Curonian bead sets with bronze spacer plates and their Scandinavian parallels
Bliujiene#, Audrone#
Fornvännen 2001(96):4, s. [235]-242
Ingår i: samla.raa.se
Curonian bead sets with bronze spacer plates and their Scandinavian parallels

by Audronė Bliujienė

From the tenth century onward and into the thirteenth, Curonian women wore bead sets with bronze spacer plates. Bead sets with multicolour glass and opaque paste, cast bronze and bronze spiral beads are only found in the territory inhabited by the Curonians. Some bead sets had no spacer plates. In Lithuanian archaeological literature, there is a tendency to interpret bead sets with spacer plates as headbands, but such were not worn by Curonian women. They covered their hair with a head-dress possibly similar to that worn in other parts of Europe in the Viking Period. This head-dress also reminds of Lithuanian nuomelas, a cloth of linen, wrapped in folds over the head and around the neck, similar to a nun’s wimple, well known from ethnographic sources. Caps fastened with pins were also common among Curonian women. The Curonian fashion of bead sets with bronze spacer plates were probably originally a result of Gotland’s cultural influence.


From the sixth century onward, the Baltic tribe of the Curonians lived in a narrow strip of the Baltic coastline of Lithuania and Latvia. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the Curonians inhabited northwestern Lithuania and southwestern Curonia. The southern boundary of the Curonians’ territory reached the environs of Klaipėda and remained there for centuries. In the north, their lands bordered on the river Tebra. Not even in the tenth century did they expand past the Tebra valley (Mugurevič 1970, p. 24, fig. 1). In Latvia, Curonian sites are concentrated in the vicinity of Lake Pape and the environs of Gruobinia. Around Gruobinia, Curonian cemeteries are intermingled with burial mounds built by settlers from central Sweden and Gotland (Petrenko & Urtâns, 1995, p. 17–18). With time, Curonian territory expanded northward. In the eleventh century the Curonians settled to the north of the river Abava and to the northeast of the river Venta (Mugurevič 1970, p. 21–36; Asaris 1977, p. 200–201). Curonian sites from the eighth through the twelfth century are found in the districts of Pilsotas, Mēguva, Keklis, Duvzarē, Piemarē, Banduva, Vindava, Vredecuronia, in the area between Skrunda and Semigallia and on the Curonian spit (Zulkus 1995, p. 3, fig. 1).

The Curonians are one of the best-known Baltic tribes. They entered the written sources at an early date and were known as warlike and wealthy people. However, while they are always mentioned in connection with armed conflict and piracy in the Baltic Sea, they also appear in accounts of the Christian missionary efforts on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. Vita S. Ans-kari mentions this restless tribe already about 873. This source describes five Curonian territories and two of their “towns”, Apuole and Seeburg. Henry of Livonia describes the Swedish attack of 853 and the siege of Apoule, an event well known in historiography. He also
mentions that the Curonians had previously paid tribute to the Danes. The Curonians apparently had close contacts with Scandinavia.

**Function**

During the Viking Period the dress of the Baltic tribes, especially the Curonians, abounded in ornaments. Besides their decorative function, Curonian women used bronze jewellery all over their outfits to button, attach and fasten their clothing. Curonian jewelry, including bead sets and jewellery erroneously attributed to headbands, has been extensively published (LAA 1987; Tautavičius 1996; Bliujienė 1999). However, the function of some ornaments still needs clarification. For one thing, the assumed remains of headbands appear to belong to quite a different category of ornaments.

Curonian women wore two types of bead sets. The first type was made up of several rows of multicolour glass and opaque beads, cast bronze and bronze spiral spirals (fig. 1). Such ornaments are known in the Lithuanian literature as necklaces. Curonian graves also yield another type of bead sets, very similar to necklaces, but with bronze spacer plates (fig. 2–4). These bead sets with spacer plates are only found in the graves of Curonian women. They were among the most impressive Curonian pectoral jewellery. Women of other Baltic tribes wore only necklaces, i.e. sets without spacers. This paper focuses on the bead sets with bronze spacer plates.

An unresolved problem in Lithuanian archaeological literature is the attribution of some bead sets with spacer plates to headbands, while others are considered to have been pectoral jewellery. They all have the same kind of spacer plates (fig. 2–5).

