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THE ROLE OF THE SAMBIAN CENTRE
IN CREATING CULTURAL MEANING OF AMBER
IN THE THIRD AND SECOND MILLENNIUM BC.
THE OUTLINE OF MAJOR PROBLEMS²

PREMISES

The Baltic amber, also called succinite, is only one of numerous kinds of fossil resins, found all over the world (Fig. 1) (Kosmowska-Ceranowicz 1983). However, thanks to the physical-chemical tests a method was determined to distinguish amber from the other kinds of fossil resins (Beck 1966). Having such starting point, we could begin research on the history of Baltic amber's cultural career in prehistory as well as the later periods of history.

In the hitherto existing literature on the subject, the role of the main centre providing prehistoric Europe with that material was assigned to the terrains on the Jutland Peninsula.

In the present paper I will concentrate on enumerating the most important characteristics of the other from the two main centres of amber extraction, i.e. the Sambian centre, which has been clearly underestimated in the hitherto existing literature. The centre embraced area from the Gulf of Gdańsk in the west to the Gulf of Riga in the east, with the Sambian Peninsula as its core. I will also make an attempt to show the significant role that centre played in popularisation of amber among prehistoric societies in Europe.

1. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY AMBER DEPOSITS IN EUROPE

The primary amber deposits were located in contemporary Scandinavia, where in various periods of the Tertiary grew forests of trees which periodically

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produced significant amount of resin. Those resins in typical conditions of natural forest, where fallen trees decompose in atmosphere, having access to the air, did not have chance to be preserved for too long. As for the Tertiary forests of Scandinavia, one more factor arose: large river, which swept away fallen resinous logs, carried them and accumulated huge deposits of them in its delta in the environment deprived of the air (Kasiński, Tołkanowicz 1999: 42). Those conditions led to transformation of resin into fossil resin. That process, from the physical-chemical perspective is scrupulously described by the specialists (Kosmowska-Ceranowicz 1983).

Fossil resin has some qualities, which we may seem self-contradictory. It has a solid structure and simultaneously low specific gravity (“light stones”). It is soft, transparent, usually of yellowish colour (a stone which is easy to be processed). It is flammable (“burning stone”, comp. German name of it: Bernstein). While burning it releases intensive odour (ground amber is one of the incense ingredients).

