THE BALTS AND AMBER

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Amber has always been attractive to craftsmen and traders. It must have been the early Neolithic period when Lithuanian inhabitants began to produce amberware and ornaments which they traded with their immediate northern and southern neighbours. Amber objects from the Neolithic Age are found in Estonia, the districts of Novgorod and Tver, Finland and Sweden. In the southern neighbourhoods raw amber and amber goods are especially abundant in the burial grounds of the Zlots culture in Poland.

In the Bronze Age the Balts used amber as the main object to barter for copper alloys. Its considerable quantities are located in the zones of copper mines in Middle and Southeastern Europe. To emphasize the importance of amber trade, the researchers of prehistory coined a special term – “Amber route”. The Bronze Age saw a number of its ramifications. The principal amber route began from the Baltic coast and led to the lower Vistula. Using the Warna and the upper Oder or their coastlines the amber route crossed Bohemia, Moravia and reached the Danube. From there the route forked: one branch went to Greece, Peloponnesus and Crete (amber beads excavated in the burial grounds of the Mycenaean culture are dated to the period between 1600 and 1500 B.C.). Through the passes of the Alps, the second branch went down to northern Italy. Another amber route from the Baltic shores travelled overland up to the Danube, then up its mouth to the Caspian Sea (1). Amber objects are found in Osetia, Middle Caucasus. Interregional amber traffic also reached Asia Minor. In the burial grounds of Sernia (near Klaipeda, Lithuania) was discovered a bronze statuette (dated to 1500–1000 B.C.) resembling a Canaanite god from Syria – Palestine (2).

The old traditions of amber trade are described by classical Greek authors and researchers. Amber is mentioned in Homer’s “Iliad” and “Odyssey”. Herodotus (490–480–425 B.C.) wrote Amber was also honoured an exhaustive account after the journey of Pytheas of Massalia to the shores of the Baltic Sea and the North Sea in around 325 B.C.

During the period of the Roman Empire amber became greatly valued and desired. It also brought the Antians (Balts) into the focus of classical Roman writers and historians who then began to describe their habitations, occupations and customs. In his “Natural History” Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23–79) writes that during the reign of Nero (A. D. 37–68) a member of the equestrian order was sent to the northern regions to procure the supply of amber to decorate the arms of gladiators. According to him, it was a distance of about six hundred Roman miles between the center of amber source and Carnuntum (near Vienna, on the right side of the Danube). He brought back amber in such vast quantities that during the days of gladiatorial contests the whole amphitheatre, gladiators and servants were decorated with amber. The largest piece of amber was 13 pounds in weight (4.2 kg). Pliny the Elder explains
monuments of the Balts of the period described by Tacitus suggest a versatile character of the amber usage in the Baltic material culture. "We cannot go along with Tacitus who says that at that time the Aestians did not use amber, did not know its value, and only the Romans made it an object of luxury," writes V.I. Katinas, the author of a comprehensive study about the Baltic amber (5).

The ramifications of the "Amber route" and the importance of trade between the Balts and the barbarian cultures to the Baltic, German and Slavic societies have been analysed and discussed by different researchers from different countries. K. Majewski, B. Bilinski contoured the principal branches of the "Amber route": 1) the so-called Klodzko and 2) Morava forks. The first branch was particularly used in the first century under the reign of Flavians and Antonines (Nerva and Trajan). From the metropolis in Pannonia the road approached the town of Vinobona near the Danube, thence it crossed the Klodzko pass and led to the region of the present-day Voslaw and on to Kalisz near the River Prusa. From there the traffic twisted to the north towards the bend of the Wysla (the district of Osielk) and reached the Baltic Sea and on to the land of amber in Sambia. In the second century A.D. under the reign of the dynasty of Antonines the number of lights with the Marcomannians began to increase, therefore, it was no longer safe to use the Klodzko branch (as it led through the Marcomannic lands). Then the Morava branch came into use. It began in the town of Carnuntum in Pannonia near the Danube. Then up its tributary Morava to the upper Oder as far as the environs of Opole, thence it turned north towards Kalisz. From Kalisz using the road of the old Klodzko branch up to Sambia.

