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**SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR:
ART HISTORY OF LATVIA I**

Art History of Latvia I, 9th Millennium BC – 1562, ed. by Elita Grosmane. Authors: Elita Grosmane, Ieva Ose, Baiba Dumpe, Irita Žeiere, Baiba Vaska, Imants Lancmanis. Riga: Art Academy of Latvia, 2024. 528 pp.

In 2024, the first volume of the *Art History of Latvia* was published. It took five years to complete, and the result is monumental: over 10 millennia of art history are covered in 528 pages and 799 images. Before discussing the volume's content, it is important to briefly address the context of its creation.

In the early 2000s, both Estonia and Latvia launched multi-volume chronological art history projects, led by the art history faculties of the Academies of Art in Estonia and Latvia. The editors-in-chief are Krista Kodres and Eduards Kļaviņš, respectively. The general aim of both projects is similar: to provide a contemporary overview of historical art based on both established and recent research, and intended for academic and broader audiences alike.¹ In Estonia, the expressed emphasis is on visual culture and its socio-cultural context, while in Latvia, the focus is on the identification and preservation of national cultural values within the European context.

The process has not been straightforward in either case. In Estonia, the first book was published in 2005, but it was the second volume of

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12697/BJAH.2024.27.07>

¹ See Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, the research project and multi-volume publication 'Eesti kunsti ajalugu', <https://www.artun.ee/et/koguteose-eesti-kunsti-ajalugu-koostamine-ja-valjaandmine/> and Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijas Mākslas vēstures institūts, the research project and multi-volume publication 'Latvijas mākslas vēsture', <https://www.lma-mvi.lv/lv/projekti-un-parskati> [accessed 25 July 2024].

the series, followed by the fifth, sixth, third, fourth, and finally the first volume in 2023. Due to the lengthy timeline, a seventh volume is now planned to cover the art of the 21st century.² In Latvia, the sequence has also been out of order: the earliest volume to be published (in 2014) was the fourth, followed by the fifth, third, and, in 2024, the first volume. The second, sixth and seventh volume are still in preparation.³

However, there are two major differences in the approaches of Estonian and Latvian projects. Firstly, in Latvia, a webpage dedicated to Latvian art history⁴ was launched as early as 2008 by the same institution and authors, following the same structure as the printed books that were published later. Secondly, in Latvia, the volumes are published simultaneously in Latvian and English, whereas in Estonia, the books are in Estonian with only brief English summaries. Both aspects have made the Latvian material much more accessible than the Estonian one. Although the webpage has been discontinued, it can still be reached through the Web Archive. The printed books in English, of course, have a more lasting impact.

The comparison of both countries' art history series is especially relevant when dealing with the medieval period, as the political and administrative boundaries of that time did not correspond to the borders of the present nation states. Similarly, the cultural phenomena were not divided by the modern linguistic distinctions between Estonian and Latvian. Therefore, the structure of the respective volumes warrants closer examination.

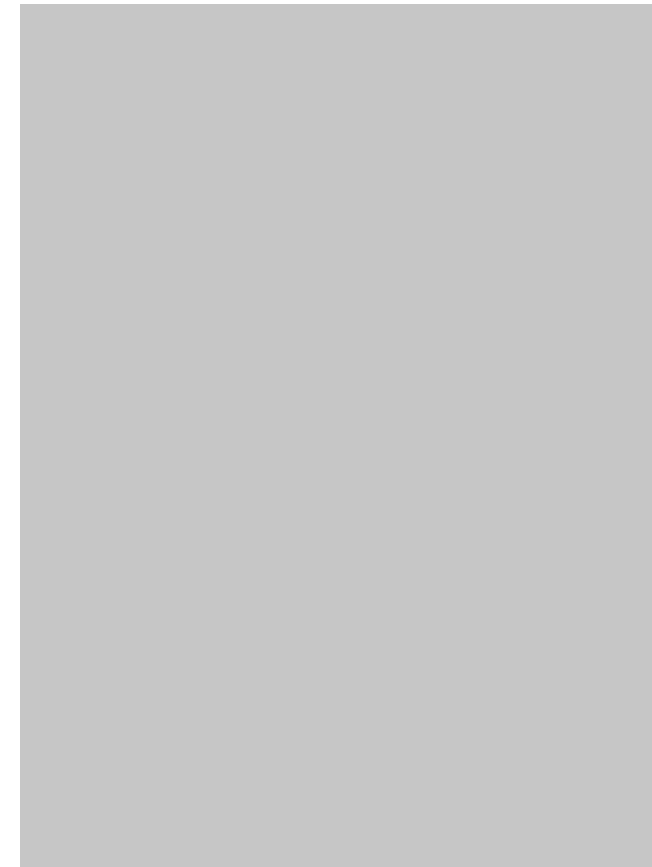
Volume 1 of the Estonian series⁵ is less ambitious in its temporal scope, beginning loosely around the year 1100 and only including late prehistoric archaeological material into the analysis with special interest in the liminal phenomena of the visual culture leading to and during the era of transitions. The volume emphasizes the entanglement of cultures and continuities throughout the period. The chapters are organised under the headings: country and village, castles and manors, the city, the church, monasteries, and symbols of power. Each section addresses

