NEEDLEWORK MEN'S BELTS IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS OF THE BALTIC STATES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LATVIA, LITHUANIA, AND ESTONIA DURING THE SOVIET PERIOD

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Abstract

This article examines the shared and distinctive characteristics of needlework men's belts in the Baltic states, with a focus on research methodologies and historiographical perspectives. Central to this study is the *Historically Ethnographic Atlas of the Baltic Peoples. Clothing* (1986, *Историко-этнографический атлас Прибалтики. Одежда*), which includes a dedicated chapter on belts. The analysis of needlework belts from the 19th and early 20th centuries highlights the ideological influences shaping interpretations of traditional clothing. While beadwork and woolwork belts were more prevalent in Latvia and Estonia, only a few examples have been documented in Lithuania, reflecting variations in ethnographic research priorities and the evolution of museum collections. Ethnographic studies conducted during the Soviet period, as part of a broader policy on ethnic histories and lifestyles, were subject to ideological constraints. Despite these limitations and the influence of propaganda, the Atlas provides a valuable comparative framework and a significant reference point for contemporary research. This study assesses the contributions of Latvian ethnographer Mirdza Slava (1924–2001), Estonian ethnographer Eevi Astel (1938–2025), and Lithuanian ethnographers Vida Kulikauskienė (1933–2023) and Marija Miliuvienė (1931–2018) in documenting belts in their respective countries, as well as their collaborative efforts in analysing embroidered men's belts across the Baltic region.

Keywords: *Baltic textile history, Soviet ethnography, traditional men's clothing, needlework belts, beaded accessories*

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Beadwork and woolwork belts (in Latvia, these are called *izšūtas jostas, zīļu jostas*, *kažoka jostas*; in Estonia – *helmevööd*, *pärlvöö, nahkvöö*; and in Lithuania – *karoliukų diržai, medžioklinis diržas*) were a popular men's clothing accessory in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century [Kont 2014; Valtere 2023, 2024]. Initially serving both functional and decorative purposes within elite attire, they gradually became incorporated into peasant dress as broader social and economic changes unfolded. Material evidence of these belts has been preserved in museum collections, acquired through ethnographic expeditions, private donations, and individual gifts. This study analyses the shared and distinctive characteristics of needlework belts in the three Baltic states, as well as the research approaches applied to their study. It incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data, documenting 171 objects from 22 Latvian museums, 167 records from 11 Estonian museums, and 8 belts from 5 Lithuanian museums. The preservation of needlework belts in museum collections not only provides material evidence of their former social and aesthetic roles but also serves as a foundation for scholarly inquiry. Yet the ways in which these objects have been studied have shifted over time, reflecting broader intellectual, institutional, and political contexts.

Since the historical study of these belts has not been uniform across the three neighbouring countries, this research considers both regional differences in scholarly approaches and the shared heritage shaped by the collaboration of Baltic ethnographers during the Soviet period, as reflected in contemporary literature and press publications. To contextualize subsequent research trajectories, it is necessary to trace the early stages of needlework belt studies in each of the Baltic states, through which these objects first entered broader scholarly circulation and became embedded within comparative ethnographic discourse. This examination highlights how institutional frameworks, research traditions, and individual scholars established the first interpretations of these objects. Although Soviet-era research was not a direct continuation of earlier traditions, it nevertheless relied on the materials, data, and publications already assembled, reframing them within a new ideological and institutional context. Such a perspective also makes it possible to assess the impact of the Soviet regime on the study of these objects – illustrating how political conditions shaped research opportunities, restricted certain lines of inquiry, and, at the same time, promoted comparative projects such as the *Historically Ethnographic Atlas of the Baltic Peoples (1986, Историко-этнографический атлас Прибалтики. Одежда).*

Foundations of needlework belt research in Estonia before 1940

In Estonia, the development of ethnology progressed consistently prior to the establishment of an independent state (1918). This was ensured by purposeful cultural policy as well as by an institutional research structure with stable scholarly

continuity. The Estonian National Museum, founded in 1909, played a central role in consolidating ethnology as an academic discipline, with its growth shaped by several distinguished scholars and museum professionals. During this period, several fundamental studies in the field of Estonian material culture were conducted by academically trained scholars holding doctoral degrees [Nõmmela 2015]. Oskar Kallas (1868–1946) as one of the founders of the Estonian National Museum and the first Estonian to receive a doctoral degree in Finnish folklore (1901, University of Helsinki), emphasized the importance of traditional cultural heritage and promoted the large-scale collection of ethnographic evidence [Viires 1991: 124–125].

The Finnish ethnographer Ilmari Manninen (1894–1935) introduced a scientifically grounded system into museology. He developed standardized terminology, organized the museum's collection according to thematic and functional divisions, and carried out detailed studies of traditional clothing, tools, and everyday practices [Manninen 1925]. His approach, based on the functional classification of objects, their contexts of use, provenance, and regional distribution, enabled a deeper and more systematic understanding of Estonian daily life, crafts, dress, and ritual practices [Manninen 1933]. Manninen's work *The History of Estonian National Costumes (Eesti rahvariiete ajalugu)* also included an analysis of leather belts [Manninen 1927]. He observed that these could be either plain or decorated with small beads and brass fittings. In the second half of the 19th century, such belts were worn primarily by men to fasten outer garments. According to Manninen, the belts were purchased rather than produced at home; as a result, they were not widely integrated into traditional dress and consequently did not receive detailed scholarly attention. Another of Manninen's major contributions was the introduction of cartographic methods into Estonian ethnography – an approach that later became foundational for the *Historically Ethnographic Atlas of the Baltic Peoples* [Viires 1991: 123–132].

