

amžiaus kapuose // Vidurio Lietuvos archeologija. – Vilnius. – 1994.

18. Graves Nr. 20, 38, 53, 82, 85, 94, 95, 102, 103, 104, 105, 108, 113, 114, 118, 119, 120, 123, 127, 128.

19. Publijus Kornelijus Tacitas. Germanija // Rinktiniai raštai. – Vilnius. – 1972.

20. Graves Nr. 36, 39, 110, 124.

21. Graves Nr. 63, 70, 79.

ROMAN IMPORTS AMONG THE WEST BALTS: COMMERCE OR “BEADS FOR THE NATIVES”?

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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 scent 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 Fectio (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; Jovaiša 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 Balt 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 Balt 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, Eketė, Klaipėda district, is surmounted 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 swamp ore (Michelbertas 1986: 18, 195, 207). Were the tribal *Aestii*² of Sambia equal trading partners with the Romans or simply “natives” dismissed with trinkets and beads?

¹ *The fashion for amber led to affectations such as amber knives for cutting truffles, and Juvenal (Sat. 9.50-3) satirizes the custom of ladies carrying balls of amber (to warm the palm of the hand?). According to Pliny (Natural History 37.12), Nero in his verses described his wife Poppaea's ringlets of hair as sucinii (meaning amber-colored, as succinum was the latin noun for amber). Pausanias (V.XII.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 Aestii (pronounced like “ICE tea”) in his Germania (45.5): “They explore the sea for amber, in their language called glaesum, and are the only people who gather that curious substance... [which] lay long neglected, till Roman luxury gave it a name, and brought it into request. To the savages 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 Aestii, but most agree that it was probably the Sambian peninsula, and perhaps included the Lithuanian coast as well (Nowakowski 1992: 226).*

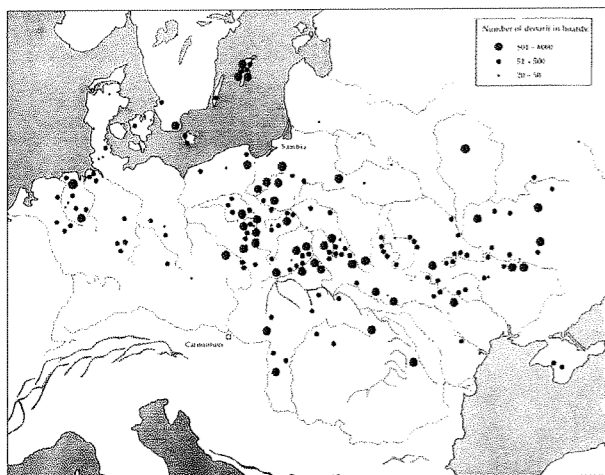


Fig.1 Distribution of 201 hoards of denarii north of the imperial Roman frontier (a modification of Lind's 1981 map).
Not all hoards are shown.

In this study, we examine broad patterns in the distribution of Roman imports across *Barbaricum*, as Romans termed Europe north of the *limes* frontier, and then look at the specific evidence of imports, particularly coins, among the West Balts. Our interest lies in the amber trade³ but we focus not so much on the amount of amber used or exported, as on the type of payment left behind by visiting traders. We hope to develop a regional model of the amber suppliers in the southeast Baltic and their role in the amber export system to the Roman world.

The terminal point of the amber route was the Sambian peninsula (now the Kaliningrad district, Russia), where a single night of westerwardly storms could wash up several thousand kilograms of drift amber along its 80km of shoreline. Much drift amber could also be collected along the Vistula Spit of Poland, southwest of the peninsula, and the long Curonian Spit (now divided by Russia and Lithuania) which extends northeast of the peninsula. During the 1st-3rd centuries, five archaeologically-defined cultures (Nowakowski 1990: Fig. 1) surrounded the "supply zone" of amber: the *Wielbark culture*, generally identified with Gothic tribes and controlling the lowermost Vistula, the hybrid *Bogaczwko culture* in the Mazurian lakes district⁴, and three cultures that represented West Balts: the *Sambian culture* of the peninsula, the *Nemunas culture*, and along the western Lithuanian coast – the *Stone Circle Grave culture*. Possible first contact between Romans and Balts is documented in Pliny's well known account of the Roman *eques*⁵ who journeyed during the time of Nero from Carnuntum on the Danube to the southeast Baltic coast, and returned to Rome with much amber (for a useful commentary see Michelbertas 1995).

³ An earlier study (Sidrys 1994) discusses why the West Balts, exporters of amber, used relatively small quantities of amber for their own funerary display, and everyday ornamental use, during the Old Iron Age and later.

⁴ This area may have been the homeland of the poorly known *Galindai* and *Sudivoi* peoples (Balt tribes?) mentioned by the second century geographer Ptolemy (cf. Nowakowski 1995). Kabelka (1982: 28) incorrectly interprets the abbreviation "GAL" appearing on obverse inscriptions of certain coins of Volusian (251-53) to mean *Galindikos* or "(conqueror of) the Galindai". In reality, Volusian was using the agnomen of his father, Trebonianus Gallus, "(conqueror of) Gaul".

⁵ Having equestrian rank at the time of Nero required a property qualification of 400,000 sesterterii and was second only to senatorial status. This *eques* was an agent of a certain Julianus, Nero's manager of gladiatorial games, who, according to Kolendo (1981), was actually Claudius Julianus, procurator and admiral of the fleet at Misenum.

The pioneering nature of this journey, as noted by Wheeler (1954: 9), implies that the northern sectors of the amber route, including the Balt region, had been up to this time inaccessible to Roman merchants and the *eques* was attempting to regulate the entire length of the network. The knight may have been evaluating the feasibility of Roman military campaigns in the region, suggests Kolendo (1981). He also proposes that Nero's interest in amber was in part political: he wanted to impress the public with his ability to display enormous quantities of an exotic luxury that decorated not only the safety nets of his wooden amphitheater, but the armor of the gladiators.