² See Estonian Academy of Arts, the research project and multi-volume publication 'History of Estonian Art', <https://www.artun.ee/en/publishing-the-6-volume-history-of-estonian-art/> [accessed 25 July 2024].

³ See Art Academy of Latvia Institute of Art History, the research project and multi-volume publication 'Art History of Latvia', <https://www.lma-mvi.lv/en/publications/art-history-of-latvia/> [accessed 25 July 2024].

⁴ Latvijas mākslas vēsture, www.makslasvesture.lv [accessed through Web Archive 26 July 2024].

⁵ *Eesti kunsti ajalugu 1, 1100–1520*, ed. by Kersti Markus (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2023).



aspects of art, architecture, and visual culture, as well as historical background, context, and historiography. Art is interpreted broadly, encompassing landscapes, urban and rural planning, vernacular and professional buildings, artworks, memorial culture, liturgical, symbolic and everyday objects, as well as clothing and jewellery. Although this is a volume in the series on Estonian art history, many topics also cover material from present-day Latvia.

The Latvian volume takes a more traditional approach. It begins with chapters on historiography and historical background, followed by chapters on architecture, sculpture, painting, and prints. These are then followed by chapters on the applied arts: pottery, textiles, and metalwork. The book concludes with a short chapter on the production of medieval craft guilds. Classical stylistic analysis prevails, with the larger sections structured chronologically.

The main authors of the volume are Elita Grosmane and Ieva Ose, both of whom have been studying medieval art and architecture in Latvia for decades. Their respective contributions reflect their research interests: Elita Grosmane covers medieval urban planning, church architecture, and fine arts, while Ieva Ose focusses on medieval town walls and castles. Grosmane has also written the introductory sections of the volume and covered prehistoric architecture. Baiba Dumpe, Irita Žeiere and Baiba Vaska have provided overviews of the archaeological materials from the prehistoric era. Imants Lancmanis concludes the book with a brief account of the ‘applied arts of early historical styles’.

The historiography chapter by Elita Grosmane provides an extensive overview of earlier writings on medieval art and architecture, with particular attention to the contributions of Baltic German art historians and architects, most notably Wilhelm Neumann. More recent historiography is covered in less detail, but all the more important researchers (such as Andrejs Holcmanis, Andris Caune, Ieva Ose, Gunārs Jansons, Agnese Bergholde-Wolf, Ilmārs Dirveiks and others) are mentioned, along with major scholarly works. The chapter also includes references to studies by some 20th-century Estonian art historians (including Armin Tuulse and Voldemar Vaga).

In the subchapter on current foreign researchers studying medieval art and architecture in Latvia, only Ulrike Nürnberger is mentioned for her contribution on wooden sculpture (p. 34). Regrettably, the studies by other German scholars, such as Jan Friedrich Richter or Christofer Herrmann, as well as those by Estonian researchers, have been excluded. This omission is notable given that the writings by Kaur Altoa, Kersti Markus, and others have significantly contributed to the discussion on architecture in the Latvian part of medieval Livonia.⁶ Anu Mänd has incorporated all Latvian material into her