Manninen's work in the 1930s was continued by Ferdinand Linnus (1895–1941; until 1935 – Leinbok), who specialized in the study of beekeeping, peasant households, and material culture [Linnus 1932, 1939]. He was followed by Gustav Ränk (1902–1998), who advanced the study of regional architecture and traditional ways of life in his dissertation *Folk Buildings in the Province of Saaremaa* (*1939*). The collective contribution of these scholars provided a sustainable foundation for the discipline of ethnology in Estonia. Their legacy continues to provide both a theoretical framework and a practical resource for contemporary research, particularly in the field of material culture. This is also evidenced by the practical study of belt materials preserved in Estonian museum collections, which builds upon the information and objects accumulated during the early phase of ethnographic research.

The Estonian National Museum holds the largest collection of needlework belts in the Baltic region, comprising 109 items. Of these, 60 entered the museum's

collection before 1940, including 22 obtained during the early ethnographic expeditions of 1911–1913. Conducted with the active participation of volunteers - including teachers, local researchers, and students, these expeditions resulted in the acquisition of the first 20 000 objects, encompassing ethnographic artefacts from across the territory of Estonia [Õunapuu 2014].

Foundations of needlework belt research in Latvia before 1940

The organized collection of ethnographic materials in Latvia began in 1869 with the establishment of the Riga Latvian Society Scientific Commission *(Zinātnības komisija*, later – *Zinību komisija*). At the time, poet, translator, and folklore researcher Fricis Brīvzemnieks-Treilands (Brihwsemneeks-Treuland, 1846–1907) urged the public to support the collection of ethnographic information and was one of the first to propose the establishment of a Latvian museum [Treuland 1869: 257–258]. The institutionalization of cultural heritage in Latvia took root soon after the proclamation of an independent state in 1918. In 1920, the State Historical Museum was founded, with Matīss Siliņš (1861–1942) as its first director – a publicist, cartographer, and dedicated researcher of archaeology and ethnography. He began working voluntarily while the museum was still under the auspices of the Riga Latvian Society and led it until 1934. The initial mission of the State Historical Museum was defined, as follows: "To collect, preserve, exhibit and popularize various values of antiquity, as well as those of recent times, which are important in the history of Latvia" [Law on the State Historical Museum 1924]. The adoption of the Law on the Protection of Monuments in 1923 resulted in the establishment of the Board of Monuments of Latvia, with historian and commissioner Arturs Štāls (1897–1951) appointed as its technical director [Baumane 2013: 9]. Štāls emerged as a central advocate of monument protection, emphasizing the necessity of national regulations in this field and formulating a definition: "Monuments are all the creations of historically concluded cultural eras that possess historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural value" [Štāls 1922: 618–629].

The available evidence confirms that the three earliest documented examples of needlework belts in the State Historical Museum collection originated from the holdings of the Riga Latvian Society's Ethnographic Museum, today incorporated into the Latvian National Museum of History. The first was acquired in 1922 during ethnographic excursions in Northern Vidzeme and parts of Latgale, when the museum's preparator and archaeologist Edīte Elksnīte (1884–1969) obtained a beadwork leather belt from Jēkabs Kļava in Veclaicene parish. According to provenance records, the belt had been made by a local seamstress approximately seventy years earlier (CVVM 13732). In 1923, two further belts were added: a woolwork belt donated by O. Rušmanis, described as a "bride's gift" to J. Rušmanis in 1860

in Budberga parish, Zemgale (near Bauska), though recorded as manufactured in Panemune (CVVM 13726); and a beadwork belt purchased from Aleksanders Girupnieks (CVVM 13736). Collectively, these three objects constitute the earliest documented examples of men's needlework belts preserved in the museum's collection.

In addition to her duties as a museum curator and archaeologist, Elksnīte actively participated in political developments and was a regular contributor to the magazine *Zeltene* (1926–1940). Her articles explored ethnography, folklore, ethics, aesthetics, pedagogy, and other cultural topics. Travel accounts indicate her familiarity with the Skansen Open-Air Museum and the Nordic Museum (*Nordiska museet*) in Sweden [Elksnīte 1929]. Comparing the clothing of Swedish and Latvian peasants, Elksnīte highlighted several similarities in the use of belts and suits. In her writings on Estonian folk clothing, she also examined traditional belts, referencing the book Estonian Ethnography by Finnish ethnographer and professor Ilmari Manninen (1894–1935) [Elksnīte 1929: 17]. These examples demonstrate the museum staff's familiarity with ethnographic research and theoretical discourse in neighbouring countries, maintaining connections with the research traditions of the Baltic and Nordic regions.

In the years following its establishment, the State Historical Museum accumulated significant ethnographic material, laying the groundwork for the development of the *Atlases of Latvian Culture (Latvju kultūras atlanti)*. Research themes were formulated, questionnaires issued, and systematic material collection initiated [Šmits 1923; Wolter 1892]. Building on these initiatives, work on the Atlases began in the late 1930s under the guidance of Swedish ethnographer Dag Trotzig (1914–1944), then a lecturer at the University of Latvia, who served as the project's scientific consultant. The aim was to produce a comprehensive, scholarly cartographic survey of Latvian traditional culture, encompassing themes such as clothing, jewellery, architecture, household objects, folklore, customs, and other elements of material and intangible culture. The outbreak of the Second World War, however, brought the project to an abrupt halt. Much of the collected material remained in manuscript or sketch form, with only fragments later incorporated into other publications. In 1943, an instruction manual was nevertheless published, defining the scope of the project, specifying its thematic coverage, and providing standard questionnaires for fieldwork [Ancītis 1942, 1943].

