1. The origins of man

Man, like all forms of life, has been shaped by biological evolution through immense spans of time. The species modern man belongs to, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, evolved from an earlier but basically identical form of *Homo sapiens*, referred to as Cro Magnon, with origins in what palaeontologists know as *Homo erectus*. Through the genetic screening of a large number of human populations, it has been possible to trace the origin of *Homo sapiens sapiens* to Africa to about 200,000 years ago. After more than 100,000 years in Africa the ancestors of modern man (Cro Magnon) moved north, making their way into the Middle East some 70,000 years ago. By continuous “migration”, *Homo sapiens sapiens* spread over Asia, Europe, Australia, the Americas and finally to the Pacific islands. Other branches of the human species that had populated the world or parts of it until then (such as *Homo neanderthalensis* in Europe and the Middle East) became extinct, probably through competition with their more successful relatives.

2. The original settlers

Throughout the entire period 100,000 – 30,000 years B.C. the average temperature of the earth was several degrees lower than it is today. During the last glacial period, large amounts of ice covered the earth to form polar caps extending far beyond the present limits. Practically the entire Baltic region was covered by a Pleistocene ice sheet. Like earlier glacials this latest one was succeeded by a warmer interglacial with a higher average temperature, starting some 20,000 to 15,000 years B.C. As the ice sheet retreated and new land was uncovered, plants, insects and small animals moved in. As biological life established itself on uncovered grounds larger animals of prey followed. The people moving into the Baltic region in these remote times were hunters and gatherers. It is generally assumed that they hunted big game such as reindeer and elk. They must have fished. Nuts, berries, eggs, honey, small game and roots were probably other ingredients of their diet. Because winters could be severe, and because of the seasonal migration of the reindeer, these early inhabitants were probably nomadic. Who they were we do not know. The archaeological records are scant. It is reasonable to assume that the early settlers of the Baltic region faced the same kind of challenges and developed similar general solutions to their needs for food, shelter and protection.

Once the ice sheet was gone climate improved rapidly. A new plant life, now including deciduous trees, soon established itself. Animal life also changed as a consequence. The reindeer retreated further north to the tundras. In the south it was replaced by deer, bison
and boar. The climate of the Baltic region was considerably warmer than it is today. This period of warm climate lasted from the Neolithic Stone Age (approximately 6,000 B.C.) well into the Bronze Age (4,000 B.C.) and beyond.

These climatically benign conditions made new kinds of human settlement possible. Agriculture and animal husbandry were gradually introduced. Goats and sheep, brought into the Baltic region from the Middle East, were the earliest animals to be domesticated. In the north the reindeer became semi-domesticated. Game provided an important additional source of food, as it still does in Sweden, Finland and northern Russia.

As lifestyles changed from hunting to more sedentary ones, populations started to grow. People’s labour was not solely occupied in the struggle for survival. Rudiments of organised society began to emerge. Archaeologically, we see the remains of this gradual process in the constructions of passage graves, burial mounds and fortifications of various kinds. Central rule of some kind was required to organise these constructions. The megalithic cultures of Western Europe, concentrated to the Atlantic seaboard in Bretagne and southern Britain, also touched the western extremes of the Baltic region. Although populations increased as a result of the introduction of agriculture, northern Europe was sparsely populated. Distances were great. Eventually this had to lead to cultural and linguistic differentiation.

Archaeology provides us with findings from the Neolithic, through the Mesolithic down to historic times from which contemporary written records of some kind or other exist. We do possess some general knowledge of living conditions in these remote times. It is possible to trace cultural contacts over different parts of the region. However, it is harder to establish the exact locations of the ancestors of particular peoples. Little is known of the populating processes in the Baltic region before the era of the Great Migration. In all likelihood it was populated by people approaching it from the south and from the east. The distribution of languages on the Scandinavian peninsula seems to indicate the existence of two different approaches, one coming via what is now Danish territory, the other coming from the east through what is now Finland, and then entering the Scandinavian peninsula north of the Gulf of Bothnia. We are talking about occurrences many thousands of years ago. Our knowledge of the Great Migration, taking place from around 400 A.D. to 600 A.D., derives mainly from the records made in Rome of the contacts between Germanic and Slavic speaking peoples with the Greco-Roman world. Another source of knowledge of locations and habitats of various people is through comparative analysis of loan-words in different languages. The language in which place-names are given is especially important. Data of these kinds are, however, not all that reliable.

