narrative of economic growth illustrated with new types of material objects, such as high-tech Soviet Lithuanian produce (television Temp-6 and Elfa tape recorders) (Žilėnas 1980:23). This universalising discourse of modernisation as economic growth did not replace the emphasis on linguistic and cultural ethnicity. Rather, it continued to assert the diachronic unity of Soviet Lithuanians with their past, faced with dangers from the North.

The Rise of Baltic Ancestors and Post-Soviet Revisions of the Northern Dimension

From 1992, after achieving independence from the Soviet Union, HEM was re-named the National Museum of Lithuania (LNM). Shortly before the millennium celebration of the name (and perhaps the state) of Lithuania, the LNM arranged an exhibition about Baltic archaeology entitled *Curonians: the Vikings of the Balts* (*Kuršiai – Baltų vikingai*, Vilnius, 19 November 2008-15 March 2009).[15] The curators sought to "inscribe the Baltic tribes on a map of civilizations, on which the territories inhabited by the ancient Balts are not yet marked" ("Britų..." 2009). The exhibition *Curonians* perpetuated the notion of the Balts as a people whose identity was uncontested and strongly supported by material evidence. The historical presence of the Balts was not to be doubted, but highlighted. The Balts were not presented as "rough barbarians" or people without history who lived at the impassable, swampy and forested edge of Europe, but as a tribe able to produce "jewellery, which demonstrates wealth, power, a great sense of aesthetics" and their weapons revealed their "military force and power" ("Pristatoma..." 2008).

A poster and an exhibition *Curonians, Vikings of the Balts*, Vilnius, 2008.
© Photo: Eglė Rindzevičiūtė

This conjecture of the unquestionable historical presence and high cultural status of the Balts-Curonians was accompanied with revision of the relation between the Balts-Lithuanians and Northern Europe. Focusing on the period 500–1200 AD, the exhibition featured archaeological findings, such as artefacts from bronze, stone and amber, and black and white photographs of archaeological sites, mainly castle mounds. A map outlined the Curonians' territory which stretched from the Eastern coast of the Baltic Sea and extended across the current border between Lithuania and Latvia. The exhibition text emphasized trade relations between Curonians and "Scandinavians", the story of which went as following. Between

500 and 850 Scandinavian merchants settled in Curonian lands and bought local jewellery and weapons. This period of peaceful trade was disrupted in the second half of the 800s, when Scandinavians mounted war campaigns against Curonian and other lands on the Eastern shore. In turn, Curonians started their own military campaigns in Scandinavia and their power peaked in 900–1100s. However, in 1422 Curonian lands were divided between Lithuania and Livonia. Curonians became assimilated with Samogitians, a West Lithuanian group. By 1600s the Curonian language became extinct. This story of the rise and fall of the Curonian tribes was framed by the exhibition text as a case of interaction and cultural exchange between Scandinavian and Baltic tribes, a process that was most evidently revealed in styles of jewellery and the production of miniatures.

The exhibition *Curonians* mobilized history in order to construct a three-fold relation between contemporary Lithuania and the Nordic countries. First, the exhibition drew attention to material cultural exchange by means of trade and stylistic influences. Second, the exhibition emphasized that the tribe of Curonians/Balts was an active agent and considerable military power in the Baltic Sea, because this tribe was able to loot and instil fear on the Swedish coast. It was not Olaf, who burned Apuolė, but Curonians who looted the Öland islands who were the focus. Thirdly, to frame the exhibition, the organisers used the widely recognisable brand of "the Vikings", a concept which is widely used to brand Norway, Denmark and Sweden. This reference to Vikings, consequently, suggested that the Baltic identity contained a "Scandinavian" dimension or, at least, that the history of Baltic tribes was comparable to that of the Vikings.[16] Indeed, in 1991 Griciuvienė had already applied the analytical framework developed within Scandinavian studies to analyse and display a history of the Baltic tribes. The exhibition *In Search of the Baltic Ornament* aimed to identify a unitary visual culture which would enable the Baltic tribes to be distinguished in a manner similar to the way Celtic ornaments enabled Nordic peoples to be distinguished.[17]

HEM eventually redefined Curonians as metonymically related with both the Baltic tribes and contemporary Lithuanians. In the post-Soviet context of the revised Northern orientation of Lithuania, the story of the Curonians turned out to be quite useful for constructing new narratives of Lithuania as a country of militarily assertive and civilized people. A few decades earlier, amber was performing a similar role, acting as material proof of the territorial presence and diligence in international trade of the Baltic tribes.