In 1934, Valdemārs Ģinters (1899–1979), Doctor of Archaeological Sciences, became director of the State Historical Museum, a position he held until the autumn of 1944, when he went into exile. By that time, the museum's collection had grown to include sixty-one needlework belts, thirteen of which had been obtained during the Board of Monuments' ethnographic expeditions (1924–1932). After the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 and following the merger of museums, ten additional belts were acquired from the Jelgava Museum (CVVM 13690, CVVM 13692,

CVVM 13693, CVVM 13697, CVVM 13717, CVVM 13731, CVVM 13727, CVVM 13758, CVVM 13760), along with three belts from the Valmiera Museum collection (CVVM 5018, CVVM 5019, CVVM 5020).

Needlework belts began to appear in Latvian publications in the late 1930s, a period characterized by an increasing emphasis on the territorial and regional classification of clothing, reflecting broader efforts to systematize and categorize traditional dress by region [Pīgozne 2020]. In descriptions of traditional male clothing published by the State Historical Museum, needlework belts were included by the head of the museum's Ethnography Department, ethnographer and archaeologist Ādolfs Karnups (1904–1973). The publication Novadu tērpi (Traditional Costumes of Regions, 1938), prepared for the 9th All-Latvian Song Festival, was compiled by Karnups, with technical descriptions provided by weaver and handicraft teacher Elga Kivicka (1905–1970) and illustrations by graphic artist and painter Eduards Dzenis (1907–1999). The sets of clothing were organized by region in fifteen booklets to facilitate the accurate recreation of traditional attire for each respective region. Although the museum's collection contained a considerable number of needlework belts, they were only briefly mentioned in the descriptions of traditional clothing. The attire of Semigallian (Zemgale) men was noted as the least well documented: garments of common people were comparatively better preserved, whereas the clothing of the wealthier strata had largely been lost or survived only in fragmentary form. Wealthy Semigallians were described as girding their coats with beadwork belts fastened with silver buckles [Karnups, Kivicka 1938: 347]. The 1939 SHM guide *Etnogrāfija. Valsts vēsturiskā mūzeja vadoņi I* referenced this attire, emphasizing wide leather belts decorated with beads and fastened with brass or silver buckles, while men's clothing in the Kuldīga region was distinguished by belts embroidered with floral motifs in beads or threads [Latvijas Valsts vēsturiskais muzejs 1939: 51–52, 64].

Foundations of needlework belt research in Lithuania before 1940

In comparison with Latvia and Estonia, ethnographic expeditions in Lithuania during the 1920s and 1930s were less developed and remained relatively limited in scope [Брук et al. 1986: 7]. This is also reflected in museum collection: the number of needlework belts preserved in Lithuania is significantly lower, with only eight documented examples distributed across five museums. Despite their small number, these objects represent distinctive examples associated with both peasant and elite culture. The National Museum of Lithuania *(Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus)* preserves two particularly notable specimens. One is identified as a hunting belt (*medžioklinis diržas)*, executed in exceptionally fine microbead embroidery (approximately ten seed beads per centimetre) and displaying a complex, continuous narrative composition (LNM IM 165). Extending over 165 × 7.5 cm, the embroidery depicts a sequence

of scenes set within a natural landscape: a monk praying before a cross; a group of white stone buildings; a playful dog chasing a butterfly; grazing sheep; a watermill; a horse-drawn carriage carrying a woman and a man; a fisherman casting his line accompanied by a dog; an elegantly dressed couple on horseback; a hunter aiming at game with his hound by his side; and, finally, a man with a horse at a monumental stone gate. The belt is made of light brown leather with a buckle and adjustable strap (Figure 1). The second belt is embroidered with coloured wool threads on a black ground, featuring large floral motifs and bunches of berries (LNM IM 166). Its base is green leather, closed with a solid brass buckle, and fitted with a small adjacent pocket (Figure 2). Both belts are preserved in the museum's historical rather than ethnographic collection. According to the *Book of Acts of Lithuanian Feudal and Capitalist History Exhibits*, the objects were re-registered in 1968, following their transfer from earlier inventory records, which have not survived. The attribution of embroidered belts in Lithuania to noble attire underscores the migration of this accessory across different social strata. Since the documentation of 19th century, noble dress was not among the objectives of ethnographic expeditions in any of the Baltic states, the preservation of such exceptionally luxurious examples provides valuable evidence for examining social mobility and processes of cultural transmission.

Figure. 1. Beadwork Hunting belt. Lithuania. Glass, cotton, linen, leather, metal. Dimensions: 165 × 7.5 cm. Beginning of the 19th century. National Museum of Lithuania, LNM IM 165. Photo: LNM: https://www.limis.lt/valuables/e/805191/756245006?searchId=23236613

Figure. 2. Woolwork belt. Lithuania. Wool, cotton, linen, leather, metal. Dimensions: 138 × 13 cm. Late 19th century. National Museum of Lithuania, LNM IM 166, Photo: LNM: https://www.limis.lt/valuables/e/805191/756250475?searchId=50519022&menuIndex=0&digitalObjectId=756250511

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that by 1940 Estonia and Latvia had established institutional and scholarly foundations for the study of needlework belts, supported by systematic museum collecting, ethnographic expeditions, and early scholarly publications. In contrast, in Lithuania such foundations remained comparatively limited: expeditions were less developed, the number of preserved belts was small, and their attribution was largely confined to elite or noble attire.

