A DOUBLE GRAVE WITH AMBER AND BONE ADORNMENTS AT ZVEJNIEKI IN NORTHERN LATVIA

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Abstract

During excavations at the cemetery at Zvejnieki in northern Latvia in the 1960s and 1970s, more than 300 graves were excavated. At new excavations from 2005 to 2009, a double grave was found. Burial 316, a female, had an arrangement of amber pendants from the waist to the knee, while Burial 317, a male, had some beads around the head and around the lower legs. The double grave 316–317 proved to be the most richly furnished grave in the cemetery in terms of amber pendants. It has been dated to about 4000 calibrated BC. The double grave is located in the eastern part of the cemetery, where other graves of the same age with amber objects were situated.

Key words: Latvia, Mesolithic, Neolithic, grave, mortuary practice, grave goods, amber adorments.

Introduction

Zvejnieki is a large Stone Age cemetery and occupation site complex located on the northeast shore of Lake Burtnieki in northern Latvia (Fig. 1). The whole area around the lake is remarkably rich in archaeological finds and sites, and has played a central role in the development of Latvian prehistoric archaeology, beginning in the 1870s (Zagorska 2006b). The most significant research project in the area was the excavation at Zvejnieki in the 1960s and early 1970s, directed by the late Francis Zagorskis, which revealed the presence of extensive settlement layers and more than 300 burials, of which the great majority were dated to the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods (Zagorskis 1987).

During the late 1990s, Ilga Zagorska of the Institute of Latvian History at the University of Latvia, Riga, and Lars Larsson of the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Lund University, initiated a research collaboration that eventually came to include a number of scholars from a wide range of fields, who contributed with their respective analyses to understanding the site (Larsson, Zagorska 2006). Geological and palaeoecological surveys were conducted, in order to reconstruct the environmental history of the site (Eberhards 2006, Kalnina 2006). The burials (Zagorska 2006a; Nilsson Stutz 2006) and the grave goods (Larsson 2006), as well as finds from the occupation layers, have been considered from a variety of perspectives: the faunal remains have been analysed (David 2006; Lõugas 2006; Mannermaa 2006), human physical development has been examined (Gerhards 2006), palaeodemography (Zarina 2006), palaeopathology (Jankauskas, Palubeckaitė 2006), dental status (Palubeckaitė, Jankauskas 2006) and stable isotopes (Eriksson 2006) have been studied. This effort also included the translation from Latvian into English of the volume by Dr Francis Zagorskis describing the graves and giving his chronological interpretation (Zagorskis 2004).

New excavations

In 2005, as this renewed research effort was being finished and published, a new field project began, including both excavation and survey. The focus of the new archaeological excavation was to better understand the relationship between the settlements and the cemetery, which still remains somewhat unclear (Larsson 2007). The expectation was that new excavation methods would provide new information concerning, among other things, the spatial relationships within graves and within their fills.

The graves excavated in the 1960s and 1970s were found within an elongated area about 250 metres long and 35 metres wide on the top of a gravel ridge, parallel to the lake shoreline (Fig. 2). Graves were mainly found in the higher western part and in the lower eastern part, with a small number of graves in between. The western part had been partly destroyed by gravel extraction, while the eastern part was better preserved, except for the presence of a farm. In some areas, the excavation extended up to the foundations of the farm buildings (Fig. 3). However, areas to the north and the east of the main building were not accessible for excavation due to gardening activities. It was uncertain whether graves might be preserved below the floor of the farmhouse. The house was subsequently aban-

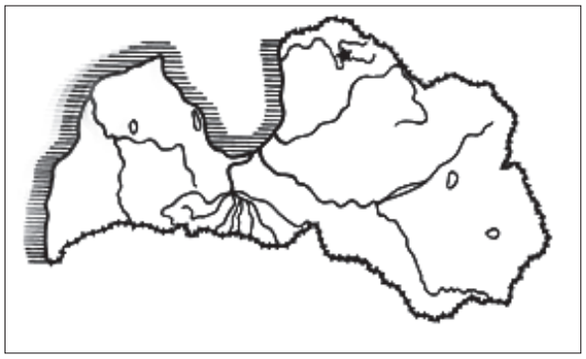

Fig. 1. The location of the Zvejnieki site in northern Latvia.

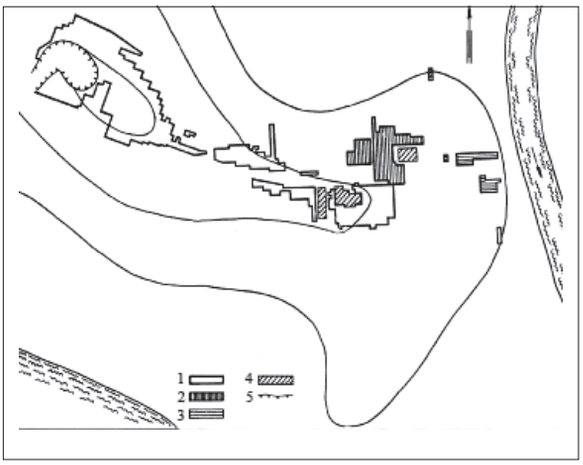

Fig. 2. Zvejnieki, with the distribution of graves and occupation layers: 1 areas with graves; 2 Mesolithic occupation layers; 3 Neolithic occupation layers; 4 buildings; 5 water.

doned and gradually fell apart, something that facilitated further excavation.

