

AMBER

Tears of the Gods

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3,000 year old Bronze Age amber necklace from Mycenae, Cyprus.

as decorations on clothing and as amulets, perhaps to protect the wearer from physical harm or disease with its 'magical' powers. What must superstitious Stone Age Baltic people have thought when they saw straw or feathers leaping to and sticking to amber when it was rubbed with animal fur? This property where amber holds a static electrical charge was not recorded until the times of the ancient Greeks. Is it possible that this 'magical' property is the reason why it became such a popular adornment in the mid to late Stone Age? Its colour being similar to that of the sun, its unusual light weight, and the ease with which amber can be carved may also have contributed to the widespread use of this unique organic material.

The trade in amber may have existed for over 5,000 years in northern Europe. Amber was one of the principal commodities for barter, and it has been found as far away as central Russia, Norway and Finland at that time. It was not just raw amber that was exchanged, but also the finished product. Amber workshops run by early Baltic tribes produced finished products locally for exchange. Amber provided the Baltic peoples a means to barter for metals that were denied the tribes farther inland, who still had to rely on stone implements.

During the Early Bronze Age, very few amber grave goods are found. This is perhaps because of the practice of cremation; however, we do know that the commerce in amber grew to reach southern Europe. Egyptian blue faience beads have been found in sites of this period in Poland, suggesting that trade extended to Egypt, but not in Baltic amber as far as we know. Some 'amber' that was found in 5,200-year-old Egyptian tombs was, in fact, a much younger sub-fossil resin, or copal. It is also possible that the Assyrians (from an area in present-day Iraq) dealt with the Baltic tribes as far back as 4,000 years ago; however, most of the amber dealing seems to have taken place along European rivers and probably reflects the major commercial routes of the time. The Central European cultures then traded amber from the Baltic region with the early Greeks, who valued it as a luxury commodity for the rich, powerful and educated classes.

In the Iron Age (2,000–1,500 years ago) Gdańsk became the centre of the Baltic amber region and also the centre for the amber trade.

Amber myths

ANCIENT GREECE

As far back as 2,500 years ago, the ancient Greeks had knowledge of the true nature of amber. The earliest record is that of the Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletos (*c.* 635 BC–*c.* 543 BC) who described the magnetic properties of amber when rubbed with a silk cloth, noting that amber attracted dust and feathers. At this time, there was a belief amongst the Greeks that amber represented the tears of the Heliades. The story has been related to us by writers such as Herodotus in the fourth century BC and Ovid in the first century BC.

The story is that Phaeton, the son of Helios, rode the Sun Chariot for the Sun God, Apollo. Phaeton was permitted to drive the Sun Chariot across the sky one day, but he lost control of the wild horses that pulled the chariot and came so close to Earth that it was set on fire. This fire was said to be the origin of volcanoes. To save the Earth, Zeus killed Helios' son with a lightning bolt. Phaeton fell from the sky and landed in the Eridanus River (now known as the Po River in northern Italy). Water



The Heliades based a woodcut print for Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in 1563 by Vergilius Solis.

nymphs of the river pulled his body out of the water and buried him on the shore. Phaeton's sisters, the Heliades (also known as the Electrides) went looking for the grave and once they had found it, they vowed to stay with their dead brother, weeping day and night for him. After four months, the Heliades were transformed into poplar trees by the Gods, and their tears into amber. One of the possible origins of the term 'amber' is from the Arabic *haur rumi* which means 'Roman poplar tree'.

THE ROMANS

Although the Romans had a fair idea as to what amber was, they had many superstitions surrounding it. The Emperor Nero used to give amber bracelets to his favourite gladiators, believing it to ensure their survival. He even gave the pet name 'Amber' to his second wife Poppaea because of the golden colour of her hair. Ironically, she was later reputedly beaten to death by Nero.

Certainly, amber as a talisman was much valued by the Romans. According to Pliny the Elder, a small piece of worked amber was said to cost as much as a full-grown male slave. A slave could cost about 600 silver denarii, which is about two years' wages of a legionary soldier. It was also Pliny who suggested that amber was actually the resin of a pine-like tree rather than the poplar tree of Greek legend. He dismisses the myths of the Greeks as nonsense, an intolerable falsehood, and considers it ridiculous that anyone should advance such absurdities. Amber was called *sucinum* (from the Latin *sucus* meaning sap or juice) by the Romans because of its resinous nature, long before Pliny wrote about it in the first century AD.

THE CELTS

Ambres, the Celtic Sun Father, gets his name from the fossil resin. Amber was used extensively by Celtic tribes and they became skilled craftsmen, producing highly prized pieces. It is interesting that the iconic stones of Stonehenge in Wiltshire, England, were once called the Ambers, and the nearby town of Amesbury used to be known as Ambersbury. It may be that it was named after the Romano-British leader resisting the Anglo-Saxon invaders in the fifth century, Aurelianus Ambrosius. Amber has been found closely associated with Cornish stone monuments as well as some barrows (burial mounds) near to Stonehenge. Thus it is possible that there is some link between amber and sun-worship at these sites.