The Community of "Northern Gold": The Case of the Museum of Amber

The organisation of the Museum of Amber is a fascinating case of the material construction of the Lithuanian people which was possible within the framework of Soviet ethnic and cultural policies.[18] The initiative to organize the Museum of

Amber belonged to the director of the Lithuanian Art Museum, Pranas Gudynas, assisted by his deputy director Romualdas Budrys (Jakelaitis 1998: 11). Opened in 1963, the Museum of Amber was established at the premises of count Feliks Tyszkiewycz's (Feliksas Tiškevičius, 1870–1932) neo-baroque summer palace. Built by the German architect Franz Schwechten in 1897, the palace was situated in gardens designed by the French landscape architect Edouard Francois Andre. It was thanks to the Tyshkiewycz family's efforts that the sleepy fishing village of Palanga emerged as a sea resort in the 1870s–1880s (Striuogaitis 2008). The count himself was a passionate collector of archaeological findings and his collections included valuable prehistoric amber artefacts (Tranyzas 1998).

The opening of the Museum of Amber coincided with changes in Soviet economic policy. In 1957 Nikita Khrushchev started economic decentralisation, delegating the administration of many sectors to territorial and not branch organs. This reform entitled LSSR authorities to more autonomy in management of republican industries and especially allocation of resources in the civil sector. It is therefore not surprising that the late 1950s and 1960s saw the construction of many new museums.

Another interesting coincidence was that in 1963 the Lithuanian SSR Economic Council took charge of the world's largest amber producer, the Kaliningrad Iantarny Amber Mines. Capitalising on this expansion of the Lithuanian amber industry, the Museum of Amber skilfully combined its goals as a natural scientific laboratory and a disseminator of ethnic nationalist values.[19] In doing so the Museum was particularly successful in mobilising popular tales and lending its scientific authority to legitimize existing and widespread popular practices of gathering and using amber in the everyday life of Lithuanians. Being an elegant, but also entertaining and reasonably quirky place to visit (think of a tractor made with amber and magnified prehistoric insects stuck in amber), the Museum of Amber perfectly fulfilled the economic rationale of Soviet cultural policy, according to which cultural organisations had to provide workers with enlightened recreation during their holidays (White 1990).

Baltic Amber, ca 50 million years old. © Photo: Antanas Lukšėnas.
Courtesy of the Lithuanian Art Museum.

"Tractor" by Mečislovas Sirukevičius. Amber, wood, metal, 16 x 20 cm. Obtained
by the Museum of Amber in 1969. © Courtesy of the Lithuanian Art Museum.

The identification of amber with Lithuanian territory and its inhabitants is a rather new phenomenon. It was only in 1923 that Lithuania gained the Klaipėda (Memel) region and access to the amber rich coastal area of the Baltic Sea. Besides this new geopolitical situation, there emerged influential literary discourses which established a connection between Lithuania and amber. The most salient example is the poem "Free Lithuania" (*Lietuva laisva*, part of *Bolševiko kelias*, 1940) written by a prominent pro-Soviet poetess Salomėja Nėris (1904–1945). Included in all Soviet school textbooks (Mažeikis 2007: 257), this poem did not lose its canonical status after the collapse of the Soviet Union and was still used in lectures dedicated to patriotic upbringing, particularly in primary school teaching (see, for example Strelčenko 2003). A recipient of Stalin's prize for literature, Nėris described the LSSR in line with the Soviet discourse of "the little homeland" (in Russian, *malaia rodina*, see Sandomirskaja 2001). The poem emphasized the smallness of the country and cosiness of local identification, which was secured by membership of the Soviet Union. The name of Lithuania was coupled with amber through the metaphor of a tiny object which could be easily handed to "a friend" (the poetess meant Stalin):

> How beautiful our small country is!
> Like a drop of pure amber.
> Since long ago I admired my home-country in textile patterns
> And in songs from my native village.
>
> I am bringing to you a little piece of amber,
> Which is a pale drop of the Baltic Sea –
> And the gentle name of Lithuania
> I am bringing to you as the sun in my hands.
> (Nėris 1940/1984: 30)

"Free Lithuania" was cited in the Museum of Amber's guide, written by eminent Lithuanian museum worker and heritage preservation specialist Pranas Gudynas and an art historian, Stasys Pinkus (Gudynas & Pinkus 1964:42). According to the guide, the Baltic Sea shore (including Kaliningrad, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) contained "the best kind of amber" or succinite, known by scientists as Baltic amber (Gudynas & Pinkus 1964:19). Called "the northern gold" Baltic amber was described as being at the heart of Lithuanian national identity:

> Amber is found in many countries in the world but nowhere is amber so deeply rooted in people's everyday life, folklore, literature and the arts as it is in Lithuania. Since ancient times amber was used to create beautiful artefacts and works of art. It is not by mistake that Lithuania is called an amber country and the Baltic Sea shore [is called] an amber shore. (...)
> The fact that Lithuanian people foster love for amber is not a contingent phenomenon, but a tradition, which is cherished by the people who lived on the amber rich shores of the Baltic Sea and who related their joy and sadness with amber. This is eloquently exemplified by archaeological burial sites, containing amber jewellery for men and women and also weapons and horses, which are found in the territory of the republic. For a Lithuanian person, a piece of amber or a pretty artefact made of amber is not just a beautiful thing, but also part of the country's cultural history.