For centuries, both married women and young girls of the Baltic tribes covered their hair. In the Roman Iron Age, caps decorated
with tiny bronze work were common (Kackute 1995). Fragments of such caps decorated with bronze acorns and loop-shaped pendants with spiral terminals are found in the areas inhabited by the Curonians from the sixth century (Kurmaičiai, Kretinga region, graves 5, 8, 22; Palanga, Palanga town; Rūdičiai I, Kretinga region). In the early fifth century, some of the Baltic tribes adopted metal headbands (Vaškevičiūtė 1992, p. 129). These were especially popular with the women of Samogitia, Semigallia and upland Lithuania bordering on Samogitia (Tautavičius 1996, p. 165–171; Kazakevičius 1993, p. 84–87). In the Viking Period, headbands were particularly common in Letgallia (Radiš 1999, fig. 40–42), Semigallia and Samogitia (Vaškevičiūtė 1992; LPA 1974 tab. 59:1–4). However, there is no indication that Curonian women wore metal headbands during the Viking Period.

This is not to say that Curonian women did not cover their hair. They did wear caps (Genčai I, Kretinga region, graves 11, 21, 36, 46, 60, 67, 76, 93, 230; Gintaliskė, Plungė region, grave 7; Kiauleikių, Kretinga region, grave 1; Palanga, grave 11, 104), kerchiefs (Tautavičius 1970, p. 112) and other textile head-dresses. Neither head-dress nor other clothing can at present be reconstructed from the small fragments known from Curonian graves. It is probable that the head-dress of Curonian women was similar to that worn by other European women of the period (Hook & Macgregor 1997, p. 50–51, fig. 67). Lithuanian archeological literature is dominated by the view that Curonian head-dress was closely similar to the Lithuanian wimple of later centuries (Lith. nuometas), which was especially typical of the eastern part of Lithuania and is known from ethnographic sources (Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė 1959, 1964, 1970). However, nuometas are mentioned in ethnographic sources only from
the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries onward (LEB 1964, p. 363–365; Bernotiene 1974, p. VII). There is no earlier evidence of such folded linen head-dress either from written, iconographic or archaeological sources. In the eighth through the twelfth centuries, Curonian, Scalvian and Lamatian women dressed differently from those of other Baltic tribes. They used a variety of pins to fasten caps or other head-dress, including crossbow fibulae (fig. 6–7). The female attire of other Baltic tribes does not seem to have included pins in such a function.

In the areas inhabited by the Curonians, bead sets with bronze spacer plates are found in cremation graves from the tenth through the twelfth century. Only very few of the presumed headbands have been found in inhumation graves. In these cases they were found on the chest (Gintališkes, Plungė region, grave 5) or on the back of the deceased (Siraičiai, Telšiai region, grave 18). Even with inhumation graves it is difficult to establish exactly how the presumed headbands were located on the bodies, as in the coastal cemeteries bones and other organic materials have perished. Most of the bead sets are found in a disintegrated state. Therefore the position in the grave provides few clues as to the original placement of the ornaments.

In addition to one of these controversial bead sets, grave 18 in the Siraičiai cemetery yielded a cap decorated with bronze spirals and two pins that were most probably cap fasteners. It appears unlikely that the deceased would have been wearing both a cap and a headband. Most of the ensembles called headbands (Bandiūžiai, Klaipėda region, grave 43A) or their constitu-
ent spacer plates have been found in cremations, in small piles together with the other grave goods. Find contexts like these cannot support a functional interpretation either as headband or pectoral jewellery.

Most Lithuanian examples of the controversial bead sets that have appeared after World War II are stray finds. They have been attributed to headbands even though their find contexts are obscure. The problem of identification and distinction between headbands and pectoral jewellery is underlined by the fact that a bronze spacer plate from grave 213 in Ramuciai, Klaipėda region, has been interpreted as part of horse trappings by the German excavator Joachim Hoffman (1941, p. 38, Abb. 7). This suggests that there is actually not sufficient data to support the assumption that Curonian women wore headbands. Instead, on the basis of parallels from Gotland, all bead sets with spacer plates should be considered as pectoral jewellery.