LITHUANIA

In the countries from which amber is derived, there are other legends as to the origins of this precious gem. In Lithuania, the legend of Jūratė and Kastytis is one of the most famous and popular tales. The origins of this story are uncertain, as it was recorded for the first time in the 1800s and has no doubt been influenced by modern romantic stories, as several versions of the plot exist today. The basic story is that the goddess of the sea, Jūratė, lived in a beautiful amber castle under the Baltic Sea where she ruled over all in this domain. One day a young fisherman, Kastytis, while catching a lot of fish, was causing a disturbance. Jūratė decided to punish him, but once she caught sight of the handsome fisherman, she instantly fell in love with him. They were happy together until Perkūnas, the god of thunder, found out. Perkūnas was furious that Jūratė had fallen in love with a mortal. In anger, he sent a bolt of lightning to destroy the goddess' amber castle and kill her mortal lover. Poor Jūratė was then chained to the sea-floor, where she cries tears of amber for her lost lover. The amber that is washed ashore after storms is reported to be either the tears of the mourning Jūratė, or fragments of the destroyed amber castle.

There is a monument to commemorate Jūratė and Kastytis in the Lithuanian Baltic Sea resort of Palanga. It is located next to a bridge that leads to the setting sun.

Another legend from Lithuania is quite similar. Amberella, the beautiful daughter of a fisherman and his wife, lived on the Baltic shores. One day while swimming, Amberella gets trapped in a whirlpool and is pulled down into the depths of the sea, only to find that she has been captured by the Prince of the Seas to serve as his princess. They live as husband and wife in a submarine amber palace, but she pines to see her parents again. Enraged at her wish to see her parents, the prince mounts foaming white horses, grasps the princess in his arms, and they rise up through the waves in a furious storm. Her distressed parents see their beautiful daughter, adorned in an amber crown and necklace, but held firmly in the prince's grasp. Realising that she will never see her parents again, Amberella tosses lumps of amber that she is holding to her parents on the shore as she sinks



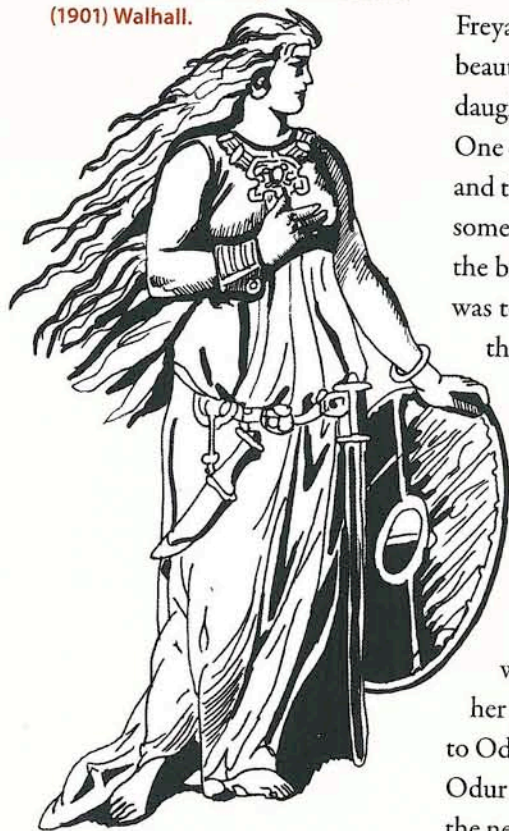
Monument to commemorate Jūratė and Kastytis at Palanga, Lithuania.

back beneath the waves. Her parents grieve as they realise that this is the last time they will see her. It is said that when the Prince of the Seas is angry, storms blow, and Amberella tosses pieces of amber from her prison-palace below to show that she still loves her parents.

POLAND

In the Kurpie region of Poland, there is a myth that has melded with the Old Testament story of Noah and the flood. It shares many similarities with the Greek story of Phaethon and the Heliades as well. When the floodwaters were rising as a punishment to mankind for their sins, people wept in despair. Their tears fell into the water and were turned into amber. Clear amber tears were produced by those who were without sin. This type of 'pure' amber was more frequently used for jewellery. The amber of the sinners was darker and opaque and was mostly used for pipes, or for varnish, rather than jewellery.

Freya wearing the Brisingamen necklace, based on a print in Dahn's (1901) *Walhall*.



SCANDINAVIA

Freya, the Norse goddess of love, beauty and fertility, had a weakness for beautiful jewels. She was married to the mortal, Odur, and had two lovely daughters. They lived in her palace of Fólkvangr, in the land of Asgard. One day Freya was out for a walk along the border between her kingdom and that of the kingdom of the Black Dwarfs. As she walked she noticed some of the dwarfs making a beautiful necklace. It glistened as golden as the bright sun. Freya asked about this wondrous piece of jewellery and was told this treasure was the Brisingamen, a necklace of great value to the dwarfs. She was desperate to possess such a gem, but was told that all the silver in the world could not buy it. She asked what treasure would buy the necklace, and was told that her love was the price. She was to be 'married' to each of the dwarfs for a day and a night before the Brisingamen could be hers. As if under its spell, Freya was overcome with madness. She forgot Odur and her daughters, and even that she was the Queen of Aesir. No-one knew of the deal for the necklace, except Loki, who always seemed to be around when evil was brewing. After completing the deal, Freya returned to her palace and hid the necklace she had paid so dearly for. Loki went to Odur and told him of what had taken place in the land of the dwarfs. Odur demanded proof of this incredible deal and Loki set out to steal the necklace. He turned himself into a flea and bit Freya while she slept.