> Amber wrote the name of Lithuania in books from antiquity. The fame of its beauty and value attracted ships of antiquity traders to the Eastern coasts of the Baltic Sea, inhabited by Lithuanian tribes. (Gudynas & Pinkus 1964:2-3)

This quote reveals the Museum of Amber's ambition to insert amber into the historical narrative of the Lithuanian population. Amber, it was suggested, was material proof of the presence of Baltic tribes in the territory of the LSSR. Consequently, it was inferred that the connections between the Balts-Lithuanians and the outside world could be traced through locations where amber artefacts were found.

Amber, in other words, made Baltic-Lithuanian people visible.[20] For example, the guide insisted that that the first mentioning of the "ancestors of Lithuanians" was found in Tacitus *Germania* (98 AD). Tacitus, according to the guide, described the *aestii* tribe (in Lithuanian "aisčiai") as "good farmers", who collected amber in shallow parts of the Baltic Sea and transported it to faraway lands to sell it (Gudynas & Pinkus 1964: 9). This was, however, largely a creative adaptation of Tacitus for a retrospective construction of Lithuanians. In his *Germania* Tacitus wrote:

> To the right-hand shore of the Suebic Sea: here it washes the tribes of the Aestii; their customs and appearance are Suebic, but their language is nearer British (...) they ransack the sea also, and are the only German people who gather in the shallows and on the shore itself the amber, which they call in their tongue "glaesum". Nor have they, being barbarians, inquired or learned what substance or process produces it: nay, it lay there long among the rest of the flotsam and jetsam of the sea until Roman luxury gave it fame. To the natives it is useless: it is gathered crude; is forwarded to Rome unshaped: they are astonished to be paid for it. (Tacitus 45, cf Bojtár 1999:30)

In *Germania* Tacitus did not mention either the Baltic Sea (although it is agreed that by Suebia he meant the Baltic Sea); he called the *aestii* "Germans", who spoke "British". Furthermore, Tacitus did not describe the assumed Lithuanian "ancestors" as "good farmers", but rather as crude barbarians. Finally, he actually did not specify in which way amber reached Rome.

The image of the Lithuanians-Aestii as far-travelling merchants, therefore, was a fictitious construction. Historians do not agree whether one can establish a certain connection between Tacitus's *aestii* and the Balts-Lithuanians. Some suggested that *aestii* referred to the Prussians, others thought that *aestii* described the Estonians or even Slavs (see Bojtár 1999: 104–107). The guide, however, did not offer any hint about the questionable interpretation of which ethnic group *aestii* referred to. Instead, it asserted the roots of Lithuanians as Baltic people who traded amber. The guide referred to amber interchangeably as "Northern gold" and "Lithuanian gold".
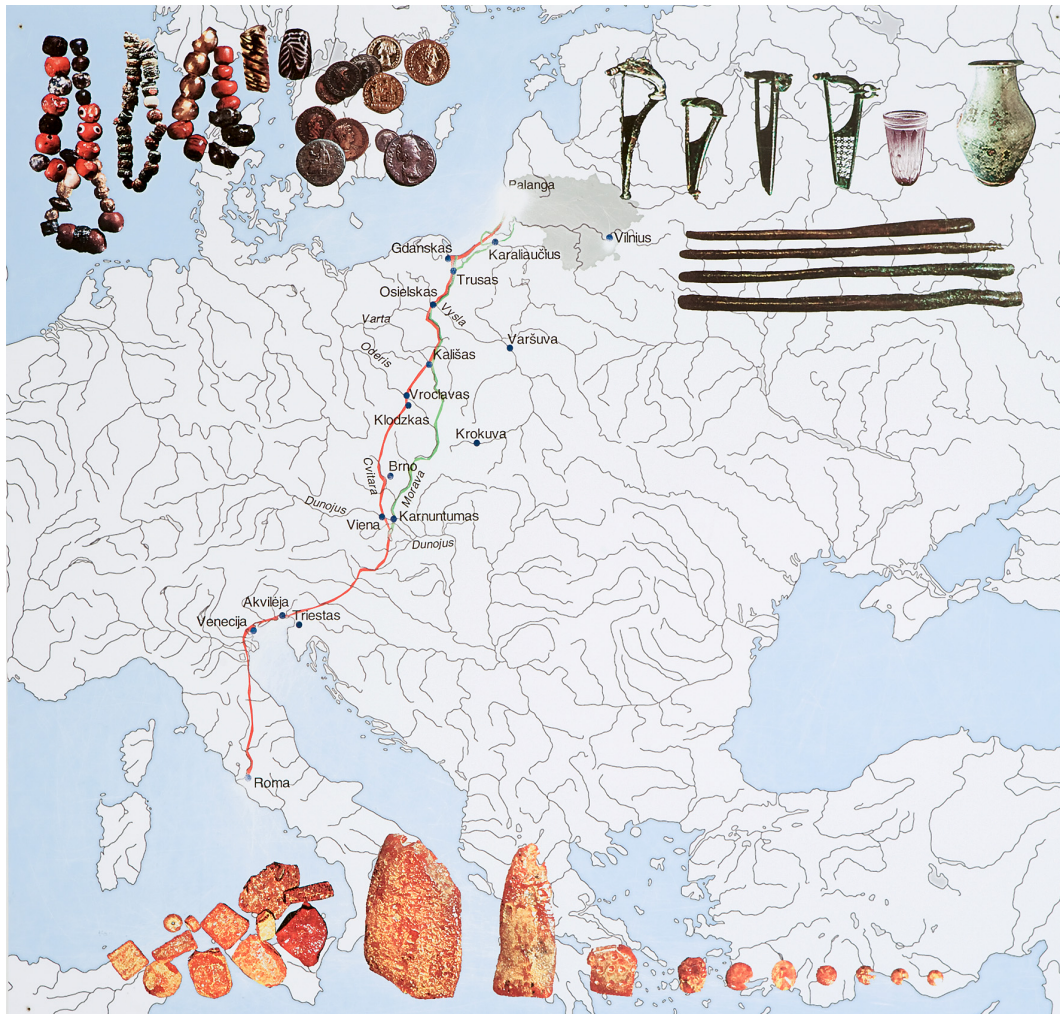
A map of amber trade routes. © Source: E. Jovaiša, A. Butrimas (eds) *Lietuva iki Mindaugo*, Vilnius: Elektroninės leidybos namai, VDA leidykla, 2003.
Courtesy of the Lithuanian Art Museum.

