

THE AMBER KNIEPĶENS
IN LATVIAN
ETHNOGRAPHIC MATERIAL**Baiba Vaska**

RIGA (LATVIA)

Before speaking about the *kniepķens*¹ itself, I should give a brief account of the situation regarding Latvian folk costume, of which the *kniepķens* forms a part. In essence, this is a peasants' costume, as in other parts of Europe. However, in Latvia there was something of a non-standard situation where the peasant estate was made up of one particular ethnic group – the Latvians, who were prevented from entering other social strata, such as craft workers, where the Germans were dominant. Thus, peasant dress was perceived not so much as an indicator of social identity as an indicator of ethnic identity. Thus, many archaic traditions were preserved, with striking differences between this costume and the urban fashion. In Rucava, where most of the *kniepķeni* derive from, the folk costume was worn even up to the 1920s and 30s.

The *kniepķens* represents a special way of fastening the shirt (Fig. 1). It was distributed within a comparatively small area in the very south-western corner of Kurzeme, mainly in the Parish of Rucava (Fig. 2). The name arose through a corruption of a Germanic word with a root meaning 'button.' M. Slava explains this in terms of Swedish language influence, a similar form of fastening the neck of the costume being found in the Swedish folk costume, called *halsknäp* [Slava M. 1966, p. 102]. However, a more likely explanation seems a derivation from the German word to button: *knöpfen*.

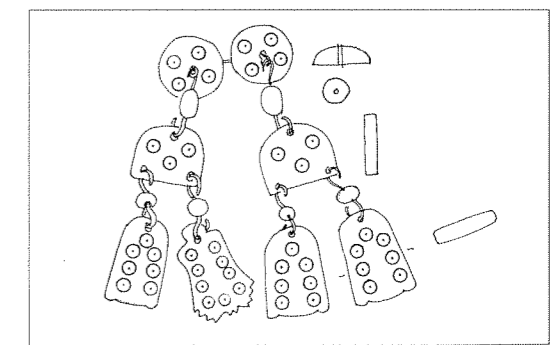


Fig. 1. *Kniepķens* with two pendants from the collections of the Latvian History Museum [CVVM 25944].

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¹ Plural *kniepķeni*

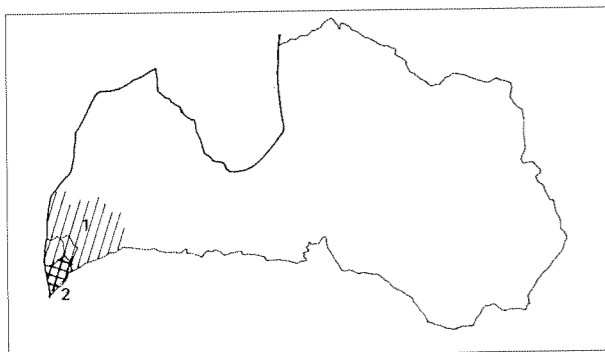


Fig. 2. Map of Latvia showing 1) the area of distribution of the *kniepkens*; 2) the Rucava area.

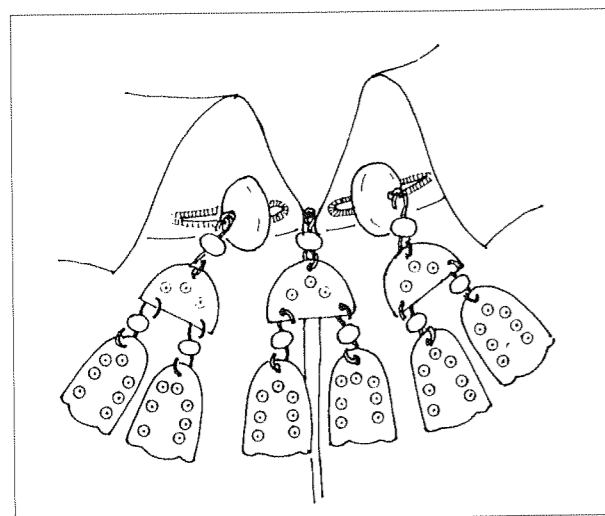


Fig. 3. The mode of wearing the *kniepkens*.