Needlework belts in Soviet ethnography: *The Historical-Ethnographic Atlas of the Baltic Peoples. Clothing* (1986)

After the Second World War, Academies of Sciences were established in the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) [Stradiņš 1998: 39]. Within these institutions, ethnographic research was incorporated into broader state policies aimed at studying the way of life of the Soviet people, their ethnogenesis (origin of peoples), ethnic geography (spatial distribution), and mutual interrelations [Strods et al. 1969: 7]. In 1964, ethnographers from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia commenced work on the *Historical-Ethnographic Atlas of the Baltic Peoples*, a planned three-volume edition [Strods 1968: 21–29]. Particular attention is devoted here to the volume *Clothing*, as it represents one of the most significant inter-state ethnographic projects of the Soviet period, bringing together for the first time in a unified compilation needlework belts from all three Baltic states. By providing a cartographically structured analysis, the Atlas established an important foundation for comparative research, which until then had been available only in fragmentary form or restricted to the national frameworks of the individual states.

The idea of mapping the locations of traditional cultural objects was not original – in the first half of the 20th century, ethnographic cartography was conducted across Europe, and the Atlas emerged as part of this broader research process [Harmjanz, Röhr 1937; Moszynski 1934]. The creation of ethnographic atlases was conceived as a common project for the entire Soviet Union and constituted an integral part of the broader tasks of Soviet ethnography. These atlases were designed to document the way of life, material culture, and ethnic history of the peoples of the USSR in a comparative framework, providing a standardized cartographic and typological representation of cultural phenomena. The underlying objective was not only scientific but also ideological: to demonstrate the cultural diversity of the Soviet peoples while at the same time reinforcing their supposed unity within the socialist system. In this context, scholars from the individual Soviet republics were primarily assigned the role of collectors, systematisers, and classifiers of ethnographic data, while the theoretical frameworks and interpretative models were developed and controlled by central institutions such as the Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnography in Moscow. Thus, the production of ethnographic atlases illustrates both the scientific

ambitions and the political functions of Soviet ethnography [Karlsone, Boldāne-Zeļenkova 2021: 70].

The first volume, *Agriculture* (*Историко-этнографический атлас Прибалтики: Земледелие*), was published in 1985 by the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the Lithuanian SSR [Брук et al. 1985]. The second volume was intended to focus on vernacular architecture, but despite extensive research efforts, it was never completed. Meanwhile, the third volume, dedicated to traditional clothing (*Историко-этнографический атлас Прибалтики. Одежда*, hereinafter – the Atlas), was prepared by the Institute of History of the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences. The 1986 Russian-language edition of the Atlas became the most extensive scientific publication on traditional clothing in the Baltic region during the Soviet period. Although Soviet ideological constraints subordinated scholarly inquiry to political interests, framing it within historical materialism as the dominant research doctrine and the Marxist–Leninist interpretation of history, the Atlas nonetheless primarily aimed to document and map elements of traditional culture. The publication consists of two parts: a theoretical study, which includes a subsection on belt research, and an appendix containing 70 maps.

The methodology for compiling the *Historical-Ethnographic Atlas of the Baltic Peoples* required the classification of traditional cultural phenomena and the determination of their territorial and chronological boundaries, resulting in a comprehensive mapping of cultural features. In addition to depicting elements of traditional culture and their distribution, the maps were also intended to illustrate the dynamics of change driven by urbanization, industrialization, and other historical factors. To fulfil this objective, extensive research was undertaken, including large-scale expeditions to examine the ethnic history of the Baltic peoples and their cultural ties with the Slavic world [Брук et al. 1985: 7]. Soviet ethnographers primarily focused on material culture, as well as the study of ways of life, livelihoods, and traditional values that aligned with the ideology of collectivism. The significance of researching traditional clothing was justified by the notion that folk art fundamentally represented the artistic expression of the working class – peasants and Soviet collective farmers [Slava 1969a: 242–243).

The chief editor of all Atlas volumes was Lyudmila Terentjeva (*Людмила Николаевна Терентьева,* 1910–1982), deputy director of the Miklukho-Maclay Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, who supervised the work of Baltic ethnographers. The editor of the Clothing volume and the author of the Latvian textual material was ethnographer Mirdza Slava (1924–2001). Among the editors were also Saulvedis Cimermanis (1929–2022), head of the Department of Ethnography at the Institute of History of the Latvian Academy of Sciences (1971–1995), and ethnographer Ingrida Leinasare (1929–2004). The co-authors of the Atlas

subsection on belt usage in the Baltic region were Estonian ethnographer and long-time Senior collections manager of the Estonian National Museum Eevi Astel (1938–2025), as well as Lithuanian ethnographers Vida Kulikauskienė (1933–2023) and Marija Miliuvienė (1931–2018, formerly Mastonytė), who, like Slava, specialized in the study of traditional clothing in their respective countries.

The creation of the Atlas was a politically and ideologically complex endeavour that, including all expeditions, spanned more than 20 years. Ethnographer Linda Dumpe (1930–2024), one of the researchers for the Atlas volume *Agriculture*, in 1975 wrote in the journal *Zinātne un tehnika (Science and Technology)* that the work on the Atlas was essentially completed and would soon be published [Dumpe 1975: 17–22]. She also acknowledged the research conducted in Latvia during the 1920s and 1930s, emphasizing that without this foundational material, the study would not have progressed as smoothly. Notably, she mentioned that 80 maps had been prepared for the Atlas volume on clothing. However, a decade later, the published version included only 70 maps. Cimermanis similarly wrote in the newspaper *Cīņa* in 1976 that the work was completed and that the editorial board was preparing the material for printing [Cimermanis 1976: 4]. He emphasized that the Atlas clearly demonstrated the cultural similarities and connections between Latvians and neighbouring peoples, countering claims of a "purely Latvian culture" and efforts to disregard historical ties with neighbouring Slavic peoples. Concluding his article, Cimermanis noted that a decision had been made to initiate the second phase of the Atlas, incorporating new, scientifically significant topics. From this moment, this process took another ten years.