Baltic amber materialized natural and social exchanges. For instance, the formation of Baltic amber was explained by the leak of tar from forests which grew on the contemporary territory of Sweden in the Paleogenic period, which lasted for fourty-two million years (Baltrūnas 2003: 21). The guide also emphasized that Neolithic amber artefacts from what is now Lithuanian territory were found in Denmark, Sweden and Great Britain (Gudynas & Pinkus 1964: 39). The latter was interpreted as proof of the international activities of Balts-Lithuanians:

> The amber trade and its routes witness not only to the extraction, processing and use of amber in the current territory of the Lithuanian SSR, but also speaks about the relations of this country with other far-away lands, with which not only amber, but also other mutually valuable goods were traded. What was lacked at home was imported, and, on the other hand, a significant input was made into the treasury of world culture by establishing amber trade relations with centres of civilization and culture at that time. (Gudynas & Pinkus 1964:41)

These narratives produced by the Museum of Amber should be understood as part of the nationalizing process (Brubaker 2004) in the LSSR. As Bojtár insightfully pointed out, the construction of "Baltic amber" as a marker of "the Baltic people" was not supported by chemical evidence: not only Baltic amber contains succinitic acid. Therefore the reconstructions of "amber routes", proudly displayed in the Museum, were little more than hypotheses of settlements, travels and relations of the Baltic people (Bojtár 1999:26–27).

In nationalising amber as the Northern-Lithuanian gold, the Museum of Amber actively downplayed the role of Baltic Germans in the economic and cultural histories of amber. The history of amber in East Prussia stretched back centuries: since the thirteenth century amber collection was increasingly regulated by the Livonian order, which held exclusive rights for mining and trading with amber.[21] From the seventeenth to the early twentieth century Königsberg, East Prussia, was the centre of both the amber industry and scientific research. The first book about amber, *A Aurifaber: Succini Historia*, was published in Königsberg in 1551 (Bojtár 1999:29). True, the guide did mention the role of German scholars, but only in passing. It seemed that the guide was so keen to find Lithuanians in the history of amber, that it discussed at some length the contribution of a Lithuanian writer, V. Kalvaitis, which was hardly an example of great scholarship. In 1910 Kalvaitis published *A Granary with a Lithuanian Name*, a collection of essays about amber as told by fishermen and a description of one amber mining company. However, it is possible that the guide gave scant information about the German amber industry in order make the "progressive development" achieved by Soviet industries more plausible. The German contribution to the amber industry was quite tellingly described as involving cruel oppression of the working class (Gudynas & Pinkus 1964: 47).

Besides making historical narratives to fit Soviet, but also ethnocentric constructions of Lithuania,[22] the Museum of Amber performed an important role in constructing a banal nationalism (Billig 1995). Located in Palanga, the most popular summer resort seaside town, the museum was frequented by holiday makers. About 600 000 visitors visited the museum during the first five years (Palangytė 2008). The location of the museum in a seaside resort enabled active visitors to engage with amber: the museum was located on a route through the park which lead straight to the beach where pieces of amber could be collected. The Museum elevated the banal object of amber, a common possession of every woman in the shape of earrings, rings and necklaces, to the status of a marker of participation in the history of amber and ancient Lithuanian people. The Museum constructed amber both as an object of natural history, which informed a visitor about the geology and biology of the current territory of the republic, and as an object of cultural history and part of folk culture (see Gudynas & Pinkus 1964:6–7). The guide contained several folk tales which featured amber. In 1968 the Museum opened a

permanent exhibition of Lithuanian folk art in addition to the amber collections (Palangytė 2008).

