

# Late Neolithic burial practices and beliefs in Latvia

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Archaeological evidence of Neolithic burial practices within the territory of Latvia provides us with a unique glimpse into the spiritual life of these ancient people, and allows a partial understanding of their religious beliefs and symbols.

A substantial number of burials dating to the Late Neolithic period (3204 - 2393 B.C., calibrated) have now been excavated in Latvia (Fig. 1). They include 61 burials from the Abora I settlement site, and 15 graves from the Kvāpāni II settlement site, both located in the Lubāna Lake Depression (Loze 1979: 43-54; 1987: 32-35). There are 11 burials from the Zvejnieki cemetery, Lake Burtnieku (Zagorskis 1987: 110) and 23 burials from the Kreiči burial field near Lake Lielais Ludzas (Zagorskis 1961: 3-18). One Late Neolithic grave has been found on the shore of Lake Sarkanu in eastern Latvia (Loze 1987: 5). In southeast Latvia, at the Late Neolithic — Early Bronze Age settlement site on the island of Lake Krīgānu, two intact and two disturbed burials are known (Stubavs 1980: 91). At the Middle and Late Iron Age burial field at Zvārdes Grinerti, two Late Neolithic graves were uncovered during the 1930's (Šnore n.d.). Data on single graves of the Corded Pottery culture have been summarized by Šturms (1970: 285).

On the basis of several variables — body posture, head orientation, anthropological type, and grave goods — the Late Neolithic burials in Latvia can be divided into two different ethnic groups (Loze 1987: 9; Denisova 1975: 163-139). One of these groups may represent an indigenous local culture, while the other — representatives of the Corded Pottery culture — possibly belongs to a northern Indo-European population. In this study, I shall discuss only the burial practices of the Corded Pottery culture.

## Corded Pottery Culture

There are 28 burials that can be firmly connected with the Corded Pottery culture. They include eight from the Abora I site, four at the Kvāpāni II site, eleven at Zvejnieki, and five at the Kreiči cemetery. Šturms (1970: 285) has identified another six possible Corded Pottery burials. Taking into account all of the single or isolated graves during this period, the total number of excavated Corded Pottery burials in Latvia may well exceed 40.

