

## THESIS DEFENCE: TÕNNO JONUKS *PREHISTORIC RELIGIONS IN ESTONIA*

On 18 June 2009, I had the honor of participating in a *rite de passage* organized at the University of Tartu to upgrade the academic status of archaeologist Tõnno Jonuks. Usually such events are simply rituals necessary to provide members of the scientific community with all formal papers, the real work and discussion taking place before. The case of Tõnno Jonuks was not fortunately an exception and the ritual successively came to its desired end. To get a PhD degree, a person needs at least two official opponents: one has to know the subject in detail while the other must not necessarily be a specialist in the same narrow field of research as the candidate him/herself. It is not a policy but rather a concession because you can rarely find two or more people who command the same data. Accordingly, there are often two specialists, *sensu lato* and *sensu stricto*, who are chosen to review the work, and I was the former.

To play such a role is not easy because you need to assess the work while being unable to control some or even most of the original data used by the candidate. If I agreed to do it, it was because I really liked the work and was eager to explain why I thought it was valuable. Now I will once again try to clarify my position.

The theme of Tõnno Jonuks's work – that is, a reconstruction of prehistoric beliefs in their temporal dynamics using archaeology as the main source of data – is one of the most controversial and difficult ones in the humanities. Hundreds of archaeologists and ethnologists have tried to test their analytical abilities in a neighboring discipline, usually with mediocre results. The reason is obvious. Applying Durkheimian language, archaeology by definition provides us with 'social facts' which are unconsciously copied from one generation to another with some changes, while the meaning of such facts for a given society, *jugements de valeur*, cannot be known without direct communication with the bearers of the corresponding tradition. It is not difficult to



From the left: Tõnno Jonuks, Yuri Berezkin, Anti Selart, Tõnu Tannberg.  
Photo by Tarmo Kulmar, 2009.

suggest a plausible interpretation for archaeological data but it is usually next to impossible to prove that namely the chosen explanation is the correct one.

The 19th-century way of reconstructing prehistoric religions, which continued well into the 20th century, was to apply a set of data on rituals and beliefs, known owing to various ethnographic and folkloristic research and to historical sources, to the generalized and vague “past”. Early written sources on rituals, folklore, and mythology (Near Eastern, Greek, Scandinavian, etc.), as well as selected materials obtained by folklorists and ethnographers in the field, were considered “archaic”, shedding light on a special stage in the development of the human mind. This stage predated the spread of world religions, school teaching and integration of tribal and rural communities into large-scale economic and cultural networks. This conception was basically shared by scholars of very different academic views, including Marxists, Freudian, Jungian, and some mavericks like Paul Radin and Claude Lévi-Strauss (for me the latter is too peculiar to name him simply a structuralist). Outside this pattern there were functionalists who were uninterested in any reconstructions of the past and German migrationists. The latter partly deserve rehabilitation after decades of contempt. Unlike most of their colleagues, they did believe that prehistoric cultures were not uniform and had different worldviews, rituals and the like, and that these cultures were not isolated but merged into blocks that the Germans usually called *Kulturkreise*. However, a naïve attempt to reconstruct the spread and succession of particular cultural types using exclusively data on living cultures (and in many cases only museum collections) led the migrationists to unsubstantiated interpretations alien to any reality.

