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Sun, Moon, and Stars on Kievan Rus Jewellery (Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries)

Ann Laurence Caudano

Abstract. The principalities of Kievan Rus, a state formed by the area that covered the Western Bug to the Volga between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, legated numerous earrings and medals shaped as a sun, a star, or a moon crescent, probably a reminiscence of Slavic paganism. Unfortunately this abundant material has not been satisfactorily analysed in studies of the Rus cosmological worldview, even though the information provided by these jewels is essential to complement the documents alluding to the heavens. Indeed, the Slavonic translations of Byzantine patristic texts with cosmological contents, or descriptions of astronomical phenomena in chronicles, deal only with a more restricted – literate – audience in Rus. Furthermore, on the basis of such written sources, one would easily conclude that the Rus showed but very little interest in the stars: it did not produce any original speculation on the heavens, and most of its material was copied or imitated from Byzantine models. The study of jewels indicates that, on the contrary, the sky and its celestial bodies fascinated a broad range of the Rus population.

Despite the limited interpretations one can offer to these sources, which do not provide a coherent picture of the cosmos, the frequent solar, lunar and stellar motifs on jewellery reveals a representation of heavens specific to the Kievan period. Indeed, they appeared in the region in the late eighth and early ninth centuries and disappeared almost completely in the thirteenth century, after the Mongol invasions. My presentation focuses on two aspects of this material: the origin of these jewels and their role in Rus society. In fact, if these motifs seem to be typical of the Rus, comparable designs were found also in Byzantium and among Finno-Ugric tribes. It is thus essential to determine in what measure these neighbouring states and tribes influenced Rus crafts. More puzzling is the sudden end to their production in the thirteenth century, which could be explained by political and economic factors, or its coincidence with a stronger implantation of the Christian faith in the Rus. This, as such, would reveal radical changes in the consideration of heavens at that period.

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Numerous jewels in the shape of a moon crescent, a star, or symbolising the sun and its rays have been excavated from the tombs and hoards situated on the former territory of Kievan Rus. This state, which emerged at the end of the ninth century and lasted until the thirteenth century, covered an area roughly comprised between the Dniestr and the Western Bug to the Volga, and was constituted by settlements of diverse ethnic origins, mostly eastern Slavic tribes and Finno-Ugrians but also Scandinavians.¹ The variety and the large quantity of this peculiar form of cosmic representations bring out a question: what could be the significance of these jewels for the society who wore them? Could we detect traces of animistic beliefs within the Rus population? Among the varied forms of the celestial bodies represented on Rus jewellery, I shall distinguish six types, organised according to their position on the costumes, as pendants attached to a headdress, a necklace, or an earring, but also to their geographical distribution. The jewels I am interested in are the following:

1. lunar pendants fixed to a headdress with the moon crescent pointing upwards;
2. seven ray-shaped and seven blade-shaped headdress pendants as solar or stellar motifs;
3. *lunnitsy*, lunar crescents attached to an earring or a necklace with their horns turned towards the ground;
4. stellar pendants;
5. solar pendants, most of which reproduce the cosmic wheel.

Prior to describing them more thoroughly, I should stress that these ornaments are not specific to the Kievan Rus. For instance, moon crescents were used on jewels across Europe from the fifth century BCE among the Scythians, the Sarmatians and the Celts. They were also frequent models on Byzantine earrings in the sixth and seventh century until the tenth century.² Stellar pendants from the sixth and seventh

¹ A map of Kievan Rus can be found in Paul R. Magocsi, *Ukraine. A Historical Atlas* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 7.

