

Nida: Prehistoric Art 2026

Prehistoric Art and Symbolism in Mesolithic–Neolithic Contexts of the East Baltic

Abstract Book

In Memory of
Habil. Dr. Rimutė Rimantienė

Nida: Prehistoric Art 2026

International interdisciplinary conference

Prehistoric Art and Symbolism in Mesolithic–Neolithic Contexts of the East Baltic

In Memory of
Habil. Dr. Rimutė Rimantienė

Accompanying Exhibitions

Unearthed Coastal Stories

National Museum of Lithuania

Dune

Nida Art Colony, Vilnius Academy of Arts

7–10 September 2026

Nida Art Colony, Vilnius Academy of Arts

E. A. Jonušo g. 3, Neringa LT-93127, Lithuania

Organizers:



**Vilnius
Academy
of Arts**



Institute of Art Research:

A. Butrimas, T. Rimkus, E. Šatavičė

Nida Art Colony:

N. Bumblienė, N. Bepiršytė

Partners:



National
Museum of
Lithuania



Vilnius
Potters'
Guild



Klaipėda
University

Institute of Baltic Region History
and Archaeology



Neringa
Museums

Sponsor:

UAB Elotus, Vidmandas Stonkus

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Habil. Dr. Rimutė Rimantienė presenting photographs
of archaeological finds from Šventoji, 1967
(photo by Ilja Fišeris)

Program

1st Day (2026, September 7)

- 9:00 **Departure from Vilnius Academy of Arts**
(organized transport to Nida Art Colony)
- 14:00 **Registration, welcome lunch**
- 15:00 **Conference opening**
Ieva Skauronė (Rector of Vilnius Academy of Arts)
Neringa Bumblienė (Director of Nida Art Colony
Vilnius Academy of Arts)
- 15:30 **From Discovery to Synthesis: The History of Investigations at
the Nida Neolithic Settlement**
Adomas Butrimas, Dalia Ostrauskienė
- 16:00 **Excursion to the Nida Neolithic Settlement**
Adomas Butrimas
- 18:00 **Exhibition opening**
Rūta Kačkutė (General Director of
National Museum of Lithuania)
Dalia Ostrauskienė (Exhibition Curator)
Neringa Bumblienė (Director of Nida Art Colony
Vilnius Academy of Arts)
- 19:00 **Conference Dinner**

2nd Day (2026, September 8)

8:00–8:45 **Breakfast**

9:00–13:30 **Session I. Expressions of Prehistoric Art**

Amber and Flint – Commodities in the Symbolic Sphere for Distant Distribution. Examples from Northernmost Europe

Lars Larsson

Aesthetic and Sensory Properties of Mesolithic Clothing in the East Baltic Area

Tuija Kirkinen, Kristiina Mannermaa

The Same but Different: Skeuomorphism and the Eastern Baltic Stone Age

Aija Macāne, Kerkko Nordqvist

Juodkrantė (Schwarzort) Amber Figurines: in Archaeology and other Contexts

Marius Iršėnas

11:00–11:30 **Coffee break**

Birds, Landscapes, and Symbolism in Stone Age Art and Ritual in the Baltic and Fennoscandia

Kristiina Mannermaa, Marja Ahola, Tuija Kirkinen

A Complex of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Art Objects in the Kretuonas Lakeshore Area

Algirdas Girininkas

Reloading Biržulis: the Results of New Fieldwork and Further Perspectives in One of the Most Famous Archaeological Places in Western Lithuania

Tomas Rimkus, Vilius Memgaudis

Manifestations of the Artistry of the Final Paleolithic–Middle Neolithic Communities in the Sites of Eastern and Southern Lithuania

Egidijus Šatavičius

2nd Day

13:30–14:30 **Lunch**

14:30–15:30 **Informal discussions and free time**

15:30–18:00 **Guided walking tour of Nida**

19:00–21:00 **Dinner**

3rd Day (2026, September 9)

8:00–8:45 **Breakfast**

9:00–13:00 **Session II. Ceramics as Art**

Nida: The Earliest Narrative Scenes in Lithuanian Art

Adomas Butrimas

Symbols in Pottery Decor. Pottery Decoration Elements and Motifs in Nida Settlement: Places of Origin

Mindaugas Pilkauskas

Ornamentation and Forms of Pottery from Settlements in the Western part of Gdańsk Bay

Danuta Król

Understanding Through Making: Experimental Archaeology of Neolithic Pottery from Western Lithuania

Eglė Šatavičė, Dainius Strazdas, Elena Aleksejeva

11:00–11:30 **Coffee break**

A Technical Approach to the Study of Neolithic Pottery Decoration

Valdis Bērziņš

Pots Behind Pots: The Meaning, Identification, and Characteristics of Grog Temper in Neolithic Pottery in Present-Day Latvia

Vanda Haferberga

Late Neolithic Pottery Decorations from Bell Beaker Contexts of North-Eastern Poland in Action

Aleksandra Cetwińska, Joanna Dymańska,
Krzysztof Cetwiński, Dariusz Manasterski

3rd Day

13:00–14:00 **Lunch**

14:00–15:30 **Informal discussions and free time**

15:30–18:00 **Museum and cultural heritage visits**

19:00–21:00 **Dinner**

4th Day (2026, September 10)

8:00–8:45 **Breakfast**

9:00–13:00 **Session III. Animal Identities and Symbolism**

**A Cervid Representation from the River Užava Collection,
Western Latvia**

Ilga Zagorska

**Elk as a Symbolic Creature in the North European Mesolithic:
Evidence from Early Mesolithic site 7 at Krzyż Wielkopolski,
Western Poland, and Beyond**

Jacek Kabaciński, Christopher L. Hill,
Małgorzata Winiarska-Kabacińska

**A Mysterious Antler Item from the Stone Age Hunter-Gatherer
Site Szczepanki, Masuria, North-Eastern Poland**

Witold Gumiński, Tymoteusz Kosiński

**Function and Symbol: Technological Aspects of
Ornamentation on Holocene Bone, Antler, and Amber
Artefacts from Lithuania**

Gvidas Slah

11:00–11:30 **Coffee break**

**Modified Tooth Pendants from the Hunter-Gatherer Stone Age
from Estonia – Aesthetics, Identity Markers or Representations
of New Animals?**

Tõnno Jonuks

**Wearing the Hare: Personal Adornment from the Neolithic
Sites of Šventoji**

Eglė Šatavičė, Dalia Ostrauskienė, Gvidas Slah,
Vytautas Baranauskas

**Symbols or Food? Animal Remains at the Stone Age Hunter-
Gatherer Cemetery at Dudka, Masuria, North-Eastern Poland**

Karolina Bugajska

4th Day

13:00–14:00 **Lunch**

14:00–15:00 **Informal discussions and free time**

15:00–18:00 **Excursion in Nida and its surroundings**

19:00–21:00 **Dinner**

5th Day (2026, September 11)

8:00–8:45 **Breakfast**

9:00 **Departure from Nida Art Colony**
(organized transport to Vilnius)

Exhibitions

Exhibition **Unearthed Coastal Stories.** **The Discoveries of Rimutė Rimantienė**

Curatorial Concept

Along the Lithuanian coast, archaeological discoveries have revealed an exceptionally rich picture of Stone Age life. Through decades of research at Šventoji and Nida, Habil. Dr. Rimutė Rimantienė uncovered evidence of communities whose daily activities, technologies, and beliefs were closely interconnected. Archaeological investigations of Stone Age settlements in these locations during the second half of the twentieth century established a fundamental scholarly basis for new interpretations of the economy, material culture, and worldview of Neolithic communities.

