

Amber as Jewellery, Status Symbol and Work of Art

Jan Bouzek

ABSTRACT

The paper presents a Late Archaic Italic amber head from the collections of the National Museum in Prague, with some brief notes on the amber routes, and role of amber in exchange of *keimelia*, wedding gifts and *antidorons*. The studied head is compared with stylistic particularities of heads and figurines, from fine Ionian oeuvres to cruder Italic and Etruscan varieties.

KEY WORDS

Amber; trade; beads; heads and figurines.

*Ma chère Iva,
merci enfinement pour toute l'aide amicale, pour le support essentiel dans des domaines pédagogique et scientifique, avec des projets, nos textes et livres communs, et notamment pour la création d'une atmosphère d'amitié collegiale et personnelle pendant les derniers 50 ans de cohabitation dans notre petit institut de famille.*

Amber has always been popular. Five conferences on Amber in Archaeology have been held and published in which I had the privilege to support my old friend Curt Beck.¹ Other conferences on this topic have been held recently and papers, catalogues or monographs have been published or are in preparation.² Good luck to all, who follow this path!

AMBER ROUTES OF THE BRONZE AGE AND THE SHIFT FROM ELITE TO INDIVIDUAL TRADE ENTERPRISES

Amber routes followed those used for the distribution of other commodities: the western tin route along the Atlantic, perhaps with the Garonne shortcut; the North-South Central European route along the eastern Alps in the Late Bronze Age and later; and perhaps even the eastern one, from the Baltic to the Black Sea (cf. BOUZEK 1997, 122-124; BOUZEK 2007). Our knowledge may be – of course – slightly biased by the state of documentation: Amber preserves worse than pottery or metals and can be burnt.

The amber finds from the Shaft Grave in Mycenae reflected the interest of contemporaneous elites in the continent. Amber is very light, easily transportable; a single backpack may bring fortune or safeguard a way to a pilgrim. But on the Mediterranean Bronze Age shipwrecks

1 Liblice: BECK – BOUZEK – DRESLEROVÁ eds. 1993; Forlì: NEGRONI CATACCHIO – BECK eds. 1998; Talsi: BECK – LOZE – TODD eds. 2003; Beograd: PALAVESTRA – BECK – TODD eds. 2009.

2 Cf. esp. ERNÉE 2012 and the amber session in the Pilsen 2013 EAA Congress.

it formed less than 1 % of the cargo. In most cases it was rather small addition to other commodities carried by ships, wagons or pack animals.

While until the LBA amber jewellery was exclusively possessed by the top elite, from 1200 BC onwards a much broader middle class might have afforded some of it. Private merchants replaced most of the gift exchange between rulers ca. 1000 BC in the Mediterranean.

The distribution of *Tiryns* and *Allumiere* beads roughly coincides with that of late violin-bow and early bow fibulae; it can also be connected with the areas of the legendary Pelasgians and may well have been part of jewellery set worn by their women (BRIQUEL 1985; BOUZEK 1997, 115–118; 2007; cf. NASO 2001; SHEFTON 2001). The Tiryns wheel (Fig. 1) has its best parallels in east Bohemian figure-of-eights of gold wire (BOUZEK 1997, 122–124). Also in the Iron Age the amber trade concentrates mainly around the Adriatic with the prominent consumer areas in Etruria and Picenum; in Greece even its name *electron* underlines its high value. According to the most probable interpretation of Herodotus IV, 33–35, amber packed in straw was brought to Delos first by Hyperborean maidens and later sent across Illyria (cf. BOUZEK 2000).



Fig. 1: The Tiryns wheel, ca. 1200 BC (after KARO 1930, Beilage XXXA).

GIFTS, ANTIDORONS, SYMBOL OF STATUS

All jewellery had magic power; it represented noble women and brides. Its force tried to seduce Penelope, who resisted, and Amphiaraos' wife, who did not. It was passed down from mother to daughter, as part of a dowry in diplomatic marriages, it was kept as part of the family treasury, *keimelion*. Amber jewels might also serve well as a gift by a lover to his fiancée, they can be exchanged as confirmation of a treaty, and be dedicated to goddesses in their sanctuaries (cf. BOUZEK – ONDŘEJOVÁ 2007; ONDŘEJOVÁ 2011).