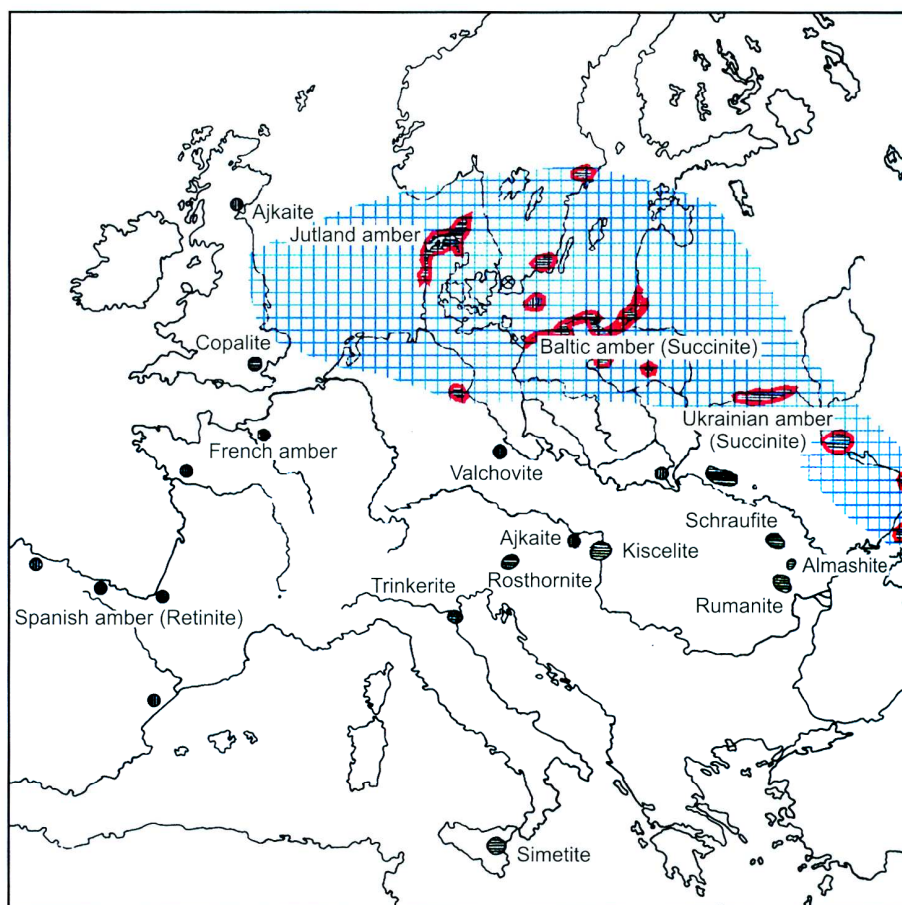


Fig. 1. Distribution of fossil resin types in Europe (after Kosmowska-Ceranowicz 1983). Beds of Baltic amber (succinite), including two main outcrops in Jutland and Sambia were contoured with a thick line. The occurrence area of redeposited succinite in younger geological deposits was hatched (after Lukashina, Kharin 1999)

1.1. TERTIARY DEPOSITS

Tertiary geology has discovered so far at least two huge deltas with amber deposits. The most famous one occupied the area of the contemporary Gulf of Gdańsk, and the river (Fig. 2), which ended its course there was called the Eridanus (Lukashina, Karin 1999). The other delta was discovered later and covers the terrains in western Ukraine (Kasiński, Tołkanowicz 1999). Let us concentrate here on the first of the mentioned areas.

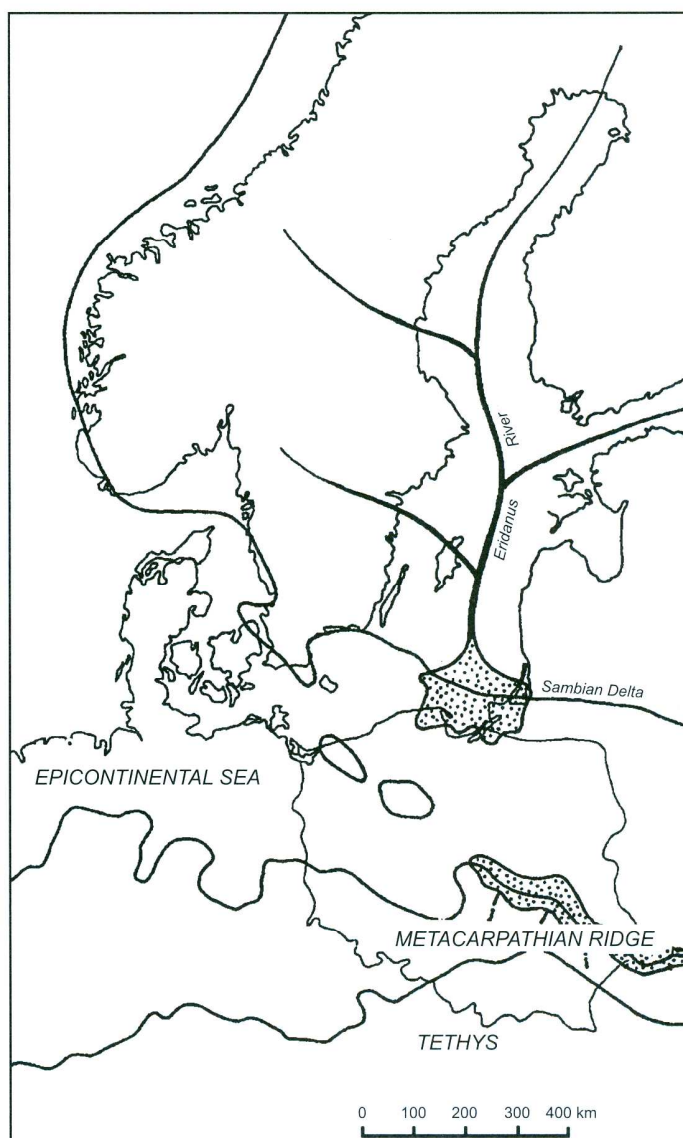


Fig. 2. Eocene Eridanus river and its delta (after Kasiński, Tołkanowicz 1999)

There amber is found in so-called blue-earth, which lies the closest to the surface (at a depth of several metres) on the Sambian Peninsula where this material has been extracted for over 100 years (Lukashina, Karin 1999). "Blue-earth" is the richest amber deposit known geologically, which was easily accessible for pre-historic people. It could be reached by means of very simple mining techniques. Amber leached from "blue-earth" was also found on the Baltic beaches.