During the first and third centuries A.D. the "Amber route", to put it in modern terms, was an entire industry. Large quantities of the Baltic amber have been excavated along the amber route in Voslaw–Partynek, near the Oder in Lower Silesia. It is assumed that the same road must have been used to export animal fur and skin, honey and wax to the Romans. Whereas from the provinces of the Roman Empire came bronze, silver and gold coins, brass and glass bowls, ceramics, glass and enamelled beads, various fibulae decorated with brass and enamel, and, most importantly, non-ferrous metals – copper, zinc, tin, silver (Illus. 1). As is known, the Baltic people had known how to obtain iron, the main metal, from local bog ore at least since A. D. 10–40.

There have recently been published a number of new studies about amber and the amber trade with Romans. Polish researchers have offered a number of more accurate details of the "Amber route" traffic (6). In Lithuania there have appeared some statistical studies which discuss the spread of amber in the burial monuments (7) in Lithuania throughout the Old and Middle Iron Age.

There have also been attempts to analyse the influence of the "Amber route" to the development of the Baltic society and to compare the Germanic people, as described by P.K. Tacitus, with the Baltic community, its life and customs (8).

A recent study "Corpus der römischen Funde im europäischen Barbaricum. Litauen", written by M. Michellbertas, consists of a comprehensive catalogue of Roman artefacts and a map of find spots (9). It shows that the tradess of the Old Iron Age relied on rivers to reach the farthest locations in Lithuania, and that enameled and glass beads, together with Roman coins (Illus. 2), comprise the biggest part of Roman articles. Other goods – such as fibulae, handbells, glass beakers or brass bowls –account only for a small part of all imports.

Another fact which is often overlooked in our archeological literature is that amber was an important trade object (as much as Roman articles were) not only in the Roman provinces but also in the Baltic lands. A map drawn up by M. Michellbertas demonstrates that amber ornaments, together with Roman artefacts, were excavated in most burial monuments in Lithuania. For example, the cemetery of Dauglaukis which is attributed to the culture of the lower reaches of the River Nemunas. Dating to the Old Iron Age, this rich burial monument manifests a versatile usage of amber in the daily life of the Balts.

A 127 burial group of Dauglaukis falls into three chronological groups which encompass a period from 70 to 260 A.D. (70–150, 150–220, 220–260). Twelve Roman bronze scepters were located in ten graves in the cemetery of Dauglaukis. Their biggest part is attributed to the dynasty of Antonines: Antoninus Pius (138–161), Antoninus Pius' adopted successor Marcus Aurelius (161–180) and Commodus (177–192) who was the last in the dynasty. This consecutive order indicates active contacts between the Dauglaukis community and the merchants from the Roman Empire. It might seem that there should have been coins of the Severan dynasty, however, it is not so. Other Roman coins are attributed to the late Roman emperors, e.g., there was found a bronze scepter of Gordian III reign (238–244) (10).
The community of Dauglaukis lived under the conditions of military democracy. The stratification of society was based on wealth and patriarchal system. Men’s graves comprise burial goods which abound in weapons and tools of labour. A man was a leader in the family, household and military. Whereas women’s graves were mostly furnished with ornaments, though some burials are equipped with such household articles as awls, needles and, in very rare cases, parts of spinning equipment. It seems that a woman must have been confined to the concerns of the household only.

Private property determined the division of the community of Dauglaukis into 3 classes: 1) “common”, 2) “well-to-do”, and 3) “rich”. An apparent reflection of this differentiation is an average number of burial goods found in a grave of an individual. A “common” tribal woman had 2.7 burial items, a “well-to-do” woman possessed 7.5 articles, and a “rich” woman owned even 14.4 burial goods. Similar finds come from the graves of men: “common” man had 2.8 items, a “well-to-do” man possessed 5.1 burial goods, and a “rich” man was equipped with 8.5 burial items. It is interesting that the well-to-do and rich members of the Dauglaukis community owned the largest share of amber – almost 75.3%. R.V. Sidrys has made a statistical analysis of the amber finds in the cemetery of Dauglaukis and confirmed a direct subordination between amber and rich graves (11).

