

A unique pectoral ornament from Bandužiai, Lithuania

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The Iron Age cemetery of Bandužiai (Klaipėda district) was systematically excavated during 1985-89, and a site monograph is in preparation (Stankus n.d.; in press). Most of the graves dated from the 1st to 13th centuries; a few as late as the 14th century. Among the recovered burial goods, one object stood out — a pectoral ornament unique in its complex workmanship, beauty and size. It was found in the rich burial of a female (Burial 74), excavated in the eastern part of the cemetery, among graves dating to the 3rd-4th centuries. This report describes the context of Burial 74 and the composition of the impressive ornament.¹

Context of Burial

The outline of the grave pit of Burial 74 (Fig. 1) became clear at a depth of 35cm (no evidence of a coffin was found). The pit was rectangular, with rounded corners, and oriented to the north-west. Its length was 190cm; width about 70-85cm. At a depth of 60cm lay the remains of a female skeleton, aligned to a north-west direction (312°). Not all of the bones were preserved. A single vertebra and rib fragments were found in the middle of the pit. Fragments of the forearm, pelvic bones, femur and shin-bone of the left leg, and femur of the right leg were also recovered. It is clear, however, that the woman was buried supine, with her legs outstretched. The arms appear to have been folded and hands placed on the chest.

The burial goods consisted of various metal ornaments. Two bronze crossbow brooches, each with a bent foot, were found 10cm below the crushed skull. They were placed diagonally on the chest. Below the brooches was a magnificent large pectoral ornament, which, when worn, would have extended well below the waist. Its total length, including the terminals is about 1.25m, and its mass, 1.12kg. We observed that the ornament had been placed upon, or over, the folded arms (Fig. 2). A bronze bracelet decorated her right arm, as well as three rings on the fingers: two bronze spiral rings and one silver ring. The left arm was similarly adorned with a bronze bracelet (broken into three pieces), and four bronze finger rings, including one with a woven design.

¹ The author is thankful to J. Petrauskienė, conservator at the P. Gudynas Restoration Center, Lithuanian National Art Museum, for microchemical analysis; and to A. Bliujienė for restoration.

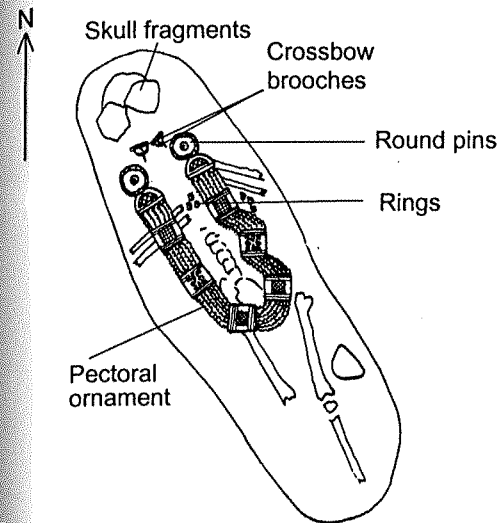


Fig. 1. Plan of Burial 74, showing skeletal orientation and grave goods.

1 pav. Moters kapo Nr. 74 planas.

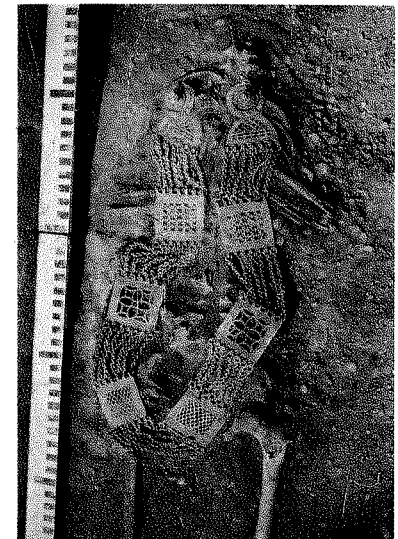


Fig. 2. Pectoral ornament *in situ*, Burial 74.

2 pav. Krūtinės papuošalas *in situ* iš moters k. Nr.74.