1.2. SECONDARY QUATERNARY BEDS

The activity of the glacier, which transformed surface features in Central and Eastern Europe, brought radical changes in amber outcrop distribution. Entire geological structures were transported long distances together with whole their contents, including amber. Therefore we may say, that amber is present in various degrees of intensity in the whole post-glacial part of Europe (Kosmowska-Ceranowicz 1983). However, there is one basic difference between the Tertiary deposits and the Quaternary outcrops. The amber present in post-glacial layers was always subject to processes of long lasting transportation, which – considering its softness, fragility and high oxidizability – evidently influenced quality of that material. Moreover, as regards quantity, it fails to equal the Tertiary deposits. Since, broadly speaking, the post-glacial processes consisted on dragging and scattering a part of the Tertiary deposits over vast areas of our continent.

2. THE BEGINNINGS OF "AMBER BOOM" IN PREHISTORY

It is not unlikely, that glacier activity served as one of the factors that contributed to the beginning of interest in amber in a wider spatial scale. This material appears in cultural contexts comparatively early, i.e. in the Palaeolithic. However, in a broader geographical scale it is rather an incidental phenomenon, which should not be surprising, considering the character of the available sources of the material. They were insignificant and ephemeral. On the other hand, they were sufficient to awake certain "cultural hunger" for that unusual and mysterious "stone that burned". Thus we may say, that the idea of amber was present in the consciousness of Europeans as early as in the Stone Age. Nonetheless, it was not given opportunity to develop, due to difficult access to adequate quantities of that material. Therefore in the 3rd millennium BC amber was constantly present only in those regions where the access to it was the easiest, i.e. on the Baltic coast (Mazurowski 1983). Clear traces of amber processing, in a form of amber workshops, are known there as early as from the Mesolithic period. They are continued later, in the Neolithic.

Nevertheless, amber still remained a local material until the decline of the 4th millennium BC. It was only at the beginning of the 3rd millennium that its cul-