A special place in Rimantienė's research was devoted to amber. In the cultural layers of the Stone Age settlements at Šventoji, she discovered substantial accumulations of raw amber, amber artefacts, and so-called "amber hoards." These finds demonstrate that coastal communities were collecting and working amber more than 6,000 years ago and that amber had become an important medium of exchange linking the coast with the wider Baltic region and neighboring territories.





Amber artefacts (photos by A. Baltėnas, K. Stoškus, G. Trečiokas)

The ancient settlement complex at Šventoji is notable for the exceptional preservation of organic materials, including wood, bone, and antler.

Working closely with conservators, Rimantienė made a significant contribution to preserving these finds. They demonstrated that the technological system of Stone Age communities was based on the integrated use of wood, bone, antler, and stone, and was closely adapted to the coastal environment. The empirical and methodological experience gained at Šventoji became an important foundation for later investigations of the ancient settlement at Nida.



Elk-head staff from the Šventoji 3 Site
(photo by K. Stoškus)

Wooden idol from the Šventoji 2 Site
(photo by K. Stoškus)





Carved wooden bird head from the Šventoji 23 site and miniature dugout boat from the Šventoji 2 site (photos by G. Trečiokas)

Nida – A Key Site of the Bay Coast (Pamarių, Rzucewo, Haffküstenkultur) Cultural Tradition



Excavation of a trial trench at the Nida settlement, 1974
(photo by R. Rimantienė)

The excavations of the ancient settlement at Nida, directed by Rimantienė between 1973 and 1978, are considered among the most significant archaeological investigations in Lithuania. More than 4,600 m² were excavated, yielding an exceptionally rich archaeological assemblage, particularly ceramics, represented by over 100,000 pottery sherds.

These data enabled a comprehensive reconstruction of Late Neolithic community life, spanning subsistence and diet, crafts, rituals, and the earliest forms of artistic expression, including some of the earliest examples of narrative art.



Pottery from the Nida settlement (photo by K. Stoškus)

Based on the Nida investigations, the monograph *Nida. Senųjų baltų gyvenvietė* (*Nida. Settlement of the Ancient Balts*, 1989) became a methodological benchmark for research on the Bay Coast Culture. The monograph's greatest value lies in its systematic analysis of the stratigraphy and ceramic development of this key cultural site. Using statistical data on vessel profiles, forms, and ornamentation, Rimantienė established the Bay Coast Culture's chronology, which subsequently became the reference framework for studies of other sites within this cultural tradition. Equally significant is that, several decades after the original excavations and already approaching ninety years of age, Rimantienė returned to the Nida material for a renewed synthesis. The expanded monograph, published in English in 2016,

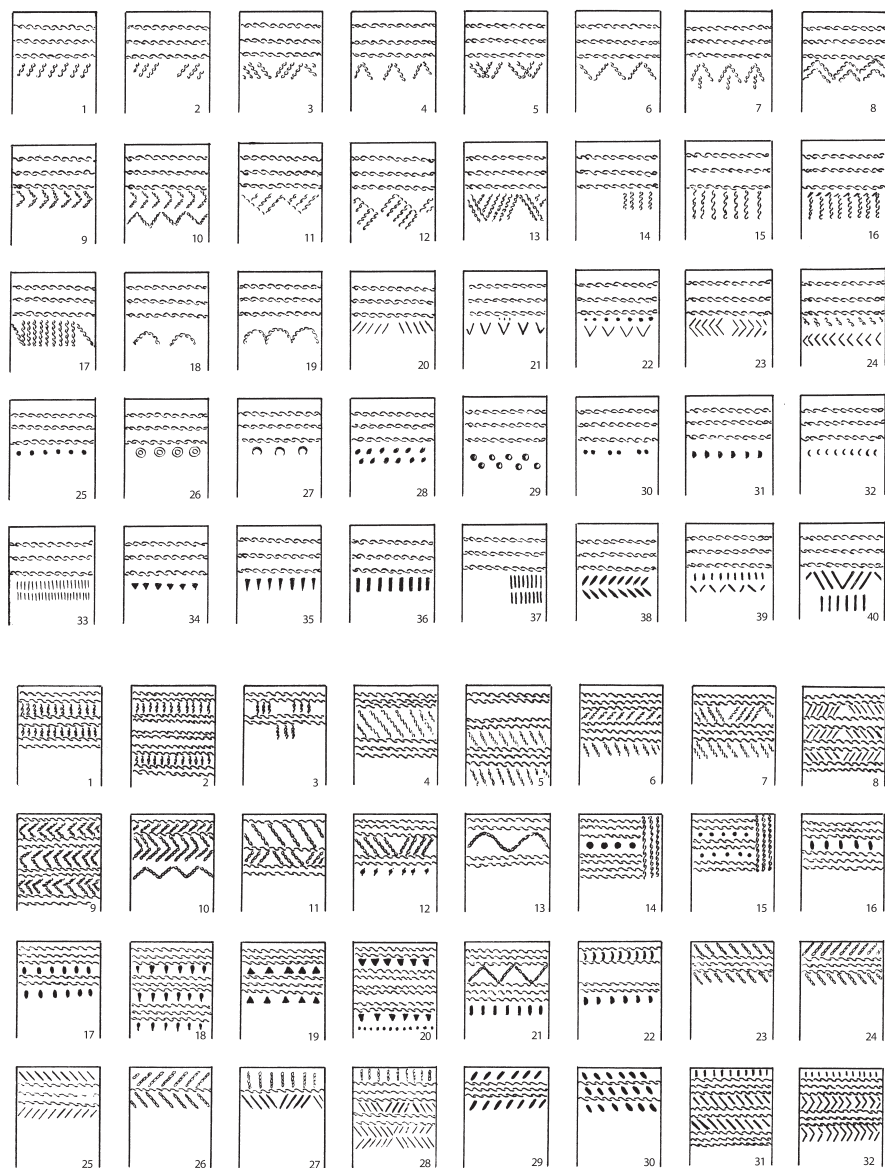


R. Rimantienė's drawing of Nida sherds with a human figures

testifies not only to the international importance of these studies but also to the scholar's lifelong commitment to a research subject of special significance to her.

Her detailed analysis of ceramic ornamentation is particularly important, allowing us to speak of a complex symbolic system in which everyday practice intertwines with ritual thinking.

Experimental archaeology was also an important part of Rimantienė's scholarly work. At the end of the twentieth century, on her initiative and in collaboration with students of ceramics from the Vilnius Academy of Arts, ancient Nida pottery production techniques were reconstructed. Practical experiments in clay selection, vessel construction, ornamentation, and firing provided valuable insights into the technological choices and craftsmanship required for the daily and ritual activities of Neolithic communities.