Burial Goods

The pectoral ornament is a wonderfully complex arrangement of openwork spacer plates, interconnected by sets of small bronze chains (Fig. 3). The terminals consist of two large round tin-plated pins (Figs. 4: 1, 2) which are nearly identical (diameters = 5.4cm). Each pin features a central raised tutulus, which, in turn, has a decorative central element of blue glass. The outer periphery of each pin is embellished by small rings. The tin-plated surfaces are further decorated by concentric ridges, and two or three small rings encircle the tutulus.

The pectoral ornament includes four opposing pairs of spacer plates, each pair featuring a different, and complex, openwork design. The spacer plates are distributed along the pectoral in mirror-image bilateral symmetry. I shall therefore describe the plates along one half of the pectoral.

The first openwork plate (or opposing pair of plates) has a roughly triangular or parabolic shape, and so differs from the quadrangular form of the other plates. The upper portion of its openwork is a lattice of diamond or lozenge shapes, while the lower portion features open rectangles. Running along the base (length = 7.8cm) is a row of seven ringlet fixtures, from which are suspended seven sets of small chains. Similar arrangements of chains interconnect all of the plates; their length ranges from 6 to 8cm.

The lattice designs of the second and third spacer plates are more sophisticated, as their images are clever examples of perceptual ambiguity. That

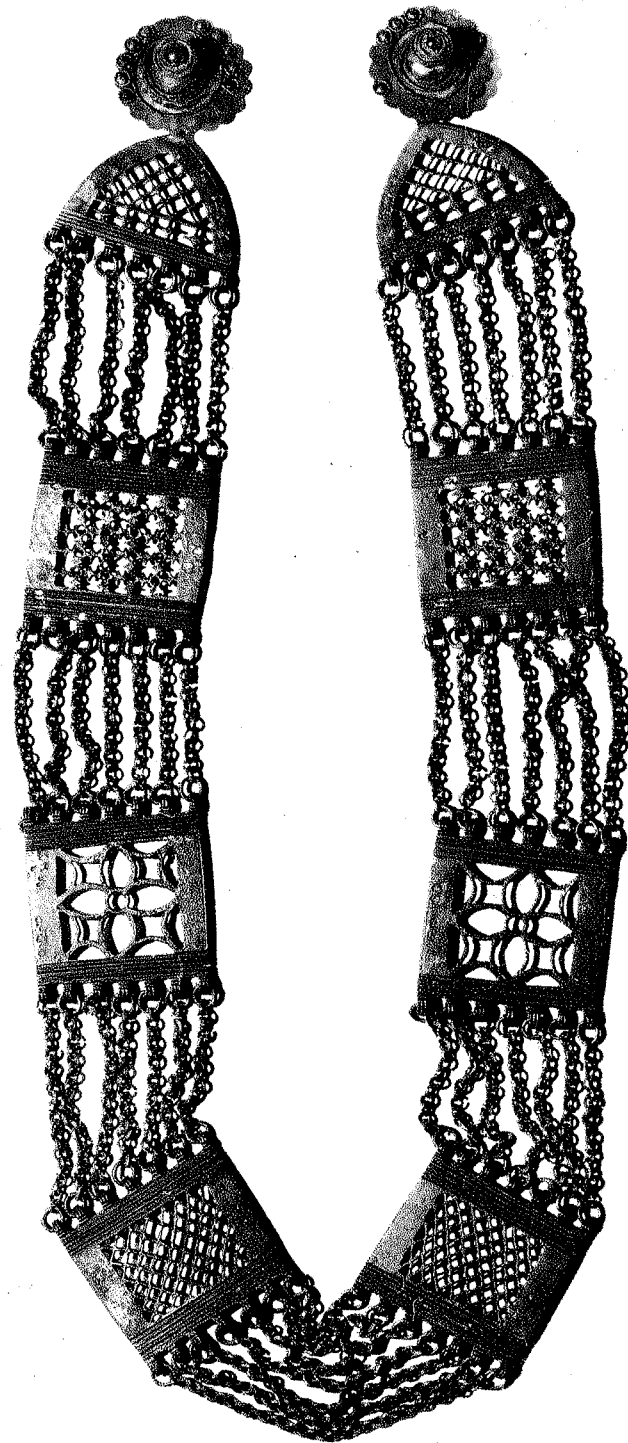


Fig. 3. Pectoral ornament from Burial 74.
3 pav. Krūtinės papuošalas iš moters k. Nr. 74