² L. Niederle, *Příspěvky k vývoji Byzantských šperků ze IV – X století* (Prague: V Praze, 1930), p. 139–40; Jean Blankoff, 'Deux survivances du paganisme en vieille Russie. Les ornements en croissants de lune. Le culte de l'ours', *Slavica Gandensia. Symposium international et pluridisciplinaire sur le paganisme slave. Bruxelles-Gand, 21–24 mai 1980. Contributions* (Ghent: 1980-1981), Vol. 7/8, pp. 9–12.

centuries, similar to those excavated in Kiev, were discovered in northern Italy, in Sicily, and on the coast of the Black Sea.³ In fact, the presence of lunar pendants and of their moulds excavated in Crimea and dated from the eighth and the ninth centuries suggested to scholars that the region was an intermediary between the Kievan Rus and Byzantium in the diffusion of these motifs.⁴ Finally, the cosmic wheel, one of the most common solar symbols, is an extremely widespread motif on jewels as well. Its origin is difficult to trace. Rays and radiating wheels associated with the sun were prominent within Ugric and Siberian tribes until recently. Closer to the Kievan period though, among the different types of Finno-Ugric solar pendants unearthed in the Prikam'e and Volga basins, many were similar to those found in the Slavic settlements of the Rus and dated from the sixth to the eleventh centuries.⁵

Lunar and stellar pendants attached to a head dress were extremely common and can be characterised ethnically. Headgear of this type is typical of the Slavic female costume. They appear as a row of pendants fixed to a band of cloth or in the hair on one or both sides of the head.⁶ A majority of the patterns on the adornments of headdresses originated from the western Slavs of the mid-lower Danube (Moravia) and of the Bug. After the eighth century, they spread gradually to the northeast of the Rus and became common among the eastern Slavs during the tenth and the eleventh centuries, until the thirteenth century.⁷ Among the various types of headdress jewels, we find lunar rings and rings with seven rays or seven blades that resemble a semi-star or semi-sun. Some even mixed both lunar and radiating models.

Most of these jewels were found in the northern forest of the Rus and on the left bank of the Dniepr.⁸ The repartition of these ornaments made by V. Sedov, on the basis of archaeological findings, revealed that the lunar-shaped pendants were widespread mainly among the Krivichians, in

³ Niederle, *Příspěvky*, pp. 130–31; V.V. V.V. Sedov, *Slaviane v rannem srednevekov'e* (Moscow: Nauka, 1995), p. 78.

⁴ Blankoff, 'Paganisme', p. 13.

⁵ L.A. Golubeva, 'Simvol' solntsa v ukrasheniakh Finno-Ugrov', in T.V. Niolaeva, ed., *Drevniaia Rus' i Slaviane* (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), pp. 69–70.

⁶ Sedov, *Slaviane*, p. 31.

⁷ A.N. Kirpichnikov, 'Rannesrednevekovaia Ladoga', in V.V. Sedov, ed., *Srednevekovaia Ladoga. Novye arkheologicheskie otkrytiia i issledovaniia* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1985), p. 18.

⁸ G.F. Solov'eva, 'Semiluchevye visochnye kol'tsa', in T.V. Niolaeva, ed., *Drevniaia Rus' i Slaviane* (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), p. 177.

the region of Smolensk and Polotsk, but also among the Slavs of Novgorod and of the Lake Il'men.⁹ Several types can be singled out. The earliest type, it seems, appeared in the eighth / ninth century in the surroundings of Smolensk. It was also made until the end of the twelfth century in the area comprised between the Kliaz'ma and the Volga. Variations of this older motif based on a western Slavic model appeared throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁰ An interesting elaboration dated from the eighth century, found in the countryside of the Dniepr north of Kiev, appended a five-pointed star to the lunar pendant, and reproduced a model designed by the Slavs of the Danube as well. Analogous shapes were still found Kiev in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹¹

Pendants ending with seven rays or seven blades were typical of the tribes living on the southeast of the Rus plain. More specifically, seven ray-shaped rings ornamented the headdresses of Radimichian women – a tribe that occupied the region between the Dniepr and the Desna – from the end of the eighth until the second half of the twelfth century. Pendants with seven blades were more common in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries among the Viatichians, who lived on the left bank of the Don, south of the Oka.¹² Once again, the appearance and the diffusion of both types of pendants within the eastern Slavs in the eighth to the tenth centuries are due to the copies made by the local artisans of models brought by Slavic migrants from the Danube.¹³ In certain variants, the rings were shaped with five rays or blades and decorated with beads or granules at their tips.¹⁴

⁹ Sedov, *Slaviane*, pp. 370–1. A map of the eastern Slavic tribes can be found in Magocsi, *Atlas*, p. 5.

