The "Idol from Šernai" and the question of Bronze Age amber provenance in the eastern Mediterranean

MICHAEL HELTZER

The historical circumstances relating to the discovery of the so-called "Idol from Šernai" are well known. In 1900, an individual walking through the forest of Šernai to the south-east of Klaipėda (then part of East Prussia, and now the Republic of Lithuania) sat down to rest and happened to lean upon a stone. The stone shifted to the side, revealing beneath it a small bronze statue, about 14.7cm in height (Fig. 1). Later investigation of the area failed to find any additional archaeological material. The statuette was kept in the archaeological museum at Königsberg, and perished during World War II. Fortunately, the statuette was well described in the pre-war archaeological literature (La Baume 1927: Taf. 218a, 1928: 228; Przeworski 1929: Fig. 18; Šturms 1936: Taf. 20a).[1]

The small statue was immediately recognized by scholars as an Oriental import, and was thought to be affiliated with the Hittite-Anatolian cultural area. This was the conclusion reached by Przeworski in his study (1929), which dealt with several oriental Bronze Age finds in regions not far from Lithuania. Most of the finds analyzed by Przeworski, however, have their origin in south-west Siberia, north Caucasia or even Transcaucasia (Przeworski 1929: 32-68), and so the "Idol from Šernai" stands out among the objects of his study as being in a very different style. Various scholars assigned different dates to the statue, falling between the XIV-VIII centuries B.C. (Bucholz 1960: 43-44).

Today, as we have at our disposal the exhaustive investigation made by O. Negbi (1976) of Bronze Age bronze-idol statuettes, we know that the "Idol from Šernai" belongs without any doubt to the Canaanite culture.[2] Literally hundreds of statuettes of this type are known here from the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 B.C.). Not all Canaanite bronze idols necessarily have their origin in Syria or Palestine, for they also appear in considerable quantities in southeast Anatolia, and on Cyprus. In general, however, the majority of the

___

[1] My thanks are given to Prof. H. G. Buchholz from Giessen for his very important advice, without which the present work could not have been done.

[2] The statuettes most similar to the "Idol from Šernai" in the monograph of O. Negbi are Nos. 1311 and 1360 (Pl. 20) from Syria and Megiddo in Israel (pp. 29-40), dated to the XIV-XIII cent. B.C.. See also Fig. 45, No. 1326, p. 31 with the standard torque; Fig. 130, No. 1440, p. 115 (cf. Pl. 21 and p. 113). The statuette belongs to the Late Bronze Age from Syria. Numbers 1175 and 1177 (Pl. 16) from Syria and Cyprus (pp. 22-24) are from occasional finds, but represent an early date (XVIII cent. B.C.).

Fig. 1. Canaanite bronze figurine known as "Idol from Šernai".

1 pav. Kananitų bronzos figūrėlė žinoma kaip „Šernų dievukas"

excavated finds, as well as the occasional finds of these bronze statuettes come from Syria-Palestine.

The "Idol from Šernai" is therefore a Canaanite figurine of a male deity, probably a weather-god of the Late Bronze Age. This type of figurine disappears from the Canaanite archaeological record at the end of the XIII cent. B.C., or by the very beginning of the Iron Age I.

The Šernai figurine is by no means a fake, then, and does not seem to be a mystification, i.e. an object taken from one archaeological context, and deliberately put into another archaeological context with the intention of deceiving an unsuspecting future "discoverer". We have to take into account the probability that at the beginning of the 20th century such figurines were almost unknown in Lithuania and elsewhere[3].

The question then arises: how could this Mediterranean bronze figurine have reached the south-eastern shore of the Baltic Sea? In my opinion, it was associated with the ancient amber trade. At this point it is useful to turn to the laboratory investigation by Curt Beck (1985a) of various types of amber— Baltic, Italian, Sicilian, Romanian, French, Portuguese and others. His analysis shows that Baltic amber can be distinguished from all other types of fossil resins on the basis of its infrared spectroscopic signature. This allows the possibility of identifying the origin of some archaeologically known amber artifacts. The selective analysis of amber artefacts found in eastern Europe and the middle East (i.e. the eastern Mediterranean) indicates that the well known Mycenean amber finds (XIV-XII cent. B.C.) as well as the Palestinian artefacts from the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages (XV-VIII cent. B.C.) are of Baltic amber (Hughes-Brock 1985; Todd 1985).