In 2005 and 2006, previously unexcavated areas to the north and the south of the main building were investigated, in order to locate and excavate new burials. The excavation immediately to the north of the house revealed several features, but none of them contained any human remains. To the east of the house, the excavations were more successful, and several burials were uncovered (Nilsson Stutz *et al*. 2008). All artefacts and faunal remains encountered in the features were recorded using three-dimensional coordinates. For the excavation of the human remains, a field protocol based on the French approach *anthropologie de terrain* was implemented. The approach is taphonomically based, and combines detailed observations in the field with knowledge in biology about how the human body decomposes after death. All the remains are carefully uncovered, and their exact position is mapped in detail and photographed, in order to allow for a detailed analysis of the sequences of disarticulation, disturbance, and so on (Nilsson Stutz 2003).

An area of seven by four metres was opened up east of the house. Most of this area had previously been covered by a veranda directly connected to the farmhouse, and therefore had previously been inaccessible for excavation (Fig. 3). A foundation wall belonging to the veranda structure cuts across the area.

Within the veranda's foundations, seven graves altogether were found. The graves in the eastern part of the excavated area were particularly affected by disturbance. Two graves in the same area, one overlying the other, had been badly disturbed in digging the veranda foundations.

However, two pits were encountered in the western part of the area, with a blackish brown fill that contrasted sharply with the surrounding substrate of yellow gravel and sand. These features were deep, and were carefully

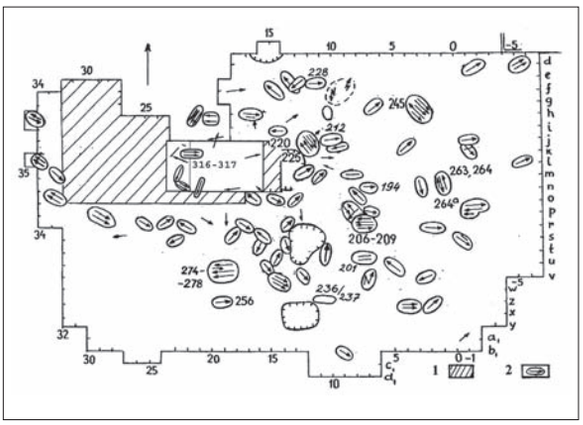

Fig. 3. The eastern part of the cemetery, with the position of the double grave 316–317. The other numbered graves also had amber objects (from Zagorska 2001, with author additions).

excavated in order to document the stratigraphy. They were both rich in finds, including flint and bone artefacts, as well as fragments of faunal remains.

The pit to the south contained an undisturbed and complete skeleton of an individual placed northeast-southwest, with the head directed to the south, in supine position with the limbs in extension. The maintained labile articulations of the hands and feet clearly indicate that the deposit was primary.

A double grave

In 2007, as the excavation of the second deep feature continued, it became clear that this too contained in-

Fig. 4. The double grave during the excavation in 2007.

terred human remains (Fig. 4). The burial extended further west, under the farmhouse. In order to complete the excavation, permission had to be obtained from the house's owner. That was accomplished in 2009, and the excavation was continued. Thus, the grave was excavated in two separate stages. When the easternmost part of the house was cleared of rubbish, it turned out that the floor of parts of the farmhouse had been placed directly above the ground surface. The construction of the farmhouse had preserved in places a previous surface that had generally been destroyed in other parts of the cemetery by subsequent activities, such as farming and gardening. Two observations could be made. No occupation layer was present below the previous surface. A number of graves were documented, and at least a couple included shallow pits that would have been destroyed if the disturbance to the top layer had been as severe as in the surrounding area. This observation was well in agreement with the situation in the excavation to the north and east of the farmhouse, where human bones and teeth, as well as objects that might have belonged to destroyed graves, were found in the topsoil (Larsson 2007; 2009).

During the excavation of the grave, a number of flint artefacts, bone artefacts and bones were found. The bone artefacts included two distal pieces of harpoons or leisters of the Kunda type (Fig. 5), with blades and cores among the flint finds. When excavating the feature, several human bones were encountered, including several disarticulated vertebrae and a more or less articulated right forearm and hand. The articulated remains of the forearm were encountered at the northern end of the feature. A right humerus was discovered adjacent to these bones, but it was disarticulated. The relative articulation of the bones of the forearm and parts of the hand indicate a primary deposit, an interpretation that would exclude the possibility that these human remains were simply part of the fill taken from the surrounding cemetery and used for this burial. Moreover, these bones did not belong to any of the two individuals buried further down in the feature (Burials 316 and 317), since the parts of the skeletons excavated were complete. Instead, these remains could be those of other individuals, buried in more or less disturbed graves prior to the burial of individuals in the double grave.