The prominent American archaeologist of Lithuanian origin Marija Gimbutas was particularly optimistic about the power of amber to establish connections. In her letter of congratulation, Gimbutas encouraged the newly opened Museum of Amber to "take care, love and use the most precious treasure of your land, because with its help we can travel all over the world" ("Kalba muziejų...": 1966: 107). In 1969 the Museum mounted a new, enlarged permanent exhibition which contained three thousand pieces of amber. The notion of an amber route was further developed in an edited collection of archaeological research about the trade relations of "Lithuania's inhabitants" in the pre-modern period, 100–1200s.[23] The Museum display was expanded in 1986 to exhibit 4500 exhibits in fifteen halls which narrated the natural and cultural history of amber, stretching from prehistory to the present day (Palangytė 2008).

Amber during the Post-Soviet Transformation: Making the "New Balts"

After the collapse of the Soviet Union both amber and the Museum of Amber were repeatedly placed on the government's agenda. In 1998-1999 the destiny of the Museum of Amber suddenly was uncertain because a descendent of Tyszkiewycz's family reclaimed the palace as it was illegally nationalized by the communist government. However, an agreement was reached that the palace was a state protected monument and that the inheritor would withdraw his claims. The public importance of the Museum of Amber was asserted. Another eloquent example of the closure of amber as the material core of Lithuanian ethnic identity was revealed in a parliamentary debate about an official definition of precious metals and stones. In 1998 the government presented a revision of the definition passed in 1995, according to which amber and pearls were defined as precious stones. The new suggestion that amber should not be classified as a precious stone stirred a heated (and somewhat amusing) debate among members of parliament, which is worth quoting at a greater length:

> *MP*: Honorable members of Parliament, I strongly doubt the suggestion that amber does not have the qualities of precious stones. I am really sorry to see that amber is made equal with clay, sand, dolomite, water and any other geological body. Nevertheless from an aesthetic point of view, from a cultural point of view, amber has always been the pride of Lithuania: "The Amber Lithuania", "The Amber Baltic Sea", and "The Amber Tuba". I could mention many other examples of uses of our amber, such as myths and cultural events. Honorable Sirs, of course, one can laugh at these things, but I do not find it funny when the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania makes amber equal with clay, sand and water and in this way creates the possibility of exporting amber just like a lump of soil from Lithuania. This is why I think that my suggestion is absolutely serious and that we do not need to remove amber from

the list of precious stones, but instead we should leave it on the list as perhaps the only precious stone found in Lithuania.
Parliament Speaker: Honorable colleague, if you think that I am laughing at you, please note that I am actually laughing at your colleagues' comments, which I happened to hear. This has nothing to do with my lack of respect for amber whatsoever. (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas 1998)

Another MP suggested creating a new, special classification of precious stones, which would enable Lithuanians to appropriately evaluate "their most valuable natural resource" (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas 1998). Although the Parliament removed amber from the official list of precious stones, amber remained a valuable resource in the material and discursive production of Lithuanian national identity. Similarly, the earlier cited passage from Tacitus' *Germania* retained its role as a vehicle which brought together amber, *aestiis*, the Balts and the modern, now post-Soviet, Lithuanians together.

In summer 2009 the Museum of Applied Art (a branch of the Lithuanian Art Museum, which is one of four national museums) in Vilnius mounted an exhibition *The Art of the Balts* (*Baltų menas,* 5 July 2009 – 20 April 2010), which immersed the visitor in a multimedia experience of sounds, moving images and archaeological objects. The exhibition was explicitly related to the celebration of Lithuanian sovereignty: the opening of the exhibition was scheduled to take place on the eve of the Coronation day of Mindaugas, celebrated on the 6th of July. *The Art of the Balts* was scheduled to travel in the national museums abroad and visit Warsaw, Gdansk, Tallinn, Riga, Berlin, Copenhagen and Stockholm in 2010–2011.

Organized by the Vilnius Academy of the Arts and curated by a historian, Adomas Butrimas, the exhibition contained a section "Tradition of Amber in the Baltic Lands". Here the Baltic lands were mapped on the basis of linguistic groups and included the contemporary territories of Lithuania, Latvia, Kaliningrad and North Eastern Poland. The architecture of the display featured two corridors formed from black coloured stands. In line with the fashionable trend of "black baroque", the exhibition colour scheme was monochromic: the display stands featured black-painted matt and glossy surfaces, dimmed lights and black chandeliers decorating vaulted ceilings. In this dark and expensive-looking space spotlights highlighted archaeological exhibits, which were made of amber, silver, bronze and copper. The display also featured the section "Baltic motifs in the contemporary art", which included a video installation showing re-enactment of Baltic cultural rituals, such as Midsummer's Day: bonfires, light night in a forested countryside, white-dressed people singing folk songs. As it appealed to almost all senses, *The Art of the Balts* continued the path of defining the Balts as amber trading tribes, and presented them as an undisputed source of Lithuanian identity.