Drawings of ornamentation charts by R. Rimantiene



R. Rimantienė in Nida with an experimental reconstruction of a Bay Coast culture bowl (photo by S. Butrimienė)

These experiments complemented the analysis of archaeological finds and reinforced interpretations that Nida pottery was not merely utilitarian but also aesthetically and symbolically conceived.

For many decades, the National Museum of Lithuania has featured archaeological finds from Rimantienė's excavations in its permanent displays and thematic exhibitions. These artifacts constitute a significant part of Lithuania's Stone Age heritage. The material accumulated through long-term coastal research has become an integral part of the museum's prehistory narrative.

The exhibition presents archaeological finds discovered by Rimantienė in Nida and Šventoji, ranging from hunting and fishing tools to ceramics, amber, stone, and wooden artefacts. Together, they reveal both the daily activities of Stone Age coastal communities and the ritual significance attributed to some objects.

Among them are seal skulls discovered at Šventoji more than four decades ago. In the exhibition, the seal—as an animal that inhabits both water and land—serves as a symbol through which the boundary between everyday life and ritual can be explored. Its skin provided protection from moisture and cold, its bones were transformed into tools, and its fat served as a source of light. Yet modified skulls and tooth amulets suggest that some parts of the animal may also have acquired symbolic significance.

Today, scholars continue to refine these interpretations and expand our knowledge of coastal economies and human–environment relationships by drawing upon the material collected by Rimantienė.

An important part of the exhibition consists of Rimantienė's archaeological drawings, published in her monographs and still used today as tools of scholarly analysis and interpretation. These drawings not only document artefacts but also reveal the researcher's methodological precision and her ability to structure archaeological information visually.

Rimantienė always viewed archaeological finds within a broader context of lifestyle and worldview, enabling everyday practices to be understood as processes through which rituals and symbolic meanings gradually emerge. The exhibition reflects this perspective by presenting the Stone Age world as a cultural system in which rituals slowly arise from everyday life.

National Museum of Lithuania

Archaeologist Dalia Ostrauskienė

Exhibition **Dune**

Curatorial Concept

We of the Tleilaxu believe that in all the universe there is only the insatiable appetite of matter, that energy is the only true solid.

— Frank Herbert, *Dune Messiah* (1969)

Nida Art Colony (NAC) is a subdivision of Vilnius Academy of Arts (VAA) located in Neringa, Lithuania. A site for art, education, research, leisure, and focused individual and collective work, NAC operates as a hybrid entity distinguished by its porous structure, fostering connections between the academic community, local and international art and cultural fields, and the wider public.

It is situated in the distinctive landscape of the Curonian Spit, a 98-kilometre-long sand dune peninsula shared by Lithuania and Russia. This UNESCO World Heritage Site has been shaped over the past 200 years by planted forests established to stabilise the natural movement of wind-driven sand.

The summer exhibition 'Dune' at the Nida Art Colony approaches Neringa as a real yet myth-laden place, opening up a space for imagination against a backdrop of geopolitical and ecological upheaval.

The exhibition's title first and foremost refers to the peninsula itself, whose landscape is the result of an ongoing collaboration between nature and human efforts to control the drifting sand dunes. Yet 'Dune' also alludes to Frank Herbert's eponymous legendary science-fiction novel. Depicting a decisive moment in history, the novel reveals both the predictable and the improbable laws governing the universe. Here, the capacity to endure even under impossible conditions is grounded in radical belief and vision, discipline and community, self-awareness and environmental perception, ancient knowledge and foresight.

Moving between documentary and speculative fiction, the participating artists focus on the meanings and possibilities that emerge at the intersections of the human, nature, myth, and new technologies.

The Italian artist duo Invernomuto, comprising Simone Bertuzzi and Simone Trabucchi, presents the work *Triton* – a cross-media project combining

sculpture, sound, and storytelling. The work is attuned to a real colony of salamanders living in two ancient rock basins in Pietra Perduca, Northern Italy. Linking Neringa to this amphibian colony, *Triton* exists simultaneously as a musical instrument and an ambient presence, its grass-green light and sound permeating the exhibition and proposing an alternative mode of listening to non-human worlds.

Deimantas Narkevičius created his series *Akmenys po du* (*Stones in Pairs*) in the summer of 2023 while travelling through Central and Eastern Lithuania. Each boulder was photographed twice, from different angles or in different seasons. The scanned Polaroid prints are marked by graininess and warm tones that mislead the viewer: the images appear to belong to the past, though they are in fact contemporary. The large, solitary stones scattered across the Lithuanian landscape remain mysterious to this day. Transported by glaciers from distant regions and seemingly out of place in their surroundings, these sacred boulders have performed an important social function since ancient times. In pagan times, they were used as altars in ritual practices; later, they were adopted into Christian tradition and, in some cases, continue to serve as sites of prayer today.

Emilija Škarnulytė's new series of drawings was created during her residency at Nida Art Colony earlier this year. Depicting aquatic microorganisms and objects associated with religious cults, the drawings were made using iron oxide, which is found everywhere: in ancient cave paintings, on Mars, and functioning as a geological time archive. The exhibition also presents Škarnulytė's glass objects *If Water Could Weep* (*Mermaid Tears*), made from neodymium glass, a material enriched with the rare-earth element neodymium (Nd), whose colour changes depending on the spectrum of light.

'Stilgar', Alia said, fighting to hold him, 'you stand in a valley between dunes. I stand on the crest. I see where you do not see. And, among other things, I see mountains which conceal the distances.'

'There are things hidden from you,' Stilgar said. 'This you've always said.'

'All power is limited,' Alia said.

'And danger may come from behind the mountains,' Stilgar said.

'It's something on that order,' Alia said.

Stilgar nodded, his gaze fastened on Paul's face. 'But whatever comes from behind the mountains must cross the dunes.'

— Frank Herbert, *Dune Messiah* (1969)

Curator: Neringa Bumblienė

Artists: Invernomuto, Deimantas Narkevičius, Emilija Škarnulytė

Coordinator: Asta Jackutė

Graphic design: Vytautas Volbekas

Communication and translations: Rosana Lukauskaitė

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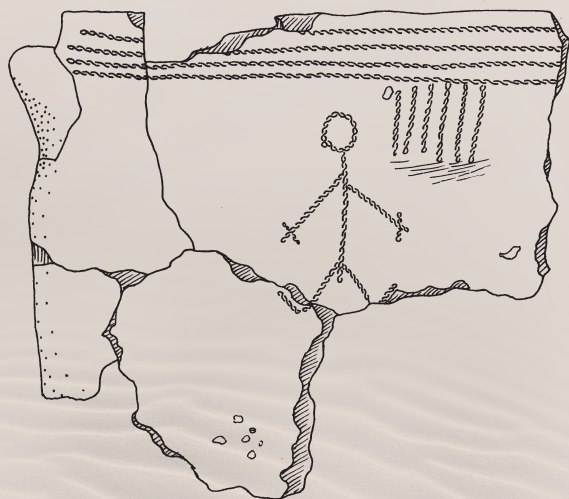
Technical implementation: Antanas Gerlikas

The exhibition is financed by the Lithuanian Council for Culture Supported by the Art and Research Projects Fund at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, Neringa Municipality, Haus der Kunst München, PAN, and the Italian Council programme (2024) Special thanks to GITA, Italy

The exhibition 'Dune' will coincide with the international symposium 'Pre-historic Art and Symbolism in Mesolithic–Neolithic Contexts of the East Baltic', organised by the Institute of Art Research at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. The symposium is dedicated to archaeologist and museum professional Rimutė Rimantienė, who extensively researched the Curonian Spit and, in particular, the ancient settlement of Nida, located in close proximity to the VAA Nida Art Colony.