During the excavation of the westernmost part of the feature, a stone in a vertical position was found. Measuring 0.3 by 0.2 metres, it is by far the largest stone in the grave fill. Its vertical position makes it reasonable to suggest that it had been deliberately placed. It was observed when the excavation started, so its top might have been just visible after the grave had been refilled. The grave itself was 0.8 metres deep.

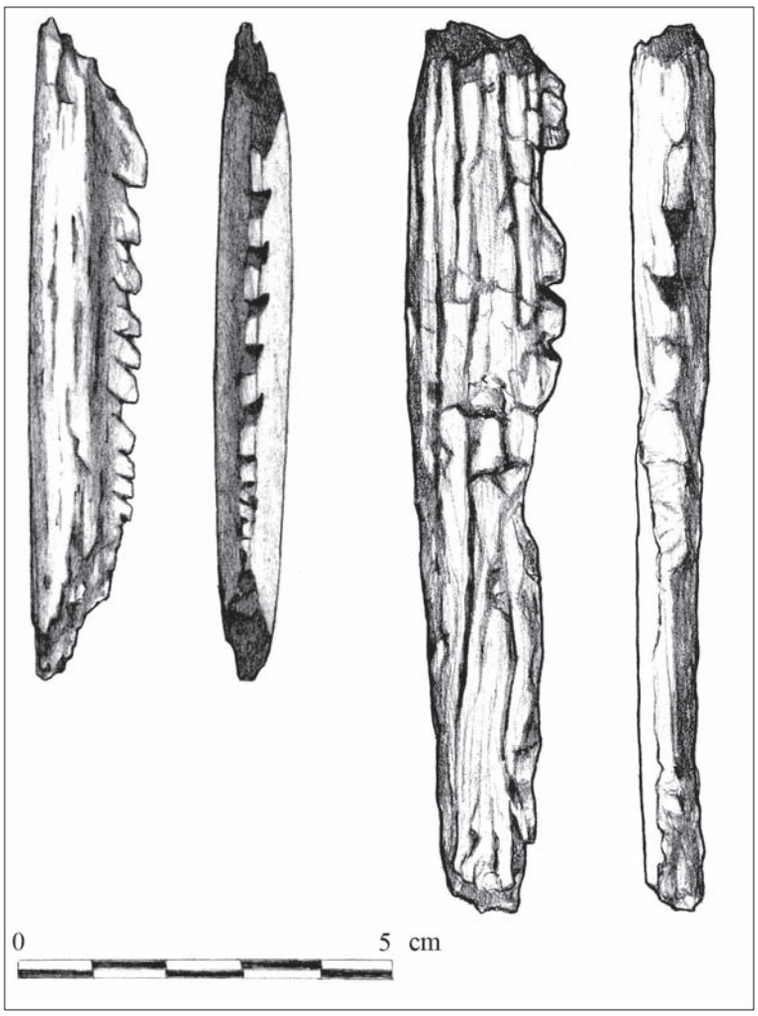

Fig. 5. Leisters of Kunda type found in the filling of the double grave 316–317 (drawing by L. Lecareux).

The remains of two adult individuals were encountered lying side by side, directed east-west, with their heads to the east, in supine position with the limbs in extension (Fig. 6). According to a preliminary anthropological examination, Burial 316 to the north is a female aged 35 to 40 years. Her teeth are worn, probably due to chewing skin and sinews. Burial 317 is a male aged 25 to 30 years. The face has a marked masculine appearance. Both individuals had parts of the body covered in ochre. The ochre was especially obvious on the forehead and face of the individual to the south, Burial 317. It had been mixed into a clayey substance that was 0.5 centimetres thick in places. In other areas, the ochre was of the same thickness but was not mixed with any other substance. The two bodies were covered with ochre (Fig. 6, see Plate I). Red ochre was documented all the way down to the feet. The intensity of the ochre varied and was especially concentrated in areas where ornaments were found. Some of the ochre was found below the human remains. Thus, the ochre must have been distributed before, as well as after, the bodies were placed in the grave, or it might have been smeared on to the dress or wrappings of the bodies. One clear exception is the layer attached to the face of Burial 317: this must have been carried out after death. Close to the feet of Burial 316, a black area was recorded. The contents of this feature turned out to have a 'fatty' consistency. This area could either consist of decomposed organic material or, less probably, include decomposed material from the body.

Description of the grave goods

The northernmost individual, Burial 316, had two amber rings located partly below the jaw. One, with a diameter of 7.5 centimetres, was probably complete at the time of burial. The other was a piece of a ring with a diameter of nine centimetres when intact (Fig. 7). There are two perforations in the incomplete ring. Two amber beads were found on the upper part of the body, one located north of the neck, and the other on the upper part of the chest. To the left of the lower part of the torso, a concentration of amber beads was recorded.

