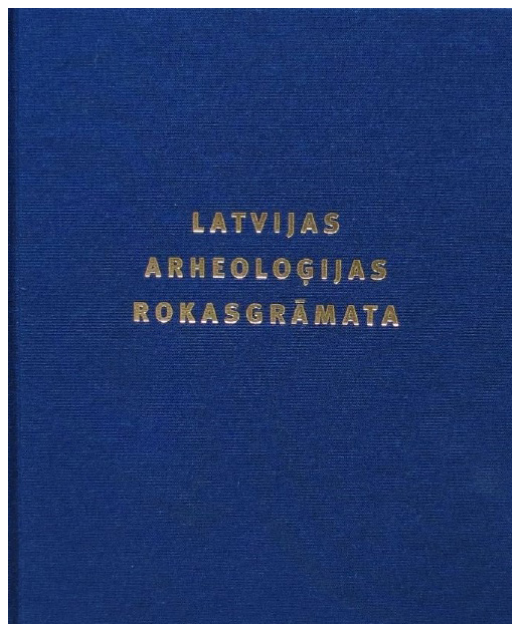


Andrejs Vasks & Gunita Zariņa (eds.):
Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata.
 Zinātne, Rīga 2021. ISBN 978-9934-599-
 08-8. 678 pp.

Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata (Handbook of Latvian Archeology) is a massive edited volume aiming to provide an overview of the state-of-the-art of archeology in Latvia at the beginning of the 2020s. It is based on more than a century of research and continues a series of comprehensive presentations of the prehistory of Latvia. The first account was *Latvijas archaioloģija* (Archaeology of Latvia) in 1926, followed by *Senākie laiki: Latviešu senvēsture* (The Ancient Times: Latvia's Early History) in 1938; Both volumes were edited by Francis Balodis. Two works were published during the Soviet occupation, compiling the accumulating evidence and new discoveries: Harri Moora's monograph *Pirmatnējā kopienas un agrā feodālā sabiedrība Latvijas PSR teritorijā* (Prehistoric Societies and the Early Feudalism in the Latvian SSR) appeared in 1952 and *Latvijas PSR arheoloģija* (Archaeology of the Latvian SSR), edited by Anatolijs Bīrons et al. in 1974.

After regaining independence, two more general reviews on Latvian prehistory were compiled: *Latvijas aizvēsture, 8500. g. pr. Kr.–1200. g. pēc Kr.* (Prehistory of Latvia, 8500 BC–AD 1200) authored by Andrejs Vasks et al. in 1997 and *Latvijas senākā vēsture, 9. g. t. pr. Kr.–1200. g.* (The Oldest History of Latvia, 9th Millennium BC–AD 1200) edited by Jānis Graudonis et al. in 2001. Although both contain new research, they draw largely on material presented in *Latvijas PSR arheoloģija*. In addition, a book for a wider audience, *Arheoloģisks ceļvedis latviešu un Latvijas vēsturē* (Archaeological Guide to the History of the Latvians and Latvia), was published in 2012 by Arnis Rādiņš. This background highlights the need for a new volume summarising Latvian pre- and early history and presenting an overview of the development of Latvian archaeology in the post-Soviet decades. Therefore, *Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata*



can be considered the most substantial and ambitious compilation of Latvian archaeology in almost 50 years.

The volume is credited to the editors Andrejs Vasks and Gunita Zariņa, followed by the editorial board consisting of Jānis Ciglis, Arnis Rādiņš, Antonija Vilcāne and Juris Urtāns. The book is authored by a large collective – 50 people in total – including a number of archaeologists, but also specialists in palaeogeography, palaeobotany, bioarchaeology, numismatics, folklore, history, landscape architecture and ethnomusicology. The list of authors includes scholars, who started their career decades ago, but also introduces a new generation(s) of Latvian archaeologists; 27 authors are women, 23 men. Each author's contribution varies widely from single or a few short entries to dozens of pages and topics. The largest contributors are Vasks (over 60), Vilcāne (over 50) and Urtāns, Ciglis, Ieva Ose and Tatjana Berga (over 30 entries each). The selection of the authors is usually based on personal scientific interests, which are reflected in the text as a broad knowledge base and expertise. At the same time, the large number of authors leads to recurrent variations and imbalances between

the form and content of the different parts, chapters and entries of the book.

Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata is large by its external dimensions: the hardcover volume has 678 pages and weighs around 3.5 kg. The book contains nine main chapters, a summary in English, a list of references, and indexes of the archaeological sites and persons mentioned. Instead of being a traditional national prehistory, *Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata* is a reference work – hence the name handbook. Consequently, the reader is not presented with an organised chronological or thematic narrative, but rather detailed descriptions and data under various headings from which understanding must emerge. While this may be troublesome to some general readers, it serves the professional audience well and allows for in-depth treatment of numerous topics. The majority of the book is dedicated to presenting key sites and main find groups (Chapters IV and V, which take up about two-thirds of the volume), but some basic concepts, methods, history and current practice in archaeology are also illustrated. Starting from the Late Palaeolithic, the volume thus covers more than 12,000 years of archaeology in the territory of what is now Latvia.

Chapter I is simply titled *Archaeology* and aims to give a general introduction to the field. It contains short entries of central theoretical directions (culture-historical, processual and post-processual) and traditional terms (archaeological culture, diffusion, migration and autochthonism) of archaeology – the selection reflects a rather old-fashioned view of archaeology and largely misses theoretical discussions (references) and concepts, which were introduced in the 2000s. A similar take on archaeology is also reflected in numerous other entries and interpretations presented in the volume. The description of different sub-fields of archaeology introduces newer approaches, but presents a limited number of fields, including aerial, underwater, experimental, social, military and ethnoarchaeology and archaeology of dark heritage (labeled here terror).

Dating methods of different scales and accuracies are presented in ten entries. This is justifiable since (absolute) chronology is the backbone of any archaeological inquiry. Still, some of the treatment is somewhat outdated, for example,

the discussion of radiocarbon dating focuses mostly on conventional method rather than AMS, and marine or freshwater reservoir effects are not discussed at all in the book, even if they are known to have potentially large impact in the area (see e.g., Meadows et al. 2016). Although the *Preface* (p. 7) mentions that radiocarbon dates are presented as calibrated, the calibration curves used and other bases for the chronologies remain unspecified, and BC and cal BC datings are presented side-by-side.

It is unfortunate that the next section of Chapter I, periodization, does not include a concise overview of the temporal division and chronology of Latvia's prehistory. A graph or table would have been helpful to understand at a glance the framework on which the book is based. The section contains descriptions of the main periods as defined in Latvian archaeology. The welcome inclusion of periods younger than about AD 1200, i.e. the mediaeval, pre-Modern and Modern times, has not been common in the general archaeological overviews and finds parallels only in the 1974 volume. However, the descriptions of the different periods vary in style and content: part of the entries focus only on the territory of Latvia, while others present a broader context of (northern) Europe. Such inconsistencies run throughout the book. Likewise, the inability of heading levels to reflect the hierarchy of the text is a recurring problem (here, for example, periods and their sub-periods are marked with similar headings).

Chapter II presents some of the methods and materials from other humanities, social and especially natural sciences used in archaeology, called 'auxiliary sciences' in Latvian archaeological parlance, including paleogeography and paleobotany. The chapter also contains a detailed entry on numismatics, the coins and their minting in Latvia throughout the prehistory and history – method aside, it remains unclear why this is included in Chapter II, as the other entries summarising groups of primary materials are found in Chapter V. The remainder of the chapter is grouped under the title *Bioarchaeology*, the content of which is again divided in two. Part of the entries provides brief introductions to selected topics (zooarchaeology, paleopathologies, isotope and aDNA analyses), while half of the section consists of a series of presentations of

paleodemography based on physical anthropology on Latvian materials during different periods.