Emilija Škarnulytė's work as part of the group exhibition 'Dune' at Nida Art Colony of Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2026. Image: Mantė Elelueta



Presentation Abstracts

From Discovery to Synthesis: The History of Investigations at the Nida Neolithic Settlement

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The Neolithic settlement of Nida is among the earliest Stone Age sites recorded in the archaeological literature of the Eastern Baltic region. It was first mentioned in 1833, when Fisheries Inspector Wilhelm Beerbohm described the site as a pagan cemetery. Systematic interest in the prehistoric remains of the Curonian Spit developed throughout the nineteenth century, largely through the activities of the scholarly societies of Königsberg: the *Königliche Physikalisch-Ökonomische Gesellschaft zu Königsberg* (founded in 1790) and the *Altertumsgesellschaft Prussia* (founded in 1844). Their research was disseminated through several important periodicals, including the *Schriften der Physikalisch-Ökonomischen Gesellschaft zu Königsberg* (1861–1922), the *Altpreußische Monatsschrift* (1864–1923), and the *Sitzungsberichte der Altertumsgesellschaft Prussia* (1874–1924), which from volume 26 onwards appeared simply under the title *Prussia*. The first archaeological investigations at Nida were conducted by some of the leading East Prussian scholars of the period, including Paul Schief-ferdecker (1873), Otto Tischler (1874), Adalbert Bezzenberger (1889, 1893), and Emil Hollack (1895, 1900). Their excavations and observations revealed the archaeological significance of the Curonian Spit and brought Nida into wider scholarly discussion. Otto Tischler documented approximately one hundred pottery sherds from sites across the Curonian Spit, most of them attributed to the Corded Ware tradition. He also analysed the famous amber finds from Juodkrantė (Schwarzort) and emphasised the importance of the region within a broader European prehistoric context, dating the material to the second millennium BC. The publications of these scholars became particularly valuable after the Second World War, when a substantial part of the archaeological collections of East Prussia was lost or destroyed.

The second major stage of research at Nida is associated with Professor Habil. Dr. Rimutė Rimantienė, founder of the Lithuanian school of Stone Age studies. In 1973, the precise location of the Neolithic settlement was identified, and extensive excavations were carried out during five field seasons between 1974 and 1978.

These investigations revealed one of the most important Neolithic settlements in the Eastern Baltic region. Cultural influences of both the Corded Ware and Globular Amphora traditions were identified within the assemblage. The cultural layer preserved remains of structures and hearths, while the finds included approximately 100,000 pottery sherds belonging predominantly to the Bay Coast (Rzucewo / Haffküstenkultur) cultural tradition, characterised mainly by cord ornamentation. The assemblage also contained Narva-type pottery, numerous flint and stone artefacts, and an important collection of amber objects. The economy of the settlement was based on fishing, hunting, gathering, animal husbandry, and crop cultivation.

The results of these investigations were presented in two major monographs (1989, 2016), in the popular book *Kuršių nerija archeologo žvilgsniu* ("The Curonian Spit Through the Eyes of an Archaeologist"), published in Lithuanian (1999) and German (1999), and at international conferences in Prague (1990), Prague–Štířín (1992), Esbjerg (1997), and Poznań (1998). The Nida material also became an integral part of syntheses of the Lithuanian Stone Age published in Lithuanian (1984, 1996), German (1994), and English (1992), and continues to be discussed in numerous scholarly and popular publications.

Today, Nida remains one of the key reference sites for understanding the Neolithic of the Eastern Baltic region and continues to provide new perspectives on prehistoric coastal communities, their technologies, and cultural interactions.

Rimantienė, R. 1984. *Akmens amžius Lietuvoje*. Vilnius: Mokslas.

Rimantienė, R. 1989. *Nida: Senųjų baltų gyvenvietė*. Vilnius: Mokslas.

Rimantienė, R. 1992. The Neolithic of the Eastern Baltic. *Journal of World Prehistory*, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 97–143.

Rimantienė, R. 1994. Die Steinzeit in Litauen, *Bericht der Romisch-Germanischen Kommission*, 75. Mainz am Rhein.

Rimantienė, R. 1996. *Akmens amžius Lietuvoje*. Vilnius: Žiburys.

Rimantienė, R. 1999. *Kuršių nerija archeologo žvilgsniu*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademija.

Rimantienė, R. 1999. *Die Kurische Nehrung aus dem Blickwinkel des Archäologen*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademija.

Rimantienė, R. 2016. *Nida. A Bay Coast Culture Settlement on the Curonian Lagoon*. Vilnius: National Museum of Lithuania.

Amber and Flint – Commodities in the Symbolic Sphere for Distant Distribution. Examples from Northernmost Europe

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Flint and amber are two raw materials that have been distributed from south to north Scandinavia. As objects of exotic origin, they have had an important role as representatives within a symbolic sphere. As to representatively, flint that has been transported in rather large pieces is very resistible while amber that has been distributed in rather small pieces and therefore more difficult to observe is much easier to have been destroyed. In the Early Neolithic during the early and middle forth millennium a number of large hoards with amber have been found in Denmark but small number of beads and pendants are found in settlements and graves. However, a considerable number of flint axes are distributed to Central Sweden. The amber distribution seems to be rather small.

The connections between south and north are intensified during the late third millennium. Flint axes are found in large hoards in north Scandinavia and amber is found in settlements. The distances of trade were very long, up to 1600 km, but most connections were facilitated by sea transport made within an archipelago along the East Swedish coast.

Aesthetic and Sensory Properties of Mesolithic Clothing in the East Baltic Area

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Although it is generally accepted that furs and feathers have been important throughout the Stone Age e.g. for preparing clothes, the finds themselves are extremely rare due to the degradation of soft organic materials. Warm clothes facilitate human lives in the north, and the ethnographic data shows the multiple ways in which furs and feathers have been applied around the world.

During the recent years, microscopic evidence of clothes, headgear and footwear as well as possible decorations have been recovered from soil samples collected from North and Central European Mesolithic and Neolithic cemeteries (Skateholm I and II, Yuzhniy Oleniy Ostrov, Rinnukalns, Zvejnieki and Bad Dürrenberg). One of the pioneering sites was Mesolithic Donkalis and its iconic Soothsayer burial in Grave 2. In the analysis, almost 30 fragments of bird feathers and mammalian hairs were recovered. In addition, new bone material has given us exciting information about the grave. For the conference, a new analysis will be made and presented in Nida.