(mainly silver) and examples from amber. With amber *kniepkeni*, the decorative function prevails. They consist of two linked buttons, worn by fastening them in two specially made buttonholes in the shirt collar [Latviešu tautas tērpi 1997, Fig. 420], and attached pendants (Fig. 3). The two two-part pendants are attached at the top of the buttons and are threaded through the buttonhole, which – from the point of view of function – is an exceptionally inconvenient arrangement. *Kniepkeni* occur with just two pendants or with three. The third pendant is usually attached to the loops of the wire connecting the buttons. In several cases, the third pendant in the middle differs from the two at the sides, and is thought to be a later addition.

It is precisely the amber *kniepkeni* that are characterised by two-part pendants, the middle part

being analogous to a chain-holder, such as occur in Latvia up to the 15th century. Since no other, more appropriate name is known, this element of the *kniepkens* will be referred to as a chain-holder.

Kniepkeni were in use for a long time, often being repaired, with replacement of the broken elements by new ones, often stylistically different or poorly made. In one case, it seems that the whole *kniepkens* had been replaced with various elements from other *kniepkeni*. In certain cases the damaged amber parts of the *kniepkens* were replaced by metal elements, usually silver – a practice indicative either of the decline of the tradition, or else functional and semantic interchangeability (Fig. 4: 1).

The metal *kniepkeni* found in Talsi District usually differ from amber examples in that, although the functional part has remained the same, the decorative aspects have changed significantly. There is a view that these *kniepkeni* are more recent than the amber examples. However, there is one example in the collections of the Latvian History Museum of a *kniepkens* made of silver [CVVM 26518], completely analogous to amber *kniepkeni* (Fig. 4: 2).

So far, there has been no special analysis of *kniepkeni*, published illustrations usually being without comments. A few paragraphs are devoted to them only in a work by M. Slava [Slava M. 1966, pp. 102].

The structure of the *kniepkens*

The *kniepkens* is quite complicated in structure, consisting of three strata. The first is functional, consisting of two buttons with a slightly convex surface, connected by two S-shaped pieces of copper or brass wire. The two other strata are purely decorative. The second stratum consists of two or three dividers, usually in the form of a half-moon with a straight lower margin, and holes drilled in both lower corners. The third stratum consists of trapezoidal flat pendants with a rounded upper margin, or else rounded, droplet-shaped pendants, attached in pairs to the dividers.

A searching for possible genetic links of the amber *kniepkeni* with earlier material gives no results with regard to the full set of components, analogous pieces being absent in medieval and Iron Age archaeological material.

The situation is somewhat different, if we divide the *kniepkens* into components and search for analogies for each component separately. However, here we immediately come across a problem with regard to material: amber objects are almost entirely absent from medieval (13th–18th century) and Iron Age cemeteries, apart from a