Despite some revisions and omissions, and although needlework belts did not show direct connections to Slavic traditions, surprisingly they retained their place in the Atlas. It classifies belts as a common element of both men's and women's clothing, dividing them into six groups: woven, braided, knitted, fabric-based, leather, and metal belts [Брук et al. 1986: 122]. The first three groups identified as the oldest, richest in tradition, and most ethnically specific, thereby attracting scholarly attention. It is acknowledged that the materials, techniques, and ornamentation of woven belts exhibit remarkable similarity across the Baltic region. In contrast, fabric-based, leather, and metal belts are classified as genetically distinct, later developments, and non-traditional; therefore, they are depicted separately on Map No. 48 (Figure 3). The Atlas employs a 25 km^2 grid as the territorial unit, corresponding to the administrative divisions of the Baltic states at the end of the 19th century.

The Atlas states that needlework belts were evenly distributed throughout Estonia (except for the islands) and most of Latvia, while they were considered rare in Lithuania. In Estonia, simple striped textile belts and beadwork belts were equally prevalent, whereas woolwork belts accounted for only a fifth of the total. In Latvia,

beadwork belts were the most prevalent, primarily concentrated in the central regions of Vidzeme and Kurzeme, as well as in Zemgale. Woolwork belts were the second most common type, documented in southern Kurzeme, Zemgale, western Augšzeme, southeastern Vidzeme, and Latgale. Regarding the distribution in Latgale, it is important to note that the collection of the Latvian National Museum of History includes one woolwork belt (CVVM 13714), originating from Krustpils parish and acquired in 1952 from L. Dumbergs (Figure 4), whereas one men's fur belt drawing (LU LVI EMK E17 4701 zmt), documented during a 1959 ethnographic expedition in Kūku village, Krustpils parish, held in the Repository of Ethnographic Materials at the Institute of Latvian History, University of Latvia (Figure 5). In 1962, Krustpils was incorporated into Jēkabpils (now part of the Sēlija region). No other evidence of needlework belts has been found in southeastern Latvia.

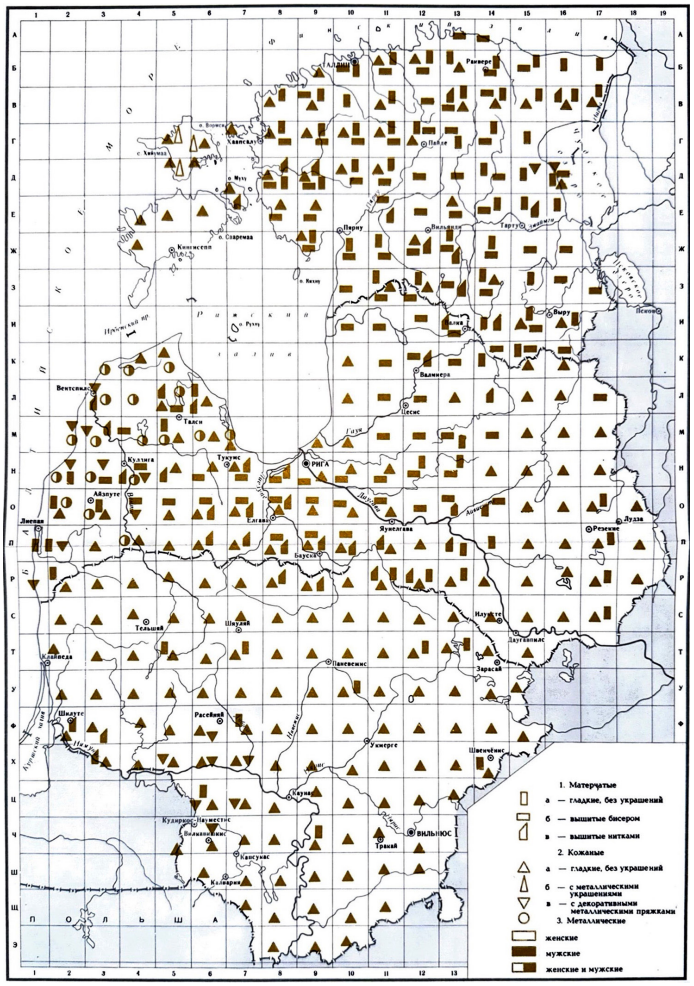

Figure. 3. Map No. 48. Textile, leather, and metal belts (second half of the 19th century). Historically Ethnographic Atlas of the Baltic Nations: Clothing (1986).

Figure. 4. Woolwork belt. Latvia. Krustpils parish. Wool, cotton, linen, leather, brass. Dimensions: 112 × 8.8 cm. 19th century. LNMH, CVVM 13714. Photo: J. Puķītis.

