Introduction

The first amber figurines in the Baltic area were found in the second half of the 19th century in the Curonian Spit (Klebs 1882) and today's northern Poland (Marches & Schulenburg 1881; Virchow 1884). Later they were also found in Denmark (Müller 1918; Mathiasen 1952), Sweden (Almgren 1907: 117, Abb. 9), Finland (Ayríppä 1945: 11, Abb. 2). These were stray finds that on account of various reasons were attributed by historical scholarship to the Stone Age.

In the second half of the 20th century a number of amber figurines were found in the course of archaeological excavations, so they are rather precisely dated.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the circumstances in which amber figurines were found, their stylistic features, dating and cultural identity. The scope of the investigation is confined to the Baltic area. The figurines found at archaeological excavations and by chance are treated separately. I bring under consideration the figurines that can be qualified as anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or combined i.e. anthropo-zoomorphic.

Artefacts found at archaeological excavations

In the second half of the 20th century a considerable number of amber figurines were found in the course of archaeological excavations carried out in the Stone Age sites:
- settlements – Zviždžė (Iose 1988: 47, taba. XLIII: 4; Iose 2000: 74, Fig. 15: 3); Nainiškė (Iose 1988: 96, taba. LXXV: 31);
- graves in settlements – Valmė (Jaanits 1965: 18, Abb. 6: 2); Tamula (Jaanits 1957: 85, Abb. 2, 4: 19); Abora I (Iose 1975: 64, Fig. 7: 2-3, 8); Abora II (Iose 1969: 126, taba. LXV: 10).
- finds in the burial ground of Kuldkarkosvė (Tørvinen 1978: 42, 80, kuva 11).

Stylistic shape and the subject matter

In respect of shape the figurines may be separated into two groups: 1. fully rounded and fully three-dimensional figurines that are intended to be viewed from all sides; 2. flat figurines that are intended to be viewed from one and opposite sides. In reality, however, not all the figurines can be neatly ascribed to one of the two groups. There are specimens that are not flat and cannot be viewed from every side. So there is a degree of overlapping and uncertainty in this division.

According to subject-matter the figurines can be zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and anthropo-zoomorphic ones.

These criteria allow to distinguish a group of flat zoomorphic figurines. They have been found in the sites of Nainiškė (Iose 1988: 96, taba. LXXV: 29); Zviždžė (Iose 1988: 47, taba. XLIII: 4; Iose 2000: 74, Fig. 15: 777
Two further rounded figurines from Sarnate resemble the rounded, unspecified heads (of birds?) (Fig. 1: 14, 15) (Banka 1970: 111, taba. LV: 4-6). Similar, hardly identifiable and fragmental zoomorphic heads were found in the sites of Abora II (Fig. 1: 18) (Izvek 1969: 126, psc. 2: 10), Sulka (Fig. 1: 12, 13) (Izvek 1969: 126, psc. 2: 11; Izvek 1988: 96, taba. LXV: 9), Zvinde (Fig. 1: 17) (Izvek 1988: 47, taba. XLIII: 4); Čventnji 23 (Fig. 1: 9) (Rimantiene 1979: 106, psc.2:771), Konsa (Akali) (Fig. 1: 16) (Indreko 1948: 302, Abb. 8: 2).

A special attention should be devoted to a figurine that was found in the settlement-site of Sarnate within the house No. 3 (Banka 1970: 111, taba. LV: 2, psc. 144). It represents almost a "naturalistic" depiction of the head of the elk (Fig. 1: 21). The figurine was modelled from either side by making graphic projections and incisions. It is a little crumpled near the neck, but it is still possible to distinguish the traces of the hole. So it looks likely that this figurine was used as a pendant.

Another figurine of distinction is that modelled from either side, which was found on the woman’s cranium in the grave of Valma site (Fig. 1: 22). Its head, hind legs and tail were produced by hollowing-out. The linear incisions reproduce the mouth. Nos- trils, eyes and ears (?) are represented by the pit-like cavities that were made by boring. The hole, drilled at the tail, could be used for hanging. Maybe this figurine was intended to represent the beaver. The figurine is 5 cm in length and 1-1.5 cm thick. It is worth observing that other such figurines of hares were laid down on the cranium of a man who was buried nearby. One of them was strongly stylised and fragmentary. Another resembles the beaver and this representation is more naturalistic (Janits 1965: 18, Abb. 6: 7, 2). So we come across in this grave the entire range of representations from almost abstract to almost naturalistic, which existed at one time in the same settlement.