Michelbertas (1995: 19) concludes that nine Roman bronze winged fibulae (type A238m dated to AD 40-80 and 238r to 50-100) found in Lithuania represent artifacts brought in by Nero's knight and provide evidence that he traveled the coast of Lithuania. It is true that beyond the *limes* these fibulae are found only in Lithuania; the Sambian peninsula; Wrocław, Poland; and Puchevé, Slovakia (cf. Garbsch 1965). Yet, they are not found along the coast of Lithuania, as one would expect, but are scattered inland across north-central Lithuania. One may also question why the knight, after traveling some 800km to purchase an enormous amount of amber, apparently gave his Balt suppliers little more than nine clothing fasteners, or "safety pins". The Balt burials which contain the winged fibulae are not notable for their wealth – the richest is at Sandrausiškės, Raseiniai district and features an "eye series" brooch, a bronze neck-ring, five bronze armbands and a socketed iron axe.

Roman Imports Across *Barbaricum*

Lotte Hedeager's excellent statistical approach (1978) to major Roman imports north of the *limes* examined the distribution of six types of objects – bronzes, glass, silver cups, weapons, brooches and pottery – in 100km intervals. The first four items, all of high value, shared one type of distribution: they increased in quantity as one moved north of the border, to about 600km, and then decreased (there was little difference between the east and west regions, and the early and late empire). Pottery, on the other hand, was abundant to only 200km and then dropped off sharply. The pattern of brooches was a special case: in the early period they have a rather high frequency to the west from 200-400km (along the Elbe) and to the east they increase remarkably after 600km, in

northern Poland and the Sambian peninsula. Hedeager (1978: 204) interprets brooches to be "commercially insignificant parts of personal equipment", which Germanic traders brought back after being in direct contact with Romans in the south. She concluded that Roman-Germanic trade north of the *limes* had two economic systems. There existed a "buffer zone" out to 200km which maintained a limited money economy, perhaps including markets and a merchant class. Further out, the more distant Germanic tribes had moneyless markets or used money without a monetary economy.

That luxury goods were not common in the buffer zone, but were concentrated at 400-700km from the border, suggested to Hedeager that societies in this region possessed strong political and military power, and were aggressive middlemen in the long-distance exchange routes. Several dozen "princely graves" of the Lübsow type (Eggers 1949/50) are located in this 400-600km interval. They represent a first century elite network of local military leaders whose burials emphasize elegant Roman drinking vessels. One such grave at Lübsow, Pomerania includes from the Roman world a pair of fine two-handled silver cups, a mirror-plate of white metal, a large bronze basin, a bronze wine bucket, two bronze ladles, one bronze pitcher, two glass bowls, bronze shears and tweezers; as well as locally produced items – two drinking horns, four brooches (one of gold and silver), two silver pins and bronze belt-fittings (Wheeler 1954: 43).

Additional evidence that Roman exports were channeled into the hands of powerful middlemen, leaving little for the primary suppliers at the end of the amber route, is found in the distribution of denarii hoards found north of the *limes*, as compiled by Lennart Lind (1981). The silver denarius was the "value" coin in the imperial monetary system (together with the gold aureus, rarely found north of the border) from the time of Augustus to about 238 when the antoninianus replaced it as the staple silver coin. Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of 201 hoards, representing a total of 88,999 denarii.⁶

The differently sized find-spots on the map reflect my categorization of the hoards into three types: small

⁶ I used hoards of 20 coins or more from Lind's catalogue. Hoards nos. 30, 211, 218, 251, 268, and 397 were excluded as they are mixed with late imperial bronze. In general, mixed hoards of imperial bronze and silver coins are rarely found as the two were part of separate "systems" (Butcher 1988: 26). Also note that Lind excluded some areas close to the *limes* border – such as Romania, Netherlands north of the Rhine, and Austria north of the Danube – because of their intimate ties with the Roman economy.

(those with 20-50 denarii), medium (51-500) and large (501-6000). The value of a small hoard represents roughly the monthly salary of a Roman legionary at the end of the second century, while hoards of medium size reflect several months of his pay and up to his entire yearly salary.⁷ The hoards classified as “large”, at the low end could have purchased several suits of legionary armor plus arms (each 200-300 denarii, cf. Harl 1996: 223), and at the higher end, paid the required fee of one to two thousand to become a member of the town council in Bithynia in the second century, or bought a pound of the finest imported spun silk, dyed purple.⁸ In short, even the largest hoards shown in Fig. 1 do not represent very much wealth by Roman standards.

We see that a dense clustering of large hoards occurs along the upper Vistula and its tributaries, while another “hot spot” of hoards is found downstream along the mid-to-lower Vistula. Yet another high concentration is situated on the upper to middle Oder. It is clear, then, that the largest concentration of denarii deposits is closely associated with the primary amber route that began at Carnuntum, led northward through the Carpathian Pass and over the Moravian plains towards Kalisz and then the Vistula delta (alternatively, one could have sailed down the Vistula most of the way – undoubtedly many “routes” existed). A wide belt of middle-sized hoards also starts in southeast Poland and crosses the Ukraine, following sections of the Dnieper and other rivers. But the latter hoards do not necessarily indicate that another amber trade started at the Dnieper, as they do not follow through to the Baltic Sea: coin hoards along the Upper Nemunas and Daugava rivers are very rare.

The near absence of denarii hoards within the Sambian peninsula, and other Balt territory to the north and east, is quite remarkable. Despite being the end-source of the amber supply, the Baltic tribes were evidently not receiving a proportional share of silver in payment for the amber that was being supplied to the Romans. Of course, amber was not the only commodity exported south, but it was the most precious one. This is an issue to which we will return.

⁷ Under Domitian (81-96) a soldier was paid 300 denarii every year and by Severus (193-211) his salary had increased to 450/500 denarii per annum (Greene 1986: 59).

⁸ Bithynia data, cf. Harl 1996: 261. Price of silk fixed by Diocletian's Price Edict in 301 at 125 aurei, equivalent to 3,100 denarius-like argentei (Harl 1996: 300).

The island of Gotland has a high density of denarii hoards, but Lind (1976: 140; also see Fagerlie 1967: x) believes that many of the very worn denarii there had been used in northern Poland, perhaps for centuries, before they arrived to Gotland. In Denmark the majority of denarii were deposited in the 4th century or later (Kromann 1993: 200). Scandinavian denarii therefore may not be relevant to our discussion of 1st-3rd century amber exchange.