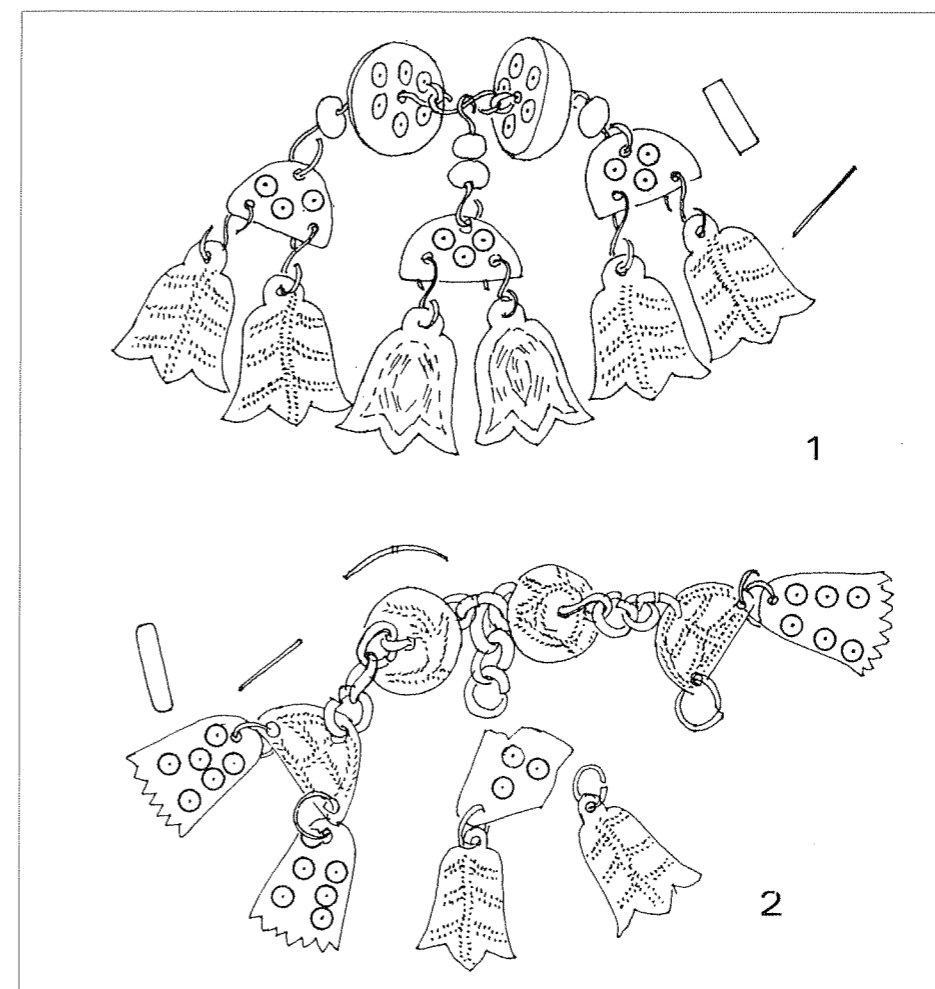


Fig. 4. Amber *kniepkeni* with metal elements:

1) with silver pendants, Rucava [CVVM 26519],

2) with silver buttons and chain-holders, Rucava [CVVM 26518]

small number of amber beads found mainly in the Couronian area. However, as mentioned above, amber can be substituted by other jewellery materials, such as silver and copper alloys, so analogies may also be sought among bronze artefacts.

The functional stratum

The main functional component of the *kniepkens*, the two connected buttons, have been retained up to the present day as the method of fastening men's cuffs. *Kniepkeni*, like cuff-links, can be divided into two types in terms of construction: those with a moveable link and those with an immobile link. It seems the first type is the earliest in the Latvian material. Amber *kniepkeni* belong to the second type.

Kniepkeni are not widespread in Latvia. Mostly, brooches were used for fastening the costume: penannular brooches in the Late Iron Age, used in parallel with ring brooches in the Middle Ages, the latter being dominant in ethnographic material, where they have attained exaggerated dimensions and very elaborate decoration. Before brooches, dress-pins were employed, and these remained in use in the Couronian areas until Christian traditions came to dominate.

The earliest bronze *kniepkens* comes from Ābeļu Boķi barrow cemetery in the Selonian area, dating from the Roman Iron Age [Vankina L., 1962, p. 13]. Most likely this is completely unconnected with the material treated in the present article.