In this presentation, we will give an overview of the fibre analysis studied in *Animals Make Identities* (AMI) project in 2020–2026. Based on the results, both aesthetic and sensory properties of the clothing will be discussed with special reference to Donkalis Grave 2.

The Same but Different: Skeuomorphism and the Eastern Baltic Stone Age

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Skeumorphs, broadly defined, are intentional imitations of objects made in different raw materials than the original. In archaeology, they have often been approached from three perspectives. The first views skeuomorphism as an important element in technological change, whereby skeumorphs facilitate the adoption of new technologies by socialising them through familiar and accepted features. The second emphasises skeuomorphism as an emulation of status, wherein mimicry serves to reduce the costs and/or skills required for production and consumption. The third adopts a relational stance, foregrounding divergent ontologies and treating skeumorphs as situational, with meanings negotiated across networks of various human and non-human agents, including things, materials, and technologies. Skeuomorphism has been discussed in numerous geographical and chronological settings, but the term has rarely been applied in the eastern Baltic area. In this contribution, we present examples of skeumorphs and skeuomorphism from Stone Age contexts in this region. The examples primarily include personal ornaments (e.g., pendants and rings), and selected tool forms (e.g., battle axes). We explore how the concept of skeuomorphism can enrich our understanding of prehistoric sign systems, and illustrate how the entanglement of material, form, and meaning was mediated through craft practices.

Juodkrantė (Schwarzort) Amber Figurines: in Archaeology and other Contexts

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In 1882, Richard Klebs published a catalog of amber artifacts reportedly recovered during industrial amber extraction at Juodkrantė (Schwarzort) on the Curonian Spit. Although the provenance and archaeological context of many of these finds remain uncertain, the collection is generally attributed to the Stone Age, with some possible Bronze Age elements. Most artifacts fit well within the known typological repertoire of prehistoric amber working in the eastern Baltic region. However, a group of anthropomorphic figurines stands apart, lacking convincing parallels in Stone Age finds in the Baltic region and beyond.

Despite these uncertainties, the figurines have repeatedly been interpreted through various archaeological frameworks and assigned to different cultural traditions. More remarkably, although for a long time they were known only through Klebs' published drawings and later copies, they came to be regarded as representative examples of Baltic prehistoric art. Beyond archaeology, reproductions of the figurines entered museum displays, heritage practices, and popular culture, eventually becoming visual markers of antiquity and, to some extent, of Baltic identity.

This paper examines the cultural biography of the Juodkrantė figurines and discusses how objects with uncertain provenance and chronology can still acquire authority and symbolic power. Drawing on concepts such as invented tradition, cultural memory, and heritage-making, it explores how archaeological images and reproductions can become more influential than the elusive originals.

Birds, Landscapes, and Symbolism in Stone Age Art and Ritual in the Baltic and Fennoscandia

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Birds played both practical and symbolic roles in Stone Age communities of the Baltic and Fennoscandian regions. Archaeological finds from Mesolithic and Neolithic graves show the use of bird bones, wings, and feathers as amulets, ornaments, hairpins, and grave offerings, indicating their deep ritual and spiritual significance. Their presence suggests that birds were seen as mediators between humans, nature, and the spirit world. Birdsong also shaped the soundscape of ritual places, potentially enhancing the atmosphere and influencing cosmological interpretations of the landscape. In Fennoscandian rock art, bird-like figures and winged beings appear, possibly representing shamans in action or their spirit helpers. Ethnographic parallels shed further light on these meanings: waterfowl are often associated with soul journeys across watery realms, while birds of prey symbolize wisdom and spiritual power. The vivid colours and plumage of many birds may have strengthened their symbolic potency, linking them to seasonal cycles, transformation, and ritual aesthetics. This paper examines how birds, environments, and humans interacted as agents within Stone Age cultural landscapes, presenting key archaeological evidence and interpreting its broader cultural and ecological implications.

A Complex of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Art Objects in the Kretuonas Lakeshore Area

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Over a period of more than 30 years of archaeological investigations in the Kretuonas lakeshore area (Eastern Lithuania, Švenčionys District), more than 250 examples of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age art have been discovered. The most numerous group of art objects from these periods consists of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations. Based on formal characteristics, anthropomorphic representations may be divided into three groups: fully figured forms in bone and antler, compositions on flat surfaces, and sculptural depictions of human heads.

Among zoomorphic objects, depictions on flat surfaces predominate, although both three-dimensional and relief zoomorphic sculptures are also present, including clay figurines.

A substantial portion of the assemblage consists of geometric motifs found on bone and antler artefacts as well as on pottery; narrative or figurative compositions are also frequently encountered.

The largest category of ornaments from this period consists of pendants, most commonly made from perforated animal teeth, as well as bone, antler, and amber plaques.

The majority of the art objects discovered in the Kretuonas lakeshore area are attributed to Narva culture communities that inhabited the region during the 5th–2nd millennia BC.

All anthropomorphic objects from the Kretuonas lakeshore area appear to have held not only aesthetic value but were also created and used as ritual objects, including offerings and items associated with the cult of the dead and ancestors. In contrast, zoomorphic representations are more likely to be connected with ritual practices related to subsistence activities, particularly hunting and fishing.

Reloading Biržulis: the Results of New Fieldwork and Further Perspectives in One of the Most Famous Archaeological Places in Western Lithuania

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Western Lithuania is famous with plenty of Stone Age sites with good organic preservation. Lake Biržulis, situated in a morainic landscape, is one of such places. First stray finds in the area were located already in the beginning of the 20th century, during the first campaigns of the draining of the lakes outskirts. It also led to the systematic archaeological surveys around, which started in 1978 and ended in 1993. During these long years of campaign data about over 50 sites, including human burials and stray finds were collected. According to this data, chronologically Biržulis contains scarce data about the last Final Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers, but its shores were densely inhabited since the Early Mesolithic to the Neolithic, and in some cases Early Bronze Age. Environmental studies followed archaeological excavation, which provided data about palaeoecosystems. Since the end of the excavation in 1993, numerous studies and monographies dedicated to the archaeological and anthropological data from Lake Biržulis were published, proving it to be one of the most significant archaeological areas in northern Europe.

Return of archaeologists to Lake Biržulis took place in 2020's, which was aimed in the searches of more hunter-gatherer burials, and collecting more data about the oldest pottery and the introduction of husbandry. In 2024, new field surveys continued with the aim to investigate the Final Palaeolithic and Mesolithic human sites and their adaptation to the local eco-

systems. These periods are still poorly understood from the settlement's perspective, therefore, field studies were aimed at the most perspective locations in the northern and southern parts of the lake where archaeological data was already known before. Particular research attention was also paid to the former lake islands, where evidence of dense human habitation during the Mesolithic and Subneolithic, and even younger periods is evident. Our goal with this paper is to provide the first results of three seasons fieldwork and present new archaeological data about past human life in the marshy landscape of Biržulis.