Figure 2 dates the denarii hoards by *terminus post quem*⁹ and compares their distribution in two “regions”: 1) those primarily found in Poland, representing the Carnuntum-Vistula amber route, and 2) those located in the remaining areas of northern Europe. The similarity between the two sets of histograms is astounding. I admit this is a “macroview” that tends to wash out micropatterns, but it still raises the possibility that the same conditions – whether economic, political or military – which reduced the inflow of silver coinage along the amber route, were also at work throughout the rest of barbarian Europe. Up to about AD 138, we see that the inhabitants of northern Europe had little reason to bury their silver coins for safekeeping.¹⁰ The denarii buried during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-61, ten hoards, whose denarii comprise about 11% of the identified 87,076 denarii from both histograms), Marcus Aurelius (161-80, twenty-nine hoards -11%), and Commodus (177-92, fifty hoards -15%) each represent modest periods of hoarding. We may also note that the denarii hoards in Poland from the time of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (i.e. the dark bars in Fig. 2) represent a smaller total than their counterparts outside of Poland. This goes against the frequently proposed idea that the Marcomannic wars in 166-180 shut down the trade routes in Poland.

It is during the reign of Septimius Severus (193-211), or shortly after, that 48,258 denarii are buried in 84 hoards throughout all of northern Europe – an amount that represents an impressive 55% of the total coinage in Fig. 2. Even if circulation increased somewhat during his reign,¹¹ this does not explain the enormous decrease in denarii hoarding that occurred throughout *Barbaricum* during the reigns that immediately followed. Thirteen hoards dated to Caracalla, Macrinus, Elagabalus and Severus Alexander account for only 5,246 coins (6% of the total).

One explanation is Gresham's law, or “bad money drives out good” – the principle in economics that when debased lighter-weight silver coins go into circulation, the heavier-weight full-value silver coins will tend to be

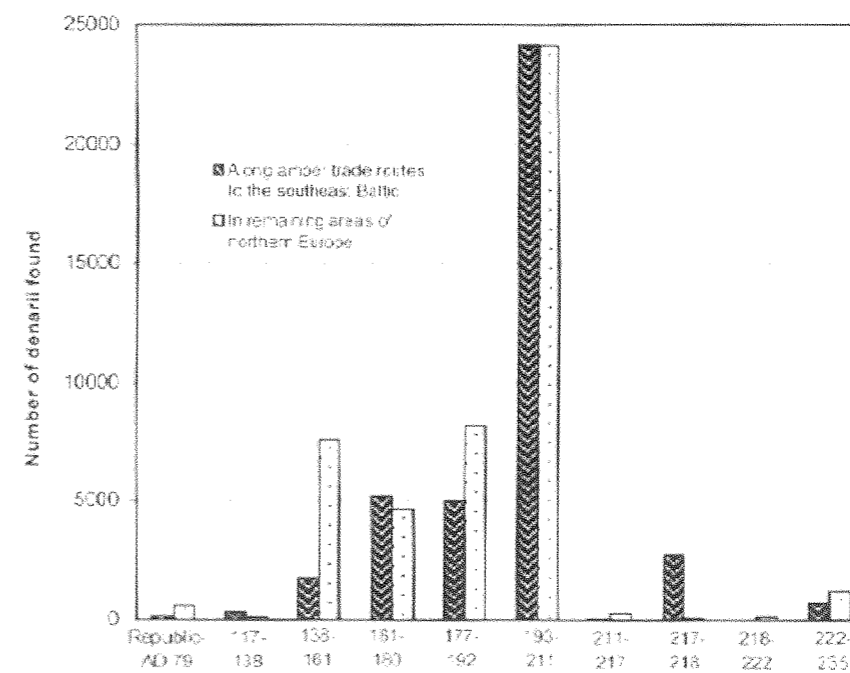


Fig. 2 Number of denarii found in: 1. hoards along the amber route in Poland, and 2. hoards in the remaining areas of Barbaricum Europe. After Lind 1981.

hoarded. Caracalla's introduction in 215 of a new larger silver coin intended to pass as a double denarius (the problem was that its weight was only one and a half times that of a denarius) is described by Sutherland (1974: 218) as “the first great overt act of depreciation in the currency of the Roman empire.” Both Kunisz (1977: 15) and Wielowiejski (1970: 286) believe that barbarian peoples refused to accept the new silver coins. The border communities, at least, were capable of judging the fineness of silver coinage.¹²

Roman Coins in Balt Territory

We now turn to the bronze sestertii in the graves of the West Balts, a distinctive case because bronze coins exported north of the *limes* only rarely occur in quantity: along the 200km “buffer zone” and in distant north-central Europe (cf. Bolin 1926b: 186, 284; Bursche 1992a). Their concentration among the West Balts is an unusual phenomenon connected with the amber trade. An early theory (Bezenberger 1904) proposed that Roman coins were imported by the Balts primarily as raw supply for smelting. This has been refuted, although at least a few coins did end up in the melting pot: fragments of a large bronze coin (a 2nd century sestertius?) were found stuck to the side of a primitive smelter at Narkūnai in east Lithuania (Luchtanas 1981: 11 pav.). And few coins were worn as pendants – coins with holes or special attachments have been found only at five sites

⁹ That is, a group of coins found together in a hoard or burial is dated by the latest coin or reign, because the group could not have been buried until after the date of the latest coin which it includes. The histogram represents the collective total from each reign.

¹⁰ Mitkova-Szuber (1989: 31) believes the scarcity of issues before Nero in Polish hoards is due to Trajan's monetary reform which removed some of them from imperial circulation.

¹¹ Septimius Severus had a long reign of 18 years, he was generous in payments to the army – his dying advice to his sons was “to enrich the army and despise everyone else” – and is known for a profuse coinage: special issues were struck for a half dozen members of the royal house. In addition, the total denarii shown in Fig. 2 for Severus includes 2,234 coins that were struck by his contemporary rivals: Pertinax (actually a predecessor who reigned for only three months in 193), Didius Julianus, Pescennius Niger, and Clodius Albinus.