This caused her to turn and allowed him to remove the necklace. When Odur saw the necklace, he tossed it aside and left the land of Asgard for a distant land. Freya woke the next morning to find her necklace and husband gone. Weeping, she went to her father, Odin, in Valhalla (which was near to the amber valley of Glaeisisvellir), to confess. At the entrance to Valhalla was an amber grove with trees that dripped beads of amber. Although Odin forgave his daughter, he demanded penance. He took the Brisingamen from Loki and commanded Freya to wear the necklace for eternity, wandering the world in search of her lost love, Odur. As she wanders, she continues to weep — her tears that land on soil turn to gold, and those that fall in the sea turn to amber.

Gdańsk and the amber route

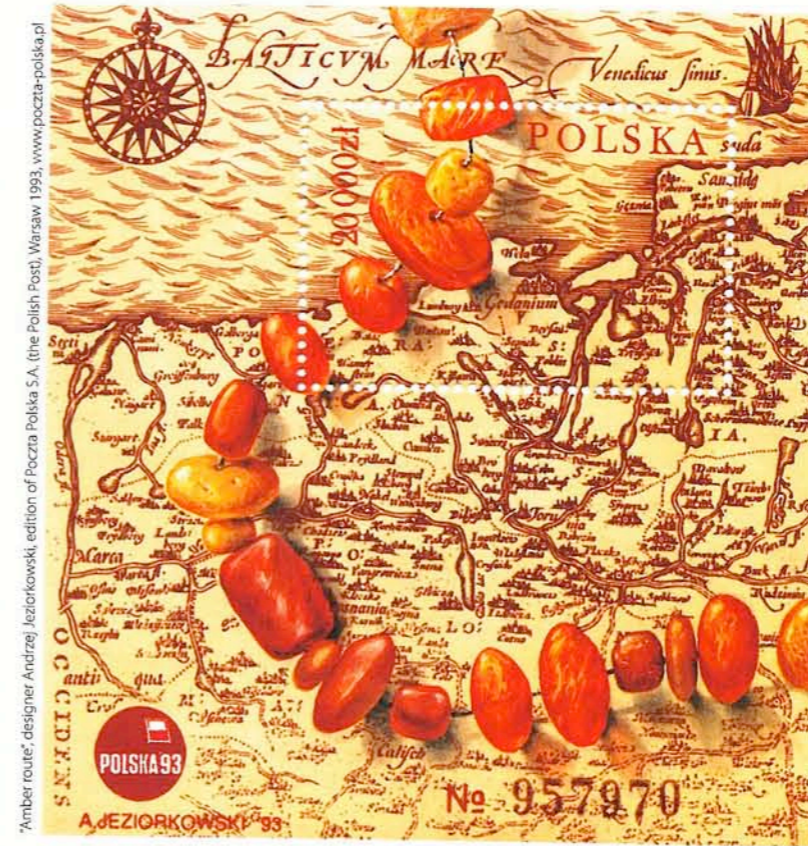
The discovery of worked (carved or polished) amber in places such as central Russia, far from its source in the Baltic region, suggests there was an active trade in amber from the late Stone Age, about 5,000 years ago, onwards. Amber was freely bartered in ancient Central Europe and the Mediterranean regions in its raw state, or as worked pieces following the western and central trade routes.

Amber beads and carvings from the late Stone Age have been found in just about every European country. As the Copper and Bronze Ages moved through into the Iron Age, amber really started to gain importance as a commodity. Amber is often found associated with copper and bronze artefacts in countries that have no native copper, which must have arrived there through commerce. This indicates the high value these early communities placed on amber as a trade item. It is perhaps interesting to note that copper and bronze have more practical uses for weapons or agricultural tools, whereas amber was exchanged more for its spiritual or aesthetic value.