The Soviet narrative, which constructed amber as both a metaphor of the Lithuanian state and a banal object of everyday life which made visible the diachronic and synchronic imagined community of Lithuanians, was strongly modi-

fied. *The Art of the Balts* constructed amber not as a universal marker of all Lithuanians, but as a marker of a particular social group, the military and social elite. As the exhibition architecture brought to mind a high-fashion store, it can be suggested that the organizers wanted to remove amber from the banal context of the everyday life of Lithuanians, who use amber as inexpensive jewellery. Instead, the exhibition framed amber as a genuine Northern gold: a valuable stone which hints at luxury and an item of refined aesthetic contemplation.

The exhibition *Art of the Balts*, Vilnius, 2009. © Photo: Eglė Rindzevičiūtė
An amber jewellery stall in Vilnius Old Town, 2010. © Photo: Eglė Rindzevičiūtė

The exhibition did feature the famous Tacitus quote. However, Tacitus's quote was explained in a way that was different from the 1960s version. Tacitus described *aestiis* as a "savages, who were not interested in the nature of amber". The exhibition curators translated this lack of intellectual interest and craftsmanship into a positive statement. The exhibition website described the raw "Baltic amber artefacts" in line with contemporary "eco-friendly" discourse. According to this view, raw amber was the result of a conscious effort and a choice based on a particular taste: "the Balts tried to keep the shape of amber as natural as possible" ("Gintaro..." 2009). An art historian clearly articulated the aesthetic value of "Baltic amber":

> One of the themes [of the exhibition] is dedicated to amber, a material which is associated with Balticness, both in professional and popular cultures. Although our ancestors chose to export amber to faraway lands and not to polish it themselves, these amber necklaces which shine in black display windows suggest that these may be examples of a more subtle understanding of the beauty of amber and the level of its processing than the understanding that we have today. (Iršėnas 2009: 24)

Crude amber artefacts, according to this exhibition, showed that the Balts were not savages, but rather a developed civilisation. Furthermore, *The Art of the Balts* did not stop with pre-history, but went on to establish a diachronic link between the Baltic tribes and Lithuanian sovereign statehood: it described the GDL elite as a "Baltic aristocracy". "The Baltic elites which created the state of Lithuania", emphasized the exhibition organizers, "accumulated massive wealth".[24] Heirs not

of savages, but civilized Baltic tribes, modern Lithuanians were constructed as the "New Balts", a historical community and rightful members of the Northern part of Europe. Here it has to be noted that this museum discourse about the Balts was significantly different from the approach advanced by some professional Lithuanian historians, who emphasized the "uncivilized" and "savage" character of the Baltic tribes in their work (see Manvydas 2006).

Conclusion

It is not a paradox that although Lithuanian ethnic nationalism first emerged at the end of the nineteenth century its institutional and cultural expressions finally developed under the Soviet regime. It was under Soviet government that a fully fledged system of Soviet Republic (or national) museums was created in Lithuania. Although highly restrictive, Soviet encouragement of the expression of apolitical ethnic cultures enabled LSSR museums to further articulate Lithuanianness and Balticness within a conceptual and material framework, which was rooted in the nineteenth century and the interwar period (Misiunas and Taagepera 2006; Rindzevičiūtė 2009). The exhibitions *Curonians: the Vikings of the Balts* and *The Art of the Balts* can be understood as statements which summarized a century-long negotiation of regional location and the material performance of Lithuanian national identity.

HEM and the Museum of Amber adopted two different strategies to situate the history of Lithuanian nation-building regionally. The Museum of Amber actively combined natural history with historiography and literary discourses to construct the Soviet Lithuanians as heirs of the imagined ancient Balts. As it principally dealt with the history of political events, HEM was in a more difficult situation than the Museum of Amber. During the Soviet period the history of Lithuania's regional ties with the Baltic Sea Area and Nordic countries was a political minefield and HEM therefore preferred to wholly abandon regional categories in favour of a Lithuania-centred story. To invoke any connections between Balticness and the area beyond the Iron Curtain was politically too dangerous, unless the museum could rely on natural history, such as glacial shifts or the formation and distribution of amber.

The Northern dimension did not play an especially important role in the Soviet museum version of Lithuanian history. Those few connections between Lithuania and the North were mainly articulated through negative events. HEM integrated the Northern dimension into Lithuanian history through the narrative of external enemies that threatened the sovereignty of Lithuania. Consequently, Russia, and later the Soviet Union, was described as a guardian of Lithuania's security. The biggest challenge for Soviet narratives was to explain centuries-long military conflicts between Lithuania and Russia. This was achieved by downplaying these events and instead focusing on other conflicts, such as the Northern Wars.