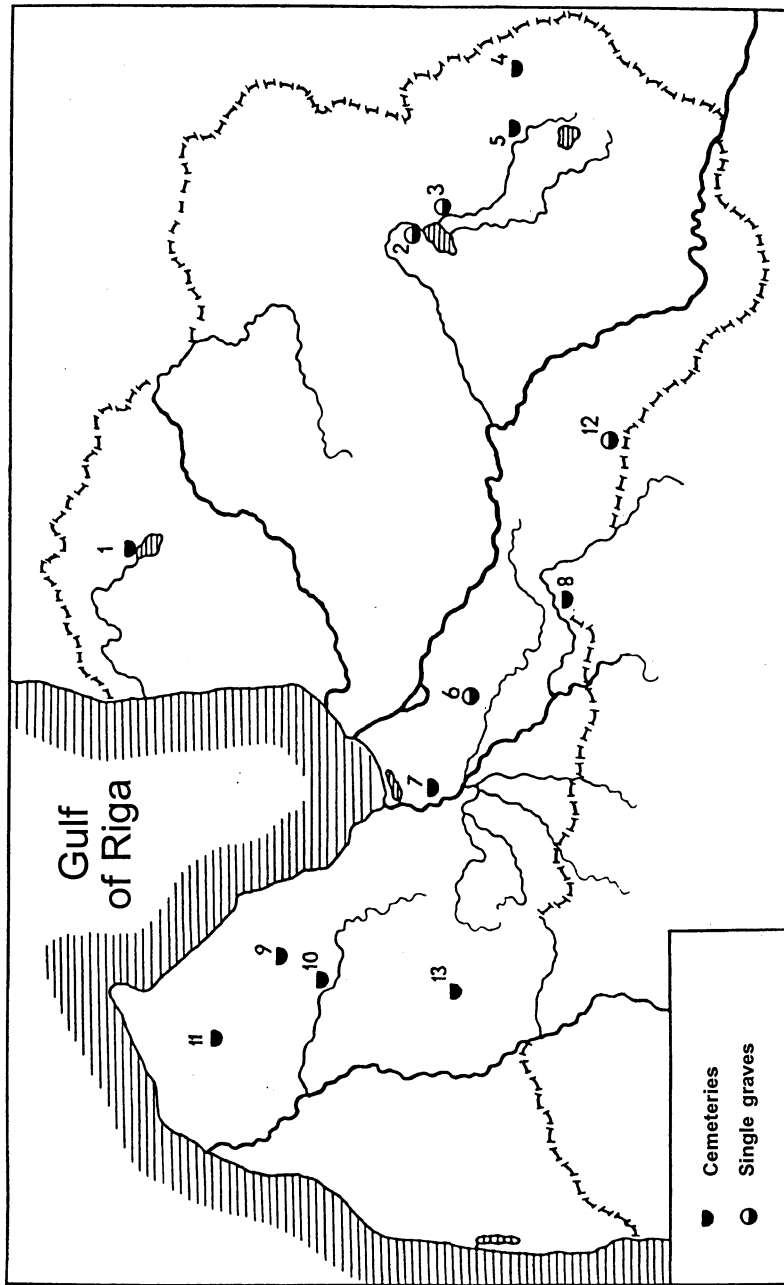


Fig. 1. Distribution of Late Neolithic cemeteries, settlements and single graves in Latvia. Cemeteries: 1 - Zvejnieki, 4 - Kreiči; settlements: 2 - Abora I, 3 - Kvāpāni II; single graves: 5 - Sarkaņi, 6 - Rutenieki, 7 - Aizupe, 8 - Tāmas, 10 - Tāmas, 11 - Kandava, 12 - Tojāti, 13 - Krigāni, 13 - Grīnerti.

1 pav. Vēlvojo neolīto kapīnyņu pasiskirstymas, gyvenvietės ir pavieniai kapai Latvijoje.

At settlement sites, individuals are often found buried within the cultural layer (Loze 1987: 8), at a depth of 0.35-0.60m from the surface. Identification of a wooden plank(?)<sup>1</sup>, found near the head of the individual in Burial 3 at the Abora I settlement site, indicates that it was probably boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*) obtained from central Europe. At cemeteries, on the other hand, individuals were buried in special pits. The pits reached a depth of 0.25-0.65m in the Kreiči burial ground (Zagorskis 1961: 13) and 0.30 - 0.70m in the Zvejnieki burial field (Zagorskis 1987: 37). At the latter cemetery, however, we were unable to trace the contours of several grave pits (Burials 72, 88, 202, 203), while other burials (Nos. 303, 307, 308) were located in the Mesolithic cultural layer. Another disrupting factor was that the Mesolithic cultural layer had often been used as filling material for grave pits at Zvejnieki (Burials 137, 183, 186, 197, 202).

Burial practices included piling stones directly upon the individual (e.g. Burial 14, Kreiči cemetery), and placing stones over the grave pit (Burial 10, Kreiči) or alongside it (Burial 5, Kreiči) (Zagorskis 1961: 13). At Zvejnieki, small piles of stones were placed near the legs (e.g. Burial 203) or the head (Burial 303) of the individual (Zagorskis 1987, Fig. 22).

Burial posture and orientation varied widely. The following types of flexed and crouched burials were observed:

- 1) Legs flexed under the body (Fig. 2: 1). The femurs and shin-bones form an acute angle, with the femurs almost perpendicular to the body. Arms are extended along the body (Burial 6, female, Abora I settlement site).
- 2) Legs flexed in front of the body (Fig. 2: 2). Here, the femurs are raised upward, forming an acute angle with the shin-bones. Arms are extended over the knees (Burial 33, female, Abora I).
- 3) Crouched or 'fetal' position (Fig. 2: 3). The legs are bent and drawn close to the body (perhaps tied up?). (Burial 7, female, Kvāpāni II settlement site).
- 4) Legs slightly bent under the body (Fig. 2: 4). The bones of the right leg form a right angle, those of the left leg form an acute angle. The arms are extended along the pelvis (Burial 197, male, Zvejnieki cemetery).
- 5) Legs very slightly bent under the body (Fig. 2: 5). The femurs and shin-bones form an obtuse angle, and the shin-bones cross each other. Arms are folded over the chest (Burial 13, female (?), Kvāpāni II settlement site).
- 6) Supine and crouched position (Fig. 2: 6). Head is turned to the right (Burial 9, male, Kvāpāni II settlement site).

