



Seminar

JENNY LARSSON

Fellow, SCAS.

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The Early Baltic Pantheon

Tuesday, 6 November, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT JENNY LARSSON

Jenny Larsson earned her PhD from the University of Copenhagen in 2004 and was subsequently awarded a research grant by the Carlsberg Foundation. During this period she was a visiting researcher at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. She has also been a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge. In 2007 she was awarded a research grant within the Elite Research Initiative by the Danish Council for Independent Research, allowing her to focus on historical word-forming processes in the Baltic languages. Larsson was also a researcher at the University of Copenhagen's interdisciplinary research centre Roots of Europe – Language, Culture and Migrations (funded as a Programme of Excellence). She is currently Professor of Baltic Linguistics at Stockholm University.

Larsson is a historical linguist, specialized in the Baltic languages. Her research has centred on historical phonological processes, word formation and accent patterns in the Baltic and Slavic languages. She has also specialized in Baltic mythology and the reconstruction of the pre-Christian Baltic pantheon. In addition, she has been involved in interdisciplinary research on the spread of the Indo-European languages in pre-historic times.

Larsson is the former president of the Young Academy of Sweden. She has been awarded the Young Elite Researcher Award by the Independent Research Fund Denmark, the Young Leaders Fellowship by the Sasakawa Foundation, the Award for Excellence by the FAIES association at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Copenhagen Gold Medal for her dissertation. She is a member of the board of the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.

At SCAS, she will be working on her research project about early Baltic mythology.

ABSTRACT

The Christianisation of the Baltic countries was a very long process and the pagan religion was practiced for a long time after the official Christianisation of the region. The earliest records with more extensive descriptions of the Baltic peoples and their religious traditions stem from the 13th and 14th century. During this period these pre-Christian people still practiced their indigenous religion, and even during the 15th and 16th centuries, when the upper strata of society had been converted to Christianity, pagan practices were still common among the peasants. However, it is an unfortunate fact that the Balts themselves did not write anything *before* they were formally Christianised; the first book ever published in a Baltic language was the Lithuanian Catechism by M. Mažvydas, published in 1547. But there were, however, other people who wrote about the Balts, describing the pagan customs that they saw or heard about.

These sources have, for a long time, been rather inaccessible to scholars of Baltic religion, but with the publication of *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai* (1996-2003), Norbertas Vėlius and his co-workers have now made a large collection of the historical documents available to the scholarly community. With this 4-volume collection of text passages from a wide range of historical documents, we are now able to get a better understanding of the Baltic pre-Christian religion and, as a next step, to compare it to the other pre-Christian religions around the Baltic Sea.

In my presentation I will review the earliest sources in order to try to establish a common Baltic core pantheon. An interesting feature of the early Baltic religions is the fact that many female goddesses are found exclusively in the Latvian folklore: where the Lithuanians and Old Prussians have male deities, their Latvian counterparts are often female deities. In my paper, I will argue that the Latvian “gender-change” is a result of cultural contact, rather than an innate Baltic feature.