On the other hand, in the Soviet period the positive dimension of the North was mobilized in attempts to articulate Lithuania as a Northern country. This was achieved by the Museum of Amber, which used the natural and cultural histories of amber in order to canonize this stone as the core material of Lithuanian ethnic identity. Through amber Lithuania defined itself as a country of Baltic people who were seen as Northerners, at least by Tacitus. The Museum of Amber suggested that it was amber which made Lithuania visible in the age of pre-recorded history, both for contemporaries of the Balts and for modern Lithuanians. Here the Museum of Amber stood in stark contrast with HEM, which did not articulate clear connections between modern Soviet Lithuanians and the Baltic tribes.[25]

The Museum of Amber, it seems, succeeded in developing a powerful and lasting nationalist narrative. This narrative relied on the notion of Lithuania as a Baltic country, defined geographically (by the Baltic Sea), linguistically (Baltic languages) and by confession (Baltic pagan religion). Amber was nominated as *the* substance which materialized the existence of Baltic tribes and, later, Lithuania and Lithuanians. The function of amber as a bridge, conceptualized earlier by Marija Gimbutas, was used to bring together the two "European Capitals of Culture 2009", Vilnius and Linz: the Museum of Amber exhibited parts of its collection at Biologiezentrum, an institution of the Upper Austrian Museums, and affirmed once again that "Lithuania" was "a country near the amber Baltic Sea" (see Makauskienė 2009: 35). The narrative of the amber-rich Balts was further reinforced by a revised narrative of Lithuanian-Northern connections. The Soviet narrative which defined both West and Northern Europe as historical enemies of Lithuania was softened or, as in *The Art of the Balts*, wholly abandoned.

These constructions of a history of "the New Balts" demonstrated a good deal of reflexivity. Curators were explicitly open about their goal to come up with new narrative nodes which would revise the traditional narrative of a victimized Lithuania, which was at the mercy of foreign powers. The short-lived military prevalence of the Balts-Curonians in the Baltic Sea area was mobilized to underpin the new pride in Lithuanian national identity.[26] However, in doing that curators were less explicitly aware that they also revised a working-class centred Soviet approach. Together with this approach a democratic articulation of Lithuanian-Baltic nationalism as something which was shared by any member of the nation was disassembled. The narrative of *The Art of the Balts* was based on modernist bourgeois values: it made the rough amber works perform the disinterested aesthetical gaze of the Balts. In addition, both exhibitions explicitly promoted social and political distinction. Little irony could be detected in the way in which *Curonians* boasted about the wealth and military might of the prehistoric "Baltic elites": "Violent people who are pagans, have a lot of wealth and the best horses live in Curonia" (Griciuvienė 2008:28).

Having charted the trajectory of the Baltic component of Lithuanian national identity and its situation in relation to the North during the Soviet occupation and

after, this article cannot do full justice to the centuries-long history of the discursive and material production of Balts-Lithuanians. Further studies are needed of the economy and politics of the Baltic identity as a meaning-making project, which draws both on natural scientific and literary discourses. Particularly instructive would be a comparative study of articulations of Balticness-Northerness as they are revealed in different institutional and geographical contexts, such as formal education in Lithuania, but also Latvia and Germany, and, last but not least, Lithuanian émigré communities. Just like the imagined Baltic amber, the production of Baltic-Lithuanians has to be treated as a multifaceted project which, on the one hand, appears as an amplification of ethno-centric nationalism, but also, on the other hand, contains possibilities for opening multiple connections and revisions of Lithuanian national identity as an ever changing relational constellation.

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Notes

1 One thousand years ago the word "Litua" was written in the Qeudlinburg Annals (1009): "Litua" referred to the lands in which a monk on a Christianising mission, St. Bruno (Boniface), was killed.
2 The identification of the Baltic with the Baltic Germans was widespread in the history of art and applied arts. For example, a catalogue of silver artefacts, published by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London emphasized that it was necessary to interpret Scandinavian silver in the context of Baltic artefacts. It meant silverware made by Riga-based Baltic Germans (Lightbrow 1975).
3 See Budryte (2005). For an excellent study of Lithuanian Jewish history and historical critique of ethnocentric Lithuanian nationalism see Nikžentaitis, Schreiner & Staliūnas (2004).

4   Due to limited space, it is impossible to do justice to the richness of the meaning of the term "Baltic" here. It suffices to note, that according Endre Bojtár, the origins of the term "Baltic" is not entirely clear. As Bojtár put it, "the term of mare Balticum is an artificial construction. None of the peoples who lived in the region in historic times called themselves 'Baltic', nor did they refer to the sea by that name". Indeed it was German nobles, settled in Livland, Estland and Kurland, who first started to use the term to describe themselves in around 1600. Only after the Paris peace negotiations in 1919 did "the Baltic" come to be used to refer to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This coincided with the rise of Baltic philological studies (Bojtár 1999: 6, 10–11).

5   For performative theories of identification as a meaning-making practice see Butler (1997) and MacKenzie (2009)

6   All translations are the author's unless indicated otherwise.

7   The year 1946 saw increasingly anti-Western policies in the Soviet Union: such Western sciences as sociology were banned and pre-war sociological museum theory suffered as well. In the mid-1950s the first studies about the history of Soviet museums were published, but sociology was not rehabilitated until the early 1960s. In the LSSR the field of museum studies started to emerge by the mid-1960s: publications about the history of museums appeared and social surveys of museum visitors were initiated.