Females were generally buried on their left side. This was the case at the Abora I settlement site (Burials 6 and 33), at the Kreiči cemetery (Burial 5), and in the Kvāpāni II settlement site (Burial 7). I found only one case in which a female was buried on her right side (Burial 13, Kvāpāni II settlement site) and

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<sup>1</sup>Analysis was kindly provided by Dr. habil. M. Bušs of the production association "Silava".

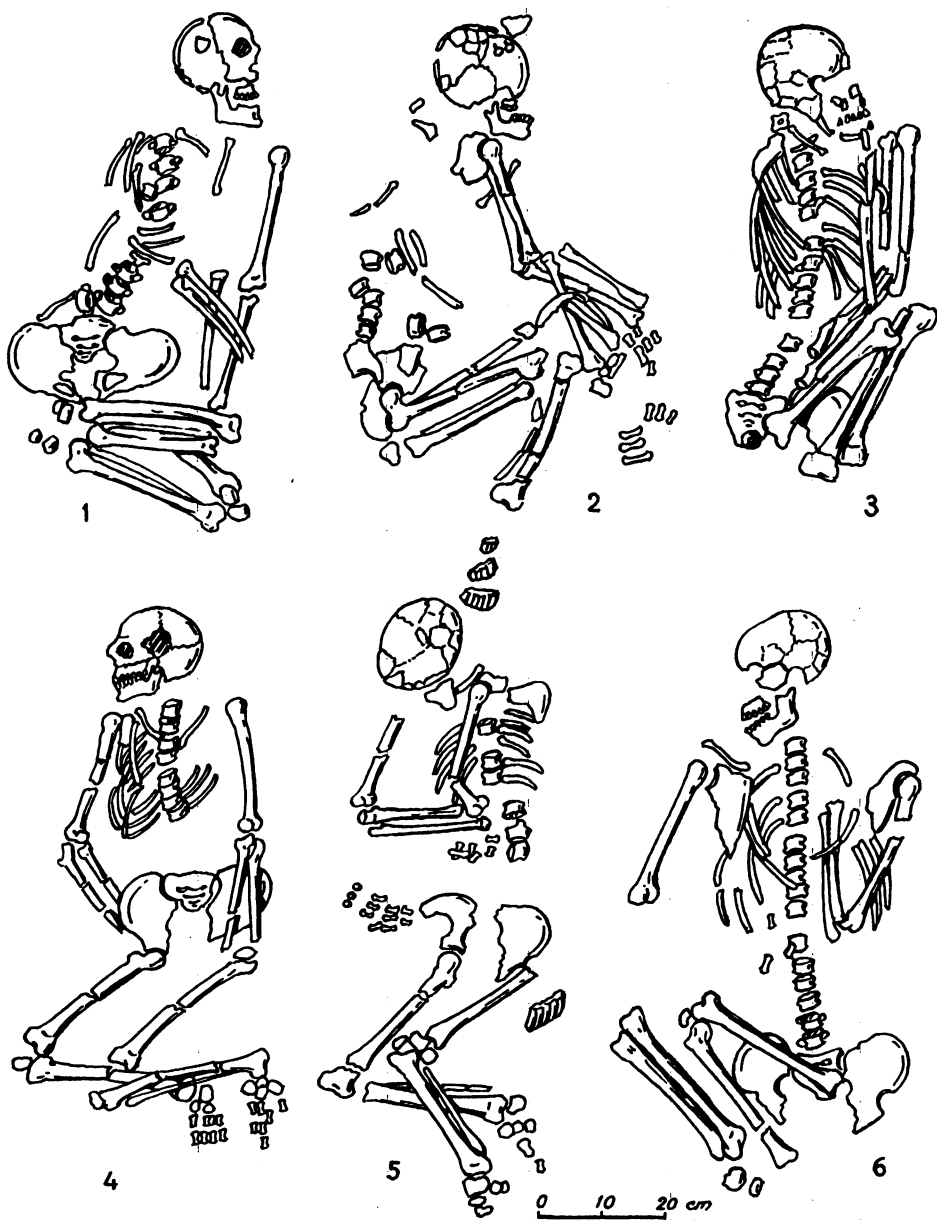


Fig. 2. Types of flexed and crouched burials of the Late Neolithic in Latvia.