A major flaw in the way of thinking characteristic of most of the cultural anthropology up to the mid-20th century and in a way up to now was and is poor knowledge of the picture of the human past created by archaeologists, and often a lack of interest in such knowledge. Franz Boas and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown who were the leaders of American and English anthropological schools before the Second World War did not believe in the heuristic potential of archaeology. Boas seemed to lose any interest in historical reconstructions since 1910 or so. His initial desire to reveal the succession of cultures and languages around the Bering Strait that resulted in the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897–1902 was based on the same belief in the potential of ethnographic sources that was typical of the migrationists. Unlike them, Boas understood his mistake and abandoned this direction of the research altogether. Besides this lack of collaboration with archaeologists, the post-Boasian cultural anthropology had another thread with which it was securely tied to the set of ideas elaborated by Boas and his colleagues. By this I mean the mortal war that Boas and Alfred Louis Kroeber waged against eugenics, racism, and the like. The participation in such a war put under doubt any attention paid to deep regional and temporal differences in the worldviews, so this way of thinking became ideologically unwelcome. The alternative understanding was something like “human culture is one with an infinite number of local variations, all of them equally valuable”. Areal studies were aimed mostly to placing this or that local culture into its immediate historical context and not investigating the nature of large-scale patterns into which such a culture was integrated. It is not without reason that the Boasian school received the name of ‘particularism’. During the later part of his career, Boas became to believe in the absolute autonomy not only of the culture as a special sort of reality but of every particular culture. The severe criticism of the Boasian

approach by Derek Freeman, published in 1983, was largely ignored by the anthropological mainstream. One of the predominant traits of the present-day anthropology is the rejection of any large-scale comparative research, either synchronic or diachronic.

During the last decades of the 20th century, archaeologists had their own battleground on which the processualists and the postprocessualists clashed. The former believed that correct methodology and large databases are enough to reconstruct cultural configurations, economic and social patterns in the past, and ultimately the universal laws of human behavior. The latter made an attempt to apply to archaeology the postmodern view of any interpretation as biased, their “anti-imperialistic” and anti-racist pathos largely borrowed from their colleagues who studied the living cultures. Both schools were not especially interested in a reconstruction of macro-history. As for rank-and-file archaeologists, most of them simply did and do their job and have never been much interested in addressing topics that are “beyond chronology and subsistence”. If somebody was willing to write about a possible significance of a loon, a bull, or a turtle in a particular prehistoric culture, taking into consideration a zoomorphic pendent or the like from one side and a selection of folklore texts from another, such exercises hardly had any influence on the progress of the research.

However, there exists an interdisciplinary community of scholars that is interested namely in macro-history, or better still, in Darwinian evolution of culture as a particular part of nature. For this, methods of archaeology, anthropology, genetics and linguistics are applied. This research direction has roots in the American neo-evolutionism that emerged as logical reaction against the psychological reductionism of the Culture and Personality school. Gordon Child is another source because his very theoretic eclectics (universal “revolutions” combined with *ex oriente lux* diffusionist position in relation to Europe) practically resulted in a moderately true reconstruction of European and Near-Eastern prehistory. Since the 1980s, when the search for particular ways, types and stages of evolution had been abandoned in favor of reconstruction of a unique and extremely complex network of links between particular prehistoric economic and cultural units, combined with the study of major statistical trends in the development of culture on the global level, there probably have been no more significant theoretical innovations.

The study of prehistoric religion usually is outside of this kind of research. Any investigation in the belief system really meets problems that can undermine the work if these remain unrecognized by the researcher.

The first problem is the choice of the model of the phenomenon of religion to be accepted. Till the mid-19th century and sometimes even later, missionaries, administrators, and chance travelers very often described particular native cultures as having no religion at all. It does not mean that these people were unaware of the magic and ritual practices in corresponding societies, and of what they called superstitions. However, for the Europeans of the time religion was not all that but a particular doctrine with a more or less codified list of deities and prescriptions. The Durkheimian interpretation of religion as a projection of the collective self-consciousness of a particular social unit on the sphere of the supernatural seems to be basically true. Since at least the mid-20th century, it has been widely used by those who studied prehistoric complex societies like chiefdoms or early states, but rarely applied to the relatively simple societies like those of the Neolithic Northern Europe. There are also other approaches

to the religion that put accent on the strict logic behind the religious thought and practices (Evans-Prichard) or on the mystical and emotional personal (Lowie) or collective (Eliade) experience. All these approaches not so much reject each other but address different sides of such a complex phenomenon as religion.