¹² More than a century earlier, Tacitus (*Germania* 1. 5) records that Germanic peoples living “close to us” preferred old fashioned Republican denarii minted with serrated edges to demonstrate they did not have an interior of base metal. More distant areas that were economically specialized – like the Kamienna valley in south Poland with its iron production – may have used denarii regularly in regional markets (Mitkova-Szuber 1989: 27-31). At “downstream” communities there also lived professional traders and the occasional expatriate Roman negotiator who were well informed on the subtleties of Roman coinage

in Lithuania (Michelbertas 1972: 87). The majority (about 60%) of the more than 1,200 Roman coins found in the territory of Lithuania represent ritual deposits in 150 graves. Based on this, Michelbertas (1964, 1995) has long held the view that West Balts used Roman coins as money in their small economic transactions.¹³ He believes the custom, practiced at 24 coastal cemeteries during 180-260, of depositing a coin in a burial (usually a sestertius) to pay Charon in the afterlife for the ferry ride to Hades, means the Balts were familiar with money as a form of payment

But rituals undertaken in burial cults do not necessarily reflect the real world. In my opinion, money did not have much of a role in the barter economy of the Balts. First, only some 458 coins (38%) are known from 13 Lithuanian hoards, if we can regard these as “economic” contexts¹⁴ (a possible bias here is that Lithuanian archaeologists have excavated far more cemeteries than settlements). Second, nearly all Roman coins (93%) found in Lithuania are of bronze rather than of higher value silver. This implies the ancient Balts ignored the rules of market economy: they preferred to receive (or were forced to accept?) lower-value sestertii¹⁵ – large, glittering yellow coins, up to about 3.5 cm in diameter, with highly visible portraits and other images – apparently of talismanic value in their Charon cult. Third, coin circulation is important to markets that use money, and the total of 1,200 coins seems very low if it was to meet the transactions of an entire tribal population (one coin for every dozen people?). Fourth, if the West Balts had developed a money-integrated economy during the second-third centuries, why did it completely disappear with the retreat of Roman coinage and fail to reemerge for another millennium?

It is precisely these factors – the preference for large bronze coins, their predominant use in ritual contexts, the scarcity of coins in “economic” contexts and the relatively small total number of coins – that set the West Balts apart from other regions of *Barbaricum* that may have had a more expanded use of money in their markets. It reflects a unique cultural phenomenon: the distant and peripheral Balts practicing the exotic Mediterranean funerary cult of “paying the ferryman”.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of 2nd-3rd century Roman coins in west Lithuania. It is based on the same 166 coins used by Michelbertas in his “use-span chart”,¹⁶ but in my histogram the deposits are dated by *terminus post quem*. In Fig. 3 the coins from Trajan and Hadrian have no visibility at all (in great contrast to Michelbertas’ chart) as they are subsumed in the

bars representing later rulers. The reign of Antoninus Pius also precedes the most active period of coin deposition in west Lithuania. Instead, the histogram shows that maximum hoarding took place during or slightly after the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. Decline in coin deposition is most strongly associated with coins from Septimius Severus. In my opinion, this finding does not support the idea (Michelbertas 1972; Bursche 1992a) that the Marcomannic wars in 166-180 fatally disrupted the amber trade.¹⁷ Commodus signed a treaty ceasing hostilities with the Marcomanni at the start of his sole reign in 180, so there was no reason to have much war-related hoarding along the amber route during his rule. In addition, if warfare did force bronze hoarding at the very terminus of the amber route during the time of Commodus, then why were silver coins not significantly hoarded along the rest of the route, or elsewhere in *Barbaricum*, until the reign of Septimius Severus (193-211) as indicated earlier by the Lind denarii data in Fig. 2?

While the Marcomannic wars do not provide a convincing explanation, neither, at this point, does the de-

¹³His controversial view has diffused into related academic fields, e.g. it is cited by the historian Gudavičius (1999: 21) in his history of Lithuania.

¹⁴I use coin data from Lithuania because Michelbertas (1972, 1986: 191) provides a thorough database. The hoard total does not include those from Dargiškė, Dirmeikiai and Klaipėda (as their quantities are not known) and this would increase the hoard percentage.

¹⁵From the time of Augustus, bronze coins suitable for everyday transactions were issued in four denominations: the sestertius (worth 4 asses), the dupondius (2 asses), the as itself, and the quadrans (a quarter of the as). Four sestertii were equivalent to one denarius. Production of sestertii substantially increased from Hadrian onwards, and during the second century the sestertius replaced the as as the coin most commonly in daily use (Burnett 1987: 58).

¹⁶Using a sample of 166 coins from “complex finds”, i.e. two or more coins at a burial, at 46 burials from 13 cemeteries in Lithuania, Michelbertas plotted the spans of observed co-occurrences for each emperor in a horizontal bar-chart (1986: 83). By counting multiple co-occurrences within a complex find, however, he greatly overstates the longevity and significance of coins from the early empire that happen to be found together in a burial or hoard with issues from later emperors. For example, he purports to show that coins of Trajan were “used” in Lithuania during the period 100-225.

¹⁷The Marcomanni, who inhabited Bohemia, and their eastern neighbors the Quadi were clients of Rome from the first century, receiving subsidies and allowing Roman traders to settle in their lands. At the start of hostilities in 166, the Quadi were actually subdued with only a demonstration of force by the Roman army. The Marcomanni however continued to engage Marcus Aurelius throughout the rest of his reign.