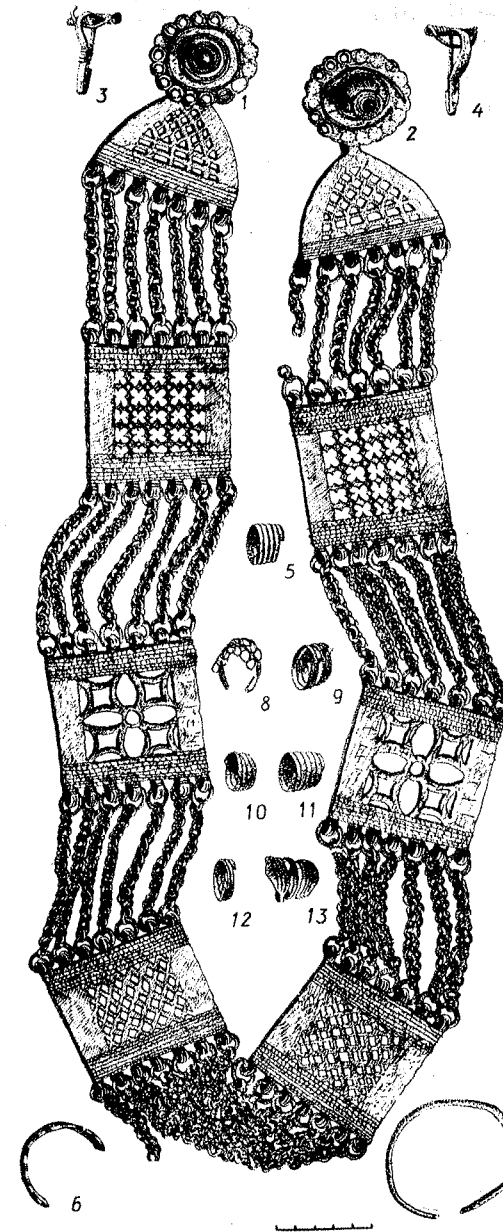


Fig. 4. Grave goods from Burial 74: 1, 2 - round pins; 3, 4 - crossbow brooches with a bent foot; 5, 9, 10, 11, 12 - bronze spiral rings; 8 - bronze ring with a frontal weave design; 13 - silver spiral ring with a wide front section; 6, 7 - bronze bracelets.

4 pav. Moters kapo Nr. 74 įkapių kompleksas: 1, 2 - smeigtukai apskritomis galvutėmis; 3, 4 - lankinės segės lenktomis kojulėmis; 5, 9, 10, 11, 12 - žiedai įvijiniai bronziniai; 8 - pinta priekine dalimi bronzinis žiedas; 13 - paplatintą priekine dalimi sidabrinis žiedas; 6, 7 - apyrankės bronzinės.

is, the design of the second plate can be read as a grid of 25 x-shaped open elements, or alternatively, it can be viewed as a configuration of 16 maltese cross-like solid elements, each with a central perforation. Similarly, the design of the third spacer plate also features a visual pun. It can be interpreted as a single open quatrefoil, or, alternatively, as an arrangement of four squares, each with concave sides. Designs that create perceptual dilemmas are a highly sophisticated form of aesthetic expression, as they force the brain to categorize complex visual data into an organized set of alternatives (Layton 1991: 163-73).²

The openwork design of the fourth pair of spacer plates returns to a motif of open lozenges, similar to that of the first plate, and establishes an aesthetic sense of closure.

Both brooches are of crossbow type, with a bent foot. One brooch (Fig. 4: 3) has a bow with a semicircular cross-section. Its foot is bent, resembling a hook; the metal rod does not terminate here, however, but continues upward and is wound four times around the bow. The length of its axis is 2.9cm; the length of the pin is 4.7cm. The cross-section of the bow of the other brooch is lozenge-shaped (Fig. 4: 4). The edges of its foot flare out and resemble the head of an animal. The remaining part of the foot is bent to form a hook. The length of the axis is 2.9cm, and the length of the pin is 5cm.

