A PARTIAL SURVEY OF RESEARCH ON PRE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITHUANIAN AMBER ARTEFACTS (ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS)

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The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century custom of wearing a string of amber beads with national folk costume, and songs and poems about “amber tears” and “the land of amber” made this material popular in Lithuania. We have taken to calling Lithuania the “amber country”. However, the question as to when people began to adorn themselves with amber and when it took on the significance of a “lucky stone” is still little researched by Lithuanian scholars. The oldest, pre-thirteenth-century period remains especially poorly researched.

The Stone Age

For a long time our most important source of knowledge about this period was the so-called “Juodkrantė (Schwarzrot) Amber Hoard”. In 1858, after work began on mining amber from beneath the Curonian Lagoon at this site, man-made amber artefacts were also dredged up from the seabed. These were collected and sent to the Stanzen and Becker Mining Company’s museum in Königsberg. These finds included pendants, beads and brooches and in 1865 amber figurines of human beings were found. By 1880 more than 400 finds had been collected. In 1882 this amber collection was described and published by R. Klebs, who showed that these objects belong to the Stone Age. It should be added that by then amber mining had led to such finds appearing in the Tilsit and Strauburg museums and even in private collections. For a long time Schwarzrot finds were handed over to the University of Königsberg. In 1938 facsimiles of some human figurines and several other artefacts were made for the Cultural Museum in Kaunas. Between the wars Schwarzrot finds were attributed to comb-marked pottery culture and were cited by many authors writing about the Stone Age in Lithuania and East Prussia. In 1944, as the eastern front closed in on Königsberg, the Schwarzrot artefacts disappeared. Only later were a dozen or so finds from this collection tracked down in Göttingen. These include the human figurines found off Juodkrantė.

Another major collection of similar ornaments (amber beads, pendants, buttons) was found near Palanga by the Counts Tyszkiwicz. The exact location and circumstances of their discovery remain unknown. In 1908 a part of this collection was donated to the Vilnius Society of the Friends of Science (Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk w Wilnie). These finds are now in the Lithuanian National Museum. The Tyszkiwicz Museum gave the remainder of their collection to the Kretinga Ethnographic Museum. From there they eventually found their way into the Cultural Museum in Kaunas. They were also dated to the New Stone Age and attributed to comb-marked pottery culture.

These two collections from Juodkrantė and Palanga were most important for understanding stone-age ornaments. However, the circumstances of how the Juodkrantė hoard found its way beneath the Curonian Lagoon remain unknown. We do not know whether any other objects, such as animal bones or post-holes, were found with them, because at that time there was no interest in such objects. Therefore, it is unclear whether this is just an amber hoard,
a sacrifice, or the remnants of a dwelling site, or whether they were tossed into the Lagoon at approximately the same time or over several hundred years. Only recently has the thought occurred that some of the Juodkrantė finds might be older and others more recent.  

Apart from small studies carried out in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries on the Curonian Spit, excavations of stone-age dwelling sites began in Lithuania only in the 1950s. At first sites in central and south-eastern Lithuania were excavated. Remnants of settlements rich in flint finds were investigated and so, when the Stone Age in Lithuania was discussed, still only the Juodkrantė and Palanga finds were used in evidence.  

The situation began to change in 1960 when coastal sites at Sventoji were investigated and later Nida (Curonian Spit) and other sites were excavated. At Sventoji more than 20 pipe beads, approximately 300 brooches, circa 100 pendants and a dozen or so rings, disks, many trial pieces, fragments and many off-cuts were found in addition to pieces of raw material.  

During excavations at Nida in 1973-78 around forty amber artefacts were found. Furthermore, in sites excavated farther from the coast only single amber artefacts or fragments of artefacts were found.  

Therefore, it is now clear that amber ornaments and amulets were known in Lithuania from the Early Stone Age and that they are found in sites belonging to the Nàrva and Raucevo (Pomorze) Culture. It is thought that amber artefacts in Lithuania spread not from only coastal areas, but that single objects also came from eastern Latvia.  