Grave 41 yielded 97 amber beads, pendants and other articles together with pieces of raw amber (12). Amber was used for decorations by everyone: men and women, girls and boys. The biggest volume of amber was located in the graves of women and girls (13). Amber beads were often used to adorn necklaces (14). As a rule, amber was used together with enamelled and glass beads, sometimes with bronze spirals (Illus. 3).

It is of interest to note that no genuine amber necklace has been found so far with the exception of the cemeteries of Vidgritai and Plinkaigalis (15), dating to the end of the 5th century and the beginning of the 6th century A.D. R.V. Sidrys writes: “Amber must have had no high status or high economic value since the merchants of Middle Lithuania did not mediate between the locals and the Romans in amber export” (16). The author demonstrates a poor understanding of the end of the Old Iron Age. Though the merchants of Middle Lithuania did not mediate between the locals and the Romans, archaeological finds comprise spectacular collections of enamelled and glass beads, imported fibulae and, most importantly, a very rare sample of imported bronze jug. However, there is no or little amber, and the further from the sea, the less amber is found in the burial monuments of the Old Iron Age. But in the burial monuments of the Old Iron Age only! This pattern, however, does not apply to the Middle Iron Age. Why? In the Old Iron Age a high demand of amber in the Roman Empire made amber a highly expensive good in the amber source metropolis itself. Not without reason, amber was combined with imported enamelled and glass beads to decorate necklaces. With the fall of the Roman Empire, already from the second half of the 5th century A.D. we observe an increase of amber objects in all Lithuanian burial monuments. Therefore, it is not by chance that considerable quantities of amber are found in the above-mentioned cemetery at Plinkaigalis in Middle Lithuania. R.V. Sidrys also notes that “the statistical subordination between amber and rich graves was confirmed in Dauglaukis, as opposed to Vidgritai which was outstanding in amber.” (17). Compared are two burial monuments which are incomparable by definition. The cemetery of Dauglaukis dates to the period 70–200 A.D. whereas the early cemeteries of Vidgritai date 450 years later. If the author had treated amber as a “high-ranking” good, it would have been obvious that with the decline of the "Amber route", amber became more available to the Baltic tribes themselves.

Amber beads-amulets (18) were located in twenty graves in Dauglaukis. Most of them were found in men’s graves, and only some were unearthed in women’s and girls’ graves. In our literature there are
no comprehensive studies made on the nature of amber beads–amulets. We can only assume that these amulets are truly genuine. In men’s graves they are usually found in the neck area. They must have been hung on a string and worn round the neck. P.K. Taczys makes a mention of amulets worn by the Aistians. It is true, though, that these were boat–shaped figurines or boat masks which “...protected them, and ensured the safety of the worshipper even among his enemies.” (4, 79). An interesting find also comes from men’s grave 82 (Illus. 4). It is composed from brass spirals, an antropomorphisch brass pendant and one amber bead. Perhaps it was not by chance that amber was coupled with a human–face–shaped pendant!

The women of the Daugaulkis community also wore amber to decorate sashes which supported their hair (Illus. 5). Such ornaments come from four graves (20). Women used sashes, made from woolen cloth or leather, to underlie their hair, and on the back of the head would attach an ornament composed from brass spirals separated by big pieces of amber. It should be added that such finds have no equivalents in the assortment of women’s head–dress decorations dated to the Old Iron Age.

Amber pendants are extremely scarce in Daugaulkis. They were accidentally excavated in three graves (21). Grave 63 possessed a necklace which had amber as both 1) a component used together with enamelled and glass beads, and 2) as a pendant (Illus. 6). Amber pendants can vary in form. They can be drop–shaped (grave 70), rectangular (grave 79), “wooden mortar–shaped”, etc.

