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## AMBER DECORATIONS FROM THE VALDAI LAKE REGION BURIAL GROUNDS

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In the III millennium B.C. amber decorations were widely spread in late Neolithic and Eneolithic sites of the forest zone of the Russia's European part. This was a result of exchange with the Baltic areas.

There are two large Neolithic and Eneolithic cemeteries in the basin of the Msta river and the Valdai lake. The Konchanskoe cemetery is situated on the northern bank of the Sheregodro lake near the Konchanskoe-Suvorovskoe village, 150 km from Novgorod. The other one – Repistche – is situated 50 km. to the East from Konchanskoe, 7 km. from the village Pereluchi.

Topography of both cemeteries is similar, both are situated at 3 – 13m. above water level of the nearest lake or river, 50 – 100 meters from the banks.

These burial grounds were excavated by the North-West expedition of the Russia Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology in 1974-88. The expedition led by the author found 267 graves in the Konchanskoe cemetery and 204 in the Repistche cemetery. Amber and slate decorations, flint and stone tools were found.

Normally, amber artefacts were found deep in a layer of ochre, sometimes they were over this layer or at the same level. In some cases the amber artefacts were structured into several layers one over another. Often the layers of amber decorations were separated by a thin layer of ochre or sand. The multi-layer structure of the amber decorations is the result of the decay processes that affected the body and the clothes of the dead.

The following types of amber decorations found at the cemeteries: buttons, rings and pendants.

Totally, over 12 000 of amber artefacts were found at the two cemeteries.

The pendants are of various shapes: rectangular, triangular oval, asymmetric (Fig.1, 2, 3).

Their length varies from 2 to 8cm., width – from 1 to 5 cm., thickness – from 0.3 to 0.8cm. The bases of pendants are straight, sloping, rounded, narrowed or carved. The upper end is usually straight and sometimes sloping or rounded. Some pendants have dents on the sides.

The section of the pendants, irrespective of their shape, is rectangular, lens-type, oval and sometimes triangle or segment-type. The thickness of sides of some pendants differs. Some have curved profiles. Most pendants have an hole in the narrow part and some have even two. It was drilled from both sides. Part of pendants were carved on their sides, base or the upper part. In some cases pendants are carved at the perimeter. Some solar-shaped pendants were found. The front side of some pendants bear an ornament made by dots and shallow pits, sometimes of antropomorphe type (Fig. 4). The hole of some pendants was broken. Sometimes a new hole was bored a little lower or to the side from the old one. Sometimes only the upper part of the pendant was suited for further use. So this remaining part of the pendant was bored again if the old hole could not be used. Broken buttons were also made into pendants.

Button was the most common type of decoration. This type is called "button" not because of its functionality but due to its shape. They were used as beads. Most of

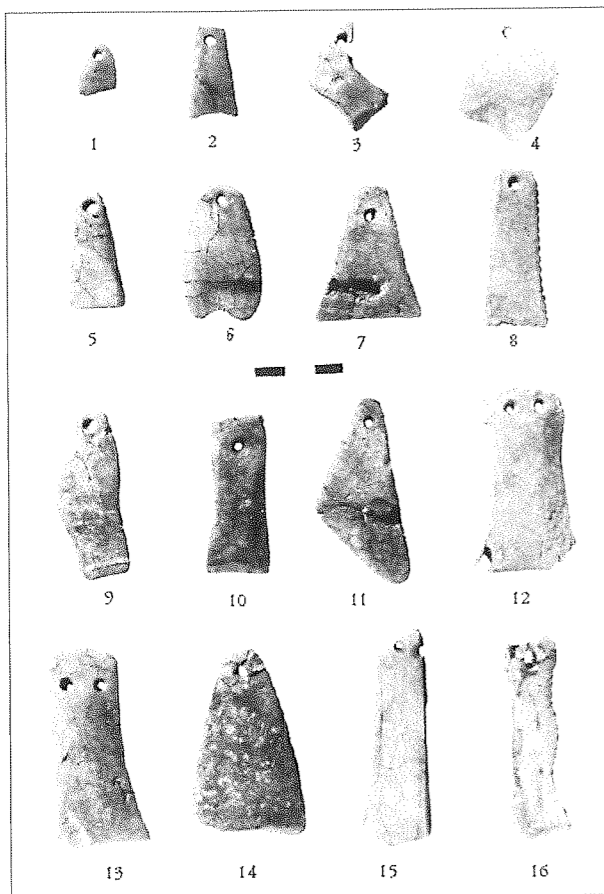


Fig. 1. Konchanskoe cemetery. Amber pendants: 1—gr. 140; 2 gr. 233; 7, 10, 12, 13—gr. 75; 4, 15—gr. 39; 5—gr. 151; 6, 11—gr. 148; 8—gr. 53; 9—gr. 151; 14—gr. 73; 16—gr. 140.