6 Kaur Altoa, ‘Rigaer Dom und Kölner Meister’, *Sten Karling and Baltic Art History*, ed. by Krista Kodres, Juhana Maiste, Vappu Vabar. Estonian Academy of Arts Proceedings, 6 (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 1999), 31–45; Kaur Altoa, ‘Der Chorumgang in Alt-Livland’, *Die Stadt im europäischen Nordosten* (Helsinki: Lübeck: Aue-Säätiö, 2001), 441–452; Kaur Altoa, ‘Basilika und Hallenkirche im Backsteingebiet Alt-Livlands’, *Sakrale Kunst im Baltikum. Baltische Seminare* (Lüneburg: Carl Schirren Gesellschaft, 2008), 15–39; Kaur Altoa, ‘Die Kirche zu Urbs/Urvaste und die Frage der Rigenser Bauschule im 13. Jahrhundert’, *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 6 (2013), 7–46; Kaur Altoa, ‘Einige Korrekturen bezüglich der Kirchen St. Jakobi in Riga und der zu Lüggenhusen (Lüganuse) in Wierland (Virumaa)’, *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 17 (2019), 173–179; Kersti Markus, ‘Die Christianisierung Livlands aus der Perspektive visueller Quellen’, *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*, 64 (4) (2015), 477–497; Kersti Markus, ‘The Church on the Borderland: The Impact of Crusading on the Architecture of Gotland and Livonia’, *Crusading on the Edge: Ideas and Practice of Crusading in Iberia and the Baltic Region, 1100–1500*, ed. by Torben K. Nielsen, Iben Fønnesberg-Schmidt. *Outremer – Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East*, 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 333–364; Kersti Markus, *Visual Culture and Politics in the Baltic Sea Region, 1100–1250* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020). See also: Anneli Randla, Anu Mänd, ‘Keskaja visuaalkultuuri uurimisseisust Eestis ja Lätis’ [The State of Research on Medieval Visual Culture in Estonia and Latvia], *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi = Studies on Art and Architecture*, 25/1–2 (2016), 7–22.

comprehensive studies on medieval liturgical vessels⁷ and altars and altarpieces⁸. Several of her books and articles⁹ cover topics relevant to the medieval history and artworks in present-day Latvia. Similarly, Merike Kurisoo has included Latvian material in her book on baptismal fonts¹⁰, and her catalogue of the exhibition on the Virgin Mary¹¹ places works from Latvian collections in a comparative context.

The chapters on architecture comprise nearly half of the book. Elita Grosmane provides an extensive overview of prehistoric archaeological material, including settlements, hillforts, and dwellings. The subsequent chapter on medieval urban planning is much shorter and covers early Liv villages in what is now Riga, the development of the wooden city in the 13th century, and its transition to a stone and brick city following devastating fires. The discussion briefly touches on street and plot patterns. However, she claims that ‘The winding street network in the quarters around the Dom (*sic!*) Cathedral was created deliberately as a common medieval defence measure to confuse the enemy in the narrow streets between the

7 Anu Mänd, *Kirikute hõbevara. Altaririistad keskaegsel Liivimaal* [Church Silver: Liturgical vessels in Medieval Livonia] (Tallinn: Muinsuskaitseamet, 2008), with English summary; Anu Mänd, ‘Liturgical Vessels in Medieval Livonia in the Light of Written Evidence’, *Art and the Church: Religious Art and Architecture in the Baltic Region in the 13th–18th Centuries*, ed. by Krista Kodres, Merike Kurisoo (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2008), 82–103.

