THE AMBER COLLECTION OF THE ALBERTUS UNIVERSITY AT KÖNIGSBERG/PRUSSIA

Siegfried Ritschowski
GÖTTINGER ZENTRUM GEOWISSENSCHAFTEN (GERMANY)

Abstract

The amber collection of the Albertus University at Königsberg/Prussia was formed at the beginning of the 20th century by combining three well-known amber collections. These were:
- the amber collection of the Royal Society of Physics and Economy at Königsberg (Königlich Physikalisch-
owenomische Gesellschaft zu Königsberg),
- the amber collection of the amber company Steenins & Becker (Becker'sches Museum) and
- a part of the amber collection of Dr. Richard Klehe.

The collection was affiliated to the Institute of Geology and Paleontology in the so-called "Eichendorff-Haus", in the Lange Rebe Nr. 4 close to the Neumarkt at the corner of the Bernsteinstrase.

The amber collection was a scientific collection. Its main part of about 100,000 items consisted of smaller amber bits with inclusions of insects, bugs, spiders and other small animals as well as plants. Furthermore, the collection contained "rich material documenting the formation and abundance of our resin" (Andrée 1927:12). A very precious part of the collection were the Neolithic Schwerinart artifacts, which were partly excavated from the bottom of the Frisches Heff, partly were found at other places in this region.

In 1944, part of the collection was brought to Göttingen to protect it from the war danger. The larger part remained at Königsberg and was obviously destroyed.

When reconstructing the history of the collection one can see the outline of the most important amber collection at the time. Its remains are treasured at Göttingen and kept accessible to the public.

1. Scientific amber collections at Königsberg

The amber collection of the Royal Society on Physics and Economy

The Royal Society on Physics and Economy was founded in 1790. Andrée (1937:207) reports that in 1844 all local collections of the society were given away except for the amber collection. G. Behrendt who was the first director from 1865 to 1874 and thus in charge of the provincial collections, intensified the research on amber. The amber collection expanded. The meeting protocols report regularly of new acquisitions of amber (Kwiatkowska 1997), which as a rule were donations to the society. Those were mostly single items. M. Becker of Messrs. Steenins & Becker was frequently mentioned as donor of outstanding collectibles. However, it also happened that complete collections were disposed of by will, like the collection of Herrn von Duitsberg, minister at Steinberg, which comprised about 2,150 items.

The collection report of 1865 (Klehe, 1885:XVII) mentions a stock of 9,517 items plus another 300 pieces, which had not been classified until then. In April 1870 the amber collection comprised already 13,070 objects.
R. Klębs who in 1874 was appointed by M. Becker to act as a consultant in the siting of the Palmnicken mine (Klębs 1910:224) had a decisive part in the amber collection. Apparently shortly afterwards the company Stanist & Becker requested him to extract a scientific collection from the company’s complete material (Klębs 1880:3). The catalogue from the first exhibition at the International Exposition on Fishery at Berlin list 3,504 objects (Klębs 1882:26). After the sale of inclusions from the Becker stock, as preferably insect-bearing inclusions had been sold by the hundredweight at certain times. After 1884 all noticeable larger findings were actually stored (Klębs 1910:231). Klębs remained consultant until 1899 when the company was taken over by the Prussian State.

"The Golden Age to collect amber inclusions was the time of Becker, mainly from 1859 - 84, but also until 1890" (Klębs 1910:232). The result was the Becker amber museum (Becker’sches Bernstein-Museum which in 1899 was opened in the Bahnhofscafe at Königberg (Klębs 1910:225). According to Schroeder (1914:386) and Brekenfeld (1991:509) the collection consisted of more than 26,000 numbers in the catalogue. An amber piece with embedded feathers registered as No. 33,482 of the Becker’sches Museum and its item No. B 36,445, both kept at Görlin, indicate that the collection comprised at least 36,500 pieces.

The collection of Dr. Richard Klębs

R. Klębs (1850-1911) collected amber on his own. He reports (Klębs 1910:233) that he bought more that 8,000 pieces at Paldingen in 1900, among these the amber flea Palaenostomella frisia, which Dampf published in 1911. Klębs bought about some 1,200 other pieces from the same place in 1907. The largest known number of the Görlin collection is K 33,209 (cordial information by Dr. Hammer-Schlemm, Görlin), meaning that Klębs’ collection should have consisted of at least 32,200 pieces.

Klębs (1910:235) wrote:

"I brought together my collection, which as the work of my life must and will be left only to a public scientific institute, with much endurance, reduced the number of double items as far as possible and sometimes rejected several hundreds of prevalent species. My purpose was to present complete material to my colleagues who intended to work on these Oligocene remainst.

Klębs himself investigated and published only few pieces from his collection. His aim was rather to interest entomologists and to provide them with material.

