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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 *nuometas*, 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.

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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 & Urtāns, 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 Pilsetas, Mėguva, Keklis, Duvzarė, Piemarė, Banduva, Vindava, Vredecuronia, in the area between Skruņda and Semigallia and on the Curonian spit (Žulkus 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

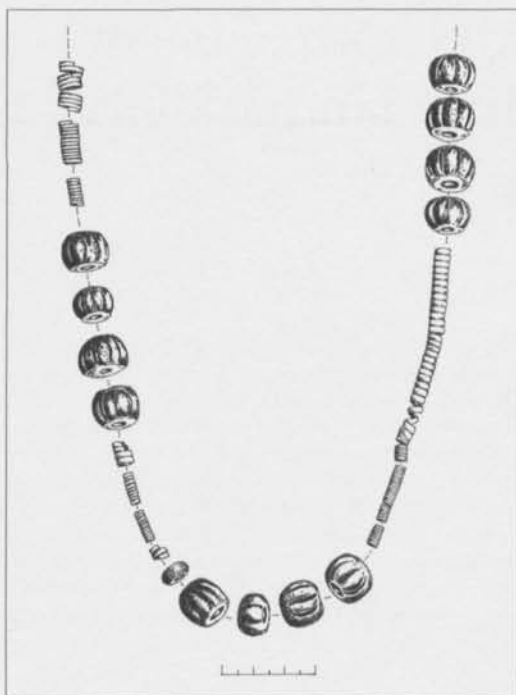


Fig. 1. Necklace from the Palanga grave 57 (drawings by Audronė Ruzienė, LNM AR). – Halsband från Palanga grav 57.

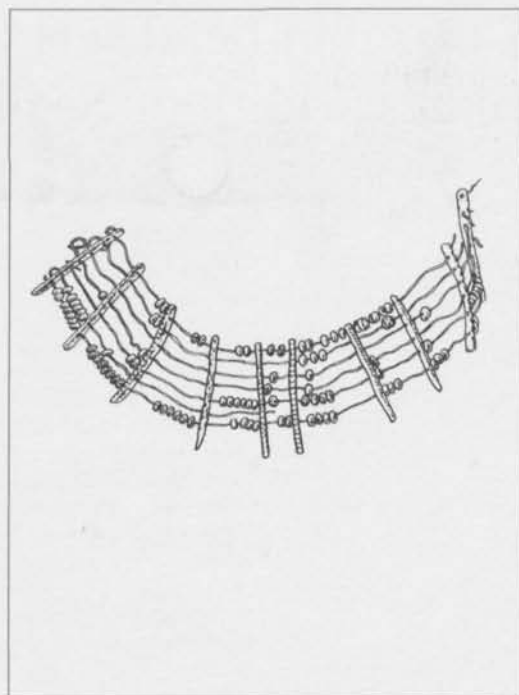


Fig. 2. Bead set from the Plungė region, unknown find circumstances (after LAB. 1961, p. 326). – Pärl-upsättning från Plungė-området, okänd fyndort.

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

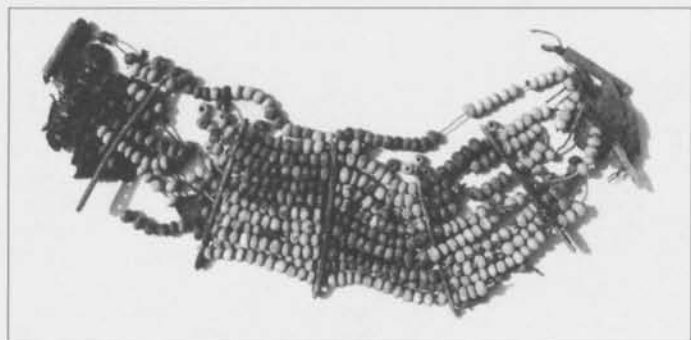


Fig. 3. Bead set from Bandužiai cremation 43A, Klaipėda region (photo by Mindaugas Brazauskas). – Pärلۇppsättning från Bandužiai brandgrav 43A, Klaipėda-området.



Fig. 4. Bead set and dress pins from Palanga town cremation 198 (reconstruction, drawings by Audrone Ruziene, LNM AR). – Pärلۇppsättning och dräknålar från Palanga stad brandgrav 198 (rekonstruktion).

