

Interaction between experimental archaeology and folklore - Latvian example

Folklore represents a body of records that show many details of local people's living conditions, social structure, beliefs and from which experimental archaeology can benefit.

■ Ieva PIGOZNE
-BRINKMANE
(Latvia)

A lot has been said and written on the interaction, overlap and mutual benefits of experimental archaeology with various disciplines, scientific approaches, as well as education and even living archaeology. However, not many people have paid attention to folklore. I come from Latvia, and the Baltic region has seen some examples of the creative and fruitful use of folklore materials in the theory building process of archaeology.⁽¹⁾ Now experimental archaeology can also be added to the disciplines that can benefit from research of folklore.

History and Folklore

The history of Latvia, in comparison to many other European countries, is characterised by a long period with no written history – up to the very end of the 12th century. This corresponds to the end of the Late Iron age in Latvian territory and the beginning of the crusaders' invasion. Even the next couple of centuries left little written records that would describe the life of the local people. Thus most of the historical theory building has been based on archaeological records.

There is however another body of records that represents many details of local people's

living conditions, social structure, beliefs and traditions, and that is folklore. Most of Latvian folklore texts – namely folk songs, tales, riddles, folk beliefs, etc. were collected in the 19th century, though the process of collecting them continues even today. The number of Latvian folklore texts exceeds 2 million and therefore they present a huge amount of records that can be examined by researchers. So far most scholars have approached Latvian folklore material as literature, some have paid more attention to the mythological aspects and a few have also recognised that folklore texts can be used as an historical record. The main problem of using them for this purpose are two:

First, you need to be ready to work with literary texts that show a great deal of mythological thinking, and

Second, you encounter the problem of dating the texts.

The first problem just needs patience and practice to find the facts, the second has been the subject of more than a century of discussion among various scholars. However, there is now united opinion that folk songs and tales are the oldest types of Latvian folklore that have survived through the centuries. There are songs and tales that cannot be dated as they would for example describe a person's love for singing and there are songs and tales that clearly depict the life of the 18th century soldiers. But most of songs are considered to have been created in the 13th-16th centuries, probably on the basis of songs that were created before, just a change of the language has made the songs to change. It is widely recognised that classic Latvian folk

songs which consist of only 4 lines have a very archaic form and structure. As to the contents, there are many indications that Latvian folklore materials, including the tales, but especially the songs have conserved bits of people's experience and knowledge for more than two millennia. Let me show you an example, which combines data for researchers of archaeology and mythology⁽²⁾ have been happy to admit that a song:

*Kas to teica, tas meloja,
Ka saulīte kājām tek.
Pār siliņu ratiņos,
Pār jūriņu laiviņā.
(LD 33811)*

*Whoever said it, lied,
That the sun walks on foot,
Over the forests she drives
in a carriage,
And she crosses the sea
in a boat.*

Depicts the typical concept of a Sun god or in the Latvian case, a goddess, that uses two types of transport for moving around. This concept dates back to the first millennium BC when it was widely represented over a large territory from Europe to India.

Useful historic records have been found in folklore texts regarding the burial traditions of the Early Iron Age (1st-4th century AD)⁽³⁾, society structure of the Late Iron age (9th-12th centuries AD)⁽⁴⁾ and many others.

Folklore and Experimental Archaeology

Now we come to the possible combination of folklore records and data of experimental archaeology and how they can be used to verify each other's data.

I represent an experimental archaeology group from Rīga, called the Ancient Environment Workshop. It is a non-governmental organisation, financed by the members of the group. The project that we have been working on for the last 8 years is to reconstruct a Baltic settlement of the 9th century, including not only buildings, but also household items, clothing, food, and the way of living. The settlement has been built on private grounds, far from any access by 21st century houses, roads and possible tourists. The project unites the methods and principles of reconstruction, experimental archaeology, and living history. The information that is used in the process comes from archaeological records, as well as ethnographic parallels used when archaeology cannot help. In addition we use the results of the most famous Latvian experimental archaeology project, namely the reconstructed Āraiši Lake fortress. Every year a two weeks long camp is organised and the people who work on the project spend this time trying to reconstruct and recreate bits of a life of the 9th century settlement. 8 such camps have been organised so far and each year new technologies are tried, with new experiences being documented. In some cases folklore texts have helped to either solve uncertainties in technical solutions or to understand the results of both experiences and experiments.