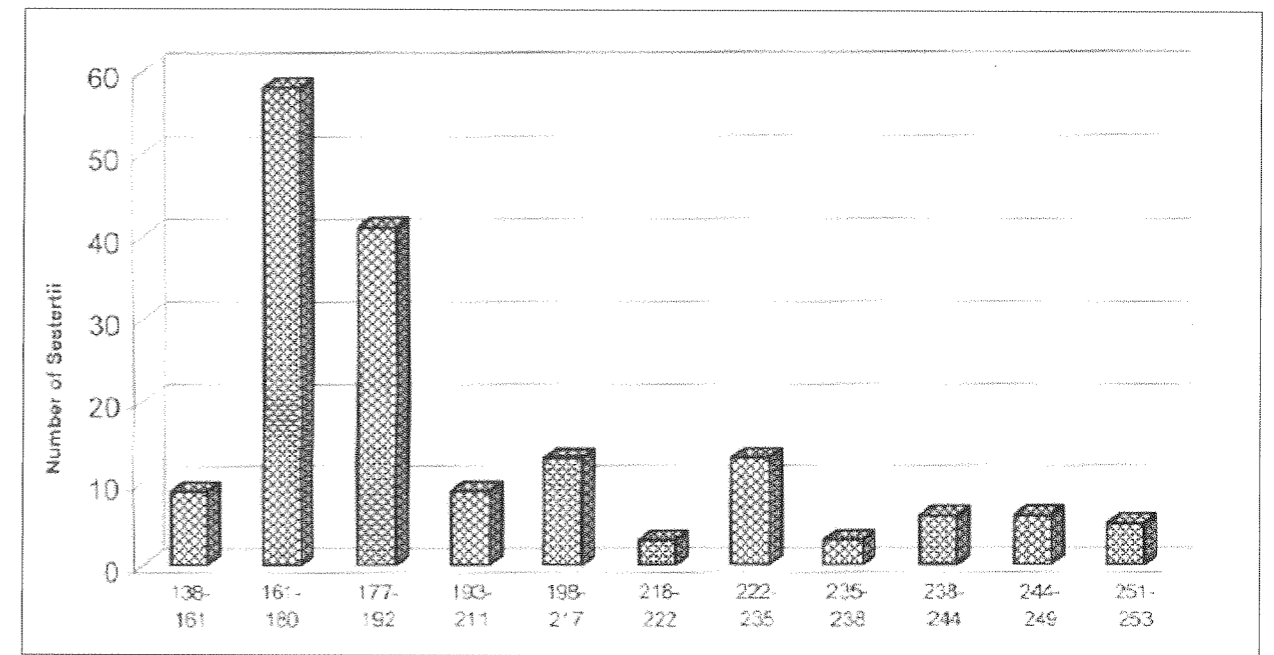


Fig. 3 Sestertii (n= 166) in complex grave finds, dated to the last emperor in group, from west Lithuania. After data in Michelbertas 1986:83, schema 1.

basement of bronze coinage. This is because reductions in coin weight began much later with Maximinus (235-38). Philip (244-49) debased bronze denominations with as much as 20 to 25 percent lead and by the reign of Gallienus (260-69) the sestertius and the as disappeared as small change (Harl 1996: 134-135). The decline in sestertius inflow to the Balts of west Lithuania is thus unresolved.

Another analysis of west Baltic coin deposition is by Bursche (1992a and 1992b represent essentially the same study). He uses a larger sample with more regional representation than Fig. 3. It includes 1,766 sestertii found in eight hoards and 83 complex burial finds (i.e. two or more coins per burial) from former East Prussia and west Lithuania.¹⁸ I transformed the data presented by Bursche in his Table 1 (1992a) into a *terminus post quem* histogram – see Figure 4. At first glance, the Sambian-dominated distribution appears different from that of west Lithuania in that the deposits dated by coins from Commodus are overwhelmingly larger than those from all other rulers. A possible explanation is that Fig. 3 is actually a sub-set of Fig. 4. In other words, the latest coins from west Lithuania are generally earlier than those from Sambia, and this makes sense statistically if they were being obtained from the Sambian region. The opposite view – that the coins were going from Lithuania to Samland

– contradicts the process of population sampling.¹⁹ The Commodus “peak” in Fig. 4 again suggests to me that the Marcomannic wars – which ended by the beginning of the rule of Commodus – were not the primary agent in disrupting the inflow of sestertii to the west Balts.

A much different view is held by Bursche, who resurrects an earlier theory that the Marcomannic wars caused a shift in bronze coin inflow: it now arrived not from Rome but from the Rhineland area using a sea route along the southern Baltic. This was earlier suggested by Gaerte (1929: 207) and supported by Michelbertas (1972: 69, 1986: 216). Bursche believes the “roundabout route” lasted until about 259, when intensified attacks by Germanic tribes across the Rhine closed it down. The trade then stagnated until the time of the Constantines, when coinage again begins to reach the West Balts by the traditional Vistula route (Bursche 1992a: 10).

Bursche’s theory is interesting and accompanied by a wealth of numismatic documentation. Much of the evidence, however, that he provides for Rhineland origins is not entirely convincing. He does not demonstrate that a break in imports actually occurred in the Westbalt circle at the time of the Marcomannic wars. He dismisses Godłowski’s conclusion (1985: 346) that no such break is present in the Sambian archaeological material, and that the inhibiting role of the Marcomannic wars is a “scholarly legend.” Second, he