![Petroglyphs in Tanum, Sweden](image)

*Figure 40. Hållristningar – petroglyphs in Tanum, Sweden, dated around 1,000 – 500 BC. Photo: Katarzyna Skalska*
3. The Finno-Ugric groups

In the vast expanses of northern Russia a number of minorities have existed (some are now extinct) speaking Finno-Ugric or Uralic languages as they are also termed. There is reason to believe that these Finno-Ugric groups represent languages that were once widely spread in these northern stretches of present-day Russia, from the Baltic to beyond the river Ob, and also in Hungary. Most languages within this family are spoken by small minorities, many of them facing extinction. Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian, however, are spoken by majority populations in sovereign states. One conjecture is that the origins of these languages are to be found amongst the ancient tribes that settled the taiga region of northern Russia and who supported themselves by hunting and domesticating the reindeer.

From archaeological evidence we know that the entire Baltic region was populated once the land-locked ice had disappeared. Recent findings support the idea that people have made their living far up north at a much earlier stage than was generally believed. It seems reasonable to conjecture that the Saami represent an indigenous people in northern Scandinavia. There is evidence of human presence north of the ice sheet about 10,000 B.C. on the fringe of the Arctic Basin. These people may have been ancestors of the Saami. Another theory is that the Saami originated in the northern regions of present-day Russia, possibly as far east as the Ural mountains. At some stage they settled in the region of the Gulf of Finland. As Finnish tribes eventually migrated into the territory of present-day Karelia and Finland, these southern Saami were driven north to their present habitat.

The most recent theory, launched at the end of the 1990s, takes into account findings from genetic, archaeological and comparative linguistic research. Genetic analyses point to the fact that the Saami have certain genetic traits that make them uniquely different from other populations in the region. This indicates that ancestors of the Saami must have been isolated from other human populations for several thousands of years. At the same time the Saami speak a language that clearly belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family, indicating common origins with other peoples that do not show evidence of extended isolation. How does one account for these contradictory findings? The hypothesis is that small numbers of hunters and gatherers from central and southern Europe followed the retreating ice sheet to the west along a narrow land corridor on the Norwegian coast, establishing themselves north of the ice on the shores of the Arctic Ocean where conditions were relatively benign. This northerly settlement in isolation from other human populations for a very long period of time accounts for the specific genetic set-up of the Saami people. Other hunters and gatherers followed the retreating ice to the east, settling in the taiga region of northern Russia, and developing Finno-Ugric languages. At some time, when the inland ice had almost disappeared, these two populations met. According to this theory, then, the Saami trace ancestors to the settlers north of the inland ice as well as to the Finno-Ugric speaking peoples moving north through Karelia and Finland.

In historic times the Saami practiced reindeer husbandry in mountain regions as far south as central Sweden and southern Norway. The Saami were eventually forced further north as Swedes and Norwegians gradually colonised the northern parts. However, small groups of Saami are still engaged in reindeer husbandry as far south as the province of Jämtland in central Sweden.
4. The spread of agriculture and Indo-European languages

All native languages of the Baltic region, except the Finno-Ugric tongues, belong to the Indo-European family of languages. It is general knowledge that this family includes a wide range of interrelated languages spoken throughout Europe, Iran and northern India. For many years the origins of the Indo-European languages have been disputed among scholars. How could these languages show such a remarkable relationship to each other and yet be spoken by peoples that are so very different to each other, culturally and phenotypically? One theory suggests that the original Indo-European language speakers spread to Europe and to India by military conquest. The conquerors imposed their language on the conquered. But, then, where did they come from and where did the Indo-European family of languages originate? Who were the conquering people?

Besides the Finno-Ugric languages, only one indigenous non-Indo-European language is still spoken in western Europe – Basque. According to one hypothesis Basque, and a few since long-extinct Italic languages such as Etruscan, originate from languages that were spoken in Europe before the diffusion of the Indo-European tongues.