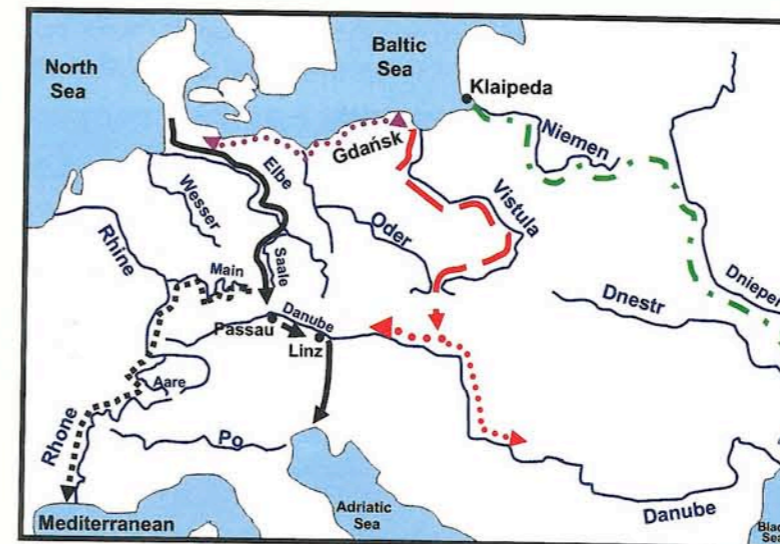
In the Iron Age the Aisti tribe of the area around Lithuania traded amber along the Baltic Coast from Klaipeda to the Elbe River. The people who traded with the Aisti tribe were using the rivers as trading highways by which amber was transported long distances from source across Europe. Amber was traded south along the Elbe River as far as the Czech Republic, a distance of over 1,000 km. The route then turned east at Passau in southern Germany and followed the Danube to Linz in Upper Austria. From here the route could access Italy and southern Europe.

There appear to be many branches of the amber route. Some head west to the Rhine, others go east along the Dnieper River to the Black Sea. What is now Gdańsk, in northern Poland, would have been as central to the trade in amber as it is now. Amber gathered from the Baltic coast east and west of the Vistula River would have supplied the central route south to the Mediterranean.

Based on the discovery of amber in some Mycenaean tombs on the Island of Crete, trade in amber to the Mediterranean may have begun as



Postage stamp commemorating the Amber Route (1993).



Major rivers that formed part of the amber route from the Late Stone Age to the Middle Ages.

Black = western route;
Red = central route;
Green = eastern route;
Purple = trade along Baltic coast.

early as 3,600 years ago. It is thought that the route for this amber went south along the Vistula River in Poland and then followed the Danube, eventually arriving in the Mediterranean via the Black Sea or the Adriatic



Two zloty coin from Poland commemorating the Amber Route in 2001 showing the route south using the Vistula River during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.

Sea. The Mycenaean ruling classes in Crete considered amber a luxury and transformed it into objects of adornment such as pendants, amulets, and beads. Quite often, amber is found associated with gold objects, indicating its high status and value.

While all this trade in amber was advancing the cultures of the Baltic coast by allowing them to trade for metals not naturally available to them, it was not benefiting the tribes further inland, many of whom remained in a virtual Stone Age. They were still ploughing their fields with stone tools whilst their richer neighbours in the amber regions to the north had bronze tools. Access to valuable resources such as amber was therefore very important in advancing the culture at this time.

Gdańsk was the centre of the amber trade in the early Iron Age (about 3,000 years ago), the Vistula River being the main artery for the trade south to the Adriatic Sea somewhere near Trieste. We know this route was particularly well used in the first and second centuries AD due to the large numbers of Roman coins from this period found along the route. Not all the amber moving along the route was worked before it left Gdańsk. Several workshops and stores for amber of this period have been found near Wrocław and Warsaw.

Commerce with the Assyrians in what is now Iraq began as early as 2,900 years ago. Excavations on the banks of the Tigris River revealed amber of Baltic origin. The route that was taken for this amber to get

A disc of amber from the Hunter Collection of the Hunterian Museum showing internal reflections caused by the rays of the sun.

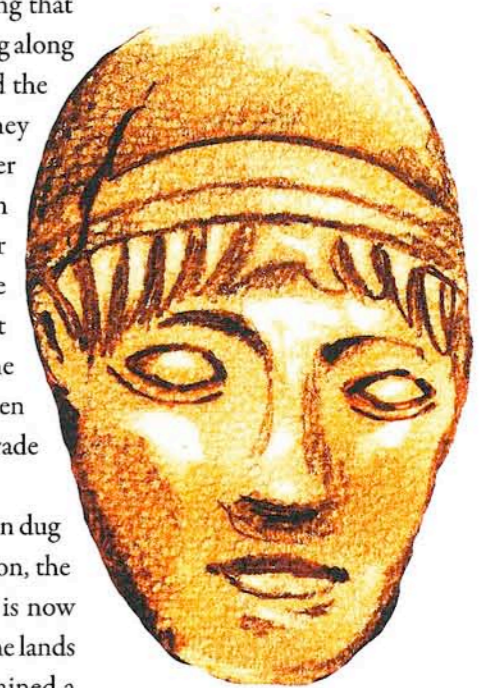


there is unknown, but it is possible that it was traded through Russia, or to the Mediterranean for exchange with the Phoenicians.