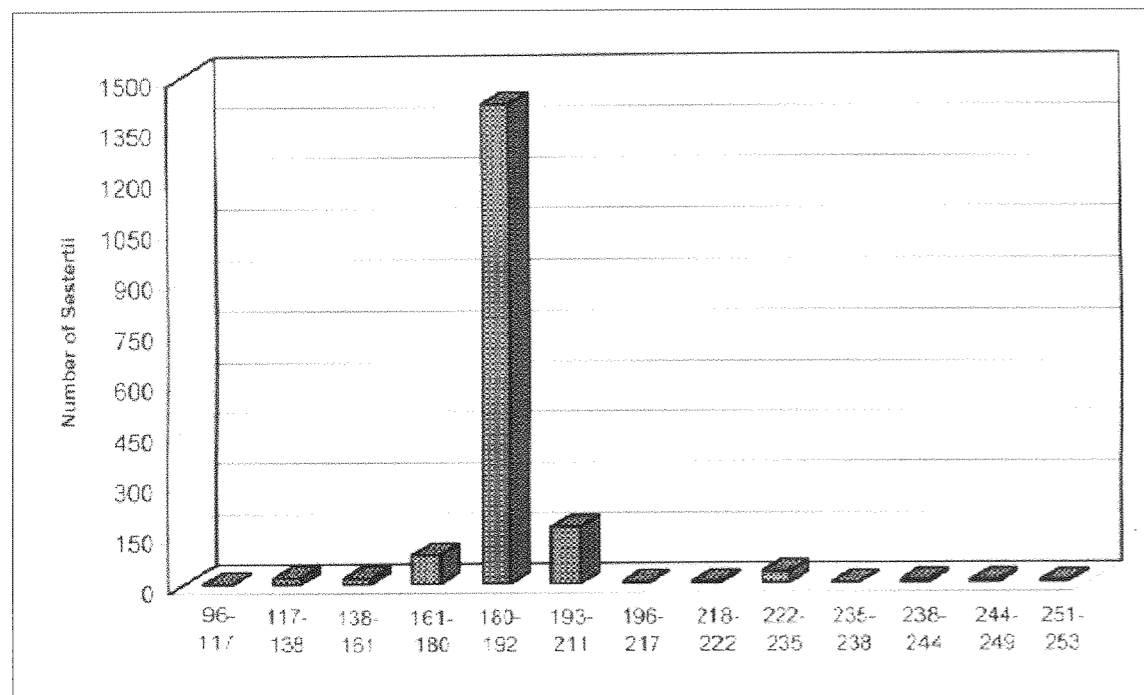


Fig. 4 Sestertii (n=1,777) in hoards and burials, dated to the last emperor in group, from Westbalt circle. After data in Bursche 1992b: Fig. 1.

assumes that Danubian *limesfalsa* (contemporary counterfeits produced during the mid-third century) necessarily had to have been brought by traders traveling from Noricum and Pannonia Superior to the west Balts. Yet, the *limesfalsa* at these two provinces represent only some 19.4% of their post-Commodan AE (Bursche 1992b: note 42) – in my view, not an overwhelming amount. Further, he also assumes that *limesfalsa* have not been found in the west Balt area because they “would have been noted by S. Bolin” and “they are not mentioned by M. Michelbertas (1972) either” (Bursche 1992b: note 66). But do we really know that either investigator was attempting to identify these coins? Third, are Rhineland hoards at this time analogous, as Bursche claims (1992a: 8), to those from the Westbalt circle? Their similarity, according to him, is based on their very slight share of dupondii (2%) and their similar proportions of autonomous emissions (10% in Rhineland and 7.5% among the west Balts). It is known, however, that after Commodus and certainly by the 240’s the dupondius and the as had become rare (Burnett 1987: 58; Harl 1996: 90, 134), so the Rhineland and west Balt hoards merely reflect an empire-wide trend. Bursche’s estimate of the 10% provincial emissions in Rhineland is based on a very small sample: four

such coins among 35 post-Commodan sestertii in the Rheinhessen district (Bursche 1992b: note 48). I venture to guess that much different percentages could be obtained by sampling other districts. Bursche himself (1992b: 236) implies this: “large amounts of autonomous coins were also recovered here [Rhineland] usually linked to movements of troops”.

Locations of Mints

Let us broaden our discussion to include all Roman coins (AE, AR and AU) found in the whole of ancient Balt territory and attempt to identify where some were struck. Figure 5 shows the location of mints throughout the Roman empire whose products have been found at Baltic sites, and Table 1 provides a tabulation. In general, the mints listed in the table that operated from the first century to about the mid-third century represent autonomous provincial mints²⁰; the later mints are from a network of imperial branch mints that began to be established during the co-reign of Valerian and Gallienus (253-60) and continued to expand throughout the third century. Provincial coinage died out early in the west, during the first years of Claudius (41-54) and was totally replaced by imperial coinage. In the eastern provinces, however, local coinages continued to



Fig. 5 Location of Roman mints whose products have been found in ancient Balt territory (for list of coins see Table 1).

flourish for 250 years. The number of provincial mints grew gradually, reaching a peak during the reigns of Commodus (177-92) and Septimius Severus (193-211) when some 350 mints issued coins (Harl 1996: Fig. 5.1).

Table 1 shows that with the exception of a single coin from Trajan there are no provincial coins found in Balt territory that were struck by 1st or 2nd century emperors. This supports the idea that the majority of bronze coins found in Balt territory struck during the first two centuries after Christ came from the senatorial mint at Rome. While they do not have a mint mark, the coins are marked with the initials S.C., standing for *Senatus Consulto*, or “by decree of the Senate”. A small cautionary note: a large part of the coinage with the mark S.C. was actually struck at a branch mint at Lugdunum, Gaul, at least through Vespasian (78) and is recognizable by a small globe at the point of the neck-truncation of the portrait bust (Sutherland 1974: 168). Very few AE from Augustus to Vespasian have been found in Balt territory, and it is not clear if investigators have consistently looked for evidence of the Lugdunum globe.²¹

By the time of Valerian and Gallienus a much wider range of mints is established (Carson 1990). In addition to Antioch, imperial branch mints producing substantial output were opened at Viminacium (251), Lugdunum? (257), Milan (259), Siscia (262), and Cyzicus (268). Massive quantities of debased coinage are produced, in particular, the double denarius.

With a low value convenient for small transactions from the imperial coins become available to everyone, and between 255-275 nearly all provincial issues die out

(Butcher 1988: 18-20). Table 1 shows that 32 coins, most of them provincials, have been found at Balt sites, which were struck during the period 209-268 (many dated by *t.p. quem* to no later than about 244). All are from the east: twenty-one come from Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean, while ten were minted in

¹⁸ The eight hoards account for 1,555 coins (88% of his sample). They are from three West Balt cultures: 1. from Sambia – Kudrinka, Zhukovskoe, Morschanskoje, and Pavyzdžiai – representing a total of 1446 coins (82% of sample); 2. ex-Schakumehlen and Skandawa in the Mazurian lakes district; and 3. Saulažoliai and Algimantai in western Lithuania. In sum, his sample overwhelmingly reflects the four Sambian hoards.

¹⁹ A useful thesis for a future dissertation is to continue the earlier work of Sture Bolin, Mykolas Michelbertas, Vladislav Urtans and Alexander Bursche and compile a comprehensive database, including new finds, of all Roman coins found in the Balt culture sphere and then use it to test alternative models.

²⁰ The difference between provincial and imperial coinage is not always clear-cut, according to a study by Butcher (1988:12). At one end of the spectrum were the official coins struck by Roman imperial authorities for circulation in the western provinces and for government expenditure and tax collection. On the opposite end, coins mostly struck in the eastern provinces, primarily bronze pieces, had a mark stating that they belong to the people of a particular city and tended to circulate close to the city where they were issued. But there also existed, in the middle, a wide range of issues which sometimes had imperial sanction and sometimes did not, and circulated over a fairly large region.