Colin Renfrew, a British archaeologist, has presented a synthesis of ideas about the origins of the Indo-European languages in his book “Archaeology and Language”, published in 1988. Renfrew challenges the conquest theory. His basic hypothesis is that the proto-Indo-European language spread over Europe, Iran and northern India, at the time that agriculture and animal husbandry were introduced and began to spread into these regions from a centre in south-eastern Anatolia.

Renfrew claims that the spread of the Indo-European languages was related to the very transition from an economy based on hunting and gathering to one based on agriculture and animal husbandry. This transition coincided with changes from nomadic ways of subsistence to sedentary ones. Archaeologists date this transition to a time about 7,000 B.C. This means that Indo-European languages were established in Europe a lot earlier than has been believed before.

The most important explanatory element of the theory is that the agricultural revolution fundamentally changed the demographic situation. Peoples engaged in agriculture grew in numbers much

Map 18. Land use map for the Baltic region showing improductive, land forests, grazing land and area of agriculture. Ill.: Karin Hallgren
more rapidly than those that relied upon hunting and gathering. It has been estimated that per unit of land even the very primitive forms of early agriculture and animal husbandry could support a population that was 50 times as large as a population dependent upon hunting and gathering for its livelihood. Thus, the introduction of agriculture involved a profound change of the demographic distribution of different language groups and cultures.

The rapidly increasing sedentary populations were in constant need of more land to cultivate. This land was appropriated from the far less populous tribes of hunters and gatherers. Agriculture and sedentary forms of subsistence spread slowly and steadily from Anatolia up through the Balkans into central Europe and north to the Baltic region. The rate has been calculated at approximately 15 kilometres per generation.

The other side of this process was that existing populations of hunters and gatherers were gradually assimilated into an agricultural economy and mode of existence through intermarriage. These early sedentary agriculturalists spoke a language from which all the Indo-European languages gradually evolved. The introduction of a new means of subsistence, which in turn involved employing new kinds of implements and technology, had essential implications for language. It all boils down to the fact that the speakers of the ancient Proto-Indo-European languages had a powerful advantage over existing nomadic peoples and the languages they represented. In time this led to the dominance of the Indo-European languages in Europe.

5. The Baltic, Slavic and Germanic peoples

Comparative linguistic research indicates that the Baltic languages are among the most archaic of the living Indo-European languages. This is probably due to the fact that for many hundreds of years these languages were spoken by peoples living under constant threat of domination by powerful neighbours. For half a millennium Lithuanian, and particularly Latvian, survived as living languages among peasant populations. Foreign rulers succeeded each other — Danes, Germans, Swedes, Poles and Russians — but they did not, or could not, impose their languages on the peasants. These conditions partly explain why Baltic languages have maintained various archaic phonetic elements and grammatical forms.

Prussian, now extinct as a spoken language, was also a Baltic language. The Prussians, under the rule of the Teutonic Order, gradually assumed German as their language. Half a millennium later the Prussian state united Germany.

Latvian and Lithuanian, the two living Baltic languages of today, are spoken only in the republics of Latvia and Lithuania, and in smaller emigrant settlements in the USA. However, place-names in Russia and Belarus indicate that Baltic languages once were spread more widely. At a later stage in history, at the close of the Mediaeval times, Lithuania was an important European power commanding a territory that stretched from Vilnius south to the Black Sea.

The Baltic language group is more closely related to the Slavic family of languages than it is to the Germanic languages. Baltic and Slavic languages are believed to have branched off from one another at a later stage in pre-history than the proto-Balto-Slavic language branched off from a proto-Germanic language.

In ancient times Baltic languages seem to have been spoken by tribes living south of the Finno-Ugric speakers and north of Slavic speaking peoples. The existence of loans from Finno-Ugric and Slavic vocabulary indicate that contacts must have existed at the least for some two thousand years.
in time. A greater amount of Finno-Ugric loans are found in Latvian than in Lithuanian. Proximity, and not in the least, periods of joint history with Poland led to a greater Polish influence on Lithuanian than on Latvian.