8   Many of those narratives positioned Lithuania as either a bridge between East and West or proposed a self-centred and isolationist view of the nation. For more see Leonidas Donskis (1999; 2002) and Egle Rindzeviciute (2003).

9   See the anthology *Ethnogenesis of Lithuanians* which summarized the results of ten years' research on Baltic pre-history, published in Vilnius, 1987 (Šimėnas 2008). The conference on Baltic studies could be compared with the foundational ethno-linguistic congress of Germanists in Frankfurt (1846) or the Pan-Slavic Congress in Prague (1848). The Baltic movement in the Soviet republics was probably inspired by systematic efforts to render visible the autonomous history of "Baltic nations", undertaken by Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian exile intellectuals. The Association for Advancement of Baltic Studies, for instance, was founded in the United States in 1968.

10   The first director was J. Petrulis.

11   For more about spatial and chronological narratives in Soviet Lithuanian historiography see Aurimas Švedas (2009). For general features of the all-union Soviet historiography see Gita Deneckere and Thomas Welskopp (2008: 153–158).

12   The guide authors were the heads of: the ethnography section (Stasė Bernotienė, 1926-2001), the history section (Ona Mažeikienė) and the archaeology section (Bronė Tautavičienė).

13   For an attempt to archaeologically construct the Baltic Sea and East European areas see the classical study by Marija Gimbutas (1956). Gimbutas's all-inclusive approach, however, was later criticized by Lithuanian archaeologists.

14   Similarly the museum's guide used the modern Estonian names of cities: Tartu not Dorpat, Tallinn not Reval.

15   The exhibition *Curonians* was organized by archaeologists Eglė Griciuvienė, Gytis Grižas and Zane Bruža in collaboration with the Latvian National Museum (LvNM).

16   It has to be noted that the accompanying text mentioned Ugro-Finnic tribes only very briefly, as northern neighbours of the Curonians, with whom "Baltic Vikings" sometimes engaged in fights.

17   In 2009 a review of an exhibition *The Art of the Balts* cited Polish archaeologist Ludwik Krzywicki (1859–1941) who famously stated that "we can talk about the culture of Lithuanians in the same way as we talk about Celtic or Scandinavian culture" (Iršėnas 2009: 25).

18   In Lithuanian "amber" is *gintaras*, in Latvian is *dzintars*, and in the now extinct East Prussian it is *gentars*.

19   Although the initiators of the Museum were not particularly interested in the industrial side. Budrys, for example, applied to the V. Muchina Applied Arts Institute in Leningrad to write a doctoral dissertation about Baltic amber workshops . The Institute turned down Budrys's application stating that it concerned an unimportant subject and proposed he write about the amber industry instead. Budrys chose not pursue this research career (Jakelaitis 1998: 11).

20   Gimbutas traced the Lithuanian and East Prussian amber trade with Northern Finland and Russia, mainly conic amber beads, to the Neolithic Age (Gimbutas 1956:180–181). However, the notion of amber trade routes was criticized by Katinas (1983) and Bojtár (1999).

21   See Baltrūnas (2003: 76–77).

22   A good summary of the Soviet Lithuanian version of ethnocentrism was retrospectively made by the Lithuanian historian Edvardas Gudavičius, who pointed out several normative statements around which Lithuanian history-writing was organized: "First and foremost, 'Lithuania which stretches from one sea to another sea with Vytautas the Great'. On the other hand, 'Two wonderful decades of Lithuanian independence'. This 'image' did not capture the gentry and the culture of noble estates, because these were understood as 'Polish'. Meanwhile peasants were seen as 'very good and beautiful, because they spoke Lithuanian and fostered our culture'. These contexts defined a search for Lithuanianness" (Švedas & Gudavičius 2008: 135)

23   See Mykolas Michelbertas (1972).

24   See http://www.baltumenas.lt

25   In 2005 the exhibition of the period between the Middle Ages and 1795 was reorganized in the following way: the chronological principle was dismantled in favour of thematic organisation of the display. Two themes were selected: the political development of the state of Lithuania and the "ethnic-confessional diversity" of the GDL. Interestingly, the Vasa dynasty was again presented mainly as part of the military history section. Nevertheless, some objects from the Vasa period were used to illustrate the everyday life of the royals. It is interesting that a written presentation of the reorganized exhibition did not contain any references to "Baltic" tribes or regions. It seems that the new display continues the project of Lithuanisation of the history of Lithuania. See Vidas Poškus (2005).

26   It is interesting to note that amber was selected as a mascot of the national Lithuanian basketball team for Eurobasket 2011. The chant goes like this: "Amber is basketball, Lithuania's precious stone" (In Lithuanian: "amberis – tai krepšinis, Lietuvos brangakmenis").

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