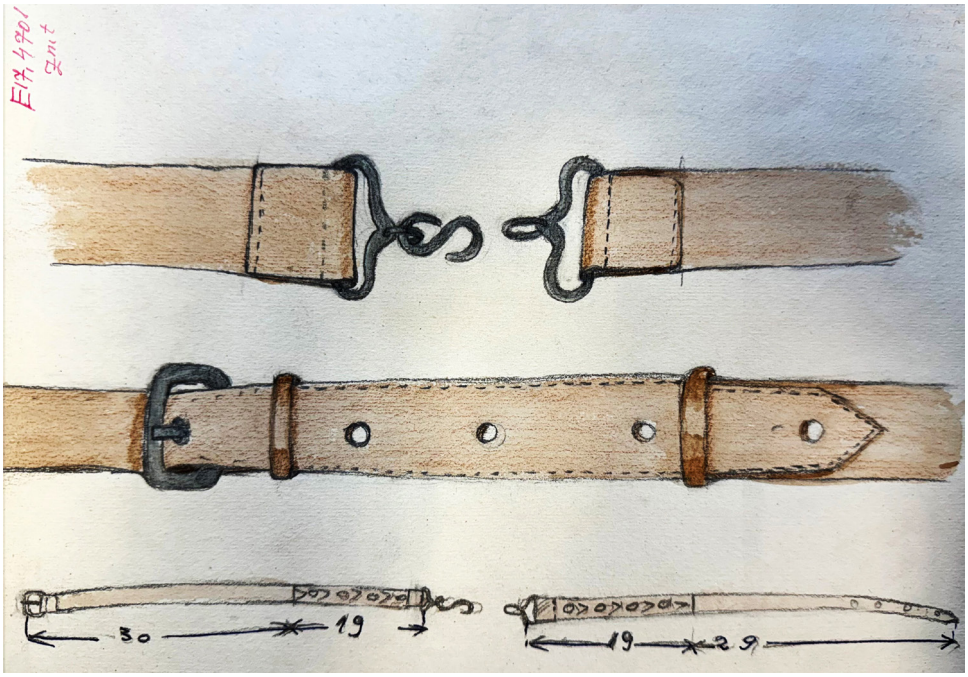

Figure. 5. Watercolour drawing. Men's fur belt. Krustpils district, Kūku village, Dreimaņi/Indriķēni. 1959. Information provided by: Dreimanis. Recorded and sketched by: M. Kazaka, REM ILH UL, E 17, 4701 zmt.

In Lithuania, only plain textile belts and woolwork belts have been documented in Klaipėda district, with no beadwork belts recorded in the Atlas. It has been concluded that beadwork belts emerged in the Baltic region in the second half of the 19th century, influenced by 18th century European fashion. The wealthier members of society acquired these belts for festive attire, while woolwork belts, being more affordable, were accessible to the peasantry [Брук et al. 1986: 126]. The cartographic review does not provide detailed information on the number of belts studied. Additionally, the sources of the belts' origins are described in general terms, referencing materials from the national history museums of the three countries. In conclusion, it is asserted that the Baltic region exemplifies how peoples from different ethnic communities, living under similar geographical conditions and having achieved comparable levels

of socio-economic development, can form a unified economic and cultural type [Брук et al. 1986: 162].

The ethnographers behind the Atlas: Studying needlework belts

Within the Ethnography Sector of the Academy of Sciences, each ethnographer specialized in a specific topic. Slava's contribution to the Atlas was closely connected to her 1955 doctoral dissertation, a comprehensive study of Latvian women's clothing and its ornamentation from the 18th to the 20th centuries. In accordance with Soviet academic regulations, the dissertation had to be written in Russian and defended in Moscow. Slava was among the first Latvian ethnographers to obtain a doctoral degree during the Soviet period [Karlsone 2019: 60]. Despite ideological requirements, such as citing the works of Marxist-Leninist classics and referencing the Programme of the Communist Party, Slava grounded her research in historical materials from museum collections, archives, as well as court records and lists of the estates of the deceased. Her articles in the journal *Arheoloģija un etnogrāfija* [Slava 1960, 1961a, 1963, 1973], as well as other publications, examine various aspects of traditional clothing history. She emphasized traditional costume as a source for ethnic history research, arguing that it could serve as an inexhaustible resource for cultivating artistic taste and aesthetic culture among the working class, as well as a foundation for artistic self-expression and applied craftsmanship [Slava 1966: 7–8].

The belt classification used in the Atlas can be compared with that proposed by Slava in her monograph *Latviešu tautas tērpi* (*Latvian Folk Costumes*, 1966), where she categorized belts into three primary groups based on material: 1) metal; 2) leather and 3) belts made of textiles, which are further divided into: woven, braided, knitted, and the belts embroidered with glass beads on a textile base (the so-called "acorn belts" – *zīļu jostas*) [Slava 1966: 55–57]. Although beadwork belts were recognized as a distinct category, the study did not elaborate on the topic. It was noted that beadwork belts became more widespread in the second half of the 19th century and were worn exclusively by men, who used them to gird their fur coats. The high cost of such belts made them a status symbol for wealthy householders. When analysing garment embellishments, Slava emphasized that the richness of decoration was influenced not only by the artisan's social status but also by their aesthetic ideals. For working people, beauty was associated with practicality, whereas the affluent classes equated it with luxury and prestige — often linked to the exploitation of labour [Slava 1966: 42]. Furthermore, Slava contributed to chapters on clothing history in *Latvian Ethnography (Latviešu etnogrāfija)* [Slava 1969a, 1969b], where she noted that in the late 19th century, wealthier peasants and merchants wore wide beadwork belts. Similarly, glass beads were used to decorate knitted bracelets, cuffs, groom's gloves, and pulse warmers, which were made from purchased yarn and worn over shirt cuffs.

The section on Estonian belts in the Atlas was written by ethnographer Eevi Astel, the most extensive researcher of needlework belts in the Baltic region. In 1983, a short article by Astel was included in the annual publication of the Estonian National Museum, summarizing data from a study of 73 beadwork belts in the collection of the State Ethnographic Museum of the Estonian SSR. This study was accompanied by three black-and-white photographs of the belts. Astel concluded that, unlike most Estonian traditional clothing, which was typically made at home, beadwork belts – or at least the materials for their production were usually purchased [Astel 1983: 104–106]. Beadwork belts were relatively rare, and their spread occurred relatively late.