The Phoenicians, like many of the European cultures at this time, worshipped many gods, with the Sun God central to their beliefs. Sun-worship practices also played a part in Greek and Roman rituals at this time. Amber may appear to capture the rays of the sun as it reflects light internally, bouncing off flaws and cracks to produce a range of different colours of yellow, orange and white. It is therefore not surprising that amber became so popular and valued amongst these groups. Living along the Mediterranean coast, the Phoenicians were adept sailors and the master businessmen of the ancient Mediterranean cultures. They probably were the 'middle men' of their day, trading their amber through the port of Marseille at the mouth of the Rhone River in southern France, which was at the end of one of the main amber routes direct from the Baltic region. The people who lived there and in northern Italy were called the Ligurians. It is possible that the Phoenicians traded amber with these peoples, as one of the early names for amber was *Ligurian*. The Ligurians presumably then traded with other merchants who came along the various amber trade routes.

Some Greek and Roman writers suggested that amber had been dug up in Liguria. In fact, as we have read, the Greek myth of Phaethon, the son of the Helios, had him fall into the Eridanus River, which is now known as the Po River in northern Italy. This would have been in the lands of the Ligurians. The true origins of the amber would have remained a secret known only to the traders from the north.

As the Phoenicians were a seafaring culture, they were able to conduct their dealings in amber all around the Mediterranean Sea. The Phoenicians also travelled out of the Mediterranean, where they traded with the British in Cornwall for tin. If they were travelling this far, it is also possible that they were trading directly with the amber producers in the Baltic, cutting out the Ligurian 'middle men'. The Phoenicians also invented stories that the Atlantic was a muddy, impassable sea, full of weird and wonderfully dangerous beasts ('Here be dragons!') most likely to prevent others from following on their valuable trade routes. The Phoenicians were invaded and subjugated by Cyrus the Great in 539 BC, and the strategic Phoenician port of Tyre was later taken by Alexander the Great in 333 BC, ending nearly 700 years of seafaring trade by the Phoenicians. This effectively closed one of the major amber trading routes of the Mediterranean.



Sketch of a Roman carved amber head.

The early Greeks continued trading in amber, partly as it had an important connection to their beliefs. Their early writers record the story of the death of Phaethon and his sisters, the Heliades, who cried tears of amber. Interestingly, this story is not too far from the truth of the origin of amber, as the Heliades changed into poplar trees before they cried the tears of amber. This suggests that people were already aware that the 'tears' were made from the resin of trees, although perhaps not the poplar tree.

The trade in amber became less popular as fashions began to change. Although the Greek colonies maintained a strong amber connection, the Greeks themselves were using it less and less. The traders from the Baltic coast did not travel so much with their wares and were content to trade with the neighbouring Germanic tribes east of the Vistula River. Amber did get through to Rome and was reported by Tacitus and Pliny the Elder in the first century AD.

Tacitus, evidently unaware of the history of amber working and trade and the beliefs of the Baltic tribes, wrote:

...(the Aisti tribe) even search the sea, and of all the rest are the only people who gather amber. They call it *Glesum*, and find it amongst the shallows and upon the very shore. But, according to the ordinary incuriosity and ignorance of Barbarians, they have neither learnt, nor do they inquire, what is its nature, or from what cause it is produced. In truth it lay long neglected amongst the other gross discharges of the sea; till from our luxury, it gained a name and value. To themselves it is of no use: they gather it rough, they expose it in pieces coarse and unpolished, and for it receive a price with wonder.

There is a certain amount of arrogance in his statement that probably reflects Roman attitudes towards northern tribes at the time: that Romans have the capacity to understand the true worth of amber and that 'barbarians' do not. The truth is that those who collected amber from the coast stood to benefit more by trading it than keeping it, and advanced their culture by doing so. However, Pliny did provide a very knowledgeable account of the origin of amber, and was well aware that amber 'is formed from a liquid that exudes from the inside of a type of pine tree — just as gum in a cherry tree.' He dismisses amber as 'exclusively an adornment for women. Not even luxury has been able to invent a reason for its use.' He used this rational understanding of amber to belittle the Greek philosophers. In fact he states that his description of

amber provides him with the 'opportunity for exposing the false accounts of the Greeks', thus indicating the superiority of the Roman intellect.

Roman demand for amber was high in the mid-first century AD. During the reign of Nero, the superintendant of the gladiatorial games, Julianus, sent a Roman knight of the Equestrian Order to acquire amber in order to decorate all the furnishings of the gladiatorial show. He returned to Rome with a large amount of amber that was used for this purpose, the largest piece he brought back being about 6 kg in weight. It is unknown which route he took, or where he ended up on the Baltic coast, but according to Pliny, 'He travelled the trade-routes and the coasts, and brought back such a large amount that the nets deployed to keep the wild beasts off the parapet of the amphitheatre were knotted with pieces of amber.' It is likely that he followed the better-known ancient route north along the Vistula River to the area of Gdańsk.

Although the Romans were ostensibly correct in their interpretation of what amber was, they were unaware that the trees they describe as producing the amber had been gone by many millions of years. The description by Tacitus was taken as fact by the sixth century Roman statesman Cassiodorus who, whilst in the employ of King Theodoric of Italy and the Ostrogoths, wrote the following to the Aisti tribe in response to their gift of amber:

You say that you gather this lightest of all substances from the shores of the ocean, but how it comes thither, you know not. But, as an author named Cornelius [Tacitus] informs us, it is gathered in the innermost islands of the ocean, being formed originally of the juice of a tree (whence its name *sucinum*), and gradually hardened by the heat of the sun...We have thought it better to point this out to you lest you should imagine that your supposed secrets have escaped our knowledge.