Manifestations of the Artistry of the Final Palaeolithic–Middle Neolithic Communities in the Sites of Eastern and Southern Lithuania

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Eastern and Southern Lithuania are among the oldest inhabited territories in our country, because these territories, which were located along the edge of the glacier in both glacial and periglacial zones, were the first to be liberated from under the glacier or its influence, and stable soil landscapes with a network of water basins and rivers were first formed here. In addition, grassy and woody vegetation with terrestrial and aquatic animals appeared here the earliest. It is regrettable, but in these territories most of the sites are located on sandy-gravelly soils, where organic finds do not survive, and early sites with peaty cultural horizons are almost unknown here. Perhaps the only object from the Final Palaeolithic (13000–9000 BC) that can be associated with manifestations of artistry or spiritual life is a crumbled oblong piece of amber (probably a former pendant or amulet) found in the Kapčiamiestis site, in one of the places where flint finds were concentrated. As is known, objects of a similar nature are characteristic of the entire North European plains from the Late Magdalenian to the Swiderian tradition. A lump of cleanly melted or remelted pine resin was found in the Pasieniai-1 site, which resembles a swan figurine. Since people lived individually in small families at that time, it is probably not worth expecting a large number of artistic items.

In the early and middle Mesolithic period (9000–7000 BC), artistic manifestations can be observed in the production or design of certain hunting tools: for example, various Pulli and Kunda-type flint tips have a very regular symmetrical flat retouch on the reverse side of the tip, which had no utilitarian significance for the functionality of the item. In addition, the large Pulli-type tips, due to their length and thinness, can also be treated as objects of symbolic or magical significance, since their practical significance in hunting is very doubtful (they quickly broke).

Flat boulders with abundant carvings have also been found at several sites (Eiguliai, Sudota). R. Rimantienė interpreted one of these finds as evidence

of artistic expression in the Final Palaeolithic. However, the available evidence suggests an alternative interpretation, indicating that these objects are more likely products of the flint knapping process, specifically core-edge trimming. It has also been observed that during the Final Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, some stone and flint tools were intentionally produced from raw materials of distinctive texture, colour, or quality, reflecting a preference for tools with exceptional visual appearance or design.

In the Late Mesolithic (7000–5800/5600 BC) and Early Neolithic (5800/5600–4400/4000 BC), as the population increased and a favorable climate established, people began to live closer to water, in lower places. They appear in settlements and wetland areas (Jara, Kupurnynas, Kretuonas). On the surfaces of many bone and horn objects of that time, single, randomly arranged engravings can be observed, but they are more specific signs of the production process than artistic ornamentation.

Perhaps the most impressive find from this period is the two long bone bi-conical points found in the Žemaitiškės-2 settlement with an ornament of pits and small incisions on the shaft, in which anthropomorphized figures can also be seen.

A particularly strong flourishing of artistry is observed in the Middle Neolithic (4400/4000–3000 BC) when most of the ornaments are transferred to the walls of clay vessels. In the settlements of the Narva culture, the production of vessels is perfected: thin-walled vessels become widespread, the profiling of the walls increases and becomes more diverse, and decorative motifs and compositions made up of various ornamental elements spread, sometimes resembling zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images.

Nida: The Earliest Narrative Scenes in Lithuanian Art

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Human representations form an important component of the iconographic system of Mesolithic and Neolithic communities across the Eastern Baltic region, encompassing present-day Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Karelia, and the territories formerly inhabited by the Prussian tribes. Anthropomorphic figures were depicted in a variety of media, including stone, wood, amber, bone, clay, and pottery decoration.

Particularly remarkable are anthropomorphic compositions depicted on ceramic vessels. Such representations are known throughout the Eastern Baltic, yet some of the most outstanding examples were discovered at the Neolithic settlement of Nida during excavations directed by Habil. Dr. Rimutė Rimantienė between 1974 and 1978.

This presentation examines two ceramic fragments bearing anthropomorphic imagery. The most impressive example occurs on a large vessel attributed to the Bay Coast (Rzucewo/ Haffküstenkultur) cultural tradition. Below several rows of cord impressions, a human figure approximately 10 cm in height was deliberately impressed into the vessel surface. The figure is shown with outstretched arms and clearly indicated hands. The opposite side of the vessel bears a distinct decorative composition consisting of vertically arranged geometric motifs, creating a rare and potentially meaningful contrast between figurative and geometric imagery within a single decorative programme.

A second sherd preserves a fragmentary but highly expressive anthropomorphic representation, providing further evidence for the significance of human imagery in Neolithic ceramic art.

The paper explores the possible meanings of these compositions within the symbolic world of the first farming communities of the Curonian Spit and western Lithuania. Particular attention is given to the relationship between anthropomorphic imagery, vessel function, decorative structure, and ritual practices. These rare depictions contribute to broader discussions of narrative representation, symbolism, and visual communication in the prehistoric art of the Eastern Baltic.

Symbols in Pottery Decor. Pottery Decoration Elements and Motifs in Nida Settlement: Places of Origin

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The symbolism in archaeological studies is a frequently examined aspect of the past. This is understandable, since it carries the mystery of former lifeways and the attempt to elucidate them stimulates researchers curiosity and engagement. Yet symbolism on past artefacts is not only a reflection of enigmatic ideas or worldviews, it also constitutes evidence of past contacts with neighbouring and more distant communities. This is particularly true for decorative elements, symbols and motifs on archaeological ceramics. Vessels produced by different communities and sometimes using different technologies were decorated using the same motifs. Motifs are readily copied, and therefore pottery ornamentation can be employed to interpret past connections where decoration was transmitted between interacting groups.

Shards of pottery recovered from the cultural layers of the Nida prehistoric settlement exhibit a wide range of decorative elements that are identical or closely similar to those from Neolithic sites of the Vistula lagoon, and some parallels can also be drawn with ceramics from contemporaneous sites in the Šventoji palaeolagoon. This is not surprising, as similar environments would likely have supported communities with comparable material culture. However, study of the extensive Nida ceramic assemblage has also revealed sherds that do not conform to the characteristic production technology or typical decorative repertoire, for example, a cord-impressed motif fixed on a pot treated with organic temper (shell), or an impressed-and-incised motif reminiscent of Funnel Beaker pottery, which has not been recorded in Lithuania.

The aim of this paper is to present the decorative repertoire of Nida ceramics, the motifs and surface treatments of the vessels, and to consider the probable provenance of the symbolic elements in use.

Ornamentation and Forms of Pottery from Settlements in the Western Part of Gdańsk Bay

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This article presents the results of research into earthenware vessels from Rzucewo culture settlements located in the western part of Gdańsk Bay. The analysis focuses on pottery found in two post-house settlements, one discovered in Osłonino and the other in Rzucewo. The materials were analysed in terms of vessel forms and ornamentation. Differences in the proportion of specific types of ornamentation were demonstrated. The materials from Rzucewo show influences from the Globular Amphora Culture. The pottery from Osłonino shows a range of connections to the Łupawa group of the Funnel Beaker Culture. These visible connections to local cultural groups open up a discussion on their role in the emergence of the Rzucewo Culture on the Bay of Gdańsk.