Starting just above the pelvic region was an arrangement consisting of at least 110 amber pendants, and extending down to the knees (Fig. 7). The preservation

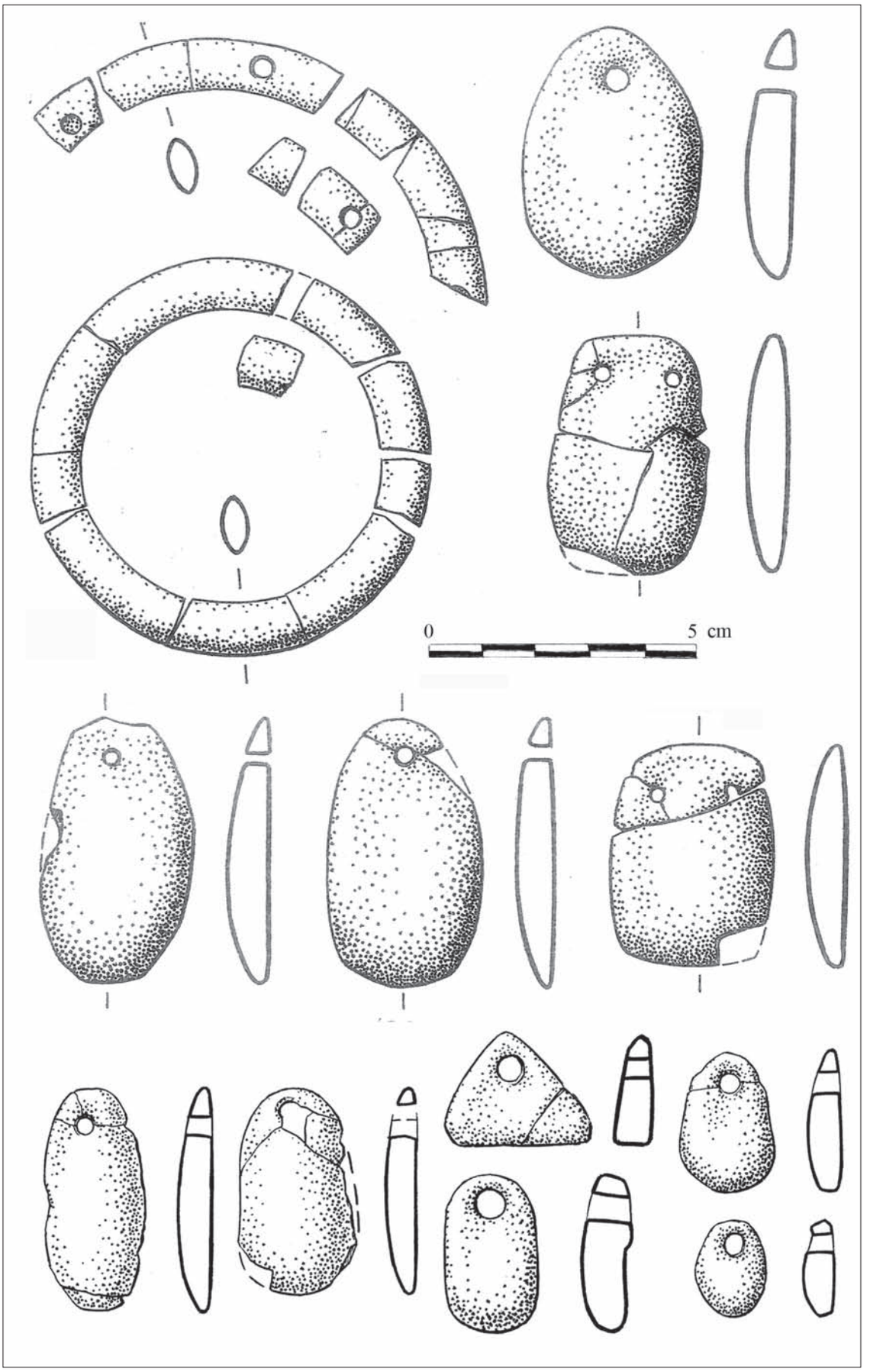

Fig. 7. Amber objects from Burial 316 (drawing by A. Bērziņa).