Another small group (neither rounded, nor flat) is made up of three figurines found at the site of Abora I (Izvek 1975: 64, Fig. 7: 2-4). Two of them may be identified as representing the slug or reptile (Fig. 1: 24, 25), the third one is too abstract (Fig. 1: 23), but regarding the context of the other two it may also be attributed to the zoomorphic type. They display a wavy silhouette, the rounded edges, and eyes represented by shallow small pits that were bored. The mouth and limbs of one figurine are represented by means of a flake. The tapering holes for hanging are situated at the rear of all these figurines. The figurines are 0.5-1.5 cm thick and 5-7 cm in length.
The anthropomorphic figures. Their number is very limited. They are a human head-like pendant found at Kukkaroski (Fig. 2: 1) in the double burial 1-1a, in the vicinity of grave No. 1a and the unspecified silhouette resembling the human body with the head from the settlement of Zvídze (Fig. 1: 10) (Johé 1988: 47, tav. 63, XLIII: 4).

At first sight the pendant from the burial ground of Kukkaroski seems flat, but on account of rather deep removals at both sides of the head and the cavity sloping down towards the chin and mouth, it may be observed from the side. It is 1 cm thick, 4 cm in length and 2 cm in width. The eyes and mouth are represented by sloping rounded cavities. The nose is rectangular. The hole for hanging is drilled on top, in the area of the forehead (Torvinen 1978: 42, 80, kuva 11).

The provenience of the finds

The major part of these figures were found in the settlements together with other usual finds: ceramics, artefacts of flint etc. The figurines (the elk’s head and a fragmentary one) from Särnaste settlement were found within the house No. 3 (Vänna 1970: 111).

Two figurines from the grave of a child in Arbora I site, but their position in respect of the skeleton cannot be established for the skeletal remains did not survive. Two amber pear-shaped pendants were found in this place too (Loze 1975: 63; Johé 1979: 49, 116).

Skeletal remains are extinct in the double burial 1-1a at Kukkaroski burial ground, where the anthropomorphic pendant was found. 125 amber ornaments were found in the vicinity of this burial (Torvinen 1978: 79-80). They included many pendants, whose form slightly differed from that of the anthropomorphic pendant.

More information is provided by the circumstances of finding the figurines in the graves of Valma and Tamula. The figure of the bear was found in the double burial of a man and a child No. XI-XII, under the man’s cranium (Jaanits 1957: 85, Abb. 2). At the site of Valma the figurine was found in the double grave of a woman and a man, on the woman’s skull (Jaanits 1965: 18, Abb. 6).

The data allow to surmise that the figurines were worn hanging from the head-dress or band. The head used to be decorated with other ornaments of amber.

The two graves of women and the two graves of children at the site of Tamula contained the artefacts of amber at the skull, most frequently near the temporal bone, or under the skull, though the artefacts of amber were also found under the woman’s backbone and on the breast of the children’s skeletons (Jaanits 1957: 93). It is doubtful if such a position of the figurines would be characteristic only of the burial.

The available data allow to attribute these figurines of amber to the burials of women and children only, though the lack of evidence cannot provide grounds for more significant conclusions.

Dating

Most sites or layers, where the figurines were found, date to the Middle Neolithic period, the 3rd mill. b.c. Some sites within this period is dated more precisely. For instance, Šventoji 23 - 2240±80 bc (Vib 1 - 419±80 bp) (Rimantienë 1979: 12), Nainiekste - 2200 bc (Le 648 - 4170±130 bp), Zvídze - 2300-2420 bc (Ta 1801 - 4750±60 bp, Ta 675 - 4760±80 bp), Sulkä - 2110 B.C (Le 752 - 4060±60 bp) (Johé 1988: 101, tav. 16), Kukkaroski - 2940±150 bc (Hel 832 - 4890±150 bp) (Torvinen 1978: 80). The two figurines from Särnaste found in house No. 3, which is related to the Typical Comb Ware culture, (Vänna 1970: 111, tav. 65, LV 1, 2, pesc. 144). The Typical Comb Ware culture is now dated to ca. 2520 - 4440 bc (Torvinen 2003: 17). The figurines from Konsa (Indreko 1948) and Valma (Jaanits 1965) sites are also attributed to the Typical Comb Ware culture.