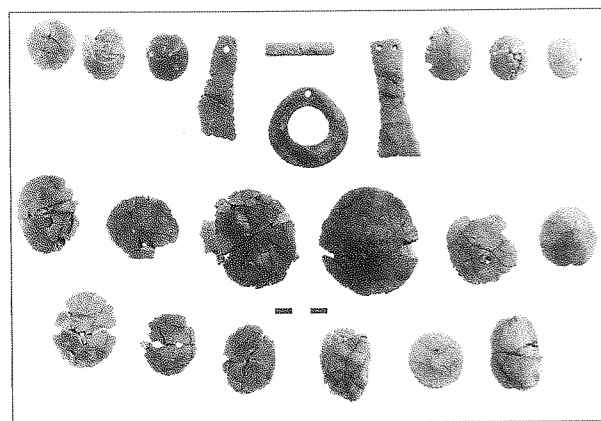


Fig. 2. Repistchie cemetery. Amber pendants, buttons, cylinder bead and ring, gr. 175.

them are round or rounded. Sizes differ from 0.3 to 0.7 cm. Most of them are segment-type in section, but there are also lens-shaped. The back side of the segment-shaped buttons is flat. The v-shaped hole was bored in it. The back-side of some is convex. In this case the hole was bored in the convex side (Fig. 2, 3).

There are also rectangular and square-shaped buttons with rounded corners. Such buttons also were lens-type or segment-type in section and had a V-type hole in the convex side. Only one rectangular-shaped button had two holes on the long axis.

Many buttons have several Y-shaped holes (i.d. two or three pairs) Sometimes a new hole was bored in place of a broken hole or the old hole was repaired. There are some buttons with several holes with the walls between them broken. Broken buttons were sometimes used as pendants.

Part of the pendants have no clear shape. They are thick or flat, their thickness differ depending on the raw piece of amber they were made from. In such cases they were polished and holes were bored. But the shape was left as it was. Sometimes they did not even polished them but just bored holes.

Normally the surface of buttons, pendants and other amber decorations was very thoroughly polished. Only some of them still bear the traces of polish on the back side and never on the front side. Beads are not so numerous as buttons and pendants. Their shape is that of a cylinder, sometimes the middle part is thicker than the ends. Their length 3.3 to 6 cm, diameter 0.8 – 1 cm. The hole was bored from both sides and the two holes were not always centered (Fig. 5).

Rings make the smallest group of decorations. Their diameter differ from 2.5 to 6 cm., the inner 0.5 to 3.5 cm. They were rectangular, triangular or sloping from inside in section. The outer diameter of a ring was often carved. A ring or a broken one was sometimes turned into a pendant for which an additional hole as bored in its side.

There are several large rings in the collection with widened lower part with a hole. Sometimes key-shaped pendants were found. Amber decorations found in both cemeteries are made of yellow or red amber.

The natural conditions of the cemeteries were harmful for amber. The artefacts are covered with a thick layer and their surface is cracked.

In some graves the decorations were placed in heaps as gifts, in some the amber decorations were sewn on the clothes in a special order. Often they formed one or several rows on the neck, chest, waist, hips or sleeves. Sometimes buttons were sewn to the lower end or the

