

A NEW STUDY The Prehistory of Eastern Europe

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Until recently there has been no comprehensive survey of the prehistory of Eastern Europe, although many studies of individual regions and accounts of archaeological excavations have been available. This great lack has now been rectified by "The Prehistory of Eastern Europe, Part I: Mesolithic, Neolithic and Copper Age Cultures in Russia and the Baltic Area," a monumental work (241 text pages plus nine introductory pages, 126 illustrations, 50 tables) by Dr. M. Gimbutas, published in 1956 by the American School of Prehistoric Research, Peabody Museum, Harvard University. I shall here describe the general features of Dr. Gimbutas' work, with emphasis upon the problems of the prehistory of the Baltic area including Lithuania. The area treated in the book is vast, stretching from the Arctic Ocean and the White Sea in the north to the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea in the south, and from the Baltic Sea in the northwest to the Carpathian Mountains and the Oder River in the southwest. The work is divided into six principal sections.

I. The Development of Culture During Early Post-Glacial Times. Obviously an area as large as that treated in this book consists of a number of regions whose cultural development followed separate paths. The glacier that covered the northern part of Europe had an especially great effect upon environmental factors. At a time when man in the southern parts—the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus—had already advanced into Paleolithic culture, immense stretches of land around the Baltic and in northern Poland and central Russia were covered with ice, making human habitation impossible. Not until the ice melted (c. 5,000-10,000 B.C.) in the southern Baltic lands and somewhat later in the north, according to geologists) did the first men appear.

M.Gimbutas begins her survey at about 10,000 B.C., after touching briefly upon the remains of Upper Paleolithic culture in the Black Sea area. Two clearly distinct cultural areas were evident: the Pontic, or Black Sea, area (the Ukraine, southern Russia and the Caucasus) and the Baltic and central and northern Russia area. In the Pontic area Mesolithic settlements are found in river valleys, usually closer to the river than those of the Paleolithic period. As the fauna of the region changed (the huge mammoths, the reindeer, etc were gradually replaced by smaller animals— for example wild boar, red deer, wolves and foxes) the hunting tools also changed and became finer. These microlithic flint implements were previously classified as belonging to the so-called Azilian and Tardenoisian cultural periods, but the author has, quite justifiably, replaced these terms, borrowed from Western Europe, with new ones: the San-Koba and Murzak-Koba periods, after caves in Crimea that bear those names. Bone implements as well as flint ones have been found.

The evolution of culture in the northern part of Eastern Europe followed a different course. Here, as has been mentioned, the first men appeared considerably later, because of the ice sheet and the cold climate. The bands of reindeer hunters first reached the western Baltic lands, and later the eastern Baltic lands. Reindeer were the principal animals hunted, as is testified to by implements made from reindeer antlers and bone. Toward the end of the Late Glacial period the flint industry of the so-called Swiderian type (named after the Seidry-Wilkiz site near Warsaw) appeared between the Oder to the west and the upper Volga and the Oka to the east. Flint artifacts of this culture are found in great numbers in Lithuania. The top of a human skull that was found at Kebeliai, near Priekule in western Lithuania, should probably be assigned to this period. In the seventh and sixth millenniums B.C., after the climate had become warmer, a fishing culture became especially

prominent. Harpoons, bone points, hooks, etc. have been found in peat bogs—the beds of former lakes. Of human remains, a skull found in the Kirsna River (Marijampole District) is usually assigned to this period. In East Prussia, the earliest ceramic fragments found date back to c. 4000 B.C.

II. The Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Copper Ages in the North Pontic Area. In this section M. Gimbutas describes the previously little-investigated and unknown Neolithic and Copper Age cultures of the fourth and third millenniums B.C. in the Ukraine and southern Russia. The author, making use of data from the latest archeological investigations, gives special emphasis to the cultural evolution of the lower Dnieper and Sea of Azov area. Here an uninterrupted cultural development from Paleolithic times to the end of the third millennium B.C. is traceable. But around 2000 B.C. men of a different culture and origin broke into southern Russia, the Ukraine and the Caucasus from the southeast. They buried their dead in barrows, in a contracted position. They congregated in small villages on high river banks. Their houses were rectangular in shape. The bones of domestic animals—cattle and goats—that have been found in their settlements testify to widespread domestication of animals. New elements are found not only in the material culture but in the human type itself. The earlier inhabitants were of the Cro-Magnon race, massive and broad-faced, while the new arrivals were representatives of the so-called Eastern Mediterranean race, narrow-faced and long-headed. All this is tied in with the Indo-European invasion of the area. As we shall see, these new inhabitants forced their way farther west and spread throughout Europe.

III. The Tripolye Peasants in the Western Ukraine. This section of the work is devoted to a discussion of the interesting Tripolye culture. This highly developed culture spread between the Carpathians and the middle Dnieper. The culture is divided, on the basis of different types of pottery and other changing cultural elements, into three periods: the Early Tripolye, the Classical and the Late Tripolye. As early as the Early Tripolye period one finds traces of agriculture and human (mostly female) and animal figurines of clay are characteristic. The high point of cultural development was reached in the Classical period. Polychrome pottery employed three colors and was made in complex designs. Men lived in large villages, in large, long buildings. The Tripolye culture disintegrated in the Late period, at the beginning of the second millennium B.C., with the onslaught of newcomers who reached the western part of the Ukraine by way of southern Russia and the eastern Ukraine.

