

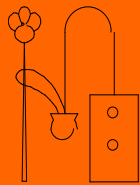
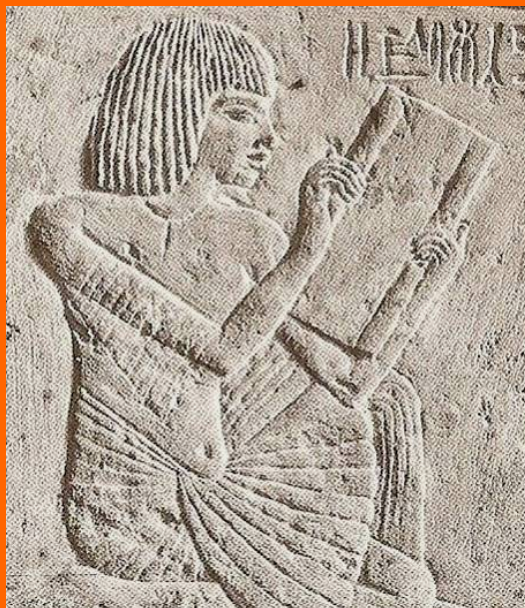
**i-Medjat**

n°2, décembre 2008

**Papyrus électronique des**



**Ankhou**



**Revue caribéenne pluridisciplinaire éditée par l'Unité de Recherche-Action Guadeloupe (UNIRAG)**

## Amber in the Ancient Near East



**Graciela GESTOSO SINGER**

Centro de Estudios de Historia del Antiguo Egipto (CEHAO)

Universidad Católica Argentina

[ggestoso@yahoo.com](mailto:ggestoso@yahoo.com)

Amber is a wholly-organic material derived from the resin of extinct species of trees. Amber can sometimes contain insects, twigs, bark, small vertebrates, and leaves. Although not mineralized, it is often classified as a gemstone of organic origin (Anderson 1995). Various cultures have referred to it by many names: "sea gold", "electron", "hardened honey", "tiger's soul", "the gold of the North", and "tears of the gods". Amber is known to mineralogists as *succinite* (lat. *Succinum*) or "gum-stone". The Greek name for amber was *elektron*, and was connected to the Sun god, one of whose titles was the "Elector" or the "Awakener". It is also associated with the word "electricity", because amber becomes electrically charged when rubbed with a cloth and can attract small particles. The word *electrum* is a Latinized form of the Greek name *elektron*, a metallic substance consisting of gold alloyed with silver. The *electrum* is pale yellow or yellowish-white, and it is called the "white gold" or the "pale gold". The same word was also used for the substance amber, probably because of the pale yellow color of certain varieties, and it is from the electrostatic properties of amber that the modern English words "electron" and "electricity" derive. The modern name "amber" comes from Arabic, meaning "ambergris", the waxy aromatic substance created in the intestines of sperm whales (Lucas-Harris 1934: 191-192; 392-394). There are many varieties of amber; some are a very rare occurrence in nature. Amber beads are mainly separated by their color, transparency, texture or grains, and locality. Amber occurs in a range of different colors: the usual yellow-orange (amber color), pale lemon yellow, brown, and black. Other uncommon colors include red (cherry amber), green, and blue (Saldukiene 1970: 85-87).

### Healing powers

In antiquity, amber was valuable, attractive for its color and magical properties, in order to guarantee victory, fertility, electrostatic energy, and fortune. In ancient India and Egypt, it was burned as incense, believed to purify temples and palaces. From antiquity, people have believed that amber