Fences and gates

One of the examples I would like to draw concerns the fence of the settlement. It is certain that during the 9th century all peasant settlements and hill forts of this kind (up to 50 inhabitants) had some type of a

fence⁽⁵⁾. Whether it was used for protecting the people from their enemies or from wild animals, but it was nevertheless there and took a round or ellipse form. It was however not clear how many gates the fence would have. In the beginning we made two gates in our fence – one towards the road, the other towards river. The problem occurred during the first camps when we made a ceramic kiln outside the fence and also kept our pile of timber for construction works outside the fence. There was too much walking back and forth through the gates that were quite far away from both these objects. So in the end the men decided to lighten this burden by making a third gate. In the very beginning we were unsure as we presumed that every gate would make an extra access to the settlement and place a burden on its defence. At the same time though the folklore texts allowed us to think that 3 was the usual number of the gates. There are many folk songs that mention precisely 3 gates, even revealing for what purpose they were made. For example there are gates for three different gods to enter (the Sun, Mara and the God of the 1st song), and there are 3 gates for different kinds of people – those who work in the meadows and harvest hay, those who work in the pastures and there are the gates that are used as the main entrance and for guests (the 2nd song). Respectively:

*Šai sētai treji vārti:
Visi treji sudraboti:
Pa vieniem Dievs iebrauca,
Pa otriem mīlā Māra,
Pa trešiem Saule brauca,
Div' dzeltēni kumeliņi.
(Savieši collection)*

*Jānītīm treji vārti
Visi treji appuškoti:
Pa vieniem gani nāca,
Pa otriem pieguļnieki;
Pa trešiem Jāņu bērni
No maliņu maliņām.
(LD 32922)*



■ **Illustration No. 1** A set of reconstructed bronze jewellery from a 10th century woman's grave number 75 from Zvirgzdenes Kivti graveyard. Author: Uldis Brinkmanis.

As there is no ethnographic tradition of having big fences around farms or villages later in Latvia, it appears that these songs contain historic records of earlier centuries, namely when such fences were built. This would mean the songs reveal the tradition of the time up to the first centuries in the second millennium AD when big fences were erected around settlements and castle mounds. This would not only allow us to make 3 gates in the fence around our settlement, but also give some ideas as to what they were used for or at least thought for. So we see that the practice of using the gates led us to make 3 of them and the folklore records mention the same.

Wedding Jewellery

Another example concerns clothing and jewellery of the same period. In **Illustration No.1** you can see a set of jewellery that belonged to one grave. Though it is more or less clear that the costumes and jewellery that are found in the graves belong to festive attire, maybe even a person's wedding dress as the ethnographic records would suggest, there is a never end-

ing discussion as to what of this would be worn every day and what not. Practice shows that clothing and jewellery that can be combined with an everyday peasant's life is very simple. For example, neckrings are very common in graves, but it is not possible to draw water from the river if one wears a neckring, as bending down to the water cause the rings to damage one's chin and teeth. It is also not possible to run, jump or dance if one wears a neckring. Many other types of jewellery create similar problems in everyday life when one makes food, work in the fields or with cattle. This is the practical part. In addition it is possible to see what the folklore texts say about this. There is the wedding songs where the bride says: Comb my hair as now I cannot even move my hands.

*Sukojit mun' galveņu,
Jau es pate navareju,
Jau es pate navareju
Ni rūceņu kustynot.
(LD 16928)*

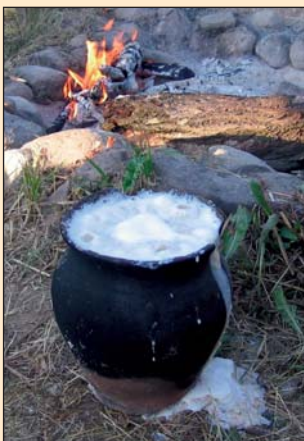
And indeed, if you wear this costume and put on all the jewellery, it was probably not possible to do anything else but stand still and look

good. You do not need to do more if you are a bride in a wedding ceremony but you cannot do any of the everyday housekeeping tasks. Thus folklore texts confirm a festive set of jewellery would not be used for everyday situations.