The term Germanic languages was assigned to the languages spoken by the Germanic peoples inhabiting the country north of the Roman empire in central and eastern Europe. Peoples speaking a proto-Germanic language settled on the southwestern shores of the Baltic, crossing the sea to the southern tip of the Scandinavian peninsula. In all likelihood this took place when agriculture was introduced in the region, some three thousand years ago. The peasant populations spread north along the coast, replacing the indigenous people.

In pre-historic times the tribes speaking proto-Slavic languages inhabited a region neighbouring to Iranian tribes on the northern shores of the Black Sea. Most evidence goes to show that when the Slavs formed as one people they were settled to the northeast of the Carpathians. One conjecture is that Gothic domination was of enormous importance in the development of the Slavs.

The Great Migration is the name given to the centuries when Germanic and Slavic peoples were on the move throughout central and southern Europe from about 400 A.D. to 600 A.D. The causes of this chain process are disputed. Due to the many wars and internal frictions the Roman empire was weakened and could not withstand the attacks from Germanic peoples. Another factor was the invasion of Huns from the distant stretches of Eastern Europe. Germanic peoples moved towards the west and the south from a habitat in central and northern Europe.

Slavic speaking tribes were caught up in this turmoil. From a central habitat in the basins of the Wîsha, Priepet and Dnestr, roughly coinciding with present-day northern Ukraine, southern Belarus and the Kursk region of southern Russia proper, they migrated south, west and north. From this period the distinction between East Slavic, West Slavic and South Slavic languages originated. The Eastern Slavs, the ancestors of the Russians and Ukrainians, encountered and assimilated Baltic and Finnish tribes as they spread north. The Western Slavs migrated to the southern shores of the Baltic. The Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Cashubians and Slavic minorities of northern Germany originate from them.

The distribution of various peoples and language groups is never fixed. Wars have constantly changed the boundaries between different states in the Baltic region. Powers have succeeded one another. During the 1,300 years that has passed since the Great Migration, Russian speakers have colonised a lot of the territories that once were inhabited by Finno-Ugric.
Ugric speaking tribes. During the most recent century there has been a large immigration of Russians into the Baltic states. For a long period of time small groups of Germans settled in various parts of Eastern Europe. Since World War II things have changed. People who can claim German origin are accepted into the Federal Republic of Germany. Because Germany was defeated in the war, it lost a considerable part of its former eastern territories. This has led to a shift of German speakers to the west.

6. The Jewish settlement

From the 15th century until World War II the southern section of the Baltic region was the spiritual and cultural centre of Judaism. During the 15th century a surge of hostile actions directed at the Jews took place in Western Europe. In Spain, for instance, Jews and Moors were forced to convert to Christianity or face expulsion. Many of the Spanish Jews migrated to the Balkans, others to the Netherlands and the German states. But there, in the Rhine valley, they were compelled to move east into Brandenburg, Saxony and Silesia. Soon they were required to leave these parts as well. However, Jews were invited to settle in Poland and Lithuania. Because Lithuania commanded an extensive territory in those days, parts of which are present-day Ukraine and Belarus, Jews also concentrated to towns in these two countries. Apart from Israel itself, there is no other part of the world where so many Jews have lived for such a long time.

In time Jewish centers of learning and pious life started to flourish. Vilnius was one of these centers. In this setting, Yiddish developed into a distinct language. Jewish presence, however, was not appreciated by all parties. Over the centuries the Jews of Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were subjected to numerous pogroms. During the mid-17th century one third of the Jewry in Poland were killed and Jewish property was destroyed in the Bohdan Khmelnicky rebellion. Whereas the Jewry in the West gradually assimilated into civilian society and were accepted as citizens this never happened in the East.

The Jewish population of the region was approximately 8 million around the turn of the last century. This figure represented about 80% of the total world Jewry. Emigration to the United States in the early decades of this century, and then the Nazi extermination of the Eastern Jewry, reduced the Jews to merely a small fraction of their original numbers. Today they number some 200,000 persons in the Baltic region.

![Jewish restaurant in Kraków. Photo: Alfred F. Majewicz](image)
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