Another and more serious problem is that beliefs and interpretations are specific to particular cultures, so to study them we must address the data on these cultures in particular and not the seemingly equivalent elements in other cultures that can have identical form but completely different meaning. This objection really cannot be overcome as long as we are eager to know what people told or how they imagined their world in detail. A general configuration of this spiritual world, however, is not beyond reconstruction but only if we approach any small culture not as a unique phenomenon but as a local/temporal variation of a widely known regional pattern. Rather often such patterns are too complicated and mixed, combining elements that can be followed in many different directions. But there are also other cases in which regional patterns are clear, systemic and represented by both extinct and living cultures known owing to ethnographic research. For example, we are on much firmer ground reconstructing the world-views of the prehistoric cultures of the North-American Southwest than in case of early agricultural cultures of Iranian Plateau or the Bronze Age cultures of southern Siberia. In the Southwest we have a relatively uniform regional pattern with well-known ethnographic survivals. In Iran we also have a rather uniform regional pattern but no ethnographic or ethnohistorical materials that can be directly applied to archaeological materials. In Southern Siberia we have rich ethnography but an overly complicated cultural situation in antiquity with a combination of elements of local and foreign origin in unknown proportion.

Addressing extinct religious patterns, we must not have an illusion that we ultimately could reconstruct everything that we would like to know. What we can do is to discover and to a certain degree explain the existence and replacement of major regional patterns if these patterns are clear enough to be selected and understood. Here I can but agree with Jonuks "that only a long-termed treatment might offer us a framework for studying the religious ideas of particular periods and their change in time".

Among archaeological materials from the territory of Estonia there are few items and objects that would be unequivocally related to the sphere of the sacred: human and animal figurines, rich burials with symbolic goods, etc. But perhaps namely this scarcity of the data helped Tõnno Jonuks to turn his attention from the interpretation of isolated items to a more productive research based on processing and evaluation of mass materials.

Our early (or not so early) written sources on folk beliefs, in Estonia or elsewhere, are not sophisticated. Usually these simply register isolated beliefs and ideas that do not coincide with the official religious doctrine or scientific interpretations. Gathering together data from such sources we get a mixture of facts that can be almost unrelated to each other and survive from different periods. Mapping such features and comparing them with their counterparts in other cultures makes it possible to discover important links that help to reveal the movements of peoples and ideas in prehistory. All this, however, rarely makes one more knowledgeable in the ideology of particular societies in the past.

Unlike isolated features like folkloric-mythological motifs, iconographic peculiarities, or some ritual and magical practices that can preserve their form over indefinitely long periods and sometimes in very different cultural and natural environments, the frameworks which integrate different rituals and beliefs, the worldviews are subject to permanent change, sometimes a quick one. Tõnno Jonuks is correct when he writes that conservativeness is not the main characteristic of religion.

Before addressing the basic body of the work, a few words about its historiographic and critical part. About one fourth of the text is dedicated to the review of previous research, classification of the sources and evaluation of their heuristic potential. Virtually all scholars who had any relation to the study of Estonian folk and prehistoric beliefs are named, their contribution and views described and assessed. In this initial part of the dissertation, and across all of its body, major terms and conceptions relevant to the theme (such as hunting magic, animism, totemism, shamanism, cult of the ancestors, folk religion, etc.) are analyzed and their applicability to the described materials evaluated. The author systematically distances himself from the approach to religion as a function of social relations and tries to select the data that elucidate religious aspect as such. I think, however, that the Durkheimian understanding of religion is not completely dismissed from Jonuks's work simply because the religion *is also* a function of social relation. However, because any functional relations in culture are weak and can be proven or rejected only if we have a large amount of statistical material, we should never suggest a particular social structure as an explanation for particular religious phenomena. To do otherwise would be like using Leslie White's ideas on dependence of culture on energy flow to explain why certain people built earthen mounds and others created statues of stone.