Hughes-Brock points out that texts from Mycenean Greece mention amber craftsmen (*re-di-na-to-mo* or "resin-cutters") who worked amber there

___

[3] Note by editor R. Sidrys: The possibility, although most unlikely, that the Šernai idol represents a mystification can not be dismissed absolutely. A. Snitkuvienė (1987) recently concluded that a cache of ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern figurines "discovered" in 1852 in Švėkšna, Šilutė region by the 17 year-old A. Pliateris (later to become a prominent archaeologist in Lithuania), while excavating ancient burials on his father's estate, had been deliberately planted there by his father, who earlier had traveled extensively throughout Egypt and the Near East. The seven figurines themselves are thought to be authentic. When Dr. Heltzer wrote his paper, he was not aware of Mrs. Snitkuvienė's article. In 1994, after reading her work, Dr. Heltzer commented in personal communication to R.S. that the account of the Pliateris mystification was fascinating, but he still did not think the Šernai idol was planted. He noted that in 1900 such figurines were a rarity (now there are several hundred), while the Pliateris figurines represent late Egyptian mass-production, which were widely available in the shops of 19th century antiquities-dealers.

Fig. 2. Amber statuette depicting Assyrian king or priest.

2 pav. Gintaro statulėlė atvaizduojanti asirų karalių arba žynį.

during the Late Helladic period. In addition to the amber artefacts locally pro-duced in Mycenean Greece, a number of unworked amber nodules have also been found (Hughes-Brock 1985: 257-267). From a possible Late Bronze Age context in Achziv, northern Israel we have the figurine of an amber lion, about 10cm in length and 5cm in height. In Israel, where archaeological work has been conducted on a large scale, amber artefacts are found from the Late Bronze age up to Byzantine times (Todd 1985: 292-298).

Baltic amber also reached ancient Mesopotamia, where it was designated by the Akkadian word *elmešu* (cf. Hebr. *ḥašmal*) (Todd 1985: 298). An out-standing object related to the amber trade of ancient Mesopotamia, and especially of ancient Mesopotamia, and especially of ancient Mesopotamia, and especially of Assyria, is an amber statue depicting a richly dressed male figure (Fig. 2). It is from the Elie Borowski collection, now in the Museum of Bible Lands in Jerusalem. Formerly this statue was in Europe, and it has been previously described by Merchav (1987: 42) and by Orthmann (1965: 14).

The height of the statuette is 28cm, which to my knowledge makes it one of the largest amber artefacts known from the ancient world. Attributes of style, including the fashion of the garment, are Assyrian, of the IX cent. B.C.. In other words, it can be dated to the period from Aššurnasirpal II (II quarter of the IX cent. B.C.) to Tiglat-piliser III (744-727 B.C.). The fact that the statue is carved to represent an Assyrian king or priest is unmistakable evidence that the amber piece was imported to Assyria in the form of a large unworked nodule. This provides additional proof of Baltic-Near Eastern contacts during the first centuries of the first millennium B.C..

What was the nature of these contacts and how did this piece of amber reach Assyria? Concerning the importation of amber into the Mediterranean, we have to agree with the opinion of C. W. Beck, that it reached the region "as we have to agree with the opinion of C. W. Beck, that it reached the region "as the result of some purposeful human effort" (Beck 1985b: 200). Based on the result of some purposeful human effort" (Beck 1985b: 200). Based on Beck's work we know that some Baltic amber in the Ukraine came by waterway along the Dniepr. Similarly, the Vistula waterway explains the distribution of amber-finds in south Poland and adjacent regions (Beck 1985b: 205-6). But, all

these finds represent small pieces of amber. Even if we accept the point of view that amber artefacts in the Iron Age burials of Slovenia came via Italy (Wells 1985), we need to note that these quantities of amber are even smaller. This pattern of distribution does not help to explain how very large pieces of Baltic amber could have reached Assyria. B. A. Turaev (1899) expressed the opinion at the end of the XIX century that the Phoenicians could have reached the Baltic Sea. At the time, however, his opinion was speculative and not based on any specific evidence.

I believe the "Idol from Šernai", found near the Lithuanian seashore, and the large Baltic amber artefacts found in the Mediterranean region may represent the terminal points of a mutual trade connection. It is possible that Phoenician merchants could be the connecting link, although at present we have no direct evidence of Phoenicians in the Baltic area. We must rely on future archaeological investigations for further explanation. Among the archaeological amber artefacts presently known in Lithuania are there any in an oriental, or at least orientalizing, style? In general, is there any evidence of an orientalizing style in the archaeological record of Lithuania? Answers to these questions will help us to resolve the interesting and important origin of the "Idol from Šernai".

References

Beck, W. (1985) "The role of the scientist: the amber trade, the chemical analysis of amber and the determination of Baltic provenience."*Journal of Baltic Studies* 16: 191-199.

Beck, W. (1985) "Criteria for 'amber trade': the evidence in the eastern European Neolithic." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16: 200-209.