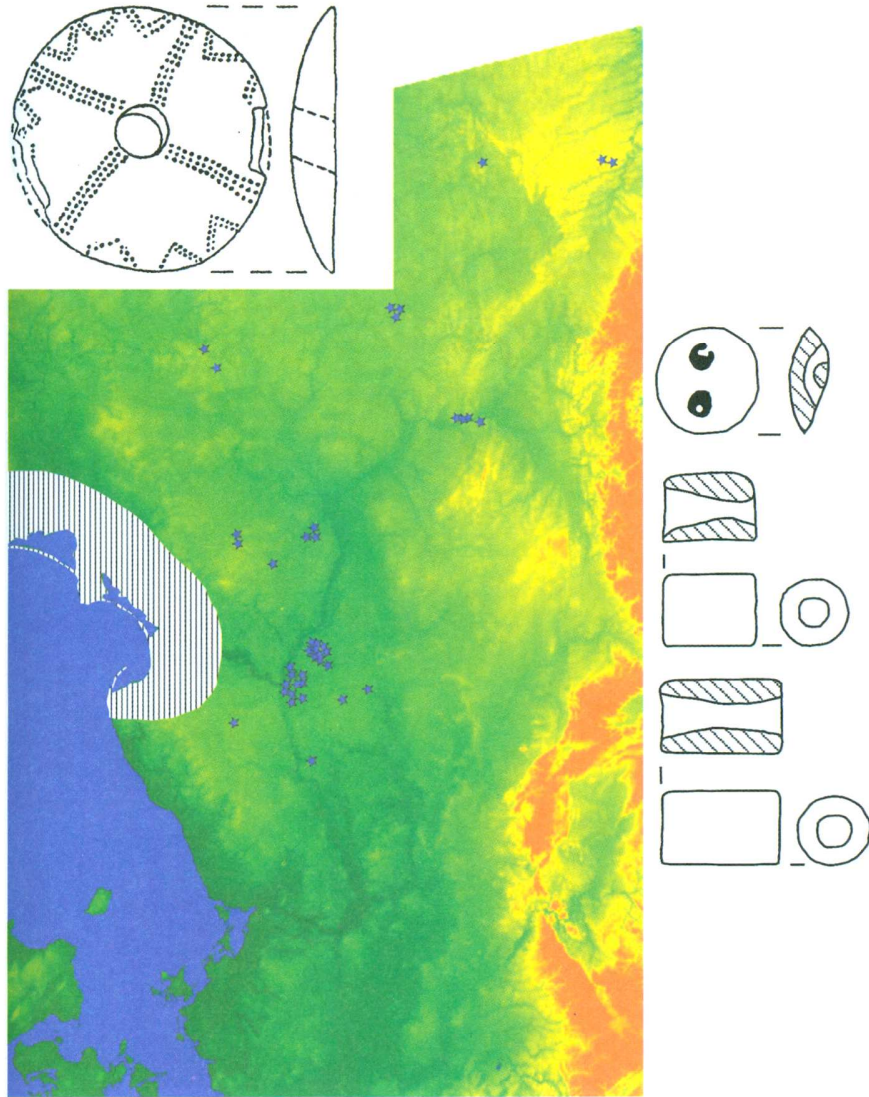


Fig. 3. The Sambian centre (hatched area) and distribution of Globular Amphorae culture sites (stars) where amber artefacts were discovered. The picture presents some examples of amber artefacts typical of the Globular Amphorae culture