There is no record of the Aisti tribe's response to the allegation that they were less than forthcoming with the truth, but it is quite certain that the Aisti genuinely had no knowledge of the true origins of amber. King Theodoric became quite interested in Baltic amber and sent several expeditions to find some of the 'Gold of the North'. His expeditions were so successful that he was even able to secure a nugget of amber weighing about 3.5 kg.

In the northern parts of the Baltic region, the Vikings dominated the sea trade routes from the eighth to the tenth centuries. Amber was an important commodity for the Vikings and was used for jewellery,

Viking hoard from the cist of Moan, mainland Orkney, Scotland.



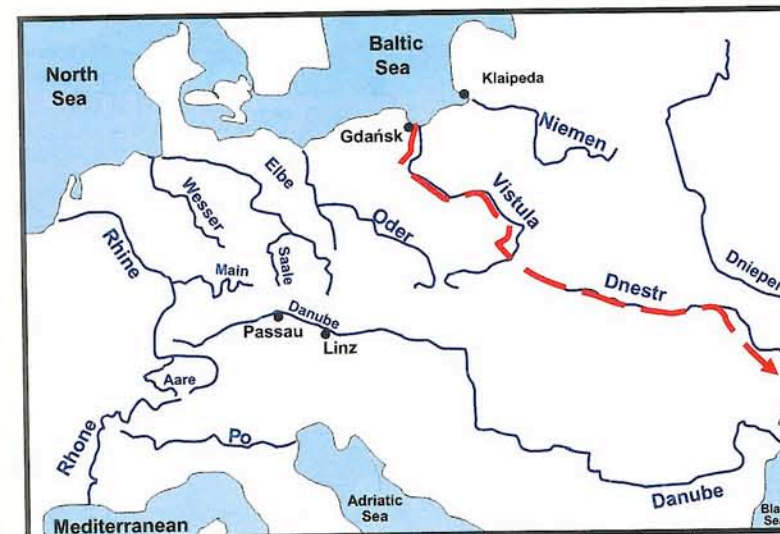
gaming pieces and religious artefacts. Amber grave goods of this period are quite commonly found associated with Viking burials, including the British hoard from the Knowe of Moan in Orkney. The Vikings were not alone in the Baltic Sea for long, though, as in the eleventh century AD, the Curonian pirates from Lithuania and Latvia grew in power and challenged the Vikings, frequently plundering the Scandinavian coast. Both the Vikings and the Curonians became rich, partly from their spoils and from trade in amber.

It was during the tenth century AD that the region that is now Poland was converted from their panentheistic and animistic pagan beliefs to Christianity. The use of amber was in decline at this time, perhaps as a result of a change in fashion or the conversion from pagan religions, as the wearing of amulets and beads may not have been very popular with the early Christian missionaries. The few amber goods from that period continue to consist of amber beads, presumably a persistence of the superstitious beliefs of the protective or curative power of amber. Amber crosses become more common amongst the converted populations, but the practice of Christians burying their dead without grave goods makes it difficult to be certain what effect Christianity had on the amber trade.

Amber and the Teutonic Knights

AMBER TRADE AFTER THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The collapse of the western part of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD led to the collapse of the amber trading routes between the Baltic states and the rest of Europe. The amber trade route persisted towards the east from Gdańsk along the Vistula River and the Dneestr River to the ports of the Black Sea. There was a mass migration of peoples away from the Baltic region towards the east between about AD 400 and AD 700 as interest in amber waned. Whether the trade in amber played an important or subsidiary roll is not clear. It was not until the early Middle Ages that the Slavic peoples of eastern Central Europe once again saw amber as a primary material for jewellery and ornaments. At this time, a 'class'-based society was being established in the Baltic region with feudal states governed by monarchs and their aristocracy. During the tenth century, small amber crosses were being fashioned for the first time. By the time of the Scandinavian Baltic crusades, amber workshops were