has healing properties. Thousands of archeological findings in Central Europe have proven that amber was used by prehistoric humans for personal embellishment and glorification of religious rituals. When a piece of amber is heated, it emits a gentle resin scent, making people feel better and believe in the healing power of the magic stone. It was also used to massage sore muscles, and mixed with honey and oil was a good medicine to almost every illness. If it is kept in water or wine for two weeks, the liquid can be used for stomach ache, sore throat, and asthma. In ancient Chinese medicine, amber was used regularly for healing and health enhancement; a belief that is still practiced today. Benefits include detoxification, increased blood circulation, and improved heart, liver, kidney, and intestinal function (Li 2001). Lithuanian tribes in former times employed amber to drive away evil spirits. The newly born babies were fumigated with amber incense to help them grow faster. For the new couples, it was a symbol of eternal happiness. For the ones heading to war, amber helped them return with victory in their hands (Saldukiene 1970: 85 ff.). In ancient Rome, amber was used as medicine and protection against different diseases. Roman peasant women wore amber medallions not only as adornments, but also as a remedy for swollen glands and sore throat. The Romans used amber in a number of different objects, including coins and *situlae* (a small bucket -*secio* in Istro-Venetian-, half-conical shaped, narrower at the bottom and supplied with a handle) (Bonfante 1985: 276-292). Today, we can find amber in some anti-rheumatic ointments, in bracelets to ease rheumatic pains, or in beads of collar to help in cases of thyroid illnesses. Current medical practitioners would certainly disagree in its curative qualities. Despite its lack of healing powers, amber still serves a number of useful purposes. Ninety percent of all extracted amber is of poorer quality and can be used only as an ingredient in other products, such as varnish, amber oil and distilled acids. Craftsmen mold the remaining ten percent into jewelry and ornaments.

### Main sources

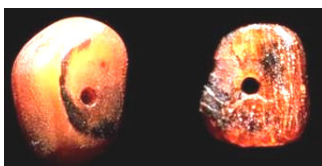
Amber from the coast of the Baltic Sea is the best-known and come from pine tree resin (*Pinus succinifera*). It has a very wide distribution from northern Europe to the Urals. Today, Baltic amber is found in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Russia, and occasionally washed up on the shores of the Baltic Sea as far away as Denmark, Norway, and England (Poinar 1992: 16-17). Other amber sources include Myanmar, Lebanon, Sicily, Romania, Germany, Mexico, Dominican Republic, and Canada. About 90% of the world's extractable amber is still located in the *Kaliningrad Oblast* ("amber region") of Russia on the Baltic Sea (Grimaldi 1996: 148-159).

In antiquity, the source of the amber found in the Mediterranean area can be determined by means of infrared spectroscopy. Most of the amber found in Mycenaean Greece, Italy and Levant comes from the Baltic Sea. In archaeological contexts, amber occurs in the form of beads, amulets, ornaments, jewelry, and rectangular plaques. It was an object of trade and barter in the Baltic and Mediterranean areas (Todd 1985: 292-301; Heltzer 2000: 169-176).

Amber jewelry is abundant in Bronze Age Aegean contexts, though it occurs infrequently in Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean contexts beyond the Aegean. The total recorded amber objects includes seventeen amber scarabs in Egypt, two beads from Assur, and six beads from Enkomi (Cyprus) (Bachhuber 2006: 352, n. 90).

The earliest amber in the Near East may date from ca. 1800 B.C.E., two beads at Assur (Harding *et al.* 1974: 169), or ca. 2400 B.C.E., at Tell Asmar. The last excavations at Qatna (Syria), reveal that amber was imported into Late Bronze Age Syria and used for making the prestige artefacts found in a Royal tomb of ca. 1340 B.C.E. There were found beads and a unique vessel in the form of a lion, likely fashioned in Syria from raw amber imported from the Baltic via the Aegean (Mukherjee *et al.* 2008: 49-59).

Thousands of beads of glass, agate, carnelian, quartz, faience, ostrich eggshell, and amber were found at Uluburun (shipwreck, late 14<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E.), near Kas, at the south coast of Turkey (Bass 1991: 69-82; Pulak 1988: 1-37). More than forty beads of Baltic amber have been recovered from the Uluburun shipwreck (Pulak 1998: 218; Bachhuber 2004: 204, table 9). Many more amber beads likely floated away from the Uluburun ship, as amber is neutrally buoyant.