²¹ The reverse type of AE from Antioch also bear the letters S.C. from the 1st into the 3rd century and was presumably sanctioned by Roman authorities, but these issues are easily recognized.

Danubian/Balkan cities (see Fig. 5). This finding certainly does not provide support for Bursche's proposal that at this time all imperial bronze was arriving to Balt territory from the northwest, i.e. Rhineland. The sudden burst of provincial coins, conspicuously absent among the Balts for the first two centuries, is difficult to explain.²² From the reign of Gordian III, or later (i.e. the 240's-260's?), the central imperial flow of coinage to the Balt area might have been interrupted by trade or military movements with some connection to the eastern provinces. It is no coincidence that this occurs during the deep crises – political, military and financial – of the short-lived “military emperors” (235-270), and a time when Valerian, the first emperor of Rome to be captured by enemy forces in 260, was literally being used as a footstool by the Shah Shapur in Mesopotamia.

Some 110 coins representing the Constantinian dynasty and later rulers (306-455), have been found at ancient Balt sites, mostly in former East Prussian territory (see Table 1). Gold coinage is prevalent. According to Burnett (1987: 115), Constantine seized huge amounts of gold locked up in pagan temples, which he liberated on his conversion to Christianity. The process continued with his successors throughout the century and gold became relatively common. Of the coins found in Balt territory whose mint can be identified, more than two thirds were struck at two cities: at the new imperial mint (326) at Constantinople, which soon established itself as the most important of all late imperial mints, and at the Ravenna mint – founded early in the fifth century when the city became the favored imperial residence of Honorius. About a dozen coins come from the mints at Aquileia (which struck fairly regularly from 294 to 425) and at Sirmium (open from 320 to 364, reopened in 379). Finally, one or two coins trickled in from important regional mints at Milan, Thessalonica, Nicomedia, Cyzicus,²³ Antioch, and Alexandria. Only one coin from Rome has been identified. Does this mean that the amber route lost its direct linkage to Rome during the late empire? The answer is not clear because the mint evidence, on balance, suggests that the majority of identified 4th-5th century coins came from cities located not far from the traditional amber route: from Italy and the western Balkans (to Sirmium), while a minority are from the eastern Balkans, Asia Minor, and the eastern Mediterranean.

Southeast Baltic Exchange Model

A comparison of Roman imports found among the five cultures that surrounded the Sambian amber supply is useful in developing a regional model (Fig. 6). The model assumes that the stream of Roman goods flows from the central Danubian provinces, and not from the Rhineland as suggested by Bursche.²⁴ By number, the most abundant Roman manufactured item was the humble, mass-produced tiny glass and enamel bead. They are present by the thousands, at least in the West Balt cultures, usually in the burials of women and children.²⁵ In many cases it is difficult for archaeologists to distinguish the early imported beads from those later locally made. By mass, the most significant import was probably bronze scrap metal, transformed by local smiths into an impressive array of ornaments and tools that characterize the regional cultures. The sources for bronze obtained by Balts, however, may have been established more than a millennium earlier so it does not seem appropriate to attribute bronze import exclusively to imperial Roman contact.

If we compare the distribution of Roman imports by quality and luxury, the Wielbark culture ranks first, followed by the Sambian and Bogaczwo cultures, with the two cultures in Lithuania having the fewest such imports (cf. Nowakowski 1995; Šimėnas 1999: 78-101). Apart from small gold and silver ornaments (not tracked in this study), imports of very high value are large ornamented bronze vessels. They are numerous in the Wielbark culture, in contrast to the other regions, each of which has only one or two bronzes. *Terra sigillata* red ware and glass vessels also represent imported luxuries – both items are present in the Wielbark, Sambian and Bogaczwo cultures, but are absent from the two cultures in Lithuania. The Wielbark territory has the largest hoards of silver coins in the region (Ossa-Rywałdzik – 1000 (?) denarii, Juskowo – 700, Golub – 556), and substantial deposits are known from or near the Bogaczwo culture (Dorothowo – 600 denarii, Zbójna > 200, Szczytno – 200). By contrast, no silver hoard found in the Sambian, Nemunas and Stone Circle Grave cultures is greater than a few dozen coins. The rich imports characteristic of Wielbark society are in evidence at the site of Weklisce, near the Vistula delta, currently excavated by Jerzy Okulicz-Kozaryn. Grave 208 (Okulicz-Kozaryn 1992: Ryc. 3-5) contained a red gloss *terra sigillata* bowl with a rich molded design of human and animal figures, a fluted bronze bowl (type E 44-49) dated to about 200-250, a ceramic skyphos

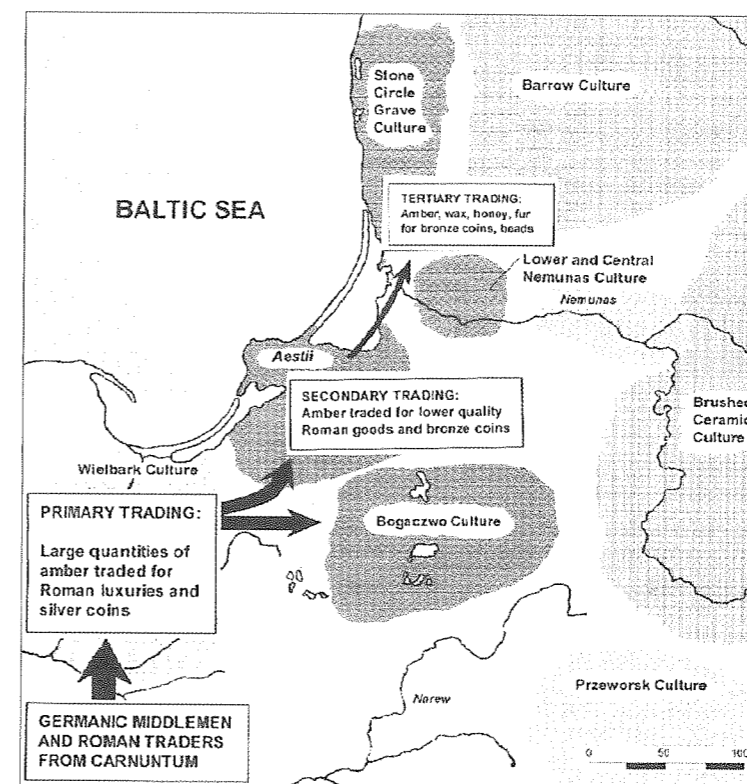


Fig. 6 Hierarchical model of second–third century exchange of Baltic amber and Roman goods in the south-east Baltic.

cup in green glaze, a gilded silver-foil medallion engraved with facing portraits of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (c. 164-165); a pair of ornate silver armbrands and bracelets, fine brooches, tweezers, a belt buckle and other items.