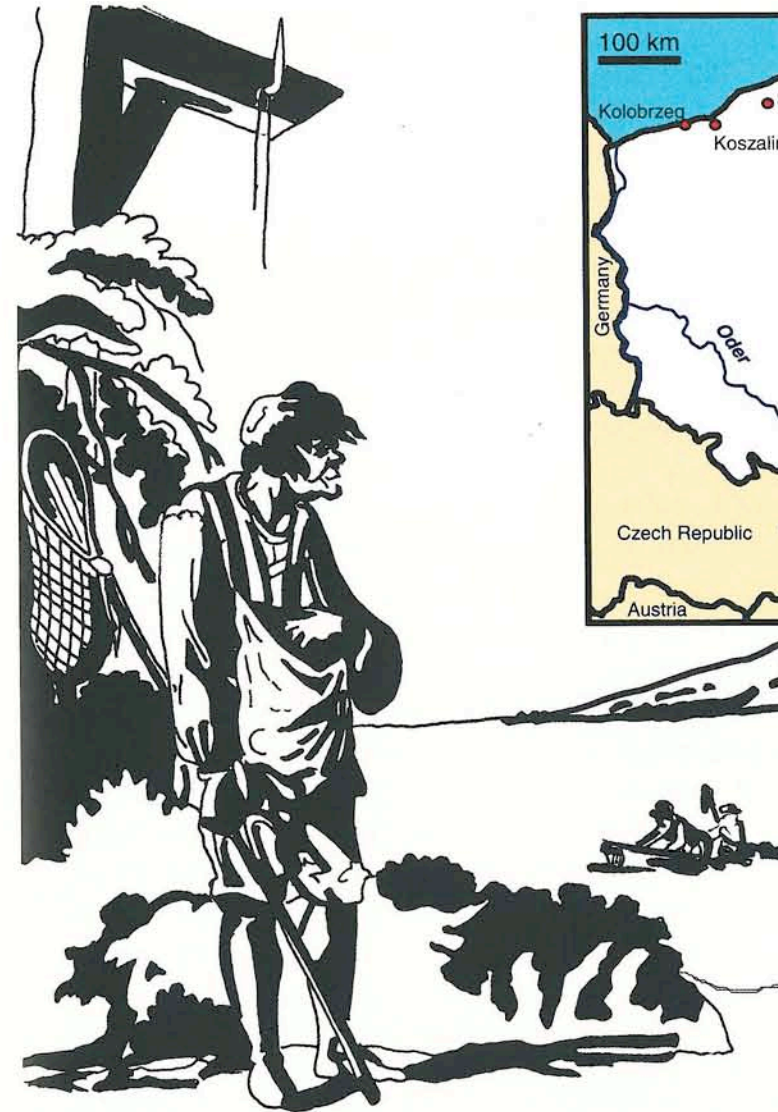
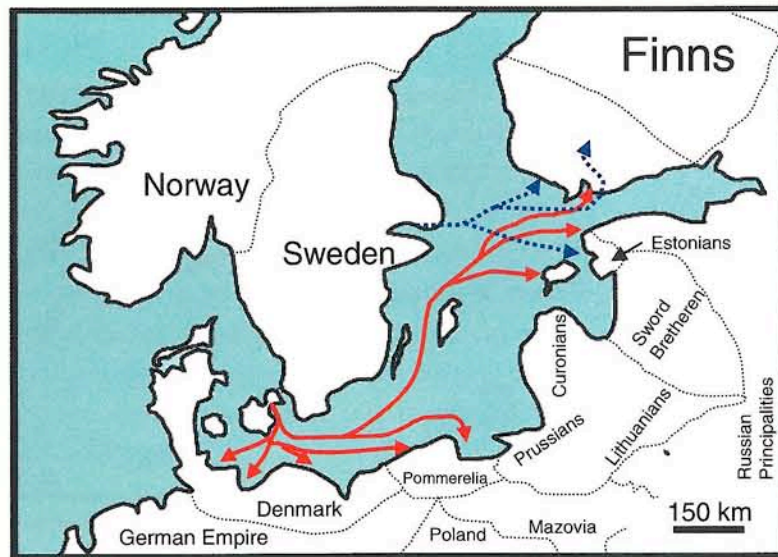
Major rivers that formed part of the Amber Route (red) after the decline of the western Roman Empire.

again thriving in the Baltic coastal towns such as Gdańsk. Amber used to belong to anyone who found it, but with the advent of the feudal system in the Baltic region, the Dukes of Pomerania had laid claim to all the amber found on the coast of northern Germany in the west and as far as Gdańsk in the east.

THE CRUSADES

Before the Teutonic Knights arrived in the Baltic region, Pope Alexander III had authorised crusades against the pagan peoples of the eastern Baltic in the 1170s. The tribes fought back, but some surrendered, accepting Christianity, only to revert to their pagan religion once the invaders had left. Nyklot, leader of the Obotrites Slavs from west of Pomerania (now part of northern Germany) did just that and avoided any loss of territory. Not all were so lucky, though, as the Pomeranian Slavs surrendered to King Canute VI of Denmark in 1185 after having 35 ships captured by just nine Danish ships in thick fog. In 1190, the Military Order of the Teutonic Knights was set up in Palestine, consisting of mainly German knights. It was one of the three main Military Orders of the crusades, on a par with the Templars and the Hospitallers. On their return from the Holy Land, the Teutonic Knights were employed to suppress rebellion in various European states, and were invited to help establish control in the Transylvanian state of Burzenland by King Andrew of Hungary. The Teutonic Knights had ambitions to become more powerful and wealthy like the Knights Templar, and began to erect stone fortifications in place

The tribes of the Baltic region and the crusades by the Danish and Swedish armies in the 13th century.



Above: Map of present day Poland with important cities and teutonic strongholds. Left: Drawing based on a copper engraving of amber fishermen and gallows by Wagner (1774).

of the wooden ones they were permitted to build. King Andrew was then pressured by his own barons into removing the Teutonic Knights from the region in 1225.