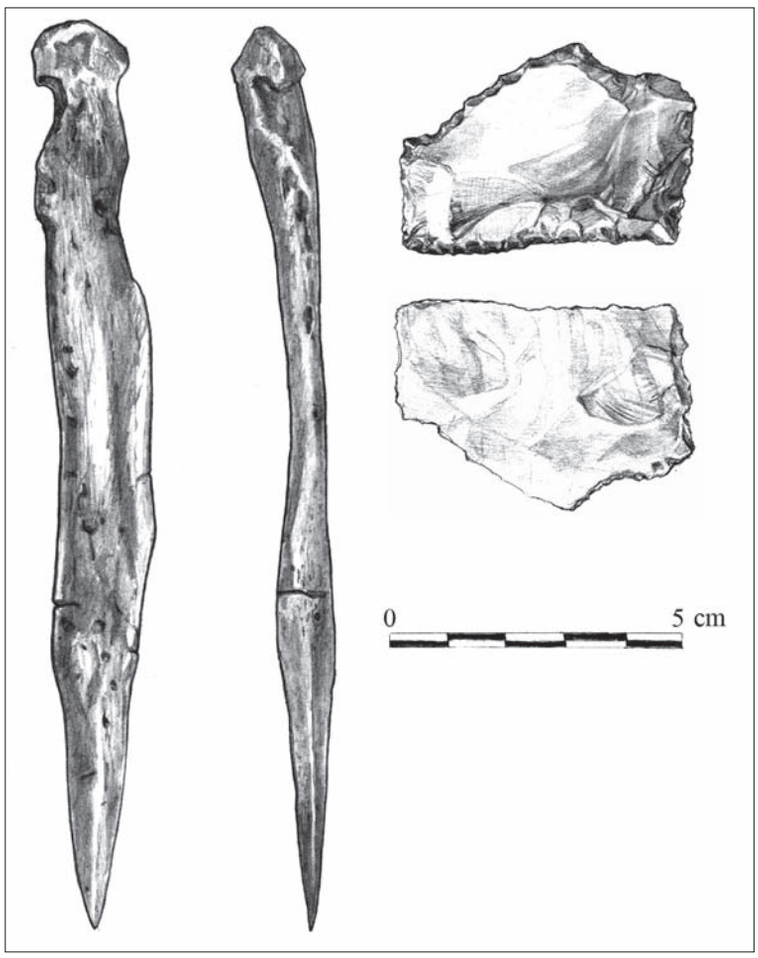

Fig. 8. Grave goods from Burial 317: left, knife; right, bone point (drawing by L. Lecareux).

of the amber pendants, particularly those in the lowest part of the arrangement, was quite poor, making it difficult to determine the exact number of them. The pendants formed eight more or less clearly identifiable rows. A gap was evident between the two uppermost rows, which included most of the large pendants, and the six rows below, with smaller pendants. The lower part of the arrangement included five bone pendants. The arrangement ended with two concentrations of smaller pendants or beads. On both sides, below the knees, concentrations of beads made of tubular bone from birds were discovered. On the right side, there were also two pendants: one of amber, and one of bone. A concentration of tubular bone beads was also found to the right of the upper femur. The tubular bone beads are 0.5 to two centimetres long. A flint knife, almost trapezoid in shape and partly made by pressure flaking technique, was found to the northeast of the head of Burial 317 (Fig. 8). Along the upper left arm, there was a bone point or a kind of dagger. It is made from the ulna of a red deer, with additional cutting and polishing of the point.

Around and on top of the head of Burial 317 were small amber beads (Fig. 9). These formed a concentration at the top of the skull, as well as a row of beads on the right-hand side. No such arrangement was found on the other side of the head. An assemblage of pendants was found just below the right knee. It does include pendants of amber, but consists mainly of bone beads. Two other concentrations and a few separate beads were located in an area around the lower legs, just above the feet. These included just a couple of beads made from amber, the rest being of bone (Fig. 10). Close to these beads, a concentration of beads made from tubular bird bones was found, and another such concentration was associated with the feet (Fig. 10).

When removing the skeletal parts of Burial 317, it turned out that the person had been placed on a stone, 15 centimetres in size, situated below the central part of the pelvic region.

A preliminary taphonomic analysis indicates that at least one of the two individuals (Burial 317) had been rather tightly wrapped in some kind of material at the time of burial. This phenomenon has been noted for several burials at the site (Nilsson Stutz 2006; Nilsson Stutz *et al.* 2008).