¹⁰ V.V. Sedov, 'Lunnichnye visochnye kol'tsa vostochnoslavianskogo areala', in Iu. S. Kukushkin, ed., *Kul'tura Slavian i Rus'* (Moscow: Nauka, 1998), pp. 249–52, 255–6, 259–60; V.V. Sedov, *Drevnerusskaia narodnost'. Istoriko-arkheologicheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow: Nauka, 1999), pp. 185, 189–95.

¹¹ Sedov, *Drevnerusskaia narodnost'*, p. 185; Iu. S. Aseev, ed., *Mystetstvo Kyivskoi Rusi* (Kyiv: 1989), figs 223b and 224b; V. Tymchyshyn, ed., *Zolota skarbnytsa Ukrainy. The Gold Treasury of Ukraine* (Kyiv: 1999), pp. 53, 55.

¹² Solov'eva, 'Semiluchevye', pp. 173–5; M.V. Sedova, *Iuvelirnye izdeliia drevnego Novgoroda (X–XV vv.)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), pp. 10, 13.

¹³ The ray-shaped pendants of ninth-century Novotroitske were fabricated on location with low-grade silver and copied the expensive ornaments imported from the Danube (Sedov, *Drevnerusskaia*, p. 188).

¹⁴ Solov'eva, 'Semiluchevye', pp. 174–5.

Lunnitsy and solar jewels were widespread in the tenth to the thirteenth centuries and are found across the whole territory of the Rus.¹⁵ Following a classification done by V.V. Hol'msten, the different sorts of *lunnitsy* created by the eastern Slavs have been sorted on the basis of the shape and width of their crescents, and dated accordingly.¹⁶ As for the jewels symbolising the sun, the most widespread is the cosmic wheel that reproduces the celestial body by means of a circle or a dot, from which emerge straight or revolving rays, often twelve as the twelve months of a solar year.¹⁷ Swastikas and crosses, many of which are thought to be the emblems of a solar divinity, were also found in the kurgans of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁸ On this matter though, it would be presumptuous to consider a cross as a pagan solar symbol, particularly because the Rus was converted to the Christian faith at the end of the tenth century. Special types of *lunnitsy* included a cross in the centre of their crescent. Some of them were even inserted into a cosmic wheel. A pendant from Novgorod for instance represented a cross inside a *lunnitsa*, from which emerged 12 rays surrounded by an outer circle.¹⁹ Once again, this form of jewellery was not produced by the Rus exclusively. A model from the Roman period with a crescent and a cross in the middle was found in Egypt.²⁰ Noteworthy are also the necklaces from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, which lined up a solar pendant – cross or cosmic wheel – in the middle of four *lunnitsy*.²¹

Along with the adoption of motifs from the Slavs of the Danube, patterns and techniques of jewellery were also influenced by Byzantium. This is the case for the golden decorative chains found in Novgorod. These typical Byzantine ornaments were made most likely for the local aristocracy at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century. Some of these chains ended with a moon crescent.²² However,

¹⁵ Sedov, *Slaviane*, p. 366–71.

¹⁶ Sedova, *Iuvelernye*, p. 24.

¹⁷ V.P. Darkevich, 'Simvoly nebesnykh svetil v ornamente drevnei Rusi', *Sovetskaia Arkheologiia* (Moscow: 1960), Vol. 4, figs. 1: 27, 34-7, 42.

¹⁸ Darkevich, 'Simvoly', p. 59.

¹⁹ Darkevich, 'Simvoly', p. 62; Boris A. Rybakov, *Remeslo drevnei Rusi* (Moscow: USSR AS, 1948), p. 448.

²⁰ Liselotte Hansmann and Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett und Talisman. Erscheinungsform und Geschichte* (Munich: Verlag Georg D.W. Callwey, 1966), p. 174.

²¹ Kiev National Museum of History; Sedov, *Slaviane*, p. 368.