Much closer is a *kniepkens* found at Renda (Fig. 5: 1) [archaeological survey material] that comes from a

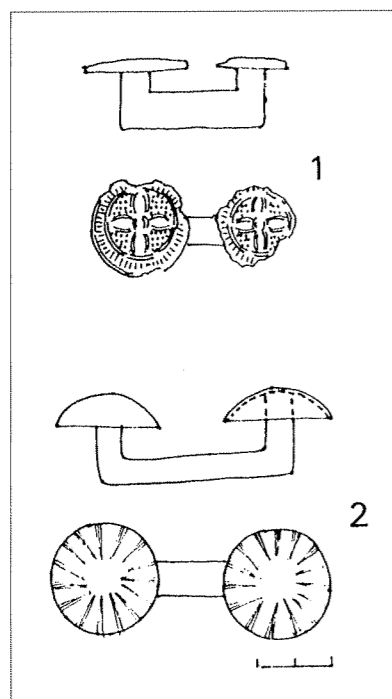


Fig. 5. Metal *kniepķeni*. 1) *kniepķens* from Renda [archaeological survey material], 2) *kniepķens* from the Parish of Sūnākste, County of Jēkabpils, Latvian History Museum [V 7486:3].

destroyed burial. The brooches that were found together with it serve to date this piece to the second half of the 17th or the 18th century. This date coincides with the time when master craftsmen invited from Holland were working in the Duchy of Courland, their activities being linked with the rise of Baroque art in Kurzeme [Grosmane E., 1981]. It should be noted that during this time the fashion of the Renaissance, when collarless costumes were worn, had been replaced by a new fashion having a collar, along with men's jackets buttoned at the front, as an important part of the costume.

Judging from the robustness of the Renda *kniepķens*, it was most likely used to fasten the outer clothing, rather than women's shirts. In addition to the Renda *kniepķens*, the collections of the Latvian History Museum contain still other *kniepķeni*, which unfortunately were all donated to the museum as single finds, so they do not contribute very much to the question at hand. A *kniepķens* from Jēkabpils (Fig. 5: 2) differs from the Renda *kniepķens*: it is even more robust and has hemispherical hollow buttons.

The functional-decorative stratum: the divider or chain-holder

The chain-holder is a very widespread form of artefact in the territory of Latvia right from the Roman Iron Age, and is among a group of artefacts whose origins may be sought in the Pre-Roman Iron Age, in the Eastern Halstatt area [Tallgren, 1931 z. 172].

It is never found as a separate artefact, but rather tends to be a connecting element, most commonly between the dress-pin and chains, but also between the tortoise brooch and the chain ornaments attached to them, in Liv material (11th–13th century). In the Liv areas it continued in use in a degenerate form up to the 15th century, when it superseded the typical horse-pendants and is attached to a ring brooch, datable to the late 14th or early 15th century, by means of a chain of metal bars (Fig. 6: 1).

The characteristic semicircular chain-holder of the Latgallians, Semigallians and Couronians (Fig. 6: 2) does not occur later than the 14th century. Thus, there is a gap of two or three centuries, during which the chain-holder with a rounded upper part (semicircular), as found on the *kniepķeni* too, does not occur.

In certain cases [CVVM 12271] the chain-holder became quite Baroque in form (Fig. 7: 1), such a development occurring in the first half of the 18th or even the late 17th century. Unfortunately, the frequent occurrence of anachronisms in the ethnographic material sheds doubt on such a dating.

The third, decorative stratum – the pendants

After the Stone Age, when a variety of amber and stone pendants were widespread in the Baltic, intensive use of such pendants recommenced in the Roman Iron Age. At this time, they appear as the terminal component in a set of artefacts consisting of a dress-pin with attached chain and pendant. Pendants also occur as components of more elaborate ornaments from this time, consisting of openwork plaquettes of various geometric forms. In Lithuanian material they occur as ornaments on women's headgear. Pendants attached to the ends of chains are considered a very characteristic feature of the Halstatt Culture of the Early Iron Age. Since the pendants attached to chains appear in this area in the Roman period, we should seek them in one of the Roman provinces where Halstatt traditions might be preserved. In this case a promising direction for study might be the so-called Amber Route that led from East

Prussia to the Adriatic Sea. This area had preserved old local traditions right up to the Roman Age [Монгайт А. 1974, стр. 198–205].