Brown Coat into Battle

There is another set of problems that concerns the precise patterns and colours of the clothes. Archaeological record can lead us in the right direction, but the details often are drawn from ethnographic parallels. Folklore texts can help, as for example they describe a young man getting ready for a fight or fighting with his mysterious enemy (like a devil or devil's mother) and wearing a brown coat during the fight. If we look at the archaeological records we see that the usual colour of the woollen coats found in men's graves are brown or blue.⁽⁶⁾ Simultaneously, looking at the process of dyes wool with natural dyes, we see that in Latvian territories blue was very hard to get as a special plant – woad (*Isatis tinctoria L.* in Latin) – was used for this purpose. Latvian folk songs mention

special gardens of these plants, thus indicating that woad needed to be specially planted and taken care of. In the meanwhile brown is easy to dye as all kinds of wild tree barks and grasses can be collected and used for this purpose. In folklore texts we read that trees are seen as the totems of the people.⁽⁷⁾ It can therefore be argued that the bark of the tree could be seen as the outer and hardest part of the tree and would thus correspond to a man's clothes and armour. Thus brown clothes would have an additional mythological meaning of protection. In addition it is easy for a person to hide in Latvian landscape, especially in the woods, if he wears brown clothes – this is what members of my group have experienced during our camps. Combining the archaeological record with the practical experience of dying and wearing brown, as well as with folklore texts of a fighter in brown clothes and the mythological concepts of trees, it can be suggested that in the Late Iron age Latvia brown clothes were worn by men on the battlefield or while hunting, while blue would be suited for the aristocracy, as well as for well off people in peace time.



■ **Illustration No. 2.** Ready cooked porridge that continues boiling and coming out of the pot after it has been taken out of the fire.

Porridge Keeps on Cooking

The last example that I would like to use concerns the preparation of food. The most usual food of the 9th century in Latvian territory is considered to be a porridge of oats, wheat or barley. The process of making it is reconstructed as follows: the grits are cooked in salted water in a ceramic pot that is placed directly in the fireplace.⁽⁸⁾ The technology of this type of pottery will not be discussed here but the experience of making food in this way can help to understand folklore texts. Namely tales that mention the following story (common to many European nations): somebody cooks the porridge, then takes it off the fire, puts it on the table and walks away. The porridge keeps on cooking and flows over the pot, and goes out of the house. Being a little girl in a 20th century city and hearing this story made me think that it is quite impossible. Now that I have cooked porridge in a pot placed directly in the fire for many years, I see that the tale contains just a small exaggeration. Practice shows that if you cook in a metal kettle or cauldron, at the very moment when you take it off the fire it stops boiling. A ceramic pot however takes longer to become hot, but once it starts boiling it will go on for a while, even after being taken out of the fire. If you place it in a cool place, the porridge will keep on boiling and its volume will keep on increasing. In **Illustration No.2** you can see this happening.

This last example illustrates how practical information gained in experimental projects can verify folklore data. Therefore the overall message is that experimental archaeology and folklore enjoy mutual benefits if they are united in the theory building process, each of them can use and / or verify the other's data if only one is lucky enough to draw the corresponding mate-

rial together. It is certain that there are many cases when this would not be possible, but when it is possible, it is worth trying as many things can suddenly become clear and logical. Take it as an encouragement to notice every possible way of contributing to the creation of the "big picture".