AMBER CARVING, RELIGION AND MEDICINE

Amber is a specific material. According to legend amber arose from the tears of Phaethon's sisters wailing at his death (DÖPP 1996), and in medicine, amber was recommended in antiquity as a remedy for a number of diseases (MÜLLER-JAHNCKE 1996; BARFOD 1996).

These magical and medicinal properties of amber add a particular dimension to carvings executed in it.

Already the Bernstorff beads (GEBHARD-RIEDER 2002), even if disputed nowadays, with magic signs reminding one of Linear A might have belonged to this category as well as the puzzles on the bows of fibulae at Verucchio (BOIARDI - VON ELES 1994; FORTE ed. 1994, Tav. IX and *passim*).

Some of the amber carvings of the Archaic period – often dedications – depict ideal females and males or their faces: Aphrodite with Adonis or heroic and Dionysiac subjects (cf. the survey of Italian finds in NEGRONI CATACCHIO 1993; LOSI - RAPOSSO - RUGGIERO 1993; NEGRONI CATACCHIO - BECK eds. 1998; BONFANTE 2009; for the finds from the Balkans – Lisjevo pole, Novi Pazar, etc. – cf. esp. PALAVESTRA - KRSTIĆ 2006). Other figurines, representing kobolds with some magic functions, followed the dead person as in Satricum (Fig. 2). Cut-off pieces were probably kept for medical use.



Fig. 2: Satricum, kobolds (?) 8th century BC (after WAARSENBURG 1995).

AN UNKNOWN MASTERPIECE

A so far unpublished amber female head is kept in the reserves of the National Museum in Prague (Inv.no. H10-8344, H. 6.8 cm; Fig. 3, Pl. 1/1-2). It is made of dark reddish well preserved amber, carved in low relief; the rear side is flat, carved sharply with a rather broad chisel. As usual, the carver respected the original shape of the amber lump giving the head a very high asymmetric hairdo, and added the magically starring mask-like face with open eyes. Even for us it expresses a kind of magical power. The female amber head has a very high hairdo or cap and a hardness typical for the Etruscan and Italic Late Archaic schools.



Fig. 3: Italic Late Archaic head, Prague National Museum (photos: archive of the author).

Two very close parallels from Apulian Canosa are kept in the British Museum (**Figs. 4 and 5**; STRONG 1966, 29-31, 68-70, Pl. XX:45, XXI:49), another one comes from Roccanova in Basilicata (BONFANTE 2009, 229, Pl. II:1). The female heads from Picenum (MARCONI 1933, Fig. 50, Tav. XXXI) are much cruder. The fine Getty head (**Fig. 6**) is later and probably Apulian, as is the earlier Eos relief and the famous representation of Aphrodite with Adonis (NEGRONI CATACCHIO 1993, Pl. X). The Ionian kouros head from Lisjevo pole is much finer (**Pl. 1/3**; after PALAVESTRA - KRSTIĆ 2006).



Fig. 4: Italic Late Archaic head, British Museum (after STRONG 1966).



Fig. 5: Italic Late Archaic head, British Museum (after STRONG 1966).



Fig. 6: Early Classical head, Getty Museum (after CAUSEY 1993).

Unlike stones of similar colours, amber is warm, amber beads agreeable to wear as a necklace and its magic always enhanced the feminine beauty. Let it bring good luck to the jubilee!

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Jan Bouzek

Institute of Classical Archaeology
 Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague
 Celetná 20, CZ-11000 Prague 1
 jan.bouzek@ff.cuni.cz



Pl. 1/1-2: Italic Late Archaic head, Prague National Museum (photos: archive of the author).



Pl. 1/3: Archaic head of a youth from Lisjovo pole (after PALAVESTRA - KRSTIĆ 2006).