On the other hand, flat trapezoidal pendants appear in Latvia comparatively late: no earlier than the 7th century AD in eastern Latvia, where they are linked to the archaeological culture of the ancient Latgallians. Such pendants are found attached to the ends of chains or to the object itself, for example women's rings, duck figurines, brooches and various garments such as men's jackets and women's crowns [Zariņa A., 1970, Figs. 71, 81, 88].

These are also characteristic Halstatt Culture features. Evidently, they reached Latvia from the territory of Russia, where they are earlier, occurring in the Milograd and Zarubincets Cultures. In Latvia, this tradition continued for a very long time, and examples are found in Medieval cemeteries even in the 15th century, for example as part of a necklace from Augustiniški cemetery [Berga T., 1997, Fig. 2].

In 13th–15th century material various pendant forms occur in great numbers. In addition to the above-mentioned trapezoidal pendants, there are coin and rhombic pendants, as well as crosses and bronze tinklers [Berga T., 1997, p. 125]. In the 16th century these seem to disappear, leaving small bronze brooches and rings as almost the only grave-goods. This situation can be explained not only in terms of poverty among the peasants, but also through changes in burial practices. Possibly, at this time the Church with its traditions became dominant, so the picture of ornaments used at this time is incomplete.

Judging from the cordiform brooches found in Latvia, pendants were again in fashion already from the 17th century, since these brooches have special processes for attachment of pendants, though unfortunately the pendants themselves have not been preserved [Apala Z. 1974., p. 257].

Two woollen mantles from Kuldīga, so-called 'blue-black mantles' (*zilās mēlenes*), dating from the 18th century, are adorned with pendants whose form is very reminiscent of Latgallian flat trapezoidal pendants. Woollen mantles decorated in this manner remained in use into the 19th century. The 12th century tradition of decorating woollen mantles with bronze was characteristic of the Latgallians, while in the 18th century such decorated mantles are found in Kurzeme, in the Alsunga and Kuldīga areas [Latviešu tautas tērpi, 1997., p. 43, Figs. 136, 151, 152]. The idea that this was an unbroken tradition seems to be

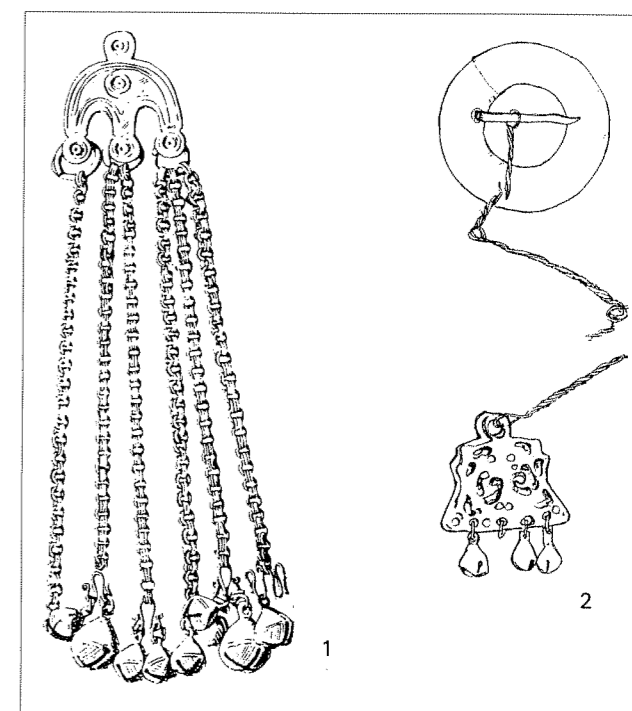


Fig. 6. Chain-holders. 1) Kalsnava 2) Mārtiņšala cemetery, burial 39. Excavations directed by A. Zariņa, 1966.

supported by the use of indigo blue to colour the woollen mantles. Trapezoidal pendants, which are not present on the Latgallian mantles, have slightly changed in form, with a serrated lower margin. It should be noted that five centuries separate these two traditions. The ornamentation has also changed. Unfortunately, we have little information about Couronian dress of the 12th–14th centuries, because during this time the Couronians cremated their dead.