Beads of Baltic amber

Photo INA : <http://ina.tamu.edu/images/Uluburun/beads/KW2832.JPG>

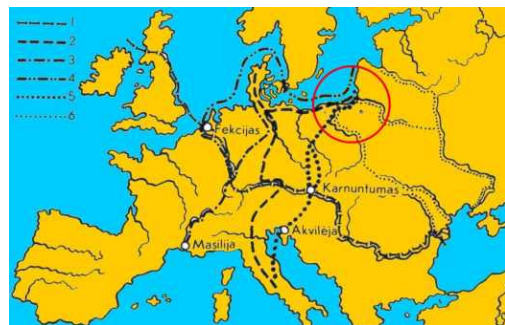
In the Greek mythology, amber was made from the tears of a nymph as they dropped into water or the tears that Apollo shed for his son Aesculapius. Heinrich Schliemann found amber beads in Troy, and in cupola tombs of Mycenaean culture built on Crete Island from ca. 1600 B.C.E. In the Greek mainland, amber is found at the very end of the Middle Helladic period (Hughes-Brock 1985: 257-267). Imports to the Late Helladic period (LH I) mainland are restricted almost exclusively to the Mycenae shaft graves. Vermeule's inventory of exotic items in the shaft graves includes "*ostrich eggs from Nubia sent through Egypt and Crete, lapis lazuli from Mesopotamia, alabaster and faience*

*from Crete, raw ivory from Syria, silver from Anatolia, and amber from Prussia brought down the Adriatic or out of Odessa across the north Aegean*" (Vermeule 1964: 89). The elite of Mycenae had a predilection for amber. The shaft grave offerings include amber beads from the Baltic region (Bachhuber 2004: 5; Renfrew 1972: 467-468). Mycenae was therefore in possession of a valuable commodity that was accessed through overland trade (Bachhuber 2004: 14).

For the Egyptians amber was "*the tears of the eye of Ra, the sun god*". The eye of Ra is most often connected with protection, divine justice, punishment and vengeance. Amber was also associated with the lioness goddess Sekhmet, daughter of Ra and one of his eyes. Small pieces of amber have been discovered inserted beneath the skin covering the hands of Egyptian mummies, in order to protect the dead in the afterlife (Todd 1985: 292 ss.). Baltic amber beads were found in the tomb of Teti (ca. 2345-2333 B.C.E.), at Saqqara. The breast ornament of King Tutankhamen (ca. 1333-1324 B.C.E.) contains large Baltic amber beads (Reeves 1990; Serpico 2000: 451-454). During the reign of Thutmose III (ca. 1500 B.C.E.), in the tribute scenes at the tomb of Rekhmire (TT 100) is registered a delivery from Greece of "*a great heap of amber, which is measured by the heket, making 36.692 deben (ca. 3424 kg)*" (Breasted 1906: II, § 761). In this case, we believe that it could be a delivery of amber, probably from the Baltic area, through Mycenaean envoys.

### Amber road

The so-called "**Amber Road**" was an ancient trade route for the transfer of amber, from Europe to Asia and back, and from northern Europe to the Mediterranean Sea (Sherratt 1995: 200-203). Amber was transported from the North Sea and Baltic Sea coasts overland by way of the Vistula and Dnieper rivers to Italy, Greece, the Black Sea, and Egypt (Beck 1985: 200-209).



**Amber trade routes** (Michelbertas 1963) 1.Border of Roman Empire 2. Route of the Early Bronze Age 3.Route of the Middle Bronze Age 4.Sea route 5."Amber route" 6.Routes of the East



During the Bronze Age, the "routes" of amber reached the Adriatic Sea starting from the Northern European sea-shores. At the beginning of the Bronze Age, the routes crossed the Alps near the Resia and Brenner passes, but then, during the Late Bronze, a new oriental way stemmed out from the Vistula River to the Alpine passes and, via the Isonzo River, reached the northern area of the Adriatic Gulf. From this area the route forked, one of the branches headed for the delta of the Po River (the market places of exotic objects), and the other made for the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea and reached the Mediterranean Sea, where the Mycenaean culture was flourishing (Catacchio 2007: 28). The presence of Baltic amber in Greece and Levant is not necessarily an indicator of intercultural contact, but only of some sort of exchange system operating in the Mediterranean area (Renfrew 1972: 467-468). Baltic amber reached the Mycenaean kings by means of a "prestige circuit" of royal gift-exchanges stretching across the Mediterranean area.