8 Anu Mänd, *Keskaegsed altariid ja retaablid* [Medieval Altars and Altarpieces] (Tallinn: Muinsuskaitseamet, 2019).

9 Anu Mänd, *Urban Carnival: Festive Culture in the Hanseatic Cities of the Eastern Baltic, 1350–1550* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005); Anu Mänd, ‘Hospitals and Tables for the Poor in Medieval Livonia’, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, 115 (2007), 234–270; Anu Mänd, ‘Memoria and Sacral Art in Late Medieval Livonia: The Gender Perspective’, *Images and Objects in Ritual Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe*, ed. by Krista Kodres, Anu Mänd (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 239–273; Anu Mänd, ‘Black Soldier – Patron Saint: St Maurice and the Livonian Merchants’, *ICO. Iconographisk Post. Nordisk tidskrift för bildtolkning = Nordic Review of Iconography*, 1 (2014), 56–75; Anu Mänd, ‘The Cult and Visual Representation of Scandinavian Saints in Medieval Livonia’, *Saints and Sainthood around the Baltic Sea: Identity, Literacy, and Communication in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Carsten Selch Jensen, Tracey R. Sands, Nils Holger Petersen, Kurt V. Jensen, Tuomas M.S. Lehtonen (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), 101–143; Anu Mänd, ‘Visuelle Memoria: die Grabplatten der livländischen Ordensmeister und Gebietiger’, *Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte*, 15 (2020), 59–92; Anu Mänd, ‘Emotions and Pragmatism: The Handling of Catholic Material Heritage in Livonian Cities after the Reformation’, *Indifferent Things? Objects and Images in Post-Reformation Churches in the Baltic Sea Region*, ed. by Krista Kodres, Merike Kurisoo, Ulrike Nürnberger (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2020), 57–69; Anu Mänd, ‘Kaks keskaegse Liivimaa kunstiteost Poznańis’ [Two works of art from medieval Livonia in Poznań], *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi = Studies on Art and Architecture*, 30/1–2 (2021), 183–196; Anu Mänd, ‘Images and Inscriptions on Dwelling Houses in Livonian Towns c. 1450–c. 1550’, *Everyday Life in a Hanseatic Town = Alltagsleben in einer Hansestadt = Argielu hansalinnas*, ed. by Ivar Leimus (Tallinn: Eesti Ajaloomuseum, 2021), 91–141.

10 Merike Kurisoo, *Ristimise läte: Ristimiskivid keskaegsel Liivimaal* [Foundation of Baptism: Medieval Baptismal Fonts in Livonia] (Tallinn: Muinsuskaitseamet, 2009).

11 Merike Kurisoo, *Neitsi Maarja: Naine, ema, kuninganna = The Virgin Mary: Woman, Mother, Queen* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuseum, 2022).

perimetrally placed buildings' and 'Typical features of a medieval town were also the radial roads leading from the town gates to the market square, which helped foreign merchants to find their way' (both p. 77) seem somewhat contradictory. It is unconvincing to suggest that creating confusion was a deliberate urban planning strategy in the Middle Ages. Due to a lack of archaeological data,¹² the discussion of other medieval towns in the territory of present-day Latvia is brief, with only Valmiera, Cēsis and Kuldīga being mentioned among the more than a dozen cities.

The chapter on town walls by Ieva Ose is more thorough. It analyses the development of the fortifications of Riga based on archaeological remains, recent excavations, and comparative material from other city walls of the region. Significant attention is paid to construction details, especially the various types of towers. A plan of the successive fortifications would have been helpful for the reader. Interestingly, the town walls of smaller cities are described in greater detail than their urban structure in the previous chapter, despite the same lack of archaeological data that should have posed an obstacle.

Ecclesiastical architecture is covered by Elita Grosmane. The text is supplemented with numerous photos, ground plans, and reconstructive drawings of building phases. Greater emphasis is justifiably placed on the churches of Riga and its environs, starting with Ikšķīle and Mārtiņšala, and extensively discussing the Cathedral of Riga, as well as the city's parish churches of St. Peter and St. James. A classical stylistic approach is used for the comparative analysis of church architecture. Agnese Bergholde-Wolf's dissertation on Riga Cathedral¹³ has provided new and revised comparisons for decorative forms. However, functional, liturgical, iconographic, and social aspects receive less or no attention in these chapters. The structure of the book leads to fragmentation of the material – for instance, the architectural sculpture of Riga Cathedral and the mural in the northern porch are covered in different chapters under the section on fine art. The section on medieval churches outside of

12 According to the database of cultural monuments of Latvia published by the National Heritage Board numerous permits for archaeological excavations and surveys have been granted in all historic city centres (see mantojums.lv).

13 Agnese Bergholde, *Rīgas Doma viduslaiku arhitektūra un būvplastika eiropēisko analogiju kontekstā*. Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijas Mākslas vēstures institūta disertācijas, 4 (Rīga: Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijas Mākslas vēstures institūts, 2015); see also Agnese Bergholde-Wolf, 'Das mittelalterliche Ensemble des Doms zu Riga', *Kunsttadeuslikke Uurimusi = Studies on Art and Architecture*, 25/1–2 (2016), 75–101.

Riga is more concise and mainly relies on the catalogue of medieval stone churches by Andris Caune and Ieva Ose¹⁴.