**Distribution and chronology**

The territory inhabited by the Curonians has yielded only few intact examples of these bead sets. They are from Bandužiai grave 43A, Gintališkės grave 5, Siraiciai grave 18 and one set from an unknown location (fig. 2–3). Of other sets, only fragments have survived: one or two spacer plates, glass beads or bronze spirals. This is the case with Bandužiai grave 54; Girkaliai (Klaipėda region) grave 23 and a stray find (inventory no. 4412); Kaulečiai (Kretingen region) grave 10 (LNM AR 4:391); Laiviai (Kretingen region) graves 43 & 198; Lazdininiai (Kretingen region) graves 61, 73, 81, 126, 179; Palanga graves 67, 198, 271, stray finds LNM AR 396: 2762, 2764, 2839; Prysmanciai I (KrM, stray find without inventory no.); Ramučiai grave 213; Lake Vilkužia, Talsai region, Latvia (LVM PV 12380, 12 381). Also, a bronze spacer plate from the Rūdaičiai I cemetery is in the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm (SHM). Bead sets with bronze spacer plates have been found in graves with elaborate burial goods. It should be repeated that bead sets with bronze spacer plates are known only from the territory once inhabited by the Curonians.
As already mentioned, in the Viking Period Curonian women also wore bead necklaces without spacer plates. Impressive sets without spacer plates are known from the cemeteries of Palanga, Genčiai I and Kiauleikiai. The necklace from Kiauleikiai grave 1 had 289 blue, yellow, and gold foliate beads arranged in three rows. It should be noted that of all known Curonian sets very few contain amber beads. On the other hand, sets of glass, amber or bronze beads were generally rare among other the Baltic tribes of the Viking Period. Outside the Curonian territory, most beads have been found in the cemeteries of the Scalvians and Lamattians in the Neinunas river delta, and a few in central Samogitia (Kuncienė 1981, p. 84). The bead necklaces of these tribes did not include bronze spacer plates. Instead, neck rings were common with all the Baltic tribes.

Curonian women wore bead sets from the end of the ninth century, but most finds are from the tenth through the eleventh centuries (LAB 1963, p. 454–455; Vaitkunskienė 1979, p. 56–69). It is probable that bead sets with bronze spacer plates were worn into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as they have been found combined with penannular brooches with star-shaped terminals and bracelets with zoomorphic terminals (Vaitkunskienė 1978, 54–55, map 43:4, p. 97–101, map 58).

**Bead set design**

Curonian bead sets contain from two to ten ornamented bronze spacer plates (fig. 5). Most often a set has spacer plates of only two different designs, but some have six or seven. The spacer plates are of two types: T-shaped (fig. 5: 3, 5, 11) and rectangular (fig. 1–2, 6–10, 12). The spacer plates of both types are most often 5–7 cm long and 0,5–0,8 cm wide. Some of them are only 3,2–3,5 cm long, and a few rectangular ones are 1,8 cm wide. The legs of the T-shaped spacer plates have 4–12 tiny holes for bead strings. Rectangular spacer plates have string holes along one of the edges. Many spacer plates of both types have ornate profile fringes (fig. 5:1, 5, 10–11). The spacer plates are decorated in geometric patterns: horizontal groups of notches, double X, small circles, vertical lines of diamonds, triangles, «eyes» (fig. 4–5). Some of them are plated with white metal. Chemical analyses performed by Bagdzevičienė and Ragauskiienė of LDM RC have revealed that spacer plates from Lazdininkai grave 179 (excavated in 1976) and Pryšmančiai I (KrM without inventory no.) are both plated with tin with a negligible lead content.

The sets under discussion were strung on bronze wire (Bandužiai grave 43A, Gintališkė grave 5, Siračiai grave 18), leather thong (stray find Plungė region, fig. 2), wool yarn (Lazdininkai grave 81; Kuncienė 1981, p. 78) or strings of unidentified fiber (Lazdininkai grave 126). Most beads are small, only 4–6 mm in diameter. The number of beads varies: some pieces have tens of beads, others up to 350 or even 500. Some of the sets have beautiful blue or green notched glass beads. These are typical of the Baltic tribes in the Viking Period and especially numerous in the Curonian, Scalvian and Lamatian territories. The bead set from Bandužiai grave 43A originally consisted of twelve rows of yellowish opaque beads. 331 beads survive (fig. 3). The Siračiai set had five rows of tiny white and black beads. The one from Gintališkės grave 5 had five rows of multicolour beads separated by two bronze spacer plates, and the necklace ended in bronze spirals. The set from Palanga grave 198 consists of two bronze spacer plates and 39 glass and bronze beads. Of these, one is a rare find for the Baltic area, a blue bead decorated with white and red flowers (fig. 4).