Chapter III gives a compact overview of the history of Latvian archaeology since the 19th century and describes five main periods of its development, all of which are closely connected to the political situation of the country. The chapter highlights the possibilities and difficulties faced by the practice of archaeology over the years and under different regimes, and introduces some of the main figures involved in the development of Latvian archaeology.

Chapter IV is one of the main chapters of the book and consists of a catalogue of different types of archaeological sites in Latvia. In addition to general descriptions of site types, entries of about 280 locations are included (actually the number is higher, as several entries cover more than one site or multi-period locations). Overall, the presented monuments make up approximately 10% of the archaeological sites registered in Latvia (see data on p. 109). Sites are roughly divided into habitation and burial places. The former consists of settlement sites, (Iron Age) pile dwellings, hillforts as well as partially overlapping categories of historical towns and castles. The latter includes burials, burial grounds and cemeteries divided into Stone, Bronze and Iron Age as well as mediaeval and historical monuments. Other site categories featured include deposits (hoards), ecclesiastical (Christian) monuments, sacred places, fossilised fields and production places, historical earthworks (fortifications) and other later infrastructure.

The *Preface* indicates that only the most important sites are included (p. 7), but no actual criteria for selection are given; one might imagine that these are related to the representativeness of material and the general focus of research. The most numerous site types presented are different Iron Age burials (93), hillforts (50), settlement sites (41, nearly all being from the Stone Age) and castles (33). Compared to the general composition and dating of all sites (p. 109), settlements and castles are somewhat over-represented and burials under-represented, balancing the choice of sites illustrated. Apart from deposits, only a few or no examples are included for the other site categories. The geographic balance of the presented sites is hard to assess as there is no map showing their distribution.

The space given to each monument varies from just some rows to several pages. This can be attributable to the availability of material and the scope of the studies conducted, but also to the personal touch and preferences of the authors, and results in presentations that are not necessarily comparable. Despite these problems, the chapter gives a broad cross-section of archaeological monuments in Latvia and can be used as an index of the key sites and their research.

Chapter V forms the second major block and presents the main find categories. The task is challenging due to the amount of material and its variability and the categorization remains nonsystematic. It is primarily based on the (presumed) function or use context of artefacts (including the following main categories: tools, weapons, saddlery and horseman's accessories, jewellery, vessels, hygiene and household items, artefacts connected with trade, toys and games, writing equipment), but in a few cases on the raw material used (categories: clothing, leather goods, building materials and details), or on neither (categories: Latvian musical archaeology, miniature objects, stray finds and ornaments). Furthermore, the division of roles between Chapters V and VI is unclear and overlaps. The latter deals with raw materials and their working and discusses flint and stone, bone and antler, bronze, iron, wood, leather, cloth, amber and glass – but clay, for example, is missing.

The varying presentations of artefacts are focused on the metal and later periods. Stone tools are meagerly described, and materials such as flint are mentioned only in Chapter VI. Various objects of organic materials from the Stone Age, numerous in Latvia (e.g., Vankina 1970; 1999; Loze 1988), are largely omitted. Stone Age amber ornaments are only displayed in Chapter VI, while the animal tooth pendants known in thousands (see Macāne 2022) are not included beyond a passing mention. Among the categories presented, two entries stand out. The first by Irita Žeiere gives a comprehensive overview of the Late Iron Age – historical clothing and dress in different parts of Latvia. The second by Baiba Dumpe presents a compact and systematic summary of the clay vessels used in Latvia from the Stone Age to the historical period.

The title of Chapter VII, *Ethnic groups*, may catch the eye of a reader unfamiliar with the

ethno-historical research tradition that combines archaeology, linguistics and historical ethnic groups. The chapter gives brief descriptions of the ethnic units constructed in the area of Latvia, the Balts (Curonians, Semigallians, Selonians, Latgallians) and the Baltic Finns (Livs and Vends). Such a culture-historical approach is still present in Latvian archaeology, especially in relation to the later parts of prehistory, and is also reflected in the more recent archaeogenetic studies.