The Iron Age  

We have no amber artefacts from the first millennium BC, the end of the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, perhaps because fewer people work on this period.  

From the first millennium AD and the beginning of the second millennium our finds come almost solely from graves. In burrows we find mostly unfinished pieces of amber (Ekëë, Klajpeda District), Inbaa (Kretia District), Jaunondys (Rokiškis District), Mažūnys, Ignalina District and so forth). Grave site excavations have shown that amber beads were worn from around the time of Christ, and from the third-fourth centuries AD amber loom weights were used, which were more common in Curonian and Žemaitian dwelling sites from the fifth-sixth centuries. In the eighth-ninth centuries certain other amber amulets spread. However, it should be added that this is only preliminary data because most grave sites have been excavated only on a small scale. Moreover, the material from the largest grave sites excavated at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (at Andulë (Kretia District), Obechor, (Klajpeda District) and Veitkazëi (Silute District)) was lost or disappeared un-published during World War Two.  

During the first century AD trade links developed between the south-eastern Baltic littoral and the Roman Empire. Amber artefacts are actually characteristic for the Empire and the reason why the first information about amber and the Aesti tribes (considered to be Balts) was included in the works of Tacitus and Pliny the Elder. Trade links with Rome and her provinces provided the Baltic with many non-ferrous metal and glass-enamelled beads. New nonferrous metal (bronze, tin, silver) ornaments and glass-enamelled beads became very popular among people living there in what is now Lithuanian territory. Metal necklaces, spirals and bronze pendants, coloured glass-enamelled beads became the main types of neck jewellery. Amber beads were used more as amulets. Single amber beads are included among other material in women's strings of beads and they are also found in men's graves. They have not attracted much attention in archaeological studies.  

In the fourth-sixth centuries amber beads are more common and have more varied forms. Excavations of the Pinkagalis grave site have shown that at that time larger strings of beads are found only in graves where there are no necklaces (Graves 24, 55, 56, 126) and various forms of beads are found in strings from that time.  

Most common finds are double-cut cones and spherical beads while semi-circular and flattened circular forms are rarer. Furthermore the surfaces of certain finds are furred with concentric rings (some of which are deep, some broader and almost unnoticeable), some are incised, cut round, while others are carefully polished and turned. We encounter pear or figure-eight shaped bead-pendants, some of which remind one of beetles. Some forms are common in large European areas. Some times they are discussed in archaeological histories. In Lithuanian finds are often ignored or reported in small numbers because Lithuanians fail to publish them.  

Amber figure-eight bead-pendants are found in south-eastern Sweden, Denmark, Pomorze (Poland), East Prussia (close to the south-eastern finds have been made in the Dnepr Delta). Lithuanian finds are not marked on find maps. However, such beads have been found in at least six grave sites (Baltai, Gintarai, Prienai and Utpelniai (Kretia District), Mažeikiai (Klajpeda District), Žvilias (Silute District)). Žvilias grave research has shown that they were used as amulets.  

The case with so-called Batakia-type beads is similar. Polish scholars who have surveyed this type of turned bead and its proliferation were able to mention three find sites in Lithuania, at Obedorbs, and Sernia in the Klajpeda District and Ingulai (Kaua) (R.V. Sidrys collated other researchers' data concerning a further sixteen find sites, although it seems that there are very many more (grave sites in Ingulai, Paalagais, Stanogas and in Zorblitas burrows). However, it is typical that they are found on strings together with amber beads of other shapes.  