Sets with bronze spacer plates sometimes feature bronze spirals. In most instances it is impossible to tell how these sets ended and how they were fastened. Some sets end in leather straps that were probably tied together at the nape of the neck (Bandužiai grave 43A, fig. 3). The set from Siračiai grave 18 ends in bronze wire loops. Two small (6–7 cm long, fig. 4) pins with spiral heads were found in Palanga cremation 198 — they may have been fasteners for the bead set. Such pins are not characteristic of the Curonians.

**Gotlandic spacer plates**

Gotlandic and Curonian bead sets are compo-
Curonian bead ... 241

References
Asaris, J. 1977. O severnix teritorijax raselenija kur- 
šej v XI – XIII v. Vakarų baltai: etnogenėze ir etni-
čė istorija. Vilnius.
Bernoitiene, S. 1974. Lietuviu lietuvių materydrybačiai
XVIII a. pab. – XX a. Vilnius.
Bliujienė, A. 1999. Vikingų epochos kuriųšų papuošaly-
ornamentika. Vilnius.
On the significant of Germanic art. Acta Archaeolo-
logia Lundensia, series in octavo 27. Lund.
Archaeological collections in the Amoskan Museum
from Alfred the Great to Richard III, Oxford.
Hoffmann, J. 1941. Die spätbeideutsche Kultur des
Memellandes (10.-12. Jahrh. N. d. Zw.). Königs-
berg.
Kačkute, R. 1995. Lietu vos moterų galvos dangos pa-
puošalai I – IV amžiais. Baltų Archeologija 1995:
3(6)–4(7).
Kazakevičius, V. 1993. Plinkaigālio kapinyns. Lietu-
vos archeologija 10. Vilnius.
Kuncienė, O. 1981. IX – XIII a. stiklo karolių
LAA 1978. Lietuvos TSR archeologijos atlasas IV. Vil-
niūs.
LAB 1961. Kulikauskas, P.; Kulikauskienė, R. & Tau-
tavičius, A. Lietu vos archeologijos bruožai. Vilnius.
Mugurevič, E. 1970. Nektorijse voprosy etnicheskoj istorii
Kurzeme v XI – XIV vekax. Vzaimoviazi baltoj I pri-
baltiiskix finov. Riga.
Funde. Stockholm.
Petrenko, V. & Urtans, J. 1995. The Archaeological
Radinž, A. 1999. Gadsmita senkapi latgalo apdūsnojotaj
teritorija un austrumzemes etniskiejas sociālas un po-
litiskas vēstures jutājumi. Riga.
XII a. moterų kepuraitei. Muziejiai ir pamink-
šlai.Vilnius.
– 1996. Vidurinysje geležies amžius Lietuvoje (V – IX
a.). Vilnius.
Thunmark-Nylén, L. 1995–. Die Wikingerzeit
Gotlands. KVHAA. Stockholm.
Vaitkuskenienė, L. 1978. Pasaginės segės kampuotais
galais. Lietu vos TSR archeologijos atlasas. IV. Vil-
niūs.
archeologijos atlasas. IV. Vilnius.
– 1979. Gintališkės kapinynas. Lietu vos archeologija
1.
Lietu vos archeologija 8. Vilnius.
Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė, R. 1959 Senovės lietuvių

Transcribed by Irena Jomantiene and revised by
Martin Rundkvist.
Sammanfattning

Kurerna är en av de historiskt mest välvaliderade baltiska stammarna under den yngre järnåldern och äldre medeltiden, känd för sin krigiskhet och sina rikedomar. De anses från 500-talet och framåt ha bebott kustområdena i nuvarande västra Lettland och nordvästra Litauen, ett område som än idag kallas Kurland (lett. Kurzeme).


Med hänvisning till liknande fynd från Gotland och tidens tydligen tät kontakter mellan ön och Kurland föreslår Bliujienė till sist att pärluppstillningen med spridare kan ha anammats därför.

Martin Rundkvist