Understanding Through Making: Experimental Archaeology of Neolithic Pottery from Western Lithuania

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The experimental reconstruction of Neolithic pottery in Lithuania has a longer history than is usually acknowledged. Experiments in making pre-historic ceramics were already carried out during the Kretuonas, Šventoji expeditions, while in Nida, Habil. Dr. Rimutė Rimantienė herself participated in experiments conducted by ceramic specialisation students of the Vilnius Academy of Arts, who attempted to recreate Neolithic pottery through practical engagement with clay, vessel form, ornamentation, and firing techniques.

This presentation discusses these experimental and reconstructive practices as an important but still underexplored part of Lithuanian archaeological research. Particular attention is given to later reconstructions made by the Vilnius Potters' Guild, whose work was carefully documented throughout the process. These vessels were not simply illustrative replicas, but interpretive reconstructions based on archaeological forms, decorative schemes, technological assumptions, and experimentally derived firing conditions. Their presentation alongside archaeological finds in the Nida exhibition further highlights the role of experimental pottery as a bridge between archaeological evidence, craft practice, and public engagement with the Neolithic past.

The main emphasis of the reconstruction work was placed on vessel morphology and ornamentation, especially the visual and formal qualities of Neolithic pottery from Western Lithuania, including the distinctive ceramic traditions represented at Nida and associated with the Bay Coast culture, also known as the Rzućewo culture or Haffküstenkultur. From this perspective, reconstructed pottery may be approached not only as an educational object, but also as a material interpretation of archaeological evidence. At the same time, these reconstructions open new research questions. While vessel form, ornamentation, and firing conditions were carefully considered, the selection of raw materials and the reconstruction of forming techniques remain topics for further investigation. By revisiting experimental pottery through the lenses of archaeology, craft practice, and material analysis, the presentation explores both what can be learned through making and how reconstructed objects continue to shape the interpretation and presentation of Neolithic pottery today.

A Technical Approach to the Study of Neolithic Pottery Decoration

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Stereomicroscopic examination of the rich impressed decoration on Neolithic pottery from Latvia has provided new insights into the decorative techniques. The methodology developed in this research involves extensive use of reflectance transformation imaging, which not only provides an effective means of recording the imprints and sharing this documentation within the research community but also facilitates measurements and side-by-side visual comparison of imprints on different vessels.

So far, the author has analysed wound cord and plait imprints on Middle Neolithic (4th millennium BC) pottery and, in collaboration with researchers Aija Macāne, Natascha Kipke and Vanda Haferberga, has investigated mammal metapodial bone imprints. A general observation from the research conducted so far is that similar-looking imprints were actually achieved by various alternative techniques, pointing to the existence of local-level traditions in the execution of impressed decoration. There is considerable potential for extending the analysis to other kinds of pottery decor, along with further development of the methodology.

Pots Behind Pots: The Meaning, Identification, and Characteristics of Grog Temper in Neolithic Pottery in Present-Day Latvia

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The study aims to distinguish the patterns and characteristics of grog use in pottery production during the Neolithic period in present-day Latvia. Both archaeological pottery assemblages (such as Abora I, Sise and Kvāpāni II) and test briquettes were analysed. The microstructure of grog grains from the archaeological material and the test pieces was investigated using ceramic petrography analysis.

Preliminary analysis shows that, during the Middle and Late Neolithic, grog was predominantly used in incoming pottery traditions, such as Comb and Corded Wares. However, this practice was still rare during the Middle Neolithic, unlike during the Late Neolithic when grog was a typical tempering material for Corded Ware vessels.

In most cases, the grog used for tempering itself was similarly tempered to the host vessel, suggesting continuity in technological choices and the re-use of pottery within the same ware tradition. Only a few samples (notably from Sise and Slocene I) contained grog derived from vessels with different tempers, including local mussel-shell-tempered pottery. This variability points to intercultural interaction between communities and may reflect practices with deeper symbolic significance.

Late Neolithic Pottery Decorations from Bell Beaker Contexts of North-Eastern Poland in Action

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Until recently, the north-eastern border of the Bell Beaker materials occurrence in Europe was thought to be the Vistula River basin. Discoveries from the North Podlasie Lowland made in recent years have prompted a reassessment of these earlier views. In primary, artefacts from ritual contexts have revealed a number of features that have led to the revision of many existing hypotheses concerning the nature of socio-cultural processes taking place during the Late Neolithic in north-eastern Poland.

Particular attention has been given to the pottery decorations. Their analysis has, on the one hand, made it possible to reassess potential networks between sites containing Bell Beaker materials in this part of the world; on the other, to identify the trajectories of influence these communities exerted on local populations; and, thirdly, to expand our understanding of the craft underlying the implementation of recurring motifs and compositional schemes.

The presentation aims to demonstrate how a „new” decorative strategy underwent gradual simplification, ultimately becoming, in its final minimalist form, the foundation for emerging cultural patterns.

A Cervid Representation from the River Užava Collection, Western Latvia

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During archaeological survey in western Latvia, a rich array of bone and antler artefacts was discovered, collected by a local resident in the waters of the River Užava (Bērziņš *et al.*, 2014).

The collection included some artistic representations, one of which is an axe made from a red-deer antler beam with a butt shaped as the head of a cervid. In creating this art object, the natural form of the antler has been used, with minimal traces of treatment. The artefact has been radiocarbon-dated to 6492 ± 35 BP or 5520–5370 cal BC (Zagorska *et al.*, 2021).

This rare art object from the Užava shows stylistic differences in the manner of depiction but in symbolic terms belongs to the group of sculptures of cervid heads (elk, red deer and roe deer) well known in Stone Age mobility art from the East Baltic and the wider region (Rimantienė, 1979; 2005; Iršenas, 2010, Iršenas *et al.*, 2018; Loze, 1970; Zagorska *et al.*, 2018).

Elk as a Symbolic Creature in the North European Mesolithic: Evidence from Early Mesolithic Site 7 at Krzyż Wielkopolski, Western Poland, and Beyond

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For Pleistocene and Holocene hunter-gatherers in Northern Europe, large animals formed not only the basis of their subsistence but also played a key role in their ceremonial practices. This is evident in the cave art of the Southwestern European Gravettian and Magdalenian cultures (e.g., Altamira, Lascaux) as well as in the portable art of the Late Palaeolithic in Western and Central Europe. The symbolic significance of large animal species is also apparent in the famous Bonn-Oberkassel burial—one of the northernmost examples of Magdalenian presence at the onset of the Late Glacial—where sculptures of an elk and possibly a horse accompanied the remains of two individuals.

This burial has gained further importance from recent palaeogenetic studies, as it is the eponymous site for the Oberkassel cluster, representing a genetically uniform population that inhabited vast areas of Western and Central Europe between the 15th and 9th millennia BP, from the British Isles in the west to Western Poland in the east. Only from ca. 8,000 BP onward is there evidence of an increasing genetic contribution from more eastern populations (Sidelkino cluster). Strikingly, the distribution of the Oberkassel cluster across the North European Plain coincides with the dominance

of the elk as a symbolic creature among culturally diverse Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene hunter-gatherer groups. This paper presents an overview of elk representations in Late Palaeolithic and Early Mesolithic contexts across Western and Central Europe. Special attention is devoted to the evidence from Early Mesolithic site 7 at Krzyż Wielkopolski.