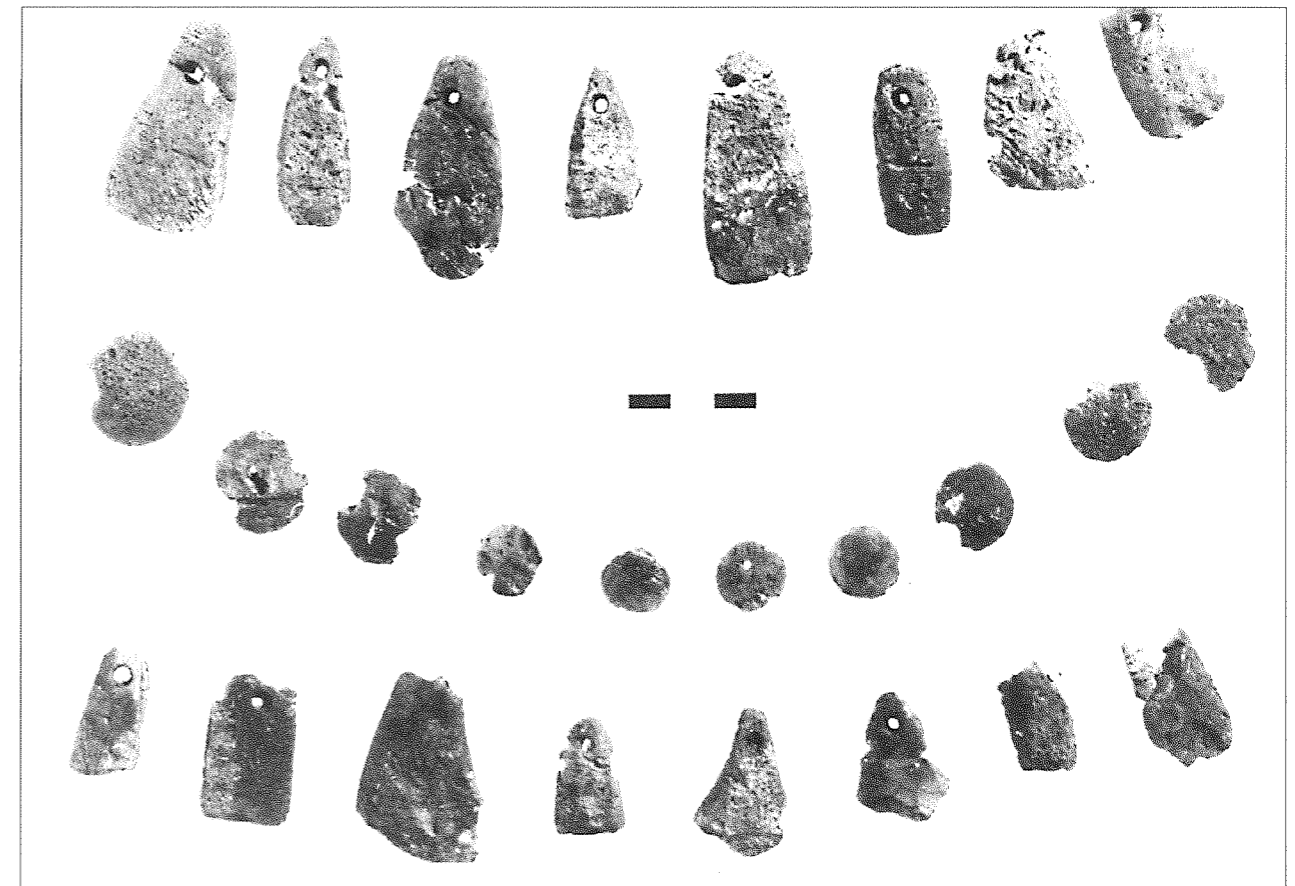


Fig. 3. Repistchie cemetery. Amber pendants and buttons, gr. 49.

collar of a shirt. In some cases the decorations were on the back of the dead.

Both pendants and buttons were sewn to the clothes. Buttons and pendants were also used to make necklaces: only buttons, pendants and beads, buttons and pendants, buttons, pendants and rings, beads and rings.

Buttons and pendants were sewn to the hat in rows. The rings were, obviously, worn as ear-rings or they were fixed to the hat near the ears.

Similar types of amber decorations are widely spread at Neolithic and late Neolithic sites and cemeteries of the forest zone in the European part of Russia, both in the Baltic region and beyond. The decorations described are similar to the decorations found at the Shviantoi [1], Sarnate [2], Abora I and Nainiekste [3] sites and Zveinieke [4] cemetery, in the graves of Sakhtysh VIII [5] and Sakhtysh IIa [6], Ilovets [7], at Modlona site [8], Tuzozero cemetery [9] and in the Korgulino cemetery [10].

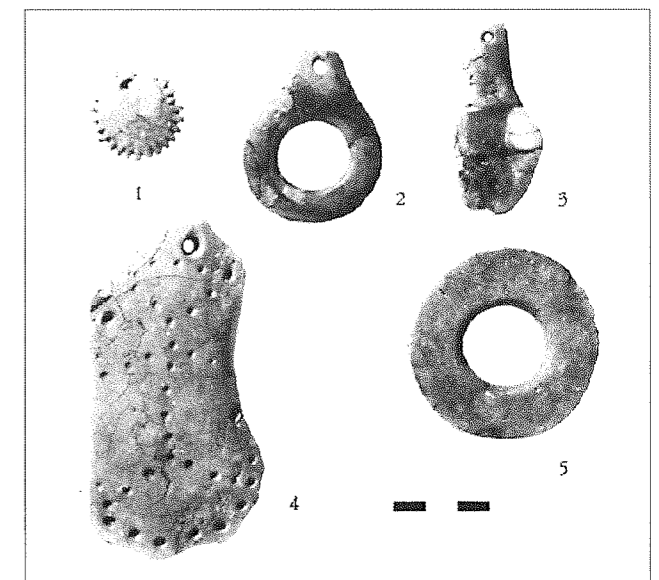


Fig. 4. Konchanskoe cemetery. Amber pendants and ring: 1- gr. 7; 2- gr. 232; 3,5- gr. 151; 4- gr. 141