Jonuks subdivides Estonian prehistory into six periods that are defined not so much according to the dating of particular archaeological cultures (all of which had emerged before they spread to the territory of Estonia) but on the characteristics of particular archaeological sources available for each period. The earliest period since the first peopling of the area from the Holocene to the early 5th millennium BC (9600–4900 BC) is practically devoid of the data suitable for interpretation. The author slightly touches upon the problem of dating the earth-diver and the earth-egg myths in Eastern Europe but is cautious enough not to join any argument in the discussion. In a work on Estonian religion it probably would be strange not to mention these tales at all. However, even if we had more iconographic and other materials on Estonian Mesolithic, it would be ultimately difficult to prove or reject hypotheses concerning the dating and areal distribution of tales.

The next period (from Early and Middle Neolithic to 3200 BC) is the first one to which the author's analytical procedures can be applied. Here we have two kinds of sources: burials (some of them disarticulated for unknown reasons) and pendants. The latter, together with some clay figurines, are decorated with representations of humans and animals. Taken alone, these data can hardly help us to reconstruct any particular religious pattern. However, Jonuks compares these archaeological materials with ethnographic materials that are not specifically related to the Estonian tradition but to boreal cultures in general. The conceptions in question are hunting magic, with a focus on the image of the Master of Animals, and shamanism. I would say that the concept of shamanism as described by the author is one of the best descriptions of

this phenomenon I have read. It would be too much to say that the biomorphic pendants, simple figurines and burials accompanied with corresponding goods (as those found in Tamula VIII) definitely prove that hunting magic and shamanism existed in the Estonian Neolithic society. However, taking into consideration the large amount of ethnographic evidence from Eurasia, the interpretation of these suggested by Jonuks is practical and reasonable. The boreal culture in question is a particular historical phenomenon which is spread widely across Northern Eurasia but not universally. Small biomorphic pendants are a pervasive part of this culture both in Northern Europe and in Siberia and their presence at the excavated sites in Estonia is a serious argument in favor of the existence of hunting magic and shamanism.

Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (3200–1100 BC) is another period which is short of evidence on religion. We should consider the possibility that this was not only the time of the spread of productive economy (at least animal husbandry) but of coming of new peoples from both the South and the East. Only after this period of merging and integration of different groups it is possible to speak about more or less direct language and cultural ancestors of the Estonians.

I liked very much that Jonuks distances himself from a popular view that connects stone and bronze axes with ‘thunderbolts’. In ethnographically known cultures, such a connection is really pan-Eurasian but the bearers of these cultures never made such objects themselves. It would be of great interest but it is practically impossible to reconstruct the symbolic interpretation of the axes which was relevant for the very producers of these objects.

The periods that are richest in finds that contain information on prehistoric religion are the Late Bronze Age (1100–500 BC) and the pre-Roman Iron Age (500 BC–50 AD); these are described by the author together. In c. 1100 BC, above-ground stone cist graves appeared. Their emergence was related to the change in economy (farming becomes widespread) and in social structure (the development of a hereditary hierarchal society). Only during the Late Bronze Age the ideology seemed to be focused on the commemoration of ancestors. I would say that during this time the Estonian society adopted some patterns which had already been elaborated before by more complex cultures in Central Europe and Scandinavia. Probably it became not so much ‘boreal’ as ‘European’. The *tarand*-graves of the Iron Age continued the same tradition but unlike the cist graves new structures were attached to the earlier ones. Both types were intended to be exposed to view and, probably in connection with collective rituals, the tombs were associated with hills and other “naturally impressive objects”. The co-existence of simpler types of inhumation and cremation alongside the stone burial chambers is an argument in favor of a complex social structure. Since goods in simple graves are not less numerous or less valuable than in the above-ground burial chambers, the nature of difference between the categories of the dead buried according to different rites hardly reflects their property status and can be rather related to their role in rituals, their genealogical position, etc.