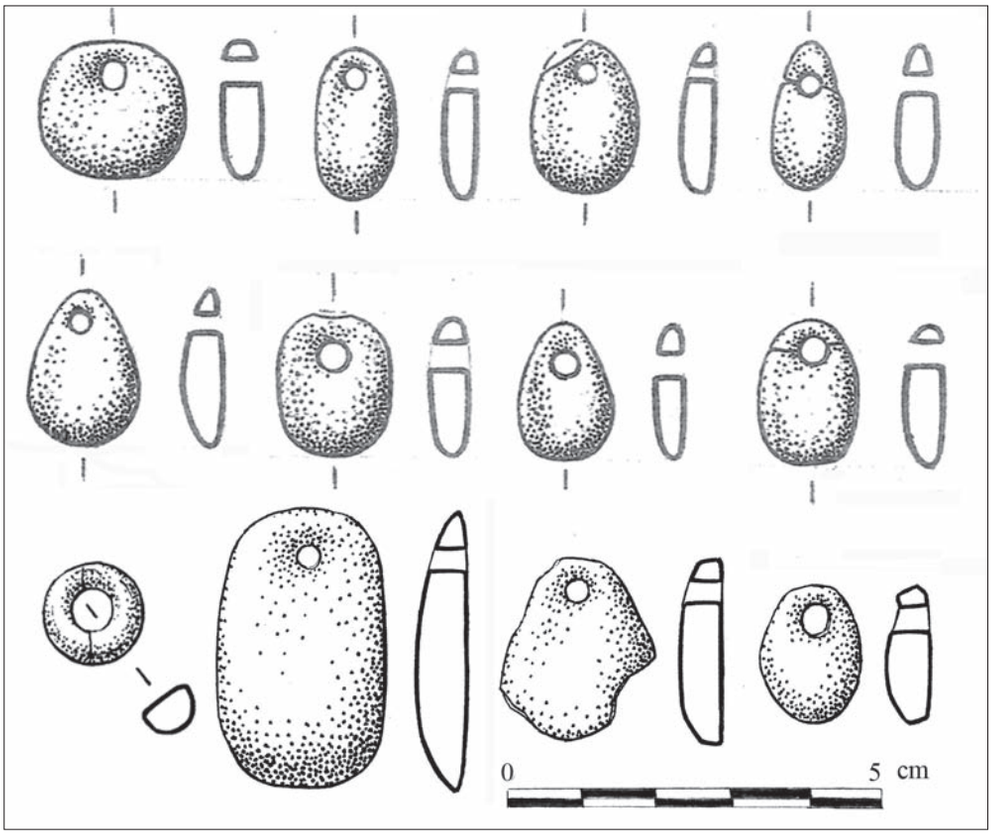

Fig. 9. Amber objects from Burial 317 (drawing by A. Bērziņa).

Pendants and beads of amber and bone

The varied preservation of the amber beads in the lowest part of the arrangement in Burial 316 makes it difficult to provide an exact number of the amber beads. Some of the tubular bone beads were also in bad condition. Altogether, it includes at least 135 beads made of amber, two large amber rings and one small one, 38 beads made of bone, one ring of bone, and at least 190 beads of tubular bones. Forty-eight beads and one ring are associated with Burial 317, while the rest relate to Burial 316.

The amber pendants vary in size. The largest belong to the two rows at the top of the arrangement in Burial 316 (Fig. 7). Most of them have a round-oval or almost rectangular shape, are between 5.5 and 3.5 centimetres in length, with one side almost flat and the other somewhat convex. Further down in the arrangement, the pendants become smaller, 4.5 to two centimetres in length, and the shapes are more varied: rectangular, droplet-shaped, triangular and irregular. As the pendants become smaller, they generally become more rectangular in cross-section. Pendants with one perforation comprise the overwhelming majority, with a small number having two perforations.

The surfaces of the amber pendants and beads are poorly preserved, thus precluding close studies of colour, traces of working, wear or even decoration.

The bone pendants have been cut out of massive bones, such as the metacarpal or metatarsal bones of elk or red deer (Fig. 10). They are similar in shape to the amber pendants: rectangular, droplet-shaped or almost circular. Most have a single perforation, but a few have a double perforation. However, they are smaller than those made of amber, 1.5 to 2.5 centimetres in length. They are of special interest, as this category of finds was not previously known at Zvejnieki cemetery. Just one tooth pendant was found, close to the feet of Burial 316. This is just the proximal end, with a cut furrow around the tip of the root, and probably originates from an aurochs.

The question remains as to how the beads were attached. In the case of Burial 317, beads might have been attached to a headdress. The pendants at the lower parts of the extremities are much more difficult to explain. Some of them might have been fastened to the hem of a dress, or sewn directly on to the lower part of the dress or the leggings.

There seems to be a contrast between Burial 316 and Burial 317 in terms of the location of the beads. Burial 317 has beads associated with the head, while they are absent in the case of Burial 316. The provision of amber rings on the neck and a small number of amber beads on the torso of Burial 316 has no parallel in Burial 317. The concentration of amber beads between