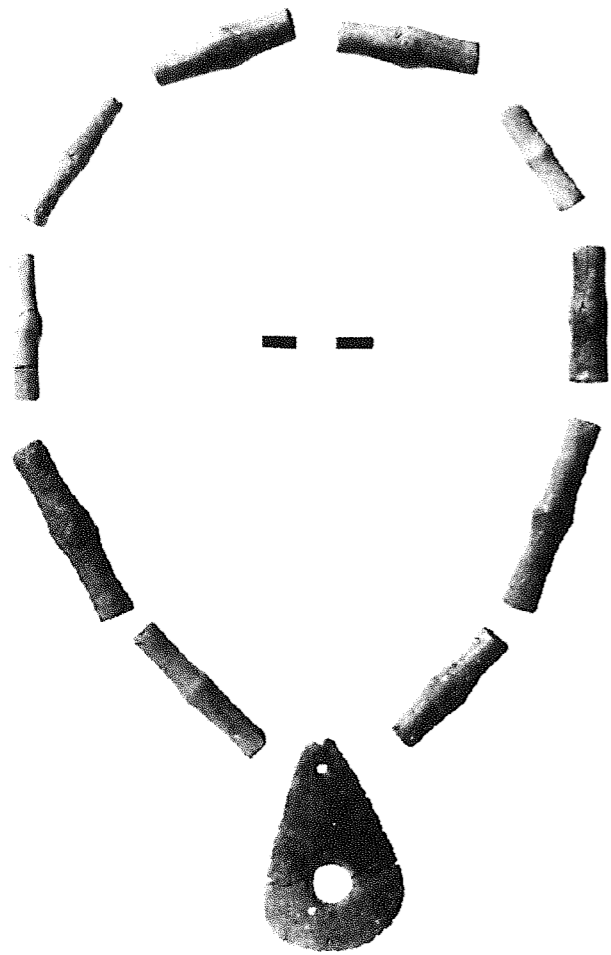


Fig. 5. *Konchanskoe cemetery.*  
Amber cylinder bead necklace, gr.232

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#### Abbreviations

- КСИА – Краткие сообщения института Археологии.  
 МИА – Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР.

## THE BALTS AND AMBER

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Amber has always been attractive to craftsmen and traders. It must have been the early Neolithic period when Lithuanian inhabitants began to produce amberware and ornaments which they traded with their immediate northern and southern neighbours. Amber objects from the Neolithic Age are found in Estonia, the districts of Novgorod and Tver, Finland and Sweden. In the southern neighbourhoods raw amber and amber goods are especially abundant in the burial grounds of the Złota culture in Poland.

In the Bronze Age the Balts used amber as the main object to barter for copper alloys. Its considerable quantities are located in the zones of copper mines in Middle and Southeastern Europe. To emphasize the importance of amber trade, the researchers of prehistory coined a special term – “Amber route”. The Bronze Age saw a number of its ramifications. The principal amber route began from the Baltic coast and led to the lower Vistula. Using the Warta and the upper Oder or their coastlines the amber route crossed Bohemia, Moravia and reached the Danube. From there the route forked: one branch went to Greece, Peloponnesus and Crete (amber beads excavated in the burial grounds of the Mycenae culture are dated to the period between 1600 and 1500 B.C.). Through the passes of the Alps, the second branch went down to northern Italy. Another amber route from the Baltic shores travelled overland up to the Dnieper, then up its mouth to the Caucasus, the eastern regions of the Black Sea and the southwestern areas of the Caspian

Sea (1). Amber objects are found in Ossetia, Middle Caucasus. Interregional amber traffic also reached Asia Minor. In the burial grounds of Šernai (near Klaipėda, Lithuania) was discovered a bronze statuette (dated to 1500–1000 B.C.) resembling a Canaanite god from Syria – Palestine (2).

The old traditions of amber trade are described by classical Greek authors and researchers. Amber is mentioned in Homer’s “Iliad” and “Odyssey”, Herodotus’ (490–480–425 B.C.) works. Amber was also honoured an exhaustive account after the journey of Pytheas of Massalia to the shores of the Baltic Sea and the North Sea in around 325 B.C.

During the period of the Roman Empire amber became greatly valued and desired. It also brought the Aistians (Balts) into the focus of classical Roman writers and historians who then began to describe their habitations, occupations and customs. In his “Natural History” Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23–79) writes that during the reign of Nero (A. D. 37–68) a member of the equestrian order was sent to the northern regions to procure the supply of amber to decorate the arms of gladiators. According to him, it was a distance of about six hundred Roman miles between the center of amber source and Carnuntum (near Vienna, on the right side of the Danube). He brought back amber in such vast quantities that during the days of gladiatorial contests the whole amphitheatre, gladiators and servants were decorated with amber. The largest piece of amber was 13 pounds in weight (4,2 kg). Pliny the Elder explains