Since all the graves of the period are collective graves, Jonuks shares the view that the rituals were focused on the transformation of the soul of an individual diseased person into “part of an anonymous group of ancestors”. Ethnography indeed supplies us with numerous and spectacular examples of such beliefs. All the examples I know are from relatively complex, sedentary agricultural societies that are geographically

distant but typologically probably similar to the Estonian society in the Early Iron Age. I think, however, that the concept of a collective ancestor could well coexist with a simpler idea of the afterworld as a place where the dead live more or less the same life as they did on earth. Ethnographically known variations here are so numerous that a precise reconstruction of ideas peculiar to a particular extinct culture is certainly impossible. Taken alone, the data on the burial customs of the Bronze Age and pre-Roman Iron Age periods would be difficult to interpret. However, compared to the data on the patterns that were predominant in the earlier and in later times, the specific ideas behind the creation of the cist and *tarand*-grave complexes have been reconstructed by the author in good probability.

The Late Bronze Age to pre-Roman Iron Age basic pattern of burials continues into the Roman Age (50–450 AD). It seems that Estonian society of the time was ever more integrated into the pan-European ideological and cultural networks and became ever richer. The author suggests that the lack of special grave goods in *tarand*-graves (most of the items found were personal adornments, probably worn during life) means that the dead were not supposed to be prepared for the long travel to the beyond but to remain nearby, in the grave itself. Such conclusion deserves to be checked against evidence on some living cultures. It should not remain an enlightened guess only because the idea looks plausible. The major problem can be that other factors, first of all competition between powerful persons and their kinsmen, can also trigger the process of placing ever greater treasure in the graves. So it is difficult to select a purely religious aspect of the phenomenon (collective soul – few goods, individual soul that has to travel to the beyond – rich goods) from a social aspect (the value of funeral goods depends on the social position of an individual and the presence of the rich goods signals the development of social stratification). I am not sure whether we have enough societies for which data on both the value of burial goods and on social stratification exists, otherwise it would be an example study using James Murdock's database.

It seems that the Middle Iron Age (450–800 AD) peoples initially tried to follow the beliefs and practices of the Roman Age. The impetus for changes did not come from within but from outside with the disintegration of all European (and even Eurasian) economic and cultural networks. The above-ground graves covered with stones and localized in proximity of the earlier *tarand*-graves are still predominant. The totally new features are the soil barrows of South-East Estonia that look like an intrusion of another culture. According to the author, during the Middle Iron Age more grave goods were intentionally placed with the dead to be used in the Afterlife, though we are rarely certain enough, as about the ideas related to any particular piece. The intentional destruction ("killing") of goods to be placed with the dead is a major argument in favor of the development of a stricter opposition between this world and the other. During the Middle Iron Age, graves seemed to lose their significance as shrines and the bones of each individual were more often treated separately and not mixed with others. The conception of the collective soul seemed to be losing ground. It is highly probable that since the end of the Roman Iron Age the ideology developed towards those patterns which are more consistent with Christianity. Though Jonuks addresses this question only later, in relation to the Late Iron Age, I think that we cannot rule out the earlier and indirect influence of those ideas that spread across Western Eurasia well before the formal adoption of Christianity by people who lived beyond the former frontiers of the Roman Empire.

The Late Iron Age (800–1220 AD) is a continuation of the Middle Iron Age just as the latter initially continues the practices of the Roman Iron Age. In both cases, changes are not abrupt but deep. In the Late Iron Age, graves were completely without above-ground elements and became practically invisible on the ground. Places for burial grounds were no longer chosen according to their relation to the outstanding features of landscape but were located near villages. Springs emerge as a new type of natural holy sites. Some burial grounds of the earlier times seemed to lose their sacred character and were probably forgotten. Weapons were placed to accompany some of the dead since the Viking Age, and this means that the idea of the special land of the dead (most probably several separate places for particular categories of the dead) is firmly established. Jonuks interprets the spread of pendants during the later part of the Late Iron Age as the pagan equivalent to the Christian habit of wearing crosses. Animals and birds represented on pendants are almost exclusively predators and this choice is certainly not motivated by the role of the corresponding species in subsistence. Warrior ideology based on aggression and the emergence of the élite is a more plausible reason. Written sources on Estonian religion contain a unique mention of only one god (Tharapita). The author's explanation for this is that the high gods that possibly existed have rapidly merged with the Christian God. Such a possibility really exists but it is still strange that the Estonians are the only people in the region whose pre-Christian pantheon was so completely ignored by both medieval authors and by later folk tradition. Of course, we will hardly ever get an answer to the question why it is so.