During the whole first millennium AD most beads were used as amulets rather than jewelry, as is illustrated by the frequency (usually one-three beads together) with which they are found in men's graves. In eighth-ninth century Curonian graves single amber beads are found near bits. From the fifth century two amber beads are more commonly found in cemeteries: women's graves near pins and near clasps in men's graves (two beads in a grave). In Curonian men's graves we find two small amber beads in the forehead region but, since organic material tends to disappear for the most part, it is unclear whether these beads were attached to the corpse's hair or head dress. For example, in the Palanga grave site (dated to the eighth-ninth centuries) such grave goods are found with 32% of corpses and at Bikavėnai (Silute District) with 30% of burials.  

After cremation customs spread in central and east Lithuanian in the sixth century and the practice became common in Skåne and Curonian burial sites in the seventh-eighth centuries less and less data survives relating to the wearing of amber beads and amulets. However, continued use of amber is illustrated by finds from inhumaion graves with a horse (date: tenth-twelfth centuries) from central Lithuania. Single beads are found above the horse's head or by its neck. These were probably attached to the horse's mane. We have examples of this from at least ten graves. Lithuanian archaeologists have not compared these finds with amber discovered in human graves.  

In Curonian men's graves of the eighth-ninth centuries we come across small amber beads attached to a belt or placed in another part of the grave. These are quadrangular or semi-circular amber plates with schematically incised "teeth" on one side. In women's graves of the same time we sometimes find a round amber plate above the corpse's bead: one side of the plate is polished. The plates lack any holes for attachment and so it is supposed that they were part of a head dress. Furthermore, in women's graves we find symbolic tools for weaving sashes (quadrangular amber plates, an amber knife and some times a loom weight with a carved stem).  

Hitherto amber loom weights have received scant attention from archaeologists. They are found from the third century onwards but are particularly typical of if the first half of the first millennium and are found in six widely separated places in Lithuania, Zemaitia, Klaipeda, and Seinų. That is, they are found in the same area where it was a custom to place stone loom weights in women's graves. In size and shape (a low cylinder) they do not differ from stone weights. More than a hundred examples have already been found in around thirty graves. Only 10-11% of these finds are decorated in the same way as stone weights. Sidrys considers these to be ritual artefacts. The frequency of amulets and their classification as ritual artefacts has forced archaeologists to consider this aspect of amber usage.  

As we see, we have no single work covering Lithuanian amber artefacts. The most important studies, we think, are those of Kekis, Rimanties and Sidrys. Amber production techniques, changes in amber production, regional variations, the amber and amber goods trade in the country remain completely unresearched. These and other matters can be studied only when we have a full catalogue of amber finds in Lithuania. Not only excavation material but also accidental finds preserved in all our museums or mentioned in archaeological writing should be drawn into this catalogue.
AMBER IN LITHUANIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

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The present amber bibliography covers the period of Lithuanian Archaeological literature from 1792 to 2001. Articles focusing exclusively on amber theme are not numerus in Lithuania. However, there are quite a number of publications, which refer, with more or less detail, to amber artifacts, trade routes and amber collections owned by museums. As a milestone in preparing this bibliography has served the capital study by Adolphs Tautavičius "Lietuvos archeologijos bibliografija" (Bibliography of Lithuanian Archeology, 1782-1998).

The current work "Amber in Lithuanian Archaeological Literature" has no ambition of being all-exhausting study, but rather is a modest attempt to give a quick overview of the main publications printed locally, as well as those printed abroad, not limited to, but including also material belonging to Lithuanian Archaeological sites. "Amber in Lithuanian Archaeological Literature" is divided into following parts.

I General knowledge (amber in Archaeological material, collections of museums, amber trade routes, amber conservation)
II Stone Age
III Bronze Age
IV Roman Iron Age - Viking Age

1. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE (AMBER IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL, COLLECTIONS OF MUSEUMS, AMBER TRADE ROUTES, AMBER CONSERVATION)

1792

1865


1869
4. Hensche A. Bericht über die Bernsteinansammlung der Physikalisch-ökonomischen Gesellschaft // Schriften der Physikalisch-ökonomischen Gesellschaft zu Königberg in Preussen. – Königsberg, 1865, T. 9, s. s. 16-17.

1879