The bracelet (Fig. 4: 7) found on the right hand has a round cross-section, with cross-diameters of 6.3 x 7.2cm. One end is decorated with six little grooves. The bracelet on the left hand (Fig. 4: 6) is semicircular in cross-section, and about 5.1cm in diameter (the terminals are missing). Its surface is ornamented by a series of grooves, arranged in groups of five.

A total of seven rings were found; six of bronze and one of silver. The latter (Fig. 4: 13) is fashioned from spirals, with a wide front section or face. Five of the six bronze rings (Fig. 4: 5, 9, 10, 11, 12) are also of spiral composition, consisting of three to six spirals. Their diameters range from 2.2 to 2.3cm. The remaining bronze ring (Fig. 4: 8) has a frontal "woven" design that consists of two parallel rows of little rings. The terminals of the ring feature a hook and a loop. The round wire from which the ring is made is 0.1cm in thickness; the diameter of the ring itself is 2.5cm.

The dating of the burial goods is internally consistent. Crossbow brooches with a bent foot were common in Lithuania during the 3rd century A.D., and pins with round heads are generally dated to the 3rd to 4th centuries. Michelbertas (1986:133) believes that a production center for the pins was located near the Lithuanian coast. Bracelets with round cross-sections and transverse grooves near their terminals were worn during the 2nd to 3rd centuries; banded bracelets with transverse grooves are associated with the 2nd to 5th centuries (Michelbertas 1986: 135-154). Individual decorative motifs that make up the pectoral ornament date to the 3rd-4th centuries. In sum, there is substantial evidence that the artefacts from Burial 74 were manufactured sometime during the 3rd-4th centuries.

² I would like to thank editor R. Sidrys for his interesting observations on the openwork design.

Conclusions

Baltic jewellers of the Old Iron Age (A.D. 1-400) manufactured metal ornaments using a variety of techniques, including bending, twisting, forging, casting, and metal plating. The round pin terminals and the spacer plates of the pectoral, for example, represent castings of bronze. Their surfaces were originally plated with a thin layer of tin, most of which has now flaked away. The brooches were forged from small rods of bronze. The spiral rings also were made from small pieces of bronze, and one ring was forged from silver.

The pectoral ornament is a complex and unique piece of jewellery. To my knowledge, it has no counterpart in the entire peri-Baltic area during the 3rd-4th centuries. It should be noted, however, that individual elements of the pectoral are similar to those that appear in less complex pectorals found in the Baltic culture-area (cf. Engel 1931, Fig. 5; Michelbertas 1986: 119-154). This leads me to conclude that the pectoral ornament from Burial 74 was made by a local Baltic craftsman. The rhythm of its ornamental design — highly patterned, with a subtle element of perceptual ambiguity — is clear evidence of the high aesthetic standards and originality of metal ornaments during the Baltic Old Iron Age.

References

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Unikalus krūtinės papuošalas iš Bandužių (Lietuva)

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Santrauka

Bandužių kapinyne (Klaipėdos m.) tyrimų metu buvo aptiktas moters kapas 74 su unikaliomis įkapėmis. Kapo duobė 70-85 x 190cm dydžio. Mirusiosios palaikai - griaučiai (sugniuždyta kaukolė, pavieniai stuburo slanksteliai, šonkauliai, dilbio kaulų fragmentai, dubens kaulai, abu šlaunikauliai, kairysis blauzdikaulis) pasirodė 60cm gylyje. Pagal griaučių padėtį mirusioji palaidota 312° ŠV kryptimi. 60-65cm gylyje pasirodė įkapės: 2 bronzinės lankinės lenkta kojele segės, 2 bronziniai apskritomis galvutėmis smeigtukai, prie kurių pritvirtintas unikalus krūtinės papuošalas, 2 bronzinės apyrankės, 5 bronziniai įvijiniai, 1 bronzinis pinta priekine dalimi, 1 paplatinta priekine dalimi žiedai. Pagal įkapes kapas datuojamas III-IVa. po Kr.