After the demise of R. Klębs A. Tornquist, director of the Institute of Geology and Paleontology and the amber collection of the Königsburg University (from 1908 to 1914) made large efforts to acquire the Klębs collection, which had become famous across the borders of Germany, for the University. His hope was dashed by the first World war, and the unstable situation of the post-war era and the subsequent inflation made the purchase impossible (Andréé 1927:14). Not before 1926 and after long negotiations the collection was bought from means donated by the German Reich, the State of Prussia, the Province of Eastern Prussia, the Town of Königsberg, the University League (Universitätsgesellschaft) of Königsberg and several banks, companies and private donors from Königspurg (Andréé 1937: 206; Andréé 1929: 166-167).

The Klębs collection comprised a large number of natural amber forms, numerous documentary evidence of amber species and colours as well as products of amber processing (Andréé 1927:15f.). Another focus of the collection consisted of numerous amber inclusions, among those the amber fleas, a bird feather and different pieces with hairs from mammals. The imprint of a leaf of a palm tree is pointed out among almost 400 inclusions of plant exsudates. Almost 14,000 inclusions from the Klębs collection were bought in 1926, so that obviously only a part of the collection – although the most important items - found its way into the amber collection of the university.

2. The amber collection of the Albertus university

The amber collection of the university originated from the association of several individual collections.

The amber company Stanist & Becker was bought in 1899 by the State of Prussia (Andréé 1937:206, Brekenfeld 1996:281). Becker wrote in his will that the amber collection should ... either be inalienable private property of the Becker Family or become property only of a national public museum..." (Tornquist 1911:34).

The latter took place in 1901, when the amber collection was given to the University of Königsburg. It was associated with the amber collection of the Provincial Museum and a number of private collections, displayed in the Eichendorff-Haus and named "Royal Amber Collection" (Königliche Bernsteinannahmungen) of the Albertus University (Tornquist 1911:34).

In 1908 the Institute of Mineralogy and Geology was subdivided. The newly founded Institute of Geology and Paleontology moved into the Eichendorff-Haus that had belonged to the University since 1906. The institute admitted the geological collections of the Provincial Museums (1908) and the amber collection which counted as independent collection (Andréé 1937).

More than 17,000 pieces stem from the amber collection of the Society of Physics and Economy. The collection Stanist & Becker contributed more than 36,500 pieces. The purchase of part of the Klębs collection of about 11,000 inclusions in 1926 was a further important contribution. The three well-known collections made up a total of at least 64,500 amber objects. An unknown number of items came from numerous private collections (Andréé 1958:15), possibly also from the stock of the former Institute of Mineralogy and Paleontology. Andréé’s statement (1927:12) that the university collection after inclusion of the Klębs collection comprised about .100,000 inclusions as well as rich material on the genesis and abundance of our resin” can thus be reproduced. The comparison of the amber collection of the University of Königsberg with present-day collections (Kranzböck & Krummbiegel, 1994:94-95) makes clear the importance and comprehensiveness of this geo-scientific archive. The directors of the Institute of Geology and Paleontology were in charge of the amber collection. Pompeckj’s successor was A. Tornquist (1908-1915). The following director, K. Andréé was head of the collection from 1915 to 1945 (Ritzkowitz, 1995). He was also the initiator of the promising publication series „Amber Studies (Bernsteinforschungen)“, which was stopped with the beginning of the Second World War in 1939.

3. The End of the amber collection at Königsburg

When on 9 April 1945 the so-called Fortress of Königsberg fell after a murderous battle, the beautiful classicistic Eichendorff-Haus, domicile of the Institute of Geology and Paleontology as well as of the amber collection, was in ruins. An eye witness, former member...
of the Institute of Zoology of the University of Königsberg, reports that his Volksturn company was positioned in the Institute of Geology at the Lange Reihe 4 on 6 April 1945. The next day he arranged that the amber objects which were still in the showcases were brought to the basement. He and his company had to retreat on 8 April. The surrounding buildings caught fire that day, and he assumes that the Institute of Geology burned down as well. Königsberg capitulated on 9 July 1945. The fire obviously destroyed the largest part of the amber collection. Thus a fruitful era of collecting and research on Baltic amber ended, which had its centre at Königsberg.

A small but important part of the amber collection of the University of Königsberg survived. In 1944 the administrations of the Königsberg University and the University of Göttingen negotiated about transferring part material from the Institute of Geology and Paleontology to Göttingen to protect it from the war danger. A courier brought accordingly two small chests of a total volume of about 0.1 m³ with material from the amber collection to the potash mine at Volpriehausen not far from Göttingen (shaft „Wittkeinde“, where the University had already stored other valuable objects and books. After the end of the war the shaft was destroyed by explosions and subsequent fire and water leakage. The two chests were rescued because they had been taken from the mine by British officials and brought first to Goslar where works of art were stored, later to Celle. André, who had moved to Göttingen after the end of the war, managed in March 1949 to have a look at the chests and to supervise the repacking of the material. Due to his efforts the amber from Königsberg reached its place of destination – the Institute and Museum of Geology and Paleontology of the University of Göttingen (now Göttingen Zentrum Geowissenschaften) in summer 1958. Here it has been stored and scientifically studied until today on behalf of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin-Dahlem (Ritzkowsky 1977).