A separate chapter is dedicated to the mendicant orders. Only small fragments of the Franciscan church in Riga have been preserved. Despite this, Gunārs Jansons proposed a hypothetical reconstruction of the entire friary layout in 1970. Regrettably, one of the few more recent studies on the architecture and furnishings of the church¹⁵ has been dismissed. The former Dominican friary church is still standing and is described as 'one of the most beautiful Late Gothic buildings [in Latvia]' (p. 145). The complex construction history of the edifice is analysed, and some new suggestions about its origins are made. While the influence of Prussian, specifically Gdansk, architecture has long been recognised, the scope has now been extended to include further examples from Eastern Prussia. It should not be ruled out that some elements may have been copied from buildings closer to home. However, the main issue with this analysis is the lack of consideration for how the specific use of church space in mendicant friaries directly influenced the architecture.

If the main contribution of Elita Grosmane's chapters on ecclesiastical architecture is the systematic assembly of scattered and scarce material into a cohesive study, Ieva Ose's task in writing the section on medieval castles was different. She could draw upon the nine extensive volumes of studies on medieval castles in Latvia which she had edited over two decades.¹⁶ The structure of these chapters is chronological, providing an overview of the development of fortifications by period and style (late Romanesque, late 12th–13th century; early and high Gothic, late 13th – first third of the 15th century, etc.). While the basic division between (arch)bishop's and Teutonic Order castles is outlined, the analysis focusses on castle types rather than their landlords due to overlapping typologies. The chronological approach results in individual castles being covered in multiple subchapters; for example, the study of Cēsis castle is divided into three sections. One of the major accomplishments is the presentation of recent research on Riga castle, although the renovation

14 Andris Caune, Ieva Ose, *Latvijas viduslaiku mūra baznīcas. 12. gs. beigās – 16. gs. sākums. Enciklopēdija* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2010).

15 Anu Mänd, Anneli Randla, 'Sacred Space and Corporate Identity: the Black Heads' Chapels in the Mendicant Churches of Tallinn and Riga', *Baltic Journal of Art History*, Autumn (2012), 43–80.

16 *Latvijas viduslaiku pils*, 9 vols, ed. by Ieva Ose (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 1999–2016).

was not yet complete at the time of the book's publication, and new discoveries have been made since.

The chapters on fine art by Elita Grosmane are organised into sections on sculpture by material (bone, stone, wood), painting, and 'graphic art' (murals, book illumination). While architectural sculpture and murals could have been examined alongside the respective buildings, this approach is more justified for loose finds or portable objects. In the stone section, the enigmatic capital (possibly from the Dominican friary) and three animated corbels from 7 Peitavas Street are described, with earlier interpretations being rejected. Whether their primary function was 'attraction of foreign visitors' attention' (p. 247) remains unclear. The discussion on the Apocalyptic Madonna and the figure of Wolter von Plettenberg from Riga castle has evolved following the latter sculpture's display in Tallinn at the exhibition *Michel Sittow in the North?* in 2023¹⁷. Both sculptures are most likely made of dolomitic limestone from Orgita (Märjamaa) in Estonia, and similarities in style and workmanship suggest that they were created by the same masters or workshop which produced the cenotaph for Hans Pawels in Tallinn a few years earlier.¹⁸ Another stone carving in Riga has a connection with Tallinn: the pair of doorside stones from the Black Heads' House, for which the uncarved slabs were purchased from Tallinn. These well-known and extensively studied artworks are thoroughly described, and their similarity to a pair of doorside stones in Rostock is noted. However, a recurring mistake initially made by Armin Tuulse and subsequently repeated is perpetuated here, despite Anu Mänd having corrected it six years ago.¹⁹ Specifically, the master Reyneke, who was paid for the work, was a painter, not a stone carver. He is consistently

17 The exhibition *Michel Sittow in the North? Altarpieces in Dialogue* was on display at Niguliste Museum in Tallinn from 4 May to 5 November 2023.

18 See Jan Friedrich Richter, 'Tallinn as a Late Medieval Art Centre', *Michel Sittow in the North? Altarpieces in Dialogue*, ed. by Merike Kurisoo (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuuseum, 2023), 85–99. For the initial petrographic analysis compare Madara Rasiņa, 'Akmens cilņi "Madonna ar bērnu" un "Volters fon Plettenbergs" Rīgas pili: Izpēte un konservācija = Stone Reliefs "Madonna with a Child" and "Wolter von Plettenberg" in Riga Castle: Research and Conservation', *Mākslas Vēsture un Teorija*, 21 (2018), 94–102.