## Bibliographie

- Anderson**, K.B. *et al.* *Amber, Resinite, and Fossil Resins*. Washington, DC, American Chemical Society, 1995.
- Bachhuber**, Ch. *Aspects of Late Helladic Sea Trade*. Texas, Texas A&M University, College Station, 2004.
- Bachhuber**, Ch. *Aegean Interest on the Uluburun Ship*. In: *American Journal of Archaeology* 110, 3 (2006): 345-363.
- Bass**, G.F. "Evidence of Trade from Bronze Age Shipwrecks". In: N.H. GALE (ed.). *Bronze Age Trade in the Mediterranean. Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology*, 90. Jonsered, Paul Åströms Förlag, 1991, 69-82.
- Beck**, C.W. "Criteria for amber trade: The evidence in the eastern European Neolithic". *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16, 3 (1985): 200-209.
- Bonfante**, L. "Amber, women, and situla art". *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16, 3 (1985): 276-292.
- Breasted**, J.H. *Ancient Records of Egypt. Historical Documents. From the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*. II. *The Eighteenth Dynasty*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1906.
- Catacchio**, N. N. "Amber and the Adriatic Sea: relationships between the two sea-shores in late prehistoric time". In: A.Uglesić (ed.), *Abstracts of the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of European Association of the Archaeologists, Croatia, Zadar, 18-23 September, 2007*. Zadar, University of Zadar, 2007, 28.
- Grimaldi**, D. A. *Amber, window to the past*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and the American Museum of Natural History, 1996.
- Harding**, A. - **Hughes-Brock**, H. "Amber in the Mycenaean World". IN: *Annual of the British School at Athens (BSA)* 69 (1974): 145-172.
- Heltzer**, M. "On the Origin of the Near Eastern Archaeological Amber". In: K. **Van Lerberghe** - G. **Voet** (ed.). *Languages and Cultures in contact at the crossroads of civilizations in the Syro-Mesopotamian Realm. 42<sup>th</sup> Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale held at the University of Leuven in July 1995. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, 96. Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 2000, pp. 169-176.
- Hughes-Brock**, H. "Amber and the Mycenaeans". *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16, 3 (1985): 257-267.
- Li**, R.K. "An Interview with Qigong Great, Master Randy K. Li". *Kansas City Chinese Journal*, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2001  
<http://www.kansascitychinese.com>
- Lucas**, A. - **Harris**, J.R. *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industry, Precious and Semi-Precious Stones*. London, Edward Arnold, 1934.
- Michelbertas**, M. "Amber Routes". In : *Amber Museum Gallery*, Vilnius, 1963. Map online:  
[http://www.ambergallery.lt/english/i-muziejus\\_gintaro\\_keliai.htm](http://www.ambergallery.lt/english/i-muziejus_gintaro_keliai.htm)
- Mukherjee**, A.J. *et al.* "The Qatna lion: scientific confirmation of Baltic amber in late Bronze Age Syria". *Antiquity* 82, 315 (2008): 49-59.
- Poinar**, G.O. *Life in Amber*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992.
- Pulak**, C. "The Bronze Age Shipwreck at Uluburun, Turkey: 1985 Campaign". *American Journal of Archaeology* 92 (1988): 1-37
- Pulak**, C. "The Uluburun Shipwreck: An Overview". *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 27 (1998): 188-224.
- Reeves**, C.N. *The Complete Tutankhamun: the king, the tomb, the Royal Treasure*. London, Thames & Hudson, 1990.
- Renfrew**, C. *The Emergence of Civilization. The Cyclades and the Aegean in the 3rd Millennium B.C.* London, Methuen, 1972.
- Saldukiene**, B. "Amber". In: S.**Suziedelis** (ed.). *Encyclopedia Lituanica*. Boston, Massachusetts, Juozas Kapocius Publisher, 1970, vol. I,85-87.
- Serpico**, M. - **White**, R. "Resins, amber and bitumen". In P.T. **Nicholson**- I. **Shaw** (ed.). *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, Part. II, Chapter 18, 430-475.
- Sherratt**, A. "Electric gold: re-opening the amber route". *Antiquity* 69, 262 (1995): 200-203.
- Todd**, J.M. "Baltic amber in the ancient near east: A preliminary investigation". *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16, 3 (1985): 292-301.
- Vermeule**, E. *Greece in the Aegean Bronze Age*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964.