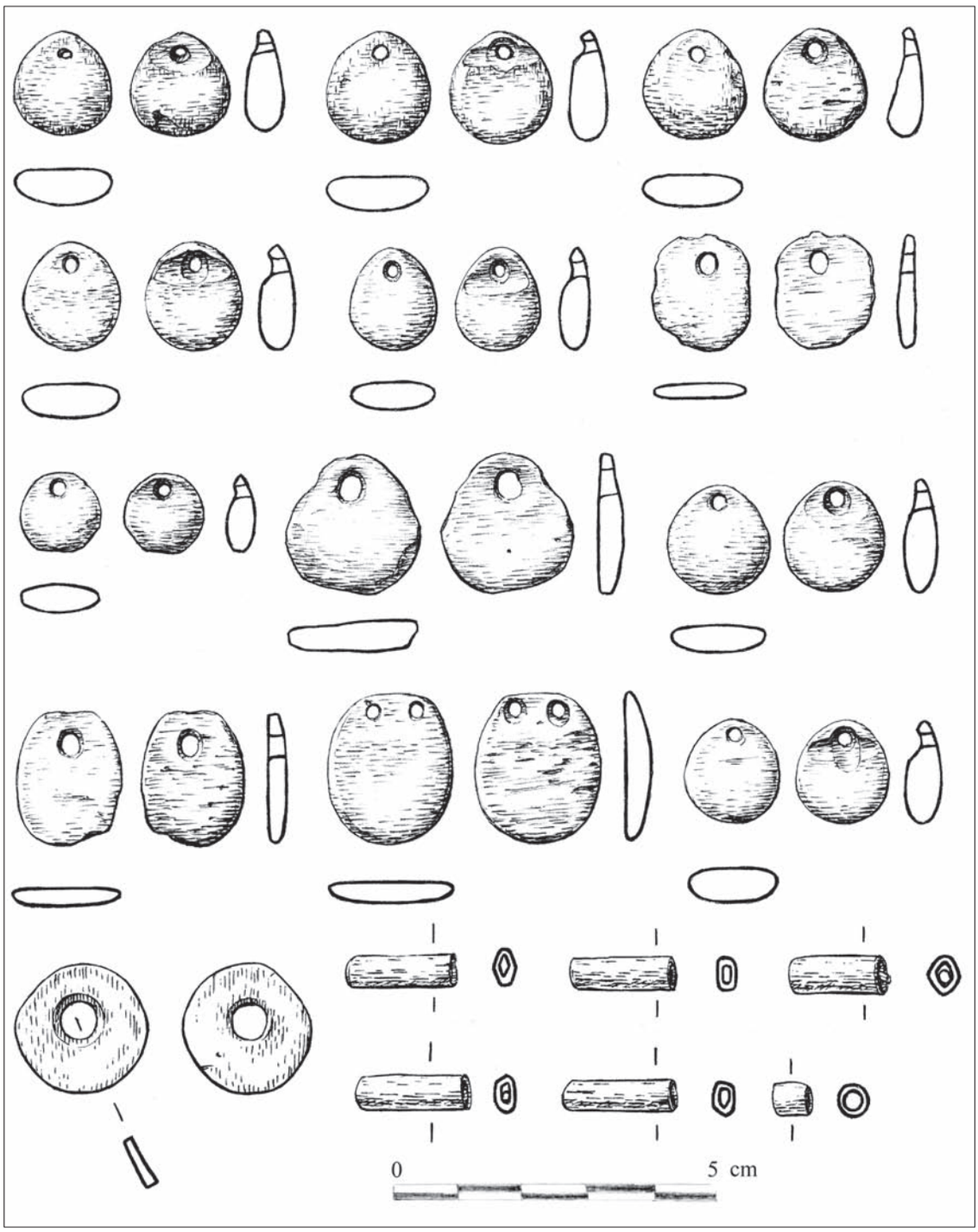

Fig. 10. Bone objects from Burial 317 (drawing by A. Bērziņa).

the pelvic region and the knees of Burial 316 contrasts with the total absence of them in this area in Burial 317. At the level where the distribution ends in Burial 316, it starts in Burial 317, continuing down to the feet.

The decoration of Burial 316 includes only a small number of bone beads in the lower part of the arrangement. All the other bone beads, including a small ring, relate to Burial 317.

Dating the burials

Both burials have been dated. Burial 317 gave an age of 5105±50 BP (LuS 8216), 3781–3391 cal. BC (according to Oxcal v. 4.1), and Burial 316 produced a date of 5285±55 BP (LuS 8217), 4256–3979 cal. BC. The bone dagger found close to the right arm of Burial 317 was dated to 4865±60 BP (LuS 7852), 3786–3619 cal. BC. If we can regard the two individuals as having died and been buried at the same time, then the age difference between Burial 317 and the item from

the grave falls approximately within the same range of acceptability.

Two samples of human bone from the grave fill gave values of 6050±55 BP (LuS 8218), 5078–4794 cal. BC, and 5830±60 BP (LuS 8219), 4845–4509 cal. BC. These probably originate from at least two different burials that were destroyed when the grave for the double burial was dug. A couple of graves, more or less destroyed, were found just at the edge of the grave of this double burial. Further analysis might give more information concerning the relationship between the people buried in this grave and the human bones found in the fill.

The fill was very rich in flint, as well as bone. Artefacts found in the fill are dated as follows: the tip of a Kunda harpoon has been dated to 8275±55 BP (LuS 8738), 7486–7141 cal. BC, a beaver vertebra is dated to 6320±60 BP (LuS 8220), 5470–5207 cal. BC, a vertebra of the fish wels has given a date of 6630±55 BP (LuS 8223), 5636–5482 cal. BC, and a wild boar incisor has been dated to 5455±50 BP (LuS 8835) 4401–4230 cal. BC. All are earlier than the two burials. The fill is black to dark brown in colour, resembling the occupation layers within the site. As no occupation layer was found on top of the grave, the fill must originate from older occupation layers found just some 20 to 50 metres away. The differences in radiocarbon values indicates occupation layers with considerable age differences.

The double grave is located within the eastern part of the cemetery, where a number of burials of about the same age have been found. Most of the burials are from the Middle Neolithic. Dates have been obtained for some 15 burials, from 5545±65 (Ua-19810), 4523–4318 cal. BC, up to 4825±75 BP (Ua-15546), 3771–3497 cal. BC (Zagorska 2006b, p.102). However, as previously described, older burials have also been excavated, such as Burial 319 and Burial 320, dated to 7635±65 BP (Ua 36994), 6609–6394 cal. BC, and 7620±65 BP (Ua 36995), 6607–6376 cal. BC, Burial 313, dated to 7525±60 BP (LuS 8220), 6466–6326 cal. BC, and Burial 312, dated to 6160±50 BP (LuS 6834), 5226–4958 cal. BC. There are also more or less contemporaneous burials, such as Burial 310, dated to 5150±60 BP (LuS 6437), 4065–3786 cal. BC, and Burial 325, dated to 5230±50 BP (LuS 8833), 4174–3961 cal. BC.