In 1998, Astel's monograph entirely dedicated to Estonian belts was published [Astel 2017]. The book explores Estonian folk arts and crafts, offering a comprehensive overview of different belt types and their uses. It emphasizes the diversity of belt ornaments, colours, and techniques as part of Estonia's cultural heritage. Astel classified belts into eight groups based on material and manufacturing technique: plain belts, belts woven using various techniques, as well as knitted, braided, crocheted, knotted, embroidered, leather, and metal belts. The geographical distribution of each group was illustrated on maps. The only woolwork belt from Kodavere was included in the section on various textile belts, while beadwork belts were placed in the context of urban-style belts (*linlikud vööd*). These belts were commonly referred to as *helmevöö* in Estonian, though alternative names such as *helmesvöö, helmine vöö, elmine vöö, helmistsik vöö* were also recorded. An irregularly shaped belt was called *helme kurte* or *helmine rihm*.

Astel also stated that, in Estonia, beadwork belts were predominantly worn by young men on ceremonial occasions over outerwear such as long coats, fur coats, or regular coats, emphasizing the wearer's wealth and social status. The use of beaded belts in Estonia was first recorded in the mid-19th century, around 1840. Their popularity increased in the following decades, and they were worn both with traditional clothing and during the transition to urban fashion until the early 20th century. Beadwork belts were used across mainland Estonia, except for the islands, and their distribution was mapped [Astel 2017: 219]. These belts were characterized by intricate glass bead embroidery and were considered symbols of luxury and prestige. They were purchased from traveling merchants, at fairs, in cities, or made at home. Often, a bride would give a beadwork belt to her groom at their wedding or during the engagement, which is why these belts were frequently called wedding belts or groom's belts. Sometimes, initials and years were embroidered onto the belts (Figure 6). Astel linked the tradition of beadwork to exceptional craftsmanship, particularly evident in medieval church textiles and Renaissance art. In the first half of the 19th century, the Biedermeier style contributed to the popularity of this embroidery technique, which was used to decorate both clothing and everyday objects.

Figure. 6. Beadwork belt. Estonia. Tartu. Glass, cotton, linen, leather, metal. Dimensions: 135 × 8 cm. 1892. ERM 18860, Photo: Eesti Rahva Muuseum: http://www.muis.ee/en_GB/museaalview/647456

Beads were not only used for belts but also for adorning purses and tobacco pouches. The belts were typically made of brown tanned leather and linen fabric, embroidered with floral motifs such as flowers, leaves, and berries. The most common motif was grape leaves, though rose and animal head motifs were also found. The embroidery background was usually blue, though grey and light purple were also used. The belts varied in width from 4 to 9 centimetres and were often decorated with engraved copper or silver buckles. Astel concluded that, although beadwork belts are not directly related to folk art, they nonetheless deserve recognition as an important accessory in Estonian traditional clothing [Astel 2017: 227].

In Lithuania, the development of the Atlas required not only an in-depth analysis of the accumulated materials but also the collection of new data through expeditions, as archival materials were insufficient. The Lithuanian materials on belts for the Atlas were prepared by two ethnographers – Miliuvienė and Kulikauskienė. Before beginning her work on the Atlas, Miliuvienė studied Lithuanian traditional clothing, including elements of peasant men's clothing, hairstyles, shoes, and accessories [Miliuvienė et al. 1981, 1985]. Kulikauskienė conducted a more in-depth study of the history of Lithuanian traditional clothing. While working on the Atlas, she also developed her dissertation on *Lithuanian peasant men's clothing in the 19th and early 20th centuries* (Kulikauskienė 1975). Her study on Lithuanian men's clothing, covering the period from the 16th century to the early 20th century,

was published in 2018. It provides an analysis of men's clothing ensembles, examining the development of individual garments, their geographical distribution, tailoring methods, adornment, and ways of wearing [Kulikauskienė 2018]. Kulikauskienė notes that men in Lithuania predominantly wore leather belts. Luxurious fabric belts were also used. These had a leather base, while the surface was embroidered or interwoven with wool threads of various colours. Often featuring plant ornaments combined with geometric patterns. Beadwork belts, considered a sign of wealth, were worn by the wealthiest peasants. In the 19th century, these belts were found in Minor Lithuania, as well as in some regions of Samogitia and Aukštaitija. East Prussian Lithuanians referred to them as "Polish belts" [Kulikauskienė 2018: 249–252].

Conclusions

By placing the present findings alongside the interpretations recorded in the Historical-Ethnographic Atlas of the Baltic Peoples and other Soviet-era ethnographic studies, several key observations emerge. The markedly uneven representation of belts in Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian museum collections cannot be attributed solely to historical patterns of use. Rather, it reflects divergent research traditions, collecting practices, and the institutional priorities of museums and academies of sciences. This demonstrates the necessity of approaching collection data critically: absence in inventories should not be equated with absence in practice.

To fully understand the geographical distribution and regional characteristics of these belts in the 19th century, it is essential to situate them within the broader historical context of the Russian Empire. At that time, the region was administratively divided into governorates with varying degrees of autonomy and distinct cultural, linguistic, and social structures. According to Map No. 48 of the Atlas, needlework belts appear to have been relatively evenly distributed across the three Baltic governorates: the Governorate of Estonia *(Эстляндская губерния),* centred in Reval (now Tallinn) and covering northern Estonia; the Governorate of Livonia *(Лифляндская губерния)*, centred in Riga and encompassing southern Estonia and northeastern Latvia; and the Governorate of Courland *(Курляндская губерния)*, centred in Jelgava and covering Courland and Semigallia. These provinces retained a degree of autonomy until the late nineteenth century, including Baltic German self-governing institutions and the continued use of German in administration. By contrast, Latgale was part of the Vitebsk Governorate *(Витебская губерния),* and Lithuanian territories were administered within the Northwestern Krai (*Северо-Западный край*), encompassing the historic lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Such divergent administrative structures shaped patterns of cultural exchange and the development of local textile traditions, producing regionally differentiated dynamics of cultural change.