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; Rūdaičiai 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 Letigallia (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 (Genčiai I, Kretinga region, graves 11, 21, 36, 46, 60, 67, 76, 93, 230; Gintališkė, Plungė region, grave 7; Kiauleikiai, 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 archaeological 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

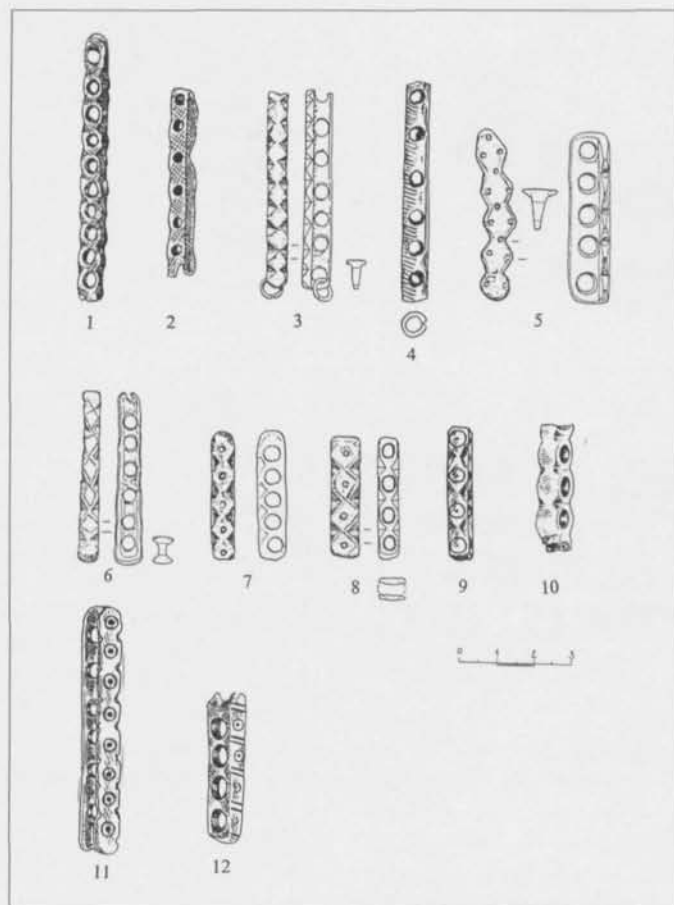


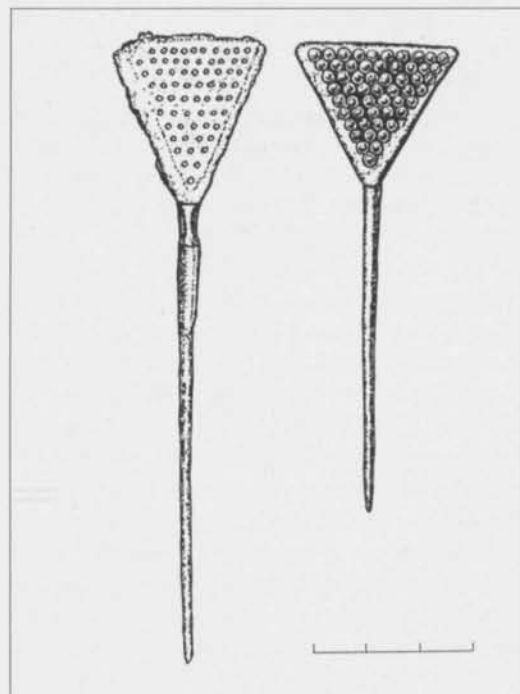
Fig. 5. Bronze spacer plates of Curonians bead sets. 1–2: Laivai cremation 198. 3: Prysmančiai I, KrM without inventory no. 4: Palanga LNM AR 396:2764. 5: Lazdininkai 179 (excavation of 1976). 6: Prysmančiai I, KrM without inventory no. 7: Palanga LNM AR 396:2762. 8: Prysmančiai I, KrM without inventory no. 9: Palanga town, LNM AR 396:2839. 10: Palanga town 271. 11–12: Palanga town 67. All cemeteries located in Kretinga region. (1–2, 4, 9–12 drawings by Audrone Ruziene, LNM AR. 3, 5–8 drawings by Virgilijus Truklickas). – Pärilspridare från kuriska pärluppsättningar.

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 archeological 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 (Bandužiai, 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 Ramučiai, 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

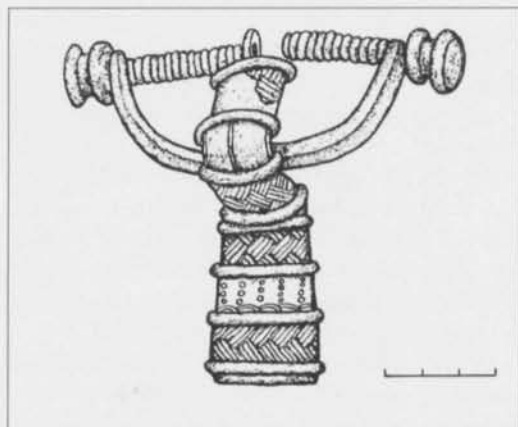


Fig. 7. Crossbow fibula from Gencai I 221 (drawing by Virgilijus Truklickas). – Armorstfibula.