A Mysterious Antler Item from the Stone Age Hunter-Gatherer Site Szczepanki, Masuria, North-Eastern Poland

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The Stone Age hunter-gatherer site Szczepanki was located on an island of the former Lake Staświn in Masuria. The site was inhabited from the Late Palaeolithic to the end of the Neolithic, however most intensively during the Para-Neolithic Zedmar culture from 5600 to 4700 BP (4500–3500 cal BC).

Most settlement debris occur close to the island shore, whereas in the littoral zone of the former lake special finds appeared in remarkably large numbers, such as almost whole pots, bone and antler implements, stone head tools or amber and bone adornments. One of them is a mysterious red deer antler item, directly radiocarbon dated to 5300 ± 35 BP (4250–3995 cal BC, GdA-6163), i.e. to the early Zedmar period.

The find is a c. 50 cm long lower section of a red deer antler with a bone fragment broken from the skull. Three lower tines are preserved, but the crown is carefully perpendicularly cut off. The antler beam was hollowed out from the cut end, so that the entire spongy substance was removed along with the part of the internal compact substance, leaving only a thin outer wall. As the X-rays show the drilled hole extended far beyond the place of the trez tine (the first from the top) and the canal is further narrowing, and at its end a fragment of a foreign body is visible – probably the broken tip of a bone(?) drill. The trez tine was also hollowed out to a depth reaching the centre of the main antler beam, but the two hollow channels do not connect with each other. The distal end of the trez tine is damaged, so it is unknown whether it was cut off straight like the main beam or diagonally. In the latter case it could have been formed like a mouthpiece and the whole implement would be an unfinished, failed wind instrument. If so, the choice of unshed antler was deliberate, as the skull piece would be a natural cap for the hollow tube plugging the spongy structure at the base of the antler.

Between Function and Symbol: Technological Aspects of Ornamentation on Holocene Bone, Antler, and Amber Artefacts from Lithuania

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In an archaeological context, works of art often possess a highly abstract definition. One of the most common manifestations of artistic expression is linear ornamentation found on the surfaces of wood, bone, antler, minerals, and rocks. When analyzing such objects, researchers frequently address questions related to their meaning within prehistoric communities. However, these questions are difficult to answer and remain a subject of considerable debate. Nevertheless, this topic also reveals various technological aspects – for example, what minimal set of tools was required to create engravings, and what evidence suggests that the ornaments were filled with pigments to enhance visual contrast.

The study focuses on archaeological finds from the present-day territory of Lithuania, dated to the Early and Middle Holocene. Several unique artefacts were selected and examined using use-wear analysis and experimental archaeology methods. Preliminary results reveal several categories of artefacts: those whose ornaments were highlighted with pigments, and those in which ornamentation might have served as technological guidelines. The analysis also seeks to determine which lines on the objects were formed prior to use, and which appeared during or after use.

Modified Tooth Pendants from the Hunter-Gatherer Stone Age from Estonia – Aesthetics, Identity Markers or Representations of New Animals?

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We know more than thousand tooth pendants from the hunter-gatherer Stone Age from the territory of modern Estonia. Majority of them are furnished only with piercings or notches to provide means to attach teeth either as free-hanging pendants or permanently attached decorations. Among these we also find teeth which are manipulated much thoroughly – elk incisors are spiltted, wild boar incisors thoroughly carved and polished, to name just two main trends.

This presentation will focus on the modified teeth, their temporal and spatial distribution, as well on production and use-wear marks. The main interest of this presentation lies on the special meanings that deliberate manipulating could have added to teeth. Was any specific capability of animals stressed? Or were the pendants part of identities, marking a special kin, profession or any other special group? Or was deliberate manipulating just a fashion for these peoples and used to make otherwise natural teeth more interesting and 'beautiful'?

Wearing the Hare: Personal Adornment from the Neolithic Sites of Šventoji

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An investigation of unique hare-tooth ornaments from the Neolithic sites of Šventoji, Lithuania, combines archaeological, archaeometric, and experimental approaches to reconstruct their manufacture, use, and significance within prehistoric personal adornment. Artefacts preserve rows of hare lower incisors embedded in a dark resinous matrix, with traces of birch bark adhering to the reverse. Their unusual form raises questions regarding the transformation of animal remains into wearable objects and their role within larger decorative compositions.

Microscopic, traceological, FTIR, XRF, microchemical, thermal, experimental, and micro-CT analyses demonstrate that the teeth were deliberately cut and standardized before being impressed into a soft resin-rich mass containing fine inorganic admixtures. The reverse-side plant remains are consistent with birch bark, which may have served as a backing or shaping support during manufacture. Use-wear traces on the teeth and prepared edges indicate prolonged friction, suggesting that the objects formed part of adornments that were worn and used over an extended period.

Rather than representing isolated pendants, the preserved fragments most likely belonged to larger composite ornaments attached to garments, belts, headgear, or other elements of personal attire. Their construction required the deliberate selection, modification, and arrangement of hare remains, transforming animal materials into visually distinctive objects worn on the human body.

These finds provide exceptionally rare evidence for the role of hare remains in Neolithic personal adornment and offer new insights into the relationship between animal symbolism, technological knowledge, and bodily display in the eastern Baltic. By exploring how animal materials were transformed into wearable objects, the paper contributes to broader discussions of identity, symbolism, and human–animal relationships in prehistoric societies.

Symbols or Food? Animal Remains at the Stone Age Hunter-Gatherer Cemetery at Dudka, Masuria, North-Eastern Poland

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Dudka cemetery is one of the biggest hunter-gatherer cemeteries on the European Plain, with over 100 identified individuals and 28 graves. Most graves are dated to the Para-Neolithic Zedmar Culture, i.e. within time frames of 4500–3400 cal BC. Grave goods were usually of a symbolic value rather than utilitarian. Generally, animal remains appeared most frequently as symbolic items, which were probably connected with the beliefs of local hunter-gatherers or were used as a kind of family or clan identifiers. Hedgehog jaws, pieces of turtle carapace and bird bones belong to the most commonly appearing. Moreover, animal tooth pendants didn't occur, only unworked teeth of different species. Intriguingly, the whole cemetery can be divided into two main zones taking into account the game species present in the graves – the northern part with wild boar and southern with the red deer and fish, which may reflect the division of the hunter-gatherer society. It suggests that such animals were not only the basis for the subsistence, but played a ritual-symbolic role as well.

The current studies on the role of animals in local rituals and funeral customs are focused on the animal bones which appeared outside the formal grave context. It seems that deposits of selected animal remains, e.g. whole mandibles, were probably made directly at the cemetery ground surface too. Besides, there are numerous pits at the cemetery, whose function is not clear, if they were connected with the funeral rites or rather with the settlement activity in the Late Neolithic. The most interesting are small rounded pits with deposits of selected animal bones, which are dated from the early Zedmar period to the Late Neolithic.

Radiocarbon dates for the cemetery were obtained thanks to NCN grant no. 2020/39/B/HS3/02375

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