This form of pendant also occurs on the *kniepķeni*, and in consequence a proportion of the *kniepķeni* may be dated to the 18th century, assuming that the date of the woollen mantles is correct.

The following pendant forms occur on amber *kniepķeni*:

1. Baroque (Fig. 8: 1, 2)
2. Tulip-shaped (Fig. 8: 3–9)
3. Trapezoidal (Fig. 8: 10–14)
4. Droplet-shaped (Fig. 8: 15–18)
5. certain indeterminate forms

Almost all of the pendant types include different variants. In the first place, there are different ways of attachment:

- 1) a specially made process (Fig. 8: 1, 3, 4, 9)

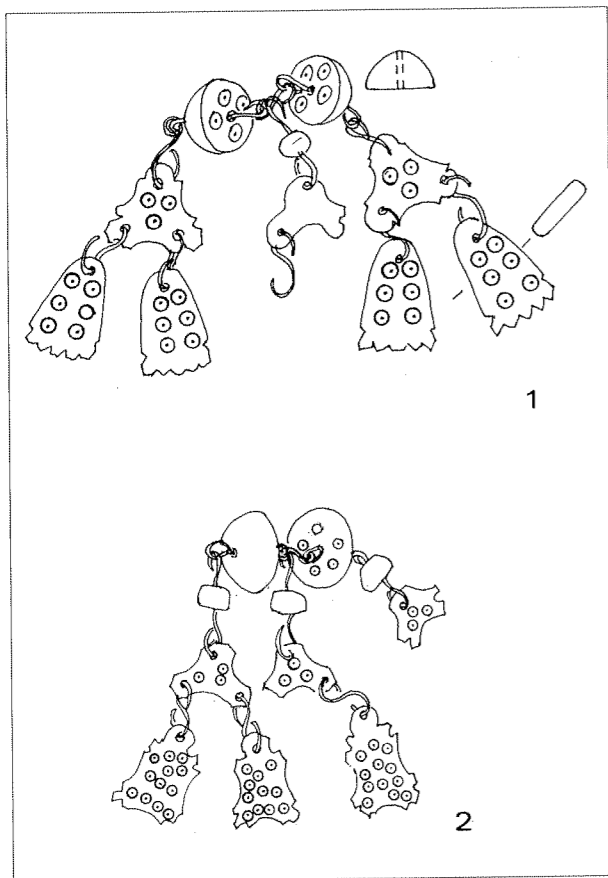


Fig. 7. Baroque *kniepkēni* 1) with Baroque chain-holders, Parish of Medze [CVVM 12271], 2) with Baroque pendants, Rucava [CVVM 12273].

2) a hole drilled in the pendant itself (Fig. 8: 2, 5-8, 10-15, 17)

Besides this, trapezoidal pendants also have different lower margins, and the flower of tulip-shaped pendants is variously proportioned.

The form of attachment

The form of the attachment of the pendant to the chain-holder observed on those *kniepkēni* where the pendant is attached directly to the chain-holder without the use of a chain, is generally uncharacteristic of Baltic groups, although in the territory of Latvia it does occur, particularly in Liv-populated areas, at least up to the 14th century. However, it is usually attached to the openwork chain-holder typical of the Livs. Both the form of the chain-holder and the form of attachment most closely corresponding to that of the *kniepkēns* chain-holders is also found in Finnic areas of Russia [Финно-угры и балты в эпоху средневековья, 1987, стр. 34], also among the Votes. People of this tribe, the Votes, were settled in 15th century Livonia near Bauska in Zemgale and retained their physical type and material culture for an extended period. In Latvia they were called *krieviņi*. There is no evidence that the *krieviņi* had amber jewellery, but very likely they could have brought with them and retained for a long time traditions of jewellery making. There is, however, no foundation for connecting the Votes with Lower Kurzeme.