THE TEUTONIC KNIGHTS

In 1226, the German Emperor Frederick II granted Prussia to the Teutonic Knights. The Teutonic Knights had learned from their mistakes and, when asked to help Duke Conrad of Mazovia against the pagan Prussians, made sure that they set up an independent centre of operations around the settlement of what is now Chelmno in Poland, just over 100 km south of Gdańsk. Control of the Baltic amber trade was

about to change yet again with the arrival of the Teutonic Knights. These crusading knights set up home along the Baltic Coast, imposing stringent regulations on any commercial enterprise in the region. From this presence in the Baltic, the Teutonic Order soon dominated the region.

From Prussia, the Teutonic Knights fought their way through the Baltic tribes, taking part of western Lithuania and defeating the western Prussian tribes. The Baltic Crusades were financed mostly by the northern Germanic Christian monarchies, who were perhaps less interested in the journey to Jerusalem. Run by a Grand Master, their Order eventually chose Malbork to be their administrative centre. The castle of Malbork, previously one of their strongholds, was, as a consequence, converted into a citadel and residence for the Grand Master. The Teutonic Knights ruled the trade in amber with a hanging noose. Anyone found collecting amber and not in possession of a licence was executed. Licences, however, were difficult to come by, and in the early days of the Teutonic Order, only the Bishop of Sambia (the peninsula to the north-west of Kalninograd) and the fishermen of Gdańsk were allowed to fish for amber. This, however, did not last long. As the price of amber increased, the licences were revoked, and anyone found collecting amber, or even in possession of raw amber, was hanged from the nearest tree. A beachmaster, who oversaw the collection of amber for the Order, would have carried out these executions. This remained the case into the fifteenth century.

Amber collected by the Teutonic Order was destined for the rosary bead trade and was stored in warehouses away from the region to prevent illegal workshops from being established near to the source of the amber. The amber craftsmen further protected themselves from illegal workshops by setting up guilds. The first amber guild was set up in Bruges, in what is now Belgium. This was soon followed by the craftsmen of Lübeck, in northern Germany, who set up another guild in about 1310. These guilds supplied the entire Christian church with amber rosaries during the early 1300s. The Baltic region was a place of turmoil during much of the Middle Ages as different states fought to consolidate and forcibly expand their boundaries, some using conversion to Christianity as their motive in order to obtain papal support. During the fourteenth century, the Baltic region became the favoured area for crusading. The pagan Lithuanians were especially targeted to provide the crusading armies with valuable fighting experience. The Papal authorities afforded the Baltic crusades the same tax incentives that the Holy Land crusaders received, and this is why the Baltic Crusades were particularly popular with the Germanic monarchs who sought to expand their borders.

THE TEUTONIC KNIGHTS IN MALBORK

The Teutonic Knights took Gdańsk, the central city of the amber trade, in 1308 and moved their headquarters to Europe's most powerful fort at Malbork, about 40 km southeast of Gdańsk, in 1309. Amber, much valued by the Order, was kept in the treasury along with the silver and gold at Malbork Castle. At the beginning of the 1400s, the rule of the Teutonic Knights was being challenged, and in 1410, the Poles and Lithuanians defeated the Teutonic Order at the battle of Grunwald. The Teutonic Order never regained its former dominance in the Baltic region after this defeat. By the late 1400s amber guilds that were previously outlawed by the Teutonic Order were being set up in various Pomeranian towns such as Kolobrzeg, Koszalin and Slupsk in what is now Poland. The Teutonic Order still wielded some power and took the town of Gdańsk in 1466, placing it under the sovereignty of King Casimir IV of Poland. However, in 1477 the Order was not able to prevent an amber guild being formed in Gdańsk, indicating how strong the guilds had become. King Casimir IV made amber free again, granting the people of Gdańsk the right to control the Baltic shores of Gdańsk and Pomerania.

During the early part of the 1500s, the Order considered Poland its enemy. As a political move it appointed a Grand Marshall from the Polish royal family. Grand Marshall Albert, however, resigned, became a Lutheran Protestant and took with him the rights to the amber monopoly. The conversion to Lutheranism by the German principalities reduced the need for rosaries and, by implication, amber. Albert, now

Statues of past Grand Masters of the Teutonic Order at Malbork Castle.





West side of Malbork Castle.

(Photo: Lech Okonski)

Duke Albert of Prussia, was having difficulty keeping the amber trade profitable, and asked court physicians to investigate the medicinal properties of amber. In addition, he encouraged the use of amber in other works of art, combining it with ivory, tortoise shell, and gemstones, in order to maintain a lucrative market for amber.

With the continued reduction in the rosary bead business, Duke Albert eventually signed over his trade to an agent, Paul Jaski, in Gdańsk. The trade in amber goods moved east to provide beads for Islamic and Buddhist countries as well as elaborate statues for the temples of the Middle East. The guild grew wealthy despite the many disputes over trade restrictions it had with the agent.