Notes

- 1 See publications of Pēteris Šmits, Arveds Švābe, Vladislavs Urtāns, Jānis Apals, Baiba and Andrejs Vasks, Juris Urtāns.
- 2 Vasks, Andrejs, Baiba Vaska and Rita Grāvere. *Latvijas aizvēsture 8500. g. pr. Kr. – 1200. g. pēc Kr.* Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 1997, p. 110.
- 3 Dārziņš, Volkangs. *Tautas dziesmu vecums.* Sidrabene. No. 3. 11994, pp. 41-45.
- 4 Ozols, Artūrs. *Raksti folkloristikā.* Rīga: Zinātne, 1968, p. 238.
- 5 Mugurēvičs, Ēvalds and Andrejs Vasks (eds.) *Latvijas senākā vēsture 9. g. t. pr. Kr. – 1200. g.* Rīga: LU Latvijas Vēstures institūts, 2001, pp. 306-309, 311.
- 6 Zariņa, Anna. *Apģērbs Latvijā 7.-17. gs.* Rīga: Zinātne, 1999, p. 72.
- 7 Švābe, Arveds. *Raksti par latvju folkloru I.* Rīga: J.Rozes apgāds, 1923, p. 80.
- 8 Pigozne-Brinkmane, Ieva. *The Cuisine of Latvia.* Rīga: The Latvian Institute, 2004, p. 2.

Summary

Interaktion zwischen experimenteller Archäologie und Volkskunde – ein Beispiel aus Lettland

Die experimentelle Archäologie ist ein Fachbereich, der aus volkswissenschaftlichen Forschungsergebnissen Nutzen ziehen kann. Die Geschichte Lettlands ist durch eine lange Periode ohne Schriftquellen gekennzeichnet, die bis in das 12. Jahrhundert hinein reicht; und auch aus den folgenden Jahrhunderten gibt es nur wenige schriftliche Dokumente, die über das alltägliche Leben der Menschen berichten. Es gibt jedoch einen ganz anderen Quellenbereich, der viele Details über die damaligen Lebensumstände, die Sozialstruktur, über Glaubensvorstellungen und Traditionen überliefert, und zwar die Volkskunde. Ein Beispiel, wo folkloristische Traditionen der Forschung weiterhelfen können, betrifft die Einzäunung der Siedlungen. Es ist festzustellen, dass im 9. Jh. n. Chr.

alle ländlichen Siedlungen eine Art von Einzäunung aufwiesen – eine Tradition, die in der jüngeren Geschichte nicht mehr existiert. Die genaue Lage der Eingänge ist dabei jedoch unbekannt. Hierüber berichten aber viele Volkslieder, die drei Eingänge nennen und dabei ebenfalls über ihren Zweck berichten – ein Eingang für die Personen, die auf den Wiesen arbeiten, einer für diejenigen, die mit der Weidewirtschaft beschäftigt sind, und ein Haupteingang. Andere volkswissenschaftliche Überlieferungen beziehen sich auf verschiedenartige Fragestellungen, wie die Nutzung von Schmuck, die Farben der Kleidung und auf das Kochen.

Interactions entre archéologie expérimentale et folklore : un exemple letton.

Les recherches sur le folklore sont susceptibles de profiter au domaine de l'archéologie expérimentale. La Lettonie est marquée sur une très longue période de son histoire par l'absence de documents écrits, manque qui perdure jusqu'à la fin du XIIe siècle. Et les sources des siècles suivants sont avares en renseignements sur la vie quotidienne. Heureusement, il est possible de retrouver des informations sur les modes de vie, la structure sociale, les croyances et les traditions à travers le folklore local. On peut par exemple en retirer des connaissances sur la structure des habitats. Au IXe siècle les ensembles ruraux devaient être ceints de murailles qui sont complètement passées sous silence dans les récits historiques, laissant inconnue la répartition des porches d'entrée. Pourtant, de nombreuses chansons populaires font mention de trois porches et nous renseignent même sur leur utilisation : l'une était à l'usage des agriculteurs (les gens des champs), une autre pour les éleveurs (les gens des pâturages) et la dernière servait de porte principale au village. D'autres informations tout aussi variées sont transmises par le folklore, comme le port de bijoux, les couleurs des vêtements ou les habitudes culinaires.

■ **Ieva Pigozne** graduated from the Latvian Academy of Culture (1995) and Trinity College Dublin, Ireland (1999). Right now she is working on her PhD thesis. Her research topic is ancient Latvian dress, compiling archaeological evidence and Latvian folklore texts. She works at the National History Museum of Latvia, Department of archaeology.