Only five figurines from sites Abora 1 - 1895±76 - 1795±60 bc (Le 749 - 3860±100 BP, Ta 394 - 3770±60 BP), Eini - 2009±800 bc (Le 751 - 4090±60 bp) (Johé 1979: 31, 42, 49) and Tamula (Jaanits 1957) are to be related to the late Neolithic period, i.e. the turn of 3rd-2nd mil. – the 1st half of the 2nd mil.

Cultural identity

The Middle Neolithic figurines belong to several cultures. The typical Comb Ware Culture or its second phase includes the sites of Kukkaroski, Kossa, Valma, Sulkä, Abora II, Särnaste. The grave from Tamula is related to the Late Comb Ware ceramics.

The layers of Zvídze and Nainiekste revealed the Comb Ware and Pietistia-type ceramics.

The layers of site Abora I revealed a mixed sample of ceramics of the Porous, the Corded Ware culture and Luban-type. The individuals were buried extended or crouched (the latter case is characteristic of the Corded Ware culture).

The porous ceramics was found in the site of Eini (H.A. Johé 1979: 31, 42, 116).

Stray finds

Part of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines from the Baltic area are found by chance, not in the course of archaeological excavations. Despite such indefinite circumstances there still exist some landmarks for dating.

We should mention three anthropomorphic and one zoomorphic figurines (Fig. 2: 2-4; Fig. 3: 10) that were not found by chance, but during underwater excavations in Saimaa lake, at Astuvansalmi Rock-Painting Site, Finland. These depictions by means of geology and archaeology are approximately dated to the Bronze and Stone Age. However, the relationship between the Rock-Painting and the amber figurines failed to be grasped (Grönvall 1991; Grönvall 1994).

Indirect evidence of possible attribution to the Stone Age is also provided by the circumstances of finding the other figurines.

T. Mathiasen attributes the zoomorphic figure (Fig. 3: 8), found in 1926 while digging peat in a drained lake of Balling (Bromstedt 1934: 147, fig. 3), to the Gudens culture (a continuation of the Maglemose culture up to the Neolithic) by reason of their discovery in Jutland, especially at Balling Lake, which is one of the richest findspots of the Gudens culture (Mathiasen 1952: 168).

According to R. Klebs the anthropomorphic figure, found south of Nida (Fig. 2: 10), in the Curonian Spit, was discovered in a prehistorical settlement site together with a stone axe and ornamented plates of the Stone Age (Klebs 1882: 35-36, Taf. XI: 6).
The anthropomorphic figurine (Fig. 2: 7) from Romi-Kalnī village, Latvia, lay on the surface of the earth, atop the settlement site of the Early and Middle Neolithic. According to L. Vankina, this figurine may be seen as the beginning of a later, more developed figurine in the Late Neolithic site of Abora I (Jone 1979: texta, LI: 3).

The surface of the figurines found at Reen (Fig. 3: 6) and Egermāte (Fig. 3: 9) localities, Denmark, is engraved with geometric motifs characteristic of the Maglemose culture (Müller 1918: fig. 24; Mathiassen 1952).

The surface of the figurines from Dobigenie (Woldenberg) (Fig. 3: 1), Western Pomerania, and from Gdns (Fig. 3: 2), has the rows of the perforations that are related by E. Suurini to the Globular Amphora culture (Suurini 1953: 174). But the new finds from Weitsche site, near Lüchow-Dannenberg in Lower Saxony, Germany, which were found in a ploughing horizon of the Federmeshner culture can relate the figurine from Dobigenie to the early or Late Palaeolithic. The forelegs and hind legs of Weitsche figurines were connected as in the figurine from Dobigenie. All figurines are shaped in very similar fashion, but their ornamentation is different (Burdzkiez 1999: 106-107, Fig. 12: 1).