2 pav. Kapu su sulenktomis ir suriestotomis mirusiju pozomis tipi vēlavajame neolīte Latvijojē.

here the identification of the sex was uncertain. On the other hand, too much significance should not be placed on this, as Corded Pottery burials at Sandomierz, Poland, display the opposite trend: women were buried on their right side, men on their left side (Krzak 1976: 175).

Head orientation of Corded Pottery culture burials also showed great variation. Females were buried with their heads oriented to the west (Burial 7, Kvāpāni II; Burial 5, Kreiči) or to the south-west (Burials 6 and 33, Abora I settlement site). Males had their heads positioned to the north (Burial 202, Zvejnieki cemetery), to the north-east (Burial 197, Zvejnieki), to the north-west (Burial 12, Kreiči burial field) or to the south (Burial 23, Kreiči). In sum, no real patterning was observed in either head or body posture in the Late Neolithic Corded Pottery culture burials. Perhaps it is worth noting that in burials of the 3rd type (i.e. in a crouched position and possibly tied), the heads of both females were oriented to the west (Burial 7, Kvāpāni II and Burial 5, Kreiči).

The quantity of burial goods recovered from the Late Neolithic Corded Pottery graves is small. It is noteworthy that the inventory does not contain boat-shaped stone axes or wedge-shaped flint axes, characteristic of Corded Pottery cultures in central and eastern Europe. Clay pots, amphorae and smaller vessels are found in the Latvian Corded Pottery graves, e.g. Burial 88, Zvejnieki cemetery (Zagorskis 1987, Fig. 34), as well as the Sarkanī and Selgas single graves in eastern and central Latvia.

On the whole, the inventory of burial goods consisted of ornaments and ritual items made of amber, animal teeth, bone and antler. Amber artefacts were represented by key-shaped pendants (used as a head ornament in Burial 33, female, Abora I), and other forms (Burial 6, female, Abora I; Burial 13, Kvāpāni II), as well as button-shaped beads (Burial 10, child, Abora I).

Pendants made of animal teeth were found with a female (Burial 6) and with a child (Burial 10) at Abora I. A necklace composed of animal tooth pendants, with a beaver's tooth in the centre, is associated with a female (Burial 5) at the Kreiči cemetery (Zagorskis 1961, Table II).

Two wristguards (i.e. a tablet, or "bracer", which protected the wrist and palm of an archer) made of antler were found near an adolescent (Burial 186) at Zvejnieki cemetery (Zagorskis 1987, Fig. 31). They have bell-shaped contours, and their surface ornament consist of bands or rows of small incised triangles (Fig. 3: 2, 3). Another wristguard (Fig. 3: 1) was found near disrupted burials at Abora I (Loze 1979, Table LIII: 6), and two more at the Lagaža settlement site, Lubāna Lake Depression (Loze 1979, Table LIII: 8, 10). Similar wristguards are known from excavations in former East Prussia, at the Kaup barrow grave (Kilian 1955, Taf. XLV, Abb. 291; Šturms 1970, Taf. 101: 1, 2), at the Balanovo burial field, Russia (Bader 1963, Fig. 164: 1) and, more distantly, in Denmark and Sweden (Brøndsted 1938, Fig. 128: f; Stenberger 1943: 92-94; 1960: 201-217). It is clear that antler wristguards were widespread in the peri-Baltic area during the Late Neolithic.