The third form of attachment, where the pendant was attached directly to an object without a chain is quite commonly observed among the Latgallians, the Livs and the Finnic tribes of Russia. This occurs in Medieval material right up to the 15th century, when the fashion for pendants disappears altogether. In the 17th century it appears once more and is seen on ethnographic brooches elsewhere in Latvia right up to the 19th century. Such metal pendants were called 'leaves' and could be variously shaped and ornamented.

Ornamentation

The amber *kniepkēni* were usually ornamented. All parts of the *kniepkēns* are decorated, though there are exceptions in this regard. There is usually no decoration on droplet-shaped pendants, though in certain cases they were decorated with a band of oblique hatching or cross-hatching. Usually, such pendants have a terminal part in what might be called a lily form. In cases where metal (silver) parts are used, the ornamentation changes and engraving of what may be described as floral design replaces the dot-and-circle or sun ornamentation.

Conclusion

Thus, the following conclusions may be drawn:

This form of decoration of the dress is comparatively recent and in terms of function is connected with the appearance of linked buttons. It is not clear when such buttons came into use for fastening the collars of women's shirt collars, but this could not have happened earlier than the appearance of a collar with a lapel on the peasants' shirt. Before this, shirts were made with raised collars, while the oldest shirts are collarless.

The *kniepkēni* are difficult to date. Although Baroque forms of chain-holders occur, it should be noted that the Baroque in Kurzeme was highly regarded in church art and elements of it are found in ethnographic material, mainly on the wooden elements of buildings. Paradoxical as it may seem, similar forms to the mentioned *kniepkēns* chain-holder are found on distaffs and grave-markers, which are thought to be considerably later. In any case, the *kniepkēni* did not appear earlier than the second half of the 17th century and more likely can be connected with the 18th or even the early 19th century.

The functional part of the *kniepkēns* is genetically unrelated to the decorative part. While the buttons of the *kniepkēns* are undeniably a very late feature and are connected with urban fashion, the origin of the decorative elements can be traced, though with interruptions, back to the Roman Iron Age. This is the time of use of both the chain-holder and pendants. In European jewellery, pendants, mainly droplet-shaped, are a characteristic element from the Renaissance, and are in use up to the present day, while the robustness of the pendants on the amber *kniepkēni* suggests a link with much more archaic forms.

The *kniepkēni* show a symbiosis of urban fashion and local traditions, which are only partially separable by formal analysis. It cannot be claimed with absolute certainty that a tradition seemingly reminiscent of ornaments from the pre-German period is not a feature brought about by 19th century urban fashion, but neither can it be denied that stylistically the *kniepkēni* have more in common with archaic local jewellery.

Although the view has been expressed in the ethnographic literature that the amber *kniepkēni* were made by the peasants themselves [Slava M., 1966, p. 102], the technical level of production is too perfect. Of course, there are badly made pieces. Usually in such cases the style and arrangement is poor.