Communication and information networks were equally significant in shaping dress practices. The dissemination of European fashion trends, the growing accessibility of printed media, and increasing human mobility all had a profound impact on both the aesthetics of textile production and the meanings ascribed to dress. These processes unfolded alongside the socio-economic transformations following the abolition of serfdom, which occurred later in the Vitebsk Governorate and the Northwestern Krai than in the Baltic governorates of Estonia, Livonia, and Courland. This created distinct temporal rhythms in cultural exchange and the formation of material culture.

The comparative evidence also highlights the different capacities of ethnographic research traditions. Early expeditions in Estonia and Latvia between 1911 and the 1930s played a pivotal role in documenting regional textile practices. In Lithuania, however, expeditions conducted during the Soviet period recorded significantly fewer examples of needlework belts, largely because parts of this material culture had already disappeared, traditions had been discontinued, or their forms substantially transformed. Moreover, the Soviet system imposed selective criteria for ethnographic collecting, often filtered through ideological agendas.

The interpretation of belts was likewise shaped by scholarly frameworks. In the Soviet period, classification and mapping were primarily organized around material typologies that reinforced ideological narratives of cultural commonality across the Baltic. By contrast, the present study demonstrates that belts cannot be fully understood through typology alone. They also functioned as culturally charged objects: as gifts, as markers of masculinity, and as visible symbols of wealth. These roles transcend purely material analysis and highlight the social and symbolic dimensions of dress. More broadly, needlework belts reveal the interplay between local craft traditions, contemporary fashion, and industrial innovation. They exemplify how tradition and novelty intersected with socio-economic change and external cultural influences. Comparative analysis of museum collections and research approaches across the Baltic states shows that the documentation and interpretation of these objects are inseparable from each country's ethnographic traditions, the scale of its museum holdings, and the broader historical circumstances that shaped scholarly agendas.

Finally, the Atlas underscores the significance of collections assembled during early ethnographic expeditions and of the research conducted in the interwar period, when the foundations of ethnology were firmly established in the Baltic states. During the Soviet era, despite ideological constraints, ethnographers from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia contributed to an ambitious cartographic project that included embroidered belts. Leading scholars of clothing history – Slava, Astel, and Kulikauskienė – were central contributors, situating the study of belts within broader

academic discourse. Thus, embroidered belts are more than functional accessories: they represent nodes of cultural meaning, linking local craft traditions, social identities, and broader transnational currents. Their study not only illuminates the history of men's clothing but also reflects the development of ethnographic scholarship and the cultural-historical heritage of each Baltic country.

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Sources

Belts from: The Clothing and Textiles Collection of the Ethnography Department of the Latvian National Museum of History:

Inv. No. CVVM 5018. Beadwork belt. Valmiera district, Valmiera parish. Glass, wool, cotton, leather, metal. Dimensions: 105 × 5 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 5019. Woolwork belt. Valmiera district, Valmiera parish. Wool, cotton, leather, metal. Dimensions: 120.5 (118) × 7.5 cm.

10.4. Inv. No. CVVM 5020. Beadwork belt. Valmiera district, Valmiera parish. Glass, cotton, leather, brass. Dimensions: 115.5 (113) × 5.5 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13690. Woolwork belt. Jelgava. Wool, cotton, linen, leather, brass. Dimensions: 113 × 6 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13692. Beadwork belt. Jelgava. Glass, wool, cotton, leather, metal, brass. Dimensions: 92 (84) × 5 (3) cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13693. Beadwork belt. Jelgava. Glass, wool, cotton, leather, metal. Dimensions: 119.5x7 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13697. Woolwork belt. Jelgava district, Jelgava parish, Jelgava. Wool, cotton, leather, brass. Dimensions: 83 (77) × 3.5 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13714. Woolwork belt. Jēkabpils county, Krustpils parish. Wool, cotton, linen, leather, brass. Dimensions: 112 (102,5) × 8,8 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13717. Woolwork belt. Jelgava. Wool, cotton, leather, metal. Dimensions: 122 × 8 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13726. Woolwork belt. Bauska district, Panemunė parish, Jaunzemji. Wool, cotton, linen, leather, brass. Dimensions: 170 × 7 cm. 1860.

Inv. No. CVVM 13727. Woolwork belt. Jelgava. Wool, cotton, linen, leather, metal. Dimensions: 139.5 (105) × 7.5 (2) cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13731. Beadwork belt. Jelgava. Glass, cotton, linen, leather, brass. Dimensions: 120 × 5 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13732. Beadwork belt. Valkas district, Veclaicene parish, Metumi. Glass, cotton, linen, leather, metal. Dimensions: 109 × 5 cm. 1882.

Inv. No. CVVM 13736. Beadwork belt. Latvia. Glass, cotton, linen, leather, brass. Dimensions: 78 (75) × 2.5 (3) cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13758. Beadwork belt. Jelgava district, Jelgava parish, Jelgava. Glass, cotton, linen, leather, silver, brass, metal. Dimensions: 96 × 6.8 cm.

Inv. No. CVVM 13760. Part of a beadwork belt. Jelgava district, Jelgava parish, Jelgava. Glass, cotton, leather, brass. Dimensions: 33 × 3 cm.

Document from Repository of Ethnographic Material of the Institute of Latvian History, University of Latvia (REM ILH UL; Latvijas Universitātes Latvijas vēstures institūta Etnogrāfisko materiālu krātuve):

E 17, 4701 zmt. Description sheet. Men's fur belt. Krustpils District, Kūku Village, Dreimaņi/Indriķēni. Information provided by: Dreimanis. Recorded and sketched by: M. Kazaka, 1 July 1959.

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