Fig. 6. Pins with triangular head for the fixing of head-dresses. 1: Palanga 357. 2: Palanga 151. (Drawings by Virgilijus Truklickas) – Nālar att fāsta huvudduken med.

yielded only few intact examples of these bead sets. They are from Bandužiai grave 43A, Gintališkės grave 5, Siraičiai 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); Kiauleikiai (Kretinga region) grave 10 (LNM AR 4:391); Laiviai (Kretinga region) graves 43 & 198; Lazdininkai (Kretinga 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 Vilkuuiža, Talsai region, Latvia (LVM PV 12380, 12 386). 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 Nemunas river delta, and a few in central Samogitia (Kunciene 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; Vaitkunsienė 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 (Vaitkunsienė 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 Ragauskienė 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, Siraičiai 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 Siraičiai 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 Siraičiai 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-

sed of the same elements, except for the pendants that are characteristic for Gotland but absent from Curonia. Most Curonian and Gotlandic spacer plates are of a similar shape (WKG I:47:7, 173:1, 179:8, 192:15, 241:6; II:161:14). Spacer plates similar to the Curonian ones have been found in Gruobinia, Latvia (Nerman 1958, Tafel 2:14, 19:105). Some of the spacer plates from Gotland are decorated in Scandinavian style (WKG I:49:5, 166:13, 207:16; II:161:1-14). The decoration of the Curonian spacer plates is less sophisticated, usually a characteristic geometric pattern (fig. 5). Sets from Gotland terminate in two spacer plates. Some sets with spacer plates found in Zealand and Bornholm (Kyndby, Nørre Sandegård) terminate in openwork spacer plates (Gaimster 1998, fig. 165:2-3). The Gotlandic bead sets were made of opaque paste, tinted glass, limestone, rock crystal and amber beads; also often adorned with bracteates, fish-head pendants and other pendants.

Sets with spacer plates spread across the Curonian territory in the tenth and eleventh centuries. During this period the Curonians cultivated an intense relationship with Gotland, which allows us to suggest that the Curonian bead sets were inspired by those of Gotland. However, bead sets with spacer plates both in Gotland and in Curonia were an outcome of the rivalry between Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire in designing the symbols of power and prestige. Elaborate bead sets, appearing under Byzantine influence, were adapted to adorn the outfits of wealthy Germanic ladies on the Continent (Gaimster 1998, p. 242-243). Elaborate pectoral jewellery was worn by the Frankish queens, as depicted on the shroud of Queen Balthilde who died around 680 AD. However, the Curonian bead sets were assembled locally and the spacer plates were produced by local craftsmen.

Translated by Irena Jomantiene and revised by Martin Rundkvist.

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Abbreviations

- KrM - Kretinga Museum
 LDM RC - Lithuanian Art Museum, Pranas Gudynas Restoration Centre
 LNM AR - National Museum of Lithuania, Department of Archaeology
 LVM - State Historical Museum of Latvia
 SHM - Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm
 ŽAM - Žemaičiai Museum, »Alka«
 WKG - *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands* (Thunmark-Nylén 1995-)

Sammanfattning

Kurerna är en av de historiskt mest väldokumenterade 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).

Mellan slutet av 900-talet och början av 1200-talet bar kuriska kvinnor pärluppsättningar med pärlspridare av brons. Sådana smyckeuppsättningar påträffas bara i de trakter som anses ha tillhört kurerna. Inom den litauiska arkeologin har man tidigare tolkat pärluppsättningar utan spridare som bröstsmucken och sådana med spridare som pannband. Pannband var vanliga i andra delar av Baltikum. Bliujiene

motsätter sig denna tolkning eftersom den saknar positivt stöd i fynden. Man har påträffat en grav med rester av både en ornerad mössa och en pärluppsättning med spridare, och det förefaller otympligt att bära båda två på huvudet samtidigt. I stället menar Bliujiene att de kuriska kvinnorna bar just en sådan mössa, eller ännu oftare, ett dok av linne som är belagt från senare århundraden. Båda fästes med nålar i håret. Alla pärluppsättningar, med eller utan spridare, bars på bröstet.

Med hänvisning till liknande fynd från Gotland och tidens tydligen täta kontakter mellan ön och Kurland föreslår Bliujiene till sist att pärluppsättningen med spridare kan ha anammats därifrån.

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