The ornamentation style of the wristguards lies in the symbolic context of a pre-Baltic ethnos, its meaning now no longer understood. The motif of bow-shaped lines (or concentric arcs), in conjunction with vertical and horizontal straight elements, occurs in several variants in Latvia (Fig. 3: 4, 5). This motif is well known in the ornamentation of ceramic vessels of the Tripol'je

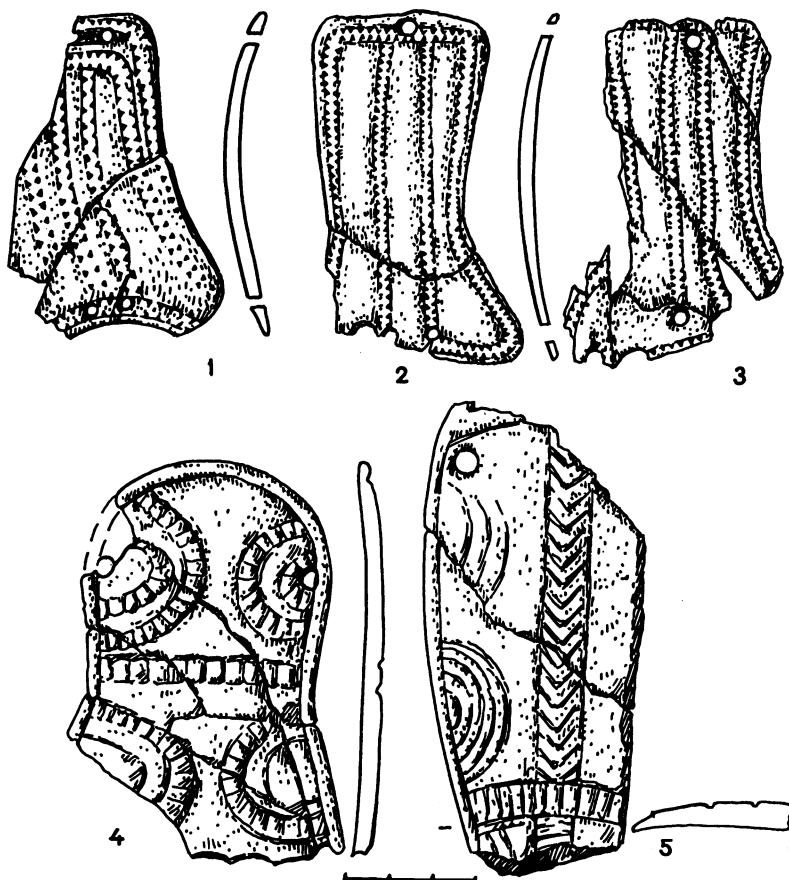


Fig. 3. Ornamented antler wristguards: 1 - Abora I settlement, 2,3 - Zvejnieki cemetery and 4,5 - Lagaža settlement.

3 pav. Ornamentuoti šaulio riešo skydeliai iš: 1 - Abora I gyvenvietės, 2,3 - Zvejnieki kapinyno, 4,5 - Lagaža gyvenvietės.

culture, particularly from the region between the east Carpathians and the middle Dnieper, in all phases of its development — from the fourth millennium B.C. up to the second millennium B.C. (Passek 1961, Fig. 13: 8). It also occurs in vessels of the north Belorussian culture, found in the upper reaches of the Daugava (Mikljaev 1969, Fig. 4; Mikljaev and Semenov 1979: Fig. 5). In addition, this motif is present on decorated vessels of the Globular Amphora culture (2500-2000 B.C.) in Poland (Wisłanski 1979, Figs. 159: 6, 13; 161: 4, 5; 163: 12), as well as in flat-bottomed pots of the Catacomb culture of the Kharkov-Voronezh area (*Arkheologija Ukrainoskyj SSR*, Fig. 107).

## Religious Beliefs

Religious beliefs held by Late Neolithic cultures in eastern Europe, including those of the post-Narva Pottery culture, are reflected most strikingly in small

objects of art. In Latvia, Late Neolithic beliefs in regard to the afterlife are evoked through bone or antler sculpture, as well as by one figurine small clay, from disrupted burials at Abora I. Throughout eastern Europe, the Neolithic practice of placing a figurine of a human, animal, bird or fish with a deceased individual appears to have its roots in the Early Neolithic. This is indicated by the presence of a female figure in a child's grave (Burial 172) at the Zvejnieki cemetery (Zagorskis 1987, Fig. 25), as well as by the figurines found in the Middle Neolithic burials (Nos. 228, 271, 277) at the same burial ground (Zagorskis 1987, Figs. 27-29).