²² Sedova, *Iuvelernye*, p. 17.

most of the aristocratic jewels created with complex Byzantine crafts were produced and consumed in Kiev. Hoards from the end of the tenth to the twelfth century revealed the existence of elaborate stellar pendants in gold or silver, ornamented with granules, pearls, or enamels.²³ The reason for this specific localisation lies in that the Byzantine jewellery skills, such as granulation, *niello*, enamels, or filigree, were first mastered and developed by the artisans of Kiev in the tenth or eleventh century, only to be diffused to the other cities of the Rus in the twelfth century.²⁴ Ultimately, most of the findings of aristocratic jewellery remain confined to Kiev and its hinterland.²⁵

At the end of the twelfth and in the thirteenth century, a shift occurred in the production, which is attested to by the numerous imitation moulds that roughly duplicated the complex and expensive models of the previous period. In relation to our ‘celestial jewels’, this is mainly the case for the *lunnitsy* and the stellar pendants. The same forms were used for the elaboration of less precious jewels in bronze or in alloys of tin and lead.²⁶ This new type of Kievan jewellery was exported, but also imitated in other cities of the Rus, for instance in Galich, Grodno, Beloozero, or Novgorod, where the moulds were more simplified.²⁷ As a result, Novgorod became the second important centre in jewel production in Rus after the thirteenth century. The diffusion of these jewels was facilitated by the intense trade between the towns of the Rus, and led to a gradual uniformity of patterns among the eastern Slavs and through a wider range of the population as well.²⁸ In reality, this change coincides with the growing power of the political centres in the northern Rus, and explains the presence of the rich caches of Old Riazan dated from the middle of

²³ G.F. Korzukhina, ‘Kievskie iuveliry nakanune mongoloskogo zavoevaniia’, *Sovetskaia Arkheologiia* (Moscow: 1950), Vol. 14, p. 227.

²⁴ Blankoff, ‘Paganisme’, p. 16; Thomas S. Noonan, ‘The Flourishing of Kiev’s International and Domestic Trade, ca. 1100–ca. 1240’, in I.S. Koropeckyj, ed., *Ukrainian Economic History. Interpretative Essays* (Cambridge, MA: CIUS Press, 1991), p. 129.

²⁵ P.P. Tolochko, *Drevnii Kiev* (Kyiv: 1983), p. 146.

²⁶ Because these metals are more easily decayed, more moulds were found than the jewels they reproduced (Korzukhina, ‘Kievskie’, p. 227).

²⁷ Noonan, ‘Flourishing’, p. 130.

²⁸ Sedov, *Drevnerusskaia*, p. 216. The diffusion of simple jewellery among the population is observed already in the first half of the eleventh century, when bronze was used to render the complex ornaments of silver and granules on *lunnitsy* (Korzukhina, ‘Kievskie’, p. 233–4).

the thirteenth century, which contain – among others – silver stellar earrings with five or six rays fixed to a hollow lunar pendant. Such a model of jewels has been excavated in Vladimir and Chernigov and dated from that period.²⁹ In the previous centuries however, these hoards were almost exclusively a Kievan phenomenon.

What was the significance of these jewels for the Rus, if any? There is, unfortunately, no definitive answer to this question, but the number and the diffusion of these motifs on Kievan Rus jewellery calls for a deeper analysis. Their position on the headdress could give us a first lead. Indeed, while a few, such as B.A. Rybakov, suggested that the eastern Slavic headgear and its adornments formed a symbolic representation of the macrocosm, others attributed to them a supernatural purpose on the women's costumes. In reality, the protective character of the pendants is implied by the representation of motifs such as trees, plants, mermaids, birds, snakes, or Saints like Boris and Gleb.³⁰ By extension, scholars saw magical functions in the various reproductions of the celestial bodies on jewellery. The *lunnitsa*, for instance, is often seen as an amulet connected to the worship of the moon.³¹ Furthermore, according to Slavic folklore and beliefs, the combination of a solar and a lunar symbol on a pendant, e.g., a *lunnitsa* and a cross, protects marriages or prevents illness, whereas the repetition of several celestial jewels on a necklace reinforces their defensive power.³² Such a model could also epitomise the dual faith

²⁹ Korzukhina, 'Kievskie', p. 233; V.P. Darkevich and A.L. Mongait, *Klad iz Staroi Riazani. The Treasure of Staraya Ryazan* (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), pp. 12–14.