One of the most positive sides of the research is Jonuks's sensibility and good understanding of the borders of the plausible, his reasonable skepticism which is demonstrated, for example, in connection with the possible influence of the meteorite impact in Kaali on mythological beliefs. On the basis of given materials the author cannot reconstruct many aspects of prehistoric rituals and beliefs in Estonia that all of us would be eager to know about but what he has reconstructed is done in a reliable manner. I am especially glad not to find in his work any speculations concerning creation myths and the like because archaeology supplies us with no data on such topics.

For the title, Tõnno Jonuks has chosen a modest and not quite transparent variant *Eesti muinasusund*. The English equivalent is slightly more precise, *Prehistoric Religions in Estonia*. However, I think that a reconstruction of the religious ideas and their historical dynamics is but an immediate aim of the dissertation. Behind it stands research on the *longue durée* of North-European prehistory. Remaining strictly inside the borders of the Republic of Estonia and meticulously analyzing details of burial practices, personal adornments, etc., Jonuks has been able to reconstruct major tendencies in the cultural configuration of the Eastern Baltic region throughout time. Although he selects six periods in his chronological schemes there are in fact three such periods and, what is especially important, they do not form an unbroken continuity, that is, they do not naturally grow one out of another. Before the Late Neolithic, Estonia was part of the Northern Eurasian boreal world of hunters and gatherers with their hunting magic and shamanism. Moreover, the initial peopling of the Eastern Baltic area in the Holocene was from the south, at least folklore materials definitely suggest the existence of some eastern, that is Siberian links. After the rather unclear period of population movements and probable changes in language, since the Late Bronze Age the country became a periphery of the European world with first Celts and then Ro-



mans being in its core. It is impossible to say whether the ‘collective soul’ ideology with *tarand*-graves as local shrines could develop *in situ* without external influences but such influences certainly did exist. The Estonian society from the 1st millennium BC to the first half of the 1st millennium AD clearly reminds many other societies in the western and southern parts of Europe that existed since the late 4th millennium BC and some even since the 5th millennium. I dare say that the emergence of the “collective soul” ideology with burial tombs fulfilling the role of shrines is the most typical trajectory in the cultural development of societies based on farming or, in some cases, on specialized gathering and fishing.

The unexpected change in ideology since the Middle Iron Age is a less typical and less understandable phenomenon. Destruction of the Roman Age patterns in Eastern and Central Europe because of the intrusion of aggressive groups from the Eurasian Steppe is certainly a major factor responsible for the changes but the very direction of the changes hardly results from it directly. The changes could be somehow related to the spread of Christianity but reasons of such a relation can be two-fold: Either it was a general trend in the ideological development in Western Eurasia with the emergence of Christianity being its most spectacular realization or the emergence of Christianity was a result of a unique combination of historical circumstances, and after that Christianity gradually transformed all the Western-Eurasian ideological space. In any case the reconstructed trend towards the more individualistic conception of the destiny of the human soul reflects a transition to the system of values and ideas that is a direct source of our own civilization.

To sum up, analyzing the archaeological data on prehistory of Estonia, and avoiding any generalizations that would lead him out of Estonian ground, Jonuks has created a research work of great interest for anybody who wants to know how European civilization ultimately emerged.

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## **SYMPOSIUM CHARMS, CHARMERS AND CHARMING HELD ON 21–27 JUNE 2009 IN ATHENS, GREECE**

The second international symposium *Charms, Charmers and Charming*, held under the aegis of the 15th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR), *Narratives Across Space and Time: Transmissions and Adaptations*, organised by the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens (Athens, 21–27 June 2009), assembled scholars from Cyprus, England, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Lithuania, Romania and Russia. Such reunions organised by the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming have become a tradition, since four similar conferences had been held before (London 2003 and 2005, Pécs 2007, Tartu 2008).