19 Anu Mänd, 'Piiskoppide eneserepresentatsioonist, vapitahvlitest ja meister Reynekest' [On the self-representation of bishops, reliefs with coats of arms, and Master Reyneke], *Pühakud, piiskopid, linnad ja linnused: Ajarännakuid kesk- ja varauusaega. Uurimusi Jaan Tamme auks = Saints, Bishops, Towns and Castles: Time Travels into Middle and Early Modern Ages. Studies in Honour of Jaan Tamm*, ed. by Erki Russow, Valter Lang (Tallinn, Tartu: Tallinna Ülikool, Tartu Ülikool, 2018), 253–278, here 264–270.

referred to as a painter (*meler*) in the written sources of the 1520s in Riga and was paid for various painting tasks. The carving was done by a journeyman whose name is not recorded in the sources.

The preserved medieval wooden sculptures represent only a tiny fraction of what once existed, as documented in written sources. In Latvia, no medieval altarpiece or sculpture has been preserved in its original location or can be definitively traced back to its original context, complicating the analysis of the surviving pieces. Elita Grosmane has described all known sculptures, starting with the five figures from the island of Ruhnu and concluding with the Madonna on the Crescent from Kuldīga. Issues of dating, provenance, and authorship are discussed, but conclusive evidence is provided in only a few cases.

Under the heading of medieval painting, only two murals and ornamental decoration in two Riga churches are presented, as nothing else has been preserved or discovered. The mural depicting the Coronation of the Virgin in the northern porch of Riga Cathedral is undoubtedly the most important medieval painting in Latvia and warrants a thorough stylistic, iconographic, and technical analysis. It is worth noting that a now-lost mural above the southern portal of St. John's in Tartu also represented the Coronation of the Virgin. The second surviving mural in Riga, discovered in St. James' church in 2017/18,²⁰ is mentioned in the text, but unfortunately, no description or illustration is provided. The medieval ornaments which adorned the architectural elements in the Cathedral, its cloister walks, and St. James' church are shown in images, and the process of their uncovering is described. Interestingly, green colour was used in the decoration of St. James' vaults, but the specific pigment is not identified.

The extensive and detailed chapters on archaeological pottery, textiles, and metalwork (specifically jewelry) span 180 pages, creating a sharp contrast with the brief overview of medieval craft guilds' production by Imants Lancmanis, which covers only 9 pages. Lancmanis provides some information on guild regulations and history and introduces a few items of liturgical silverware, brass, pewter, and ceramics. However, the substantial amount of surviving (though scattered) material would have supported a much more in-depth analysis. Additionally, some of the information provided

20 Ilmārs Dirveiks, 'Jaunākie atklājumi Sv. Jēkaba baznīcas viduslaiku arhitektūrā', 21. *Borisa Vīpera piemiņas lasījumi: Viduslaiku arhitektūra un māksla Latvijā* (Rīga: Latvijas Mākslas akadēmija, 2019), 19–24.

by Lancmanis is outdated. For example, while the text mentions only one pilgrim badge from Riga/Livonia (p. 484), at least six such badges (marked *SIGNVM S MARIE IN LIVONIA REMISSIONIS PECCATORVM*) have been found in northern Germany and Sweden, with one more discovered in Kuldīga. Furthermore, two pilgrim badges produced for visitors of the Holy Blood relic in the Cathedral of Riga were unearthed in Tallinn in 2018.²¹

Despite some shortcomings, the first volume of the *Art History of Latvia* provides a monumental overview of prehistoric and medieval art on the territory of present-day Latvia, offering many interesting insights and a lot of new illustrative material. Now that both the Estonian and Latvian volumes have been published, it is an opportune moment to combine the information and create a comprehensive history of visual culture in all its forms in medieval Livonia as a whole. The synergy from such a project could enhance our understanding of the history, people and culture of the Middle Ages, as well as illuminate how our current perceptions and beliefs influence research outcomes.

CV

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21 Anu Mänd, Anti Selart, 'Püha Vere reliikvia ja Tallinnast leitud palverännumärgid', *Tuna: Ajalookultuuri ajakiri*, 2 (2024), 30–47; Anu Mänd, Anti Selart, 'The Relic of the Holy Blood in Riga and Schwerin and the Pilgrim Badges Found in Tallinn', *Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte*, 20 (2025), forthcoming.