³⁰ G.K. Vagner, *Kanon i stil' v drevnerusskom iskusstve* (Moscow: 1987), p. 76; Boris A. Rybakov, 'Iazycheskaia simbolika russkikh ukrashenii XII v.', *I Mezhdunarodnyi kongress slavianskoi arkheologii. Varshava 14-18 IX 1965* (Wroclaw–Warsaw–Krakow: 1970), p. 352; W. Hensel, 'O magicznej funkcij wczesnosredniowiecznych kastyczków skroniowych', *Slavia Antiqua* (Poznan: 1970), Vol. 16, pp. 60–1.

³¹ *Skarbnytsa*, p. 185; Darkevich, 'Simvoly', p. 57. William Ryan includes the *lunnitsa* among amulets, but does not comment on its expected magical properties (William F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight. An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (Trowbridge: 1999), p. 219).

³² Because of the supposed influence of the moon on bodily fluids, lunar symbols were used against epilepsy (Hansmann and Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett*, p. 176). Until recently, men of the Kaluga wore soli-lunar earrings to protect them from sickness. According to V.P. Darkevich, the combination of the sun – female symbol – and of the moon – male symbol – is a prototype of human marriage (Darkevich, 'Simvoly', pp. 61, 65).

of the period, when, being recently converted, the Kievan Rus still lingered at the margin of paganism and Christianity.³³ On one hand, pagan beliefs considered the sun and the moon as divinities of life, health, and luck that protected against impure and evil forces. On the other hand, however, Christian apocalyptic traditions gave them a strong eschatological signification.³⁴ Frequent correlations were made between Christ and the sun through the halo and the rays – usually twelve – that surrounded his head. The Church – Christ’s betrothed – also receives its light from Christ, in the same way as the moon is illuminated by the sun.³⁵ Thus, ultimately, these jewels remain difficult to categorise.

Moreover, as emblematic as they could be, these ‘cosmic jewels’ do not belong to the same type of protecting amulets as those that represent concretely an animal or an object, and fulfil by themselves their apotropaic function.³⁶ Be it for the wheel or the crescent with its horns pointing upwards or downwards, these pendants do not correspond to the observed reality. If it is this schematisation that should hint to their relation with the cosmic world and provide their protective power, we cannot establish firmly whether they were thought to have magical properties.³⁷ And if so, they could only maintain their protective character as long as they were recognised and used as amulets, an attitude of the Rus about which we lack information.³⁸ In addition, it is hasty to systematically attribute a religious intention, pagan or Christian, to the representation of a cosmic symbol.³⁹ Let us also remember that many of these motifs on Kievan jewellery were borrowed from others, the Byzantines or the Danubian Slavs, for instance. In that sense, their magical dimension could have been lost, or a new one added. Besides, it

³³ Blankoff, ‘Paganisme’, p. 14.

³⁴ Darkevich, ‘Simvoly’, p. 62; Hansmann and Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett*, pp. 174, 176.

³⁵ J. Viret, ‘Un cryptogramme carolingien du Christ-Soleil’, in J. Batany, ed., *Le soleil, la lune et les étoiles au moyen âge* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 1983), p. 427–8; Otto Mazal, *Die Sternwelt des Mittelalters* (Graz: Akademische Druck-und-Verlags-Anstalt, 1993), p. 159–60.

³⁶ G.K. Vagner, *Problema zhanrov v drevnerusskom iskusstve* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974), p. 54. For this reason, M. V. Sedova did not include the *lunnitsa* among the amulet-pendants that reproduced axes, weapons or animals in the jewellery of Novgorod (Sedova, *Iuvelernye*, pp. 26–9).

³⁷ Hansmann and Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett*, pp. 173–4.

³⁸ Vagner, *Problema*, pp. 55–6.

³⁹ Hansmann and Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett*, p. 177.

is difficult to draw the border between fashion and superstitions. Still, their existence reveals a certain familiarity with and integration of the celestial bodies into everyday life.