Bone sculptures found at Abora I include several different animals and birds, probably of special religious and totemic significance. There are two representations of a common grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) (Loze 1979, Table LI: 6, 8; 1983: Fig. 69). Bone figurines of grass snakes have been found also in Estonia, within the burials of an adult (Burial 8) and an adolescent (Burial 14), at the Tamula settlement site (Jaanits 1957, Abb. 4: 10, 20; Loze 1983, Fig. 70). The important role of grass snakes in religious cults among the Baltic peoples is attested by traditional folklore. Straubergs (1944: 216-244) notes that they were particularly important in the religious tradition of the ancient Lithuanians and Old Prussians. They regarded the grass snake as an animistic creature and a spirit-protector of the household (*genius familiaris*). Folkloric and apocryphal accounts allege that the snake was given milk to drink.

Figurines of wild boar are well represented in eastern Baltic miniature art. A clay sculpture of this animal was found at Lagaža (Loze 1979, Table LII: 5). Carved rather more successfully, in bone, is a boar figurine from excavations at Tamula (Jaanits 1965, Abb. 15: 3; Loze 1983, Fig. 64). The wild boar is a representative of the "middle world" of the tripartite conceptual model proposed by Dumézil for ancient Indo-European myths, including those of the Germanic peoples, Celts and the Baltic Slavs (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1984: 516-517). The figurines of wild boar found in archaeological excavations throughout the Baltic republics, in view of the highly regionalized Late Neolithic culture, probably reflect ancient Baltic mythological concepts of the boar as a special ritual beast. A further line of support here is the Late Neolithic production of knives made of wild boar's tusk.

The beaver, in its context as a "water animal", is widely known in the traditional folklore of the Baltic peoples. Rituals associated with this animal thus may have their roots in the Late Neolithic. For example, a beaver figurine made from a split wild boar's tusk was found at Abora I (Loze 1979, Table LII: 6). There is also a representation in bone of a swimming beaver, from the Valma settlement site in Estonia (Jaanits 1965, Abb. 7: 4; Loze 1983, Fig. 61).

Figures of other animals can also be mentioned, among them bone sculptures of a bear from Abora I (Loze 1979, Table LII: 9; 1983, Fig. 59) and another in amber from Tamula (Jaanits 1957, Abb. 4: 19; Loze 1983, Fig. 90). It is thought, however, that the cult of the bear among ancient Indo-Europeans was less significant than that of the wolf (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1984: 94-97). In fact, there is little evidence of a wolf cult, in terms of Late Neolithic art, in the eastern Baltic area. In addition, the loss of the proto-Indo-European root word for 'bear' in the Baltic-Slavonic-Germanic area, and subsequent regional

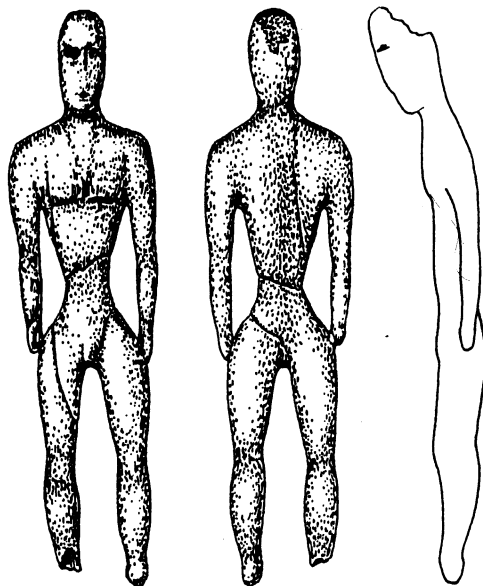


Fig. 4. Male figurine carved from antler. Abora 1 settlement, Lubāna Lake Depression, Late Neolithic.