The remaining two short chapters focus on the present day. Chapter VIII deals with the protection, conservation and management of archaeological and cultural heritage, as well as the applicable national and international legislation. Chapter IX introduces the main repositories and keepers of archaeological materials and documentation in Latvia. However, entries on higher education in archaeology, the academic and museum network and their pedagogic activities, general ethical issues in archaeology, metal detecting and citizen science, and private sector and contract archaeology would have contributed to a fuller understanding of the various aspects of current Latvian archaeology.

The bibliography is extensive, although references are used variably between different parts and entries in the volume. It contains quite little new literature, which reflects the general content of the handbook: traditional tones prevail, while the new methods are only introduced and the first results are preliminary. It is likely that *Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata* will later be seen as a snapshot of Latvian archaeology at the crossroads of research traditions and generations.

All in all, the handbook has been a massive undertaking. The background of the work can be found in an earlier project on an electronic archaeological lexicon, which was eventually transformed into a handbook (see Sprēde 2022). This remains visible to some extent as unsystematic treatment and imbalance between the different parts of the outcome. Despite the encyclopaedic nature, a more rigorous editing would have been desirable. On the technical side, too, more attention could have been placed on consistency. On the other hand, the length of the work and the number of authors make such errors quite understandable.

Richly and colourfully illustrated, the book includes hundreds of photos and drawings of sites and artefacts, as well as archival sources and field documentation. The layout by artist Mārtiņš Plotka is generally clear. The text runs in two paragraphs, opening up opportunities for the interplay of illustrations and text, but occasionally fitting too many images, captions, headings and author names on a single page or opening makes the layout uneasy to the eyes. In a few cases, the illustrations are unnecessarily truncated or overlapped (e.g., pp. 466, 472, 580–81). The visual appearance is quite varied as the sources of the images are diverse. Maps are numerous and an important source of information, but a revision to a more consistent outlook would also have been advisable, at least for maps created specifically for this handbook. In addition, their usage is sometimes inconsistent, and the reader might have hoped, for example, for maps for all the periods presented in Chapter I (now the Late Iron Age and later periods maps are missing).

Despite the above remarks, *Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata* is a significant addition to the existing Latvian archaeological literature, providing an overview of the main archaeological sites and some of the recent developments in the field of archaeology. It not only serves the archaeological community and the next generation of researchers, but also the wider public who are interested in Latvian prehistory in general or in certain sites or fields of research in particular. The merits have already been recognized by the handbook being voted as one of the most significant scientific achievements in the annual competition of the Latvian Academy of Sciences in 2021.

As *Eesti esiaeg* (Prehistory of Estonia; Kriiska et al. 2020) published a year earlier, *Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata* documents the development of Latvian archaeology, particularly after regaining the independence in the early 1990s. The Soviet occupation left deep marks and cast long shadows also in the field of archaeology, in research and excavation methods, as well as in the education system – a ‘legacy’ that takes time to overcome. At the same time, much archaeological materials produced during this period in major infrastructure projects and field expeditions are still actively

used and will also serve the future generations of scholars, but without top-down dogmatic ideological constraints.

Given the rapid development in archaeological research and various scientific methods – which are also underlined in the volume – many entries in the handbook will soon be outdated. Nonetheless, the site and material descriptions are unlikely to change quickly, emphasising the value of the book. Still, one can wonder how practical or popular a heavy volume of nearly 700 pages is in 2021. Wouldn't an electronic version also find its niche and demand in the current market?

While *Latvijas arheoloģijas rokasgrāmata* is clearly aimed at Latvian audiences, it has broader, international value. Latvian territory and archaeology is still fairly little known internationally and this volume gathers in one place a lot of information previously scattered in numerous monographs and hard-to-find journals. The problem in this context, as in many of the previous publications, is the Latvian language: 680 pages compressed into just three pages of English summary are hardly enough. However, rumour has it that an English version of the handbook is already being prepared

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