Buchholtz, H.G. (1960) "Die Doppelaxt - eine Leitform auswärtiger Beziehungen des ägäischen Kulturkreises?" *Prähistorische Zeitschrift* 38: 43-44.

Hughes-Brock, H. (1985) "Amber and the Mycenaeans". *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16: 257-267.

La Baume, W. (1927) "Ostpreussen, Tafel 218a." *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte* IX.

La Baume, W. (1928) "Schernen." *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte* XI: 228.

Merchav, R. (1987) "Statue of a priest of king." In *Treasures of the Bible Lands, The Elie Borowski Collection*, ed. by R. Merchav, p. 42. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum

Negbi, O. (1976) *Canaanite gods in metal: an archaeological study of ancient Syro-Palestinian figurines*. Tel Aviv: Israel Exploration Society.

Orthmann, W. (1965) *Der Alte Orient*. Propyläen-Kunstgeschichte.

Przeworski, St. (1929) "Znalezisko Kuhervickie, Najstarcze Slady handlu Wschod-niego na Ziemiach polskich." *Swiatowit* 13: 32-68.

Snitkuvienė, A. (1987) „Švėkšnos radinių paslaptis." *Moklas ir Gyvenimas* [362] 12: 24-26.

Šturms, C.E. (1936) Die ältere Bronzezeit im Ostbaltikum. *Vorgeschichtliche Forschungen*, Heft 10.

Todd, J.M. (1985) "Baltic amber in the ancient Near East: a preliminary investigation." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16: 292-301.

Turaev, B.A. (Тураев, Б.А.) 1899 "Вопрос о финикянах в Балтийском море." *Труды десятого археологического съезда*, 1896: 201-213. (The question about Phoenicians in the Baltic Sea).

Wells, P.S. (1985) "Socio-economic aspects of the amber trade in Early Iron Age Slovenia."*Journal of Baltic Studies* 16: 268-275

„Šernų dievukas" ir žalvario amžiaus gintaro kilmės klausimas rytų Viduržemyje

M. HELTZER

Santrauka

„Šernų dievukas" rastas 1900 m. Šernų miške (Klaipėdos raj.) yra bronzinė figūrėlė, atvaizduojanti Kaananito Dievą iš Sirijos – Palestinos (1 pav.). Ji datuojama II tūkst. pr. Kr. II puse, dėl to iškyla klausimas dėl prekybinių santykių su Artimaisiais Rytais. Baltijos gintaro radiniai rytų Viduržemio archeologiniuose paminkluose, datuojami 1500-800 pr.Kr., yra aiškiai susiję su šiuo klausimu. Kaip buvo organizuota sena Baltijos Viduržemio gintaro prekyba? Tik tolimesni archeologiniai tyrimai ir gintaro radiniai galės išaiškinti šį intriguojantį klausimą.

New data on Early Iron Age settlement in south-eastern Latvia

ANDREJS VASKS

The cultural identity of south-eastern Latvia during the Early Iron Age (A.D.1-400) emerged as an archaeological issue in the 1980's, when excavations were begun along the Daugava river. Prior to this time, three culture-regions associated with the Early Iron Age had been recognized in the territory of Latvia:

1) south-western Latvia, with inhumation burials in shallow graves
2) northern Latvia, with *tarand* graves
3) middle and eastern Latvia, with inhumation burials in sand barrows surrounded by stone circles (Birons et al. 1974, Figs. 37, 58).

The south-eastern part of Latvia was not recognized as a separate area; instead, this territory was included with the region of middle and eastern Latvia. In the latter half of the 1970's, archaeological excavations were conducted at several hill-forts in south-eastern Latvia, and in the 1980's at settlement sites on the banks of the Daugava. Data from these excavations indicated that this area had been sparsely populated in the Early Iron Age, and that the problem of its cultural identification needed to be resolved. In this context, excavations at settlement sites along the Daugava in the Krāslava and Daugavpils Districts were particularly important. This paper will report on excavations conducted at one of these sites — the Kerkūzi settlement. Background on previous research in the region is first presented.

Previous Research

At the Sloboda settlement site, on the right bank of the Daugava, an area of 1300m² was investigated, and two periods of settlement were identified: one from the Early Iron Age and another from the Middle Ages (Zariņa 1988:162). The cultural layer identified with the Early Iron Age remained only in hollows of bedrock and reached a thickness of 0.8m. Four stone hearths were found. Evidence of ploughing (i.e. plough-marks) was also found, and appeared to be older than the settlement site. The plough-marks consisted of deep intersecting lines (5-8cm in width, 5cm in depth) in the light-coloured primary rock (Zariņa