Beside two Roman coins, an amazing article was found in woman’s grave 55. It resembles a modern–day thread spool or a fly–wheel. It is the only such find out of all Lithuanian burial monuments dating to the Old Iron Age, and it is hard to say what purpose it served. It might have been a woman’s tool used for spinning. Grave 6 was equipped with an amber spindle. Grave 34 describes a mention, too. It contained three little pieces of raw amber (Illus. 7).

The burial grounds of Daugaulkis have revealed a wide range of amber usage in the Baltic household. The finds encompass ornaments, items of religious purpose, tools for labour. With its origins in the Neolithic Age, amber tradition was developed in the Old Iron Age.

References
13. Graves Nr. 1, 34, 36, 37, 39, 55, 63, 64, 82, 90, 93, 96, 105, 106, 109, 110, 113, 114, 120, 124.
17. R.V. Sidrys. Gintaro įkapis senojo ir vidutiniojo geležies...
The ancient West Balts came into contact, directly and indirectly, with the advanced material culture and foreign concepts of imperial Rome during the period known as the Old Iron Age (AD1-400) in Lithuanian archaeology. Roman traders and their middlemen arrived to procure natural drift amber, an exotic material that would be transformed in the workshops of Aquileia into items much desired by the fashionable ladies of Italy: finger rings, necklaces and amulet pendants, ornately carved scented bottles and other miniature vessels, mirror-backs, and intricate figurines of deities, theater performers, and cupids riding dolphins and horses (Strong 1966).1 This trade contact, some archaeologists believe, greatly stimulated the cultural evolution of Baltic society. They term it a "golden age" that saw trade embassies from Rome, and by the early third century cargo ships from the Frisian port of Fecettio (near Utrecht, Netherlands) anchor off the Baltic coastline, bringing in sacks of coins, metal tools and weapons, textiles, household wares and personal ornaments to be exchanged for amber (Michelbertas 1972, 1986; Jovaica 1997, 1998). This allowed Balts to acquire new metal and farming technologies, plants and livestock, which in turn increased productivity and population and began to stratify Baltic society into nobles, farmers and slaves.

But is this an accurate reconstruction of Roman contact and influence in the southeast Baltic, and is it consistent with what we know about the simple level of Baltic social and economic organization at the time? The largest excavated cemetery of the second-third centuries, for example, Sargėnai (Kaunas), has only 343 graves, equivalent to an associated community of 35-60 people; one of the largest hill forts, Eketi, Klaipeda district, is surrounded by a settlement area that measures only 110 by 105m; and it was not until about the first century that Balts learned how to produce iron from local swamps ore (Michelbertas 1986: 18, 195, 207). Were the tribal Aesti of Sambia equal trading partners with the Romans or simply "natives" dismissed with trinkets and beads?

1 The fashion for amber led to affections such as amber boxes for cutting truffles, and Journal (Sat. 9:50-3) sativates the custom of ladies carrying balls of amber (to warm the palms of the hands). According to Pliny (Natural History 37:12), Nero in his turn described his wife Poppea's ringlets of hair as actici (meaning amber-colored, as sacrum was the Latin noun for amber). Pausanias (V.XVII.7) mentions a life-size statue of Augustus made of amber (presumably a coating) standing in a round building in Olympia.

2 Tacitus writing in about 98 provides the first description of the Aesti (pronounced like "ACE tea") in his Germania (45.3): "They explore the sea for amber, in their language called glaucum, and are the only people who gather that curious substance...[which] by long neglected, till Roman luxury gave it a name, and brought it into prices. To the severe it is of no use. They gather it in rude heaps, and offer it for sale without any form or polish, wondering at the price they receive for it." Archaeologists can not define precisely the homeland of the Aesti, but must agree that it was probably the Sambian peninsula, and perhaps included the Lithuanian coast as well (Nowakowski 1992: 226).