4 pav. Vyro figūrēlē iš rago. Abora I gyvenvietė, Lubanos ežero žemuma, vėlyvasis neolitas.

neologisms (Latvian *lacis*, Lith. *lokys*, Rus. *medved*, Old High German *bero*) suggests that the cult of the bear evolved in northern Europe.

Latvian folklore contains references to the cuckoo and owl as death-birds (Straubergs 1944: 127). In this context, it is of interest that a Late Neolithic sculpture of an owl's head is known from Šturms' excavations in the Lubāna Lake Depression (Loze 1983, Fig. 41). Another possible mythological bird figurine is that of a black grouse (fashioned from the vertebra of a sturgeon) from Burial 228 at the Zvejnieki cemetery (Zagorskis 1987, Fig. 29). This bird is a representative of the "upper world" of the ancient Indo-European tripartite model (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1984: 540). Three examples of waterfowl — a duck, a goose and a swan — are represented very strikingly in eastern Baltic art of the Late Neolithic (at the settlement sites of Eīņi, the mouth of the Malmuta, Riņņkulns and Tamula).

Finally, anthropomorphic figurines made of antler and bone are known from settlements in the Lubāna Lake Depression (Abora I and Lagaža) and Tamula. From Abora I (Loze 1979, Table LI: 5; Fig. 76) comes a small masterpiece of Late Neolithic art: the figurine of a man carved in antler (Fig. 4). It is possible that this, and some of the other small anthropomorphic sculptures, represent prototype deities of the ancient Indo-European pantheon.

## Conclusions

Burial practices of the Late Neolithic Corded Pottery culture in Latvia have been analyzed on the basis of more than 40 burials at the Kreiči and



Zvejnieki cemeteries (cf. Zagorskis 1961, 1987). Other burials from this period are known from the Abora I and Kvāpāni II settlement sites in the Lubāna Lake Depression (Loze 1979, 1983). Single graves have been investigated within the entire territory of Latvia (Šturms 1970; Loze 1987).

Six different burial postures were identified. In general, males lay with their heads oriented to the north, and females to the west. Grave goods included an amphora, beakers, animal tooth pendants, amber button-shaped beads and wristguards made from antler. The ornamentation of the wristguards is noteworthy and reflects a style that was apparently used across a wide area — from the Globular Amphora culture in Poland to the Catacomb culture of the Kharkov-Voronezh region in eastern Ukraine and south-east Russia.

A complex of Late Neolithic religious beliefs is reflected in special bone and antler sculptures: a grass snake, a wild boar, a beaver, a bear and various birds. Their representation evokes traditional subjects and themes of early Indo-European folklore, in particular those of the Lithuanians and Old Prussians.

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## Vēlvarojo neolito laidojimo papročiai ir tikėjimai Latvijoje

### ILZE LOZE

#### Santrauka

Vēlvarojo neolito virvelinēs keramikos kultūros laidojimo papročiai Latvijoje ištūrīnēti pagal daugiau nei 40 kapu su sulenktomis ir suriestomis mirusiųjų pozomis iš Kreiči ir Zvejnieki kapinynu (Zagorskis 1961, 1987). Šie kapai buvo rasti Abora I ir Kvapani II gyvenvietēse Lubanos ežero žemumoje (Loze 1976, 1979). Atskiri kapai buvo ištūrīti visoje Latvijos teritorijoje (Šturms 1970, Loze 1987a). (Pav. 1).

Paaiškėja 6 skirtingos šių palaidojimų pozicijos (Pav. 2). Vyrų galvos buvo orientuotos į šiaurę, moterų - į vakarus. Kapų radiniai - amfora, taurelės, pakabučiai, pagaminti iš gyvulių dantų ir gintaro, gintaro sagutės su V pavidalo skylute ir šaulio riešo skydeliai. Pastarieji pasižymi originaliu savo ornamentų stiliumi (Pav. 3).

Religiniai tikėjimai atsispindėjo vėlvarojo neolito kaulo ir rago figūrėlėse - žalčio, šerno, meškos ir paukščių. Šių figūrėlių temos gali būti palygintos su ankstyvų indoeuropiečių tautosakos subjektais, ypač senovės lietuvių ir prūsų.