What happened to the amber shipment between its storage in the Wittkeinde mine at Volpriehausen in autumn 1944 and the repacking by André in March 1949 is still unclear. André made no inventory of the material to control at a later time whether the shipment was still complete. The Institute of Geology and Paleontology at Göttingen, however, received a collection of 223 amber inclusions years later which definitely had belonged to the material in the two chests. Among these there were 8 inclusions from a publication by Meurter, which Meurter had investigated during his time at Königsberg. The inclusions had been since the end of the war at Uslar, a town close to the Wittkeinde mine. Also a museum of local history owns a figurine made of small amber pieces. It can be concluded that part of the shipments left during the capitulation in April 1945 and destruction of the shaft in June 1945.

The inclusions make up the main part of the collection. The recent record of all inclusions by computer yielded 13,976 objects (cordinate information by Dr. Hammer-Schiemann). The number of plant inclusions (450 items) is small compared to the animal inclusions, both flying animals like mosquitoes and running animals like ants or spiders. The collection includes extremely rare pieces like the amber flea Palaeoxypus kloesiana (Dampf 1911). Also residues of vertebrates are embedded in amber, like the amber lizard lacerta salamandra or hairs of mammals (Ritzkowsky 1998, 1999, Böhme & Weitkast 1998). The identification of unknown animal species from the geological past is documented by 1,850 types and originals, respectively, with numerous scientific publications. The amber collection of the University of Königsberg was a scientific collection, a data base which stored petrified testimony of the life on earth 40 - 50 millions of years ago. The same is true for the remaining part at Göttingen.

Outstanding items are amber pieces treated by humans. Among its 1,131 artifacts and crafts at the collection Göttingen includes the famous amber carvings from the bottom of the Haff at Schwarzent (Juodkrante), carved in the Neolithic about 5,000 years ago, either as adornment or as talisman (Klebs 1882; Le Baume 1924; Sturm 1927; 373-379 and pl. 119-120; Weisserger & Ritzlow 1999; Gaigalas 2000). Amber beads from different eras, figurines or objects of utility from past centuries, figurines or boxes for ointments from China or less technical products give an impression of the efforts to demonstrate the various use of amber in the world by the former Königsberg collection.

The amber collection at Göttingen, i.e. the part of the former amber collection of the University of Königsberg that survived the war, comprises 15,557 objects. This is about 16% of the original collection according to number. However, the important items of the Königsberg collection, that is a large part of the paleontological types, the important natural forms and Neolithic artifacts, were preserved.

References
Andréé, K. (1958): Der Bernstein... in „Osteuropa“, Essen (Buchhard-Verlag).
The Royal Collections at the Royal Palace contacted the conservation department at the National Heritage Board in December 1999 about six amber objects of art, which had been seriously damaged through accident. A colleague of mine, Ingrid Hall Roth and I were invited to look at the objects and assess the extent of the damage. After a thorough examination of the objects we decided to make an attempt to restore them.

Description of objects (before accident)

LARGE BOX (Fig. 1) No. 139. Early 18th century. Height 270 mm.

This large rectangular box, is made up of thin amber pieces attached to a wooden framework, a technique called incrustation. By using amber pieces of various shades and shapes a striking mosaic has been created. The feet are made of ivory with a carved acanthus motif. At the very bottom of the front is a part hanging down with a female head in white amber, surrounded by shells and dolphins (Béarín-cartouches).

Views over harbours and castles delicately carved in white amber and mounted on top of skimming brass foil are inset beneath transparent cover plates on each side of the box.

The lid is crowned by an ivory group composed of Pegasus seated in a shell drawn by two sea horses. In his left hand he holds an oval female portrait, depicting Ulrika Eleonora the Younger, married to king Fredrik I of Sweden.

SMALL BOX (Fig. 2) No. 131. 17th century. Height 250 mm.

The box has been ascribed to Georg Schreiber and once belonged to the queen dowager Hedvig Eleonora (1666-1715) of Sweden.

It is rectangular in shape and stands on eight spherical amber feet, attached to the bottom of the box with metal pins. It consists of three storeys - a base, middle and an upper storey. The base storey, with three small drawers next to each other, is composed of a wooden framework with thin amber pieces of various shades and colours attached to it. In the centre of each short side and the back long side is an inset relief in white amber mounted on top of pincered mica foil and covered with a transparent amber plate. The two upper storeys, on the other hand, are made up of pieces of amber, which have been notched together without any wooden framework.

The middle storey is decorated with small and large relief panels showing the four seasons, the four continents, antique deities, women dressed in 17th century clothes, hunting scenes, etc. The relief panels are flanked by female herms (twelve in total, four on each long side and two on each short side).

In the bottom of the middle storey, covered by a transparent amber plate, is an inset relief carved in white amber and mounted on a black background, depicting the death of Thiseis.