R. Klebs has attributed the figurines from Jukkdrankre to the Stone Age on account of traces left by flint tools and patinas that are seen on their surface (Klebs 1882).

The features of the figurines are not very useful in dating, for their means of expression are characteristic of all the primitive art, which existed at all times and still exists (Rhodes 1994).

The nature of the figurines is difficult to interpret the zoomorphic figurine of anguila sillidinou from Polezyn Zdolno locality (Fig. 3: 3), Poland (Rüchholtz 1930: 16-18), or the round zoomorphic figurine from the old Royal Cabinet of Curiosities, Copenhagen (Fig. 3: 5) (Boegh 1909: fig. 212), or the zoomorphic-anthropomorphic figurine from Kilkönen site (Fig. 2: 9), Finland (Gröndahg 1994:10, 16, 18, Kuru 5), or the figurine representing the bear from Sulp locality (Fig. 3: 4), Poland, which, moreover, was “improved” after its discovery (Kunkel 1926: 292, Taf. 39; Šarnas 1952: 377-379, Abb. 1: 1).

Conclusions

Most of the figurines found at archaeological excavations should be dated to the Middle Neolithic. Only five figurines from Abora I, Eini and Tamula sites are possibly to be attributed to the Late Neolithic.

A small number of the figurines from the Late Neolithic site of Eini do not have to be drawn vast conclusions as to the change of the style in the course of time. We may note, however, that the figurines from Abora I site constitute a distinctive group. A separate group is made up of the flat figurines coming from the Middle Neolithic sites of Lake Lahua (though one flat figurine, representing the bird, is found in the Late Neolithic site of Eini).

Except Abora I figurines, the rounded figurines and their fragments are found in the Middle Neolithic sites. At some sites the rounded and the flat figurines were found together. It is obvious that the rounded figurines as well as the flat ones were produced and functioned simultaneously in the same sites during the whole of the Middle Neolithic. If we could rely on the dating of the stray figurines from Reen, Egermāte, Denmark, the same notice would be valid for the Mesolithic as well.

The new find near Weitsche site would probably redact the beginning of using the amber for making the figurines as early as the Late Neolithic.

The “naturalistic” representation of the head of elk from Sarnie site distinguishes it from the rest. In regard of its style its analogues might only be found in the big stuff of amber representing the elk's head from Svarnei site (Rimantienė 1979: 106, pav. 85, 86) and the burial ground of Oljenik Ostrov (Pyrusnė 1956: 113-220).

The burial posture allows to surmise that some figurines had been worn hanging on the head-dress or the band. All the extant and the better-preserved rounded figurines have or had the holes for hanging. They were found near the skeletons of the children (Tamula, Abora I) and of the woman (Valma). The site of the figurines found in the sites varies from 1 to 7 cm, but the stray figurines, such as those from the Curonian Spit, can even amount to 10-14,5 cm in height.

A small number of the figurines from the Middle Neolithic are related to the Comb Ware culture.

The circumstances of finding the stray figurines, their surface ornamentation, features of shape would allow to attribute some of them to the Neolithic, some to Mesolithic even to the Late Palaeolithic. Part of them could also have been produced in the Bronze Age.

The stray figurines and those found at the sites alike, illustrate fairly well the skill of the prehistoric man to transform the image into the sign, symbol and his craftsmanship in representing the natural features.

Translated by Dario Barama

The list of amber figurines from archaeological sites

Abora I, grave 18, Labuoha, west Latvia, Zoonorphic (? ) figurine. Lone 1975: 64, Fig. 7: 2.

Abora I, grave 18, Labuoha, west Latvia, Zoonorphic figurine. Lone 1975: 64, Fig. 7: 3.

Abora I, Labuoha, west Latvia, Zoonomorphic (? ) figurine. Lone 1975: 63, Fig. 7: 4.


Zīdvere, Labuoha, west Latvia. Zoonomorphic figurine. Lone 2000: 74, Fig. 15: 2.


The list of amber figurines (stray finds)


References