After a period of intense economic activity, the production and the diffusion of jewels suddenly stopped as a consequence of the Mongol invasions of 1237–1240.⁴⁰ With them disappeared most ‘cosmic ornaments’ as well. In fact, a general decrease is observed in the jewellery of the Rus until the fifteenth century.⁴¹ Demographic decline, depredation of cities and of agriculture, along with the high tribute due to the Tatars, disrupted the Rus economy heavily.⁴² Findings of Rus jewels such as pectoral crosses in the region of Saratov on the Volga, close to the summer residence of Khan Baty, suggest that the Mongols displaced the Rus artisans to use their skills. Among the items excavated was also a stone mould of a stellar pendant, similar to the models found in Kiev’s workshops.⁴³ A few cities were spared most of the damages, though, and could benefit from the Tatars’ policy of protecting trade routes and exchanges with the Orient in particular.⁴⁴ Two centres emerged, revealing continuity in the manufacture of jewels in the Rus: Novgorod and Moscow. There the ancient models were developed and new patterns were created.⁴⁵ In Moscow, for instance, seven-blade-shaped headdress pendants were still produced in the fourteenth century, but their form evolved rapidly to a three-blade-shaped ornament with intricate motifs, a very thin jewellery apparently intended for mass production.⁴⁶ With only three blades on the suspension ring, the pendant of the Viaticians lost its original stellar aspect.

Is economic disruption sufficient to explain the disappearance of these jewels? Some suggested that, in the mid-thirteenth century, the old pagan symbols had been supplanted by the Christian ones and therefore lost

⁴⁰ Tolochko, *Drevnii*, p. 146; Noonan, ‘The Flourishing’, p. 122.

⁴¹ Rybakov, *Remeslo*, p. 695.

⁴² Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde. The Mongol Impact on Russian History* (London: 1987), p. 76.

⁴³ Rybakov, *Remeslo*, pp. 529–31; reproduction on p. 530.

⁴⁴ Halperin, *Russia*, pp. 81, 83, 85.

⁴⁵ Jewellers reused moulds from the thirteenth century to produce pectoral crosses and *zmeeviki*, an amulet representing a group of snakes in a radiating wheel (Rybakov, *Remeslo*, p. 614). On *zmeeviki*, see T.V. Nikolaeva and A.V. Chernetsov, *Drevnerusskie amulety-zmeeviki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991).

⁴⁶ Rybakov, *Remeslo*, pp. 551–2.

their meaning.⁴⁷ However, as we have seen, these jewels were fashionable and widespread at the eve of the Mongol invasions, thanks to the use of imitation moulds. Moreover, the celestial bodies are metaphorically rich concepts to describe the reality of Christ, the Church, and the world. Another reason could be pointed at. After the fourteenth century, Rus cities were indeed dependant on new political and/or economic centres, and thus subjected to new influences – Western, Oriental and Byzantine.⁴⁸ With them came new artistic patterns, which would have given jewellers the opportunity to design other motifs and express new preferences.



Fig 1. Lunar headdress-pendant.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Blankoff, 'Paganisme', p. 17.

⁴⁸ Rybakov, *Remeslo*, p. 651-2.

⁴⁹ Sedov, 'Lunnichnye', p. 251

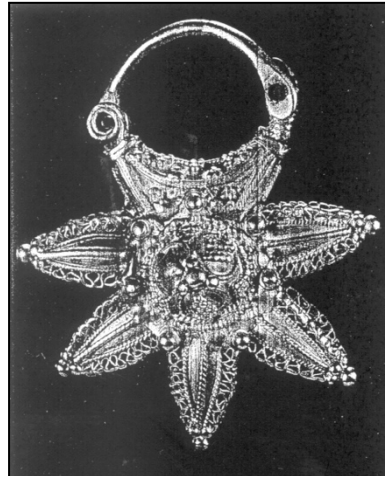


Fig 2. Stellar pendant attached to a *lunnitsa*.⁵⁰



Fig 3. Seven-ray-shaped headdress-pendants and *lunnitsy*.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Tymchyshyn, *Skarbnytsa*, p. 55.

⁵¹ Sedov, *Slaviane*, p. 367.



Fig 4. Seven-blade-shaped headdress-pendants⁵²

⁵² Sedov, *Slaviane*, p. 368.