Other graves with amber objects in the cemetery at Zvejnieki

Like the double grave, all the graves containing amber objects are located in the eastern part of the cemetery (Fig. 3). Apart from the double grave, another 17 graves included amber adornments of different shapes, with a total of about 210 finds (Zagorska 2001, p.109). Amber objects have been found in collective graves with between two and seven individuals, strewn with ochre. Some of the burials in these graves were richly adorned with amber. Amber adornments have been found in single graves too, but in small numbers.

It is difficult to identify special rules for how the amber beads, pendants and rings were worn or placed in the tomb. Burial 221 is the richest, with 53 pendants and four rings altogether, covering the area from the pelvis to the knees, just as with Burial 316. No other grave contained a similar arrangement. The dating of Burial 221 has given an age similar to the double grave, namely 5180±65 BP (Ua-19813), 4083–3895 cal. BC (Zagorska 2001, Table IV). Burial 221 is identified as male, whereas Burial 316 is female. If the sex characterisation is correct, then evidently both males and females could wear this kind of arrangement. A female burial, Burial 256, had two pendants between the legs. Only one other grave has a parallel for the distribution of beads around the head of Burial 317. This is Burial 206, where a pendant was found in a similar location, namely under the skull.

An almost circular bead (Fig. 9, top left) was found just below the right eye socket of Burial 317. It might initially have been located in the eye socket. During the previous excavation, a thick layer of clay and red ochre was found on six individuals (Zagorska 2006a, p.100). On these skulls, round amber rings were found intentionally stuck into the eye sockets as ‘replacements’ for the eyes. In these cases, the amber pieces have a large, centrally placed hole, while the bead on Burial 317, like all the others, has an asymmetrically positioned perforation.

As regards dress decoration, it should be noted that the older graves in the cemetery at Zvejnieki were adorned with tooth beads, and the youngest such example, Burial 164, is dated to 5230±95 BP (Ua 15544), 4267–3910 cal. BC (Larsson 2006, Fig. 21). Shortly later, amber beads and pendants replaced tooth beads. Graves with amber have been dated to between 5285±50 BP (Ua 3634), for Burial 206, and 4865±75 BP (Ua 19884), 3801–3507 cal. BC, for Burial 201.

Summary

Despite the intensive excavation of more than 300 graves during excavations in the 1960s and 1970s, the cemetery at Zvejnieki still has a lot of interesting features and finds to reveal that shed a light on mortuary

practices and grave goods. New excavations started in 2005, and in 2007 and 2009 a double grave was investigated. Burial 316, a female, had an arrangement of amber pendants from the waist to the knee, while Burial 317, a male, had some beads around the head and around the lower legs. The double grave 316-317 proved the most richly furnished grave in the cemetery in terms of amber pendants, and also included a new type of adornment, namely bone pendants. It has been dated to about 4000 cal. BC, which corresponds with other burials in the cemetery that have amber adornments. The double grave is located in the eastern part of the cemetery, where the other graves with amber objects were situated.

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Written in English by the author,
language revised by Valdis Bērziņš

Abbreviation

Back to the Origin – L. LARSSON AND I. ZAGORSKA, eds. *Back to the Origin. New research in the Mesolithic-Neolithic Zvejnieki cemetery and environment, Northern Latvia* (Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, Series in 8°, No. 52), Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International.

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DVIGUBAS KAPAS SU GINTARO IR KAULO PAPUOŠALAIS ZVEJNIEKUOSE, ŠIAURĖS LATVIJOJE

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Santrauka

Nepaisant intensyvių kasinėjimų XX a. 7–8-ojo dešimtmečiais ekspedicijų metu, apėmusių daugiau nei 300 kapų, Zvejnieki kapinynas vis dar turi įdomių bruožų ir radinių, galinčių atskleisti laidojimo papročius ir įkapes (1–3 pav.). Kasinėjimai atnaujinti 2005 m., o 2007 ir 2009 m. buvo tirtas dvigubas kapas 316–317 (4 pav.). Moteriškos lyties mirusiosios kape 316 rasta gintaro kabučių dėlionė nuo moters juosmens iki kelių (6 pav.; 1 įklija). Tuo tarpu vyriškos lyties mirusiojo kape 317 buvo karoliai, išdėlioti aplink galvą ir kojų apatinės dalies srityje. Dvigubas kapas buvo turtingiausias gintaro kabučių atžvilgiu visame kapinyne, be to, jame buvo rastas ir naujas papuošalo tipas, būtent kauliniai kabučiai (7; 9 pav.). Kapas datuotas kalibruota data apie 4000 m. pr. Kr., kuri atitinka ir kitų kapinyno palaidojimų su gintaro papuošalais datas. Dvigubas kapas buvo atidengtas rytinėje kapinyno dalyje, kur buvo išsidėstę ir kiti kapai su gintariniais daiktais.

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