The Balt (?) culture in the Mazurian area featured rich graves during the C1 period, and according to Šimėnas (1998: 93) enjoyed much closer ties to the Vistula delta culture than to the Sambians. One rare Roman import found at Sterlawky Maly is a silver ring with a carnelian intaglio showing a boy milking a goat. A more mundane import, but much more important, is found among the wealthy graves at Szwajcaria – an iron turning share from an advanced type of Roman plough (the Balts at this time were using wooden ards). Unfortunately, the associated burial can not be precisely dated (Šimėnas 1998: 94).

The Sambian culture is notable for having the most bronze coins in the region (about 2,087) with three-fourths of them in hoards, but only 16 denarii have been found.²⁶ It enjoys the curious distinction of also having the highest number (8) of Roman small bronze bells, *tintinnabula*, which Nowakowski (1994) presumes were used in magical practices. The West Balts on or near the Lithuanian coast, as mentioned earlier,

²²That it is connected to the “peak period” of provincial mints under Caracalla, as suggested by Bursche (1992a: 3) is not a satisfactory explanation, because local mints had been numerous under earlier emperors as well: Hadrian – 250 provincial mints, Antoninus Pius – 290, Marcus Aurelius – 250, Commodus – 340, Septimius Severus – 380 (Harl 1996: Fig 5.1).

²³A small AE by Constantius II with a mint mark from Cyzicus (SMKE, officina 5) and supposedly found at Vecpils, Daugavpils district, Latvia is listed by Kropotkin (1961: 101, no. 1468), but Urtāns (1977: 62) does not include it in his table.

²⁴If, following Bursche's theory, third century Roman goods had arrived along a southern Baltic sea route, then primary trading would have been with the Sambian culture, followed by the Wielbark and western Lithuanian coastal cultures; secondary trading with the Nemunas culture, and tertiary trading with the inland Bogaczwo culture (in the poorest logistical position). Coastal settlements in Latvia, Estonia and Finland would have actively bartered for Roman goods. Roman historians would not have been ignorant about societies on the eastern Baltic coast (Nowakowski 1992). This scenario, however, is not consistent with archaeological and historical facts.

²⁵In 1986, Michelbertas (p. 102) estimated that some 2,500 beads were known from 51 OIA cemeteries in all of Lithuania. In an update, Mudėnas (1997) counted 5,517 beads for central Lithuania alone, for the period 50-400.

had the highest number of Roman winged profile brooches, as well as about a thousand bronze coins, but very few denarii. They also were importing from the Roman provinces indigo cloth or at least indigo dye (*Indigofera tinctoria*) – an unusual discovery made by E. Pečeliūnaitė (1998) during her analysis of minute fragments of textiles from the Lazdininkai, Paragaudis and Pajuostis cemeteries near the Lithuanian coast.

The differential distribution of Roman imports among the amber supplier cultures, and their variable access to drift amber, suggests the existence of a regional hierarchy that controlled the export of local amber (Fig. 6). The Wielbark culture was in the best position for *primary trading* and profit: its boats could sail directly to the Sambian peninsula to obtain, inexpensively, large amounts of amber directly from the Sambians. Controlling the lower Vistula, its fleet was able to sail upstream to intercept and barter with fellow Germanic (?) middlemen from Carnuntum, making it unnecessary for them to continue on to Sambia. The Bogaczwo culture could pursue a similar course of action, but perhaps not as effectively. That large quantities of amber were being placed in depots 100-300 km from the coast is verified by the existence of amber processing centers in the Kujawy district, in Wielkopolska, in western Mazowsze and in Małopolska (Wielowiejski 1994: 22). The Sambians, or the *Aestii*, while possessing tons of drift amber at their doorstep, were faced with a distribution problem. Linguistically and ethnically different from the Goths to the west and southwest – separated by a “fear corridor” as some archaeologists put it – it may have been difficult for Sambian traders to launch their own trading expeditions southward. They were forced to engage in *secondary trading* with Germanic middlemen and ended up with the less valuable goods from Roman provinces. The West Balts along the Lithuanian coast and the Nemunas river were in the worst position. Located beyond (i.e. north-east of) the Sambian peninsula, they had little reason to expect that traders seeking amber would come to them, while their own attempts to journey south would be resisted effectively by their three neighbor competitors. Consequently, they were forced to fall back on *tertiary trading* with the Sambians and had to accept an even lower line of Roman items: noluxuries such as glass or *terra sigillata* vessels, perhaps one bronze vessel²⁷, bronze brooches and other ornaments, bronze rather than silver coins, thousands of trinket beads, and some dyed cloth.

The model helps explain Tacitus' observation, cited earlier, that *Aestii* called amber *glæs* in their own lan-

guage (Tacitus used the latinized form *glæsum*). This has long been a vexing linguistic problem: Why would Balt speakers use a Germanic word (soon to mean “glass”, cf. Old English *glæs*) rather than a variant of the East Baltic word for amber, *gintaras*? Either Tacitus was relying on German informants who had substituted their own word, or, more likely, the *Aestii* had accepted a German loan word because it was Germanic middlemen who were their portal into the amber route and the distant Roman world to the south.

²⁶ *Sambian culture is represented by former East Prussian counties of Eylau, Fischhausen, Freidland, Heiligenbeil, Heilsberg, Königsberg, Labiau and Weblau (cf. Bolin 1926a).*

²⁷ *A fragment is known from Kurmaičiai, gr. Nr. 7 (Michelbertas 1972: 24); a more impressive whole bronze pitcher at Veršvai, gr. Nr. 197 (304) is now thought to date to the last half of the D period and may represent migration period plunder – E. Jovaiša, per. comm.).*

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