IV. The Neolithic and Chalcolithic in East Central Europe. In this section the author investigates the two principal cultures of the third millennium B.C.: the Danubian culture and the so-called First Northern or Funnel Beaker culture. The former culture is adjacent to the Danube and in neighboring areas. The Danubian culture gradually took over substantial areas beyond the Carpathians, along the Vistula, Oder, Elbe, Weser and Rhine. This cultural development had several phases. Men gathered in large villages and lived in large houses. A large village on the bend of the Vistula, near the Brzes Kujawski, that belongs to this period has been investigated. It consists of many long (15 to 40 meters) houses of trapezoidal shape. The dead were buried in a contracted position. The second culture, the Funnel Beaker (named for its characteristic funnel-shaped pottery), is found between Denmark and Lithuania. It also was a farming and cattle-raising culture, and its development is divided into four periods. The author has concentrated her attention on its eastern representatives, who lived along the Vistula and in eastern Prussia to the Nemunas River. Here she has scrupulously grouped the ceramics and describes other cultural remains. The Funnel Beaker and Danubian cultures met the same fate: Both were overwhelmed by a new wave of inhabitants coming from the east.

V. The Final Neolithic and Chalcolithic in Northeastern Europe. This section is the most significant for us, since in it the author analyzes the culture of the newcomers, the Indo—Europeans, and at the same time the problem of the Indo—Europeans' origins. As is well known, the homeland of the Indo—Europeans has never been conclusively established. Over a long period of time etymologists and prehistorians have produced a whole series of theories. Some scholars have sought the Indo—European homeland in the First Northern cultural area, others in Saxo-Thuringia, still others in Southeastern Europe and elsewhere. Up to now the Corded Pottery culture of the beginning of the second millennium B.C. in Central and Northern Europe—named for its pottery decorated with the impressions of cords—has been considered a representative of Indo-European culture. M. Gimbutas, after analyzing the available data, links the Corded Pottery culture with the Globular Amphora culture (named for its globe-shaped amphora), considering it to be a later development of the Globular Amphora culture. In the author's opinion, the Globular Amphora culture, distributed between Jutland and the Dnieper, should be considered a hybrid made up of the old local culture plus components from the newly arrived Indo—European culture. Further analysis leads M. Gimbutas to affirm that the Indo—Europeans came to Europe from the southeast. The Indo—Europeans made their appearance in Southeastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Ukraine and Asia Minor toward the end of the third millennium B.C. At about 2000 to 1800 B.C. they spread through the other areas of Europe, reaching the shores of the Baltic at about the same time. From here they forced their way further north—reaching even southern Finland—and through the Dnieper Basin and the vast areas of central Russia. A more or less unitary culture dominated all the land occupied by the Indo—Europeans, but contact with the old inhabitants of the various areas gave it certain local colorations. In the eastern Baltic region the Indo Europeans were the originators of farming and animal husbandry. They lived in small villages—the excavated village of Succase, near Elbing in former East Prussia, is an example. Their dwellings were small, roughly eight to twelve meters long and four to six meters wide. It is even possible from available data to determine their religion; the cult of the sun, the snake and certain domestic animals dominated, and there are evidences of human sacrifices. Racially, as can be seen from skeletal fragments, the new inhabitants were dolichocephalic with a proclivity to mesocephalism. From the Indo—Europeans who settled in the eastern Baltic region the Baltic branch, the direct ancestors of the Lithuanians, was soon formed.

VI .The Culture of the Hunters and Fishers of Northeastern Europe. The book's final section is devoted to a discussion of the culture of the hunters and fishers in the eastern Baltic region and Russia. It is concerned with the culture of those who inhabited the area before the Indo—Europeans arrived on the scene. This culture had many common traits, but it was spread over a broad area and thus was made up of certain differing elements. This has given rise to a division into three cultural groups; the Eastern Baltic, Central Russia; and Eastern Russia plus the Central Urals.

A characteristic of the Eastern Baltic group was pottery decorated with comblike impressions. Stone and bone industries gradually developed after the Mesol-ithic period. The group belonged to the Cro—Magnon race. They were rapidly assimilated by the Indo-Eu-ropeans.

The pottery of the Central Russian group—the Desna, upper Volga and Oka basins—was decorated with pitlike impressions. A substantial Mongoloid admixture is noted in the members of the group. As the Indo—Europeans broke into their territory, the Central Russians retreated toward the northwest, reaching Estonia and Finland

The Eastern Russia and Central Urals region was dominated by a culture alien to the cultures of the Eastern Baltic and Central Russia groups. However, the pottery here also has comblike markings.

Finally, M. Gimbutas discusses extensively the naturalistic art of the fishers and hunters of Eastern Europe; animal and human figurines of amber, flint, clay and bone and the rock engravings of the Lake Onega and Baltic Sea area.

I have discussed in this brief summary only the principal conclusions bearing on cultural evolution and processes. M. Gimbutas has collected in her book almost all the available data, has evaluated it fundamentally and critically and has made cautious conclusions. The bibliography appended to each section is sufficient testimony to the volume of material drawn on. The illustrations are carefully chosen and well presented. An index of names greatly simplifies the use of the work. On the whole, the book makes an excellent impression. It is to be hoped that the succeeding volumes will appear soon. Harvard University, which made the research possible and provided the funds to publish this monumental work, merits special gratitude.