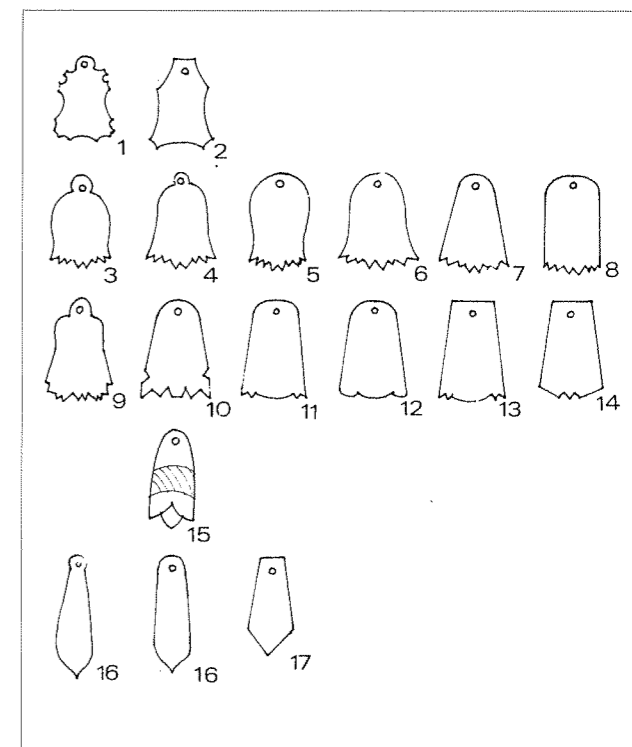


Fig. 8. Main types and variants of *kniepkēni*. 1-2 Baroque, 3-9 tulip-shaped, 10-14 trapezoidal, 15-18 droplet-shaped.

Ornamentation using the circle-and-dot or sun design is an old indigenous tradition. The possible semantic interpretation connected with solar symbolism corresponds to an interpretation of amber as a sun-stone. A very interesting feature is the combination of Baroque forms with this archaic ornament on two *kniepķeni* from the Parishes of Rucava and Medze (Fig. 7: 1, 2).

The *kniepķens* consists of three parts, each of which developed at a different time. A degree of continuity in traditions, reflected in the origin of particular parts of the *kniepķens*, appears in Latvian archaeological material. The basis for the archaic tradition seen in Latvian ethnographic costume is the dress of the indigenous groups, which even seemed archaic to a 13th century German chronicler. In the Middle Ages, restrictions based on social strata, and the hatred of the estates and all that was German on the part of the Latvian peasants, created conditions that permitted certain elements of this archaic set of components, recorded in the 13th century, to remain in use up to the early 19th century.

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CONTEMPORARY AMBER ART IN KALININGRAD

Zoia Kostiasbova

KALININGRAD AMBER MUSEUM (RUSSIA)

Starting from the beginning of the 1990s new conditions for the amber industry in the Kaliningrad area have been created. They were determined by the following factors. First of all, the monopoly of the only enterprise - Kaliningrad Amber Factory, which has had an exclusive right on extraction and processing of amber for more than half a century, was liquidated. According to the decree of the regional administration of 1992, it became possible for private companies and individual entrepreneurs to receive license on these kinds of activity. All of a sudden amber has ceased to be a "state stone" and turned out to be available for a broad army of professional artists and amateurs.

In the second place, the threat of competition with foreign manufacturers of adornments started to play a significant role. After the liberalization of foreign trade in Russia, a flow of imported bijoux came to the country, including amber goods from Poland and Lithuania. Thus, the local manufacturers were forced to begin fighting for the consumer.

Thirdly, tastes and preferences of a mass buyer have changed. Gone were the times when millions of adornments of one kind, produced by the local Amber Factory, could be sold without difficulties. More and more attention started to be paid to hand-made goods, one-off items or small-scale production goods.

Fourthly, a new type of customer has appeared - banks, major private companies, the Church and ordinary rich people. They could afford buying or ordering large and expensive items.

Fifthly, finally, the region's links with foreign countries sharply have expanded. Entrepreneurs and artists from Kaliningrad, those involved in the amber business, initiated trips to neighbor countries in order to participate in exhibitions, fairs and competitions. For instance, the number of Russian participants at the annual *Amberif* exhibitions in Gdansk is increasing now year by year. Some of the local manufacturers directly focus on the foreign market. It is true though, that the enclave situation of the region has a negative impact. Local artists feel strongly their isolation from the "mainland". Distances and border difficulties hinder and sometimes even make impossible their participation in an all-Russian art process.

All of the conditions that has just been mentioned not only contributed to modernization of amber industry and market but also had a huge impact on development of amber art in the Kaliningrad region.

Kaliningrad jewelry school

Since most of the older generation artists had come to former Eastern Prussia from Moscow, Leningrad and Krasnoye Selo, initially the local school of artistic processing of amber developed in the direction of traditional Russian jewelry. For a long time the artists saw amber as a component of a precious adornment, just a simple "substitute" to jasper, agate or malachite and paid major attention to metal framing. This was the way how beautiful complicated adornments were cre-