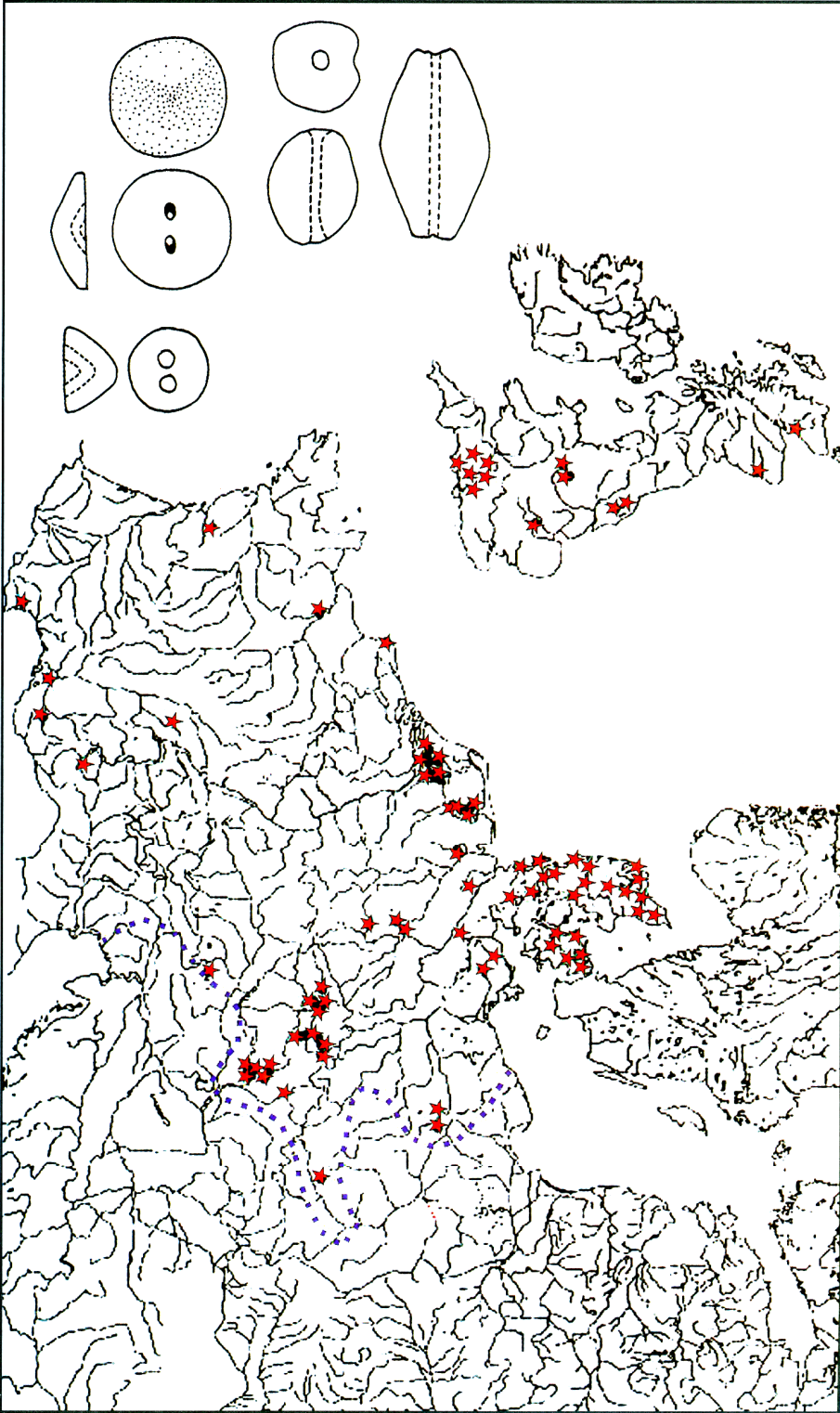


Fig. 4. Distribution of Bell Beakers sites where amber artefacts (stars) were recorded. East border of Bell Beakers occurrence is marked with a dashed line. In the picture some examples of amber artefacts typical of Bell Beakers were presented



tural career begins. The first archaeological culture which spread products made of amber far beyond the Baltic area was the Globular Amphorae culture (Czebreszuk 2003: 167–173). That phenomenon took place in the first half of the 3rd millennium BC. That culture created the oldest in history broad-spatial style (“amphorae like”) of amber products, which was mainly characterised by so-called solar discs and V-perforated buttons (Fig. 3).

Amber became more popular in the period of the Bell Beakers, i.e. in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC (Fig. 4). Here also we meet characteristic stylistics of amber products (especially V-perforated buttons). It is together with the Bell Beakers, that amber reaches the Mediterranean zone, which was proved in the works by C. du Gardin (1998). That takes place in south-eastern France. Later stylistics of amber products are connected with the beginning of the Bronze Age

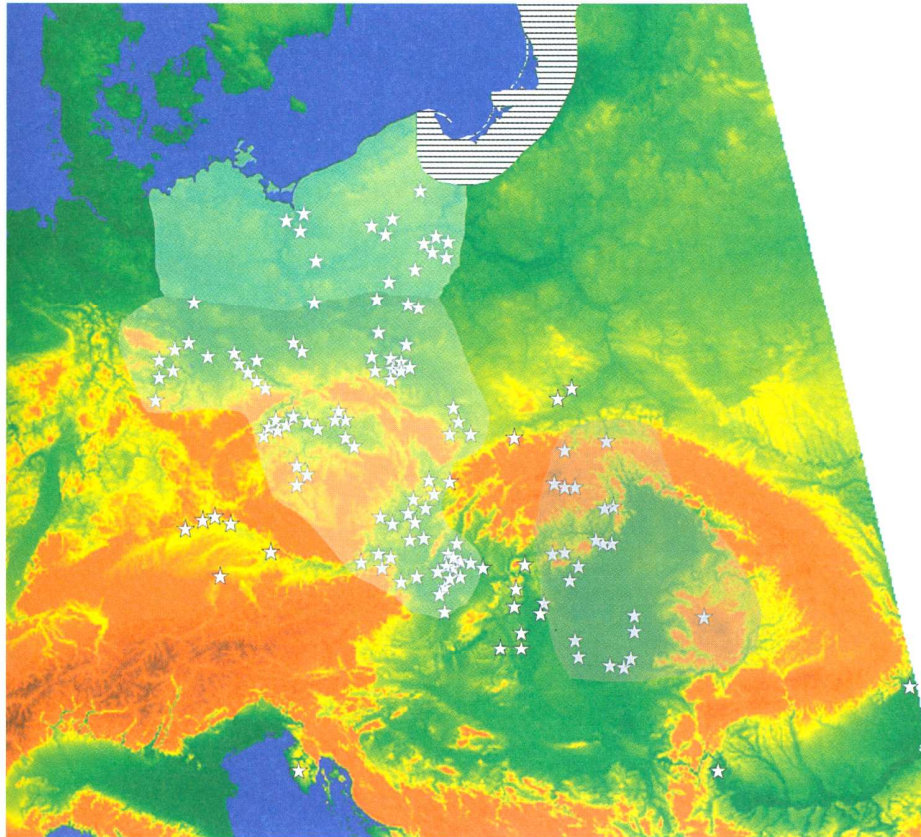


Fig. 5. Early Bronze Age amber finds (marked with stars, after Marková 2003). The areas of the north Únětice (light), Únětice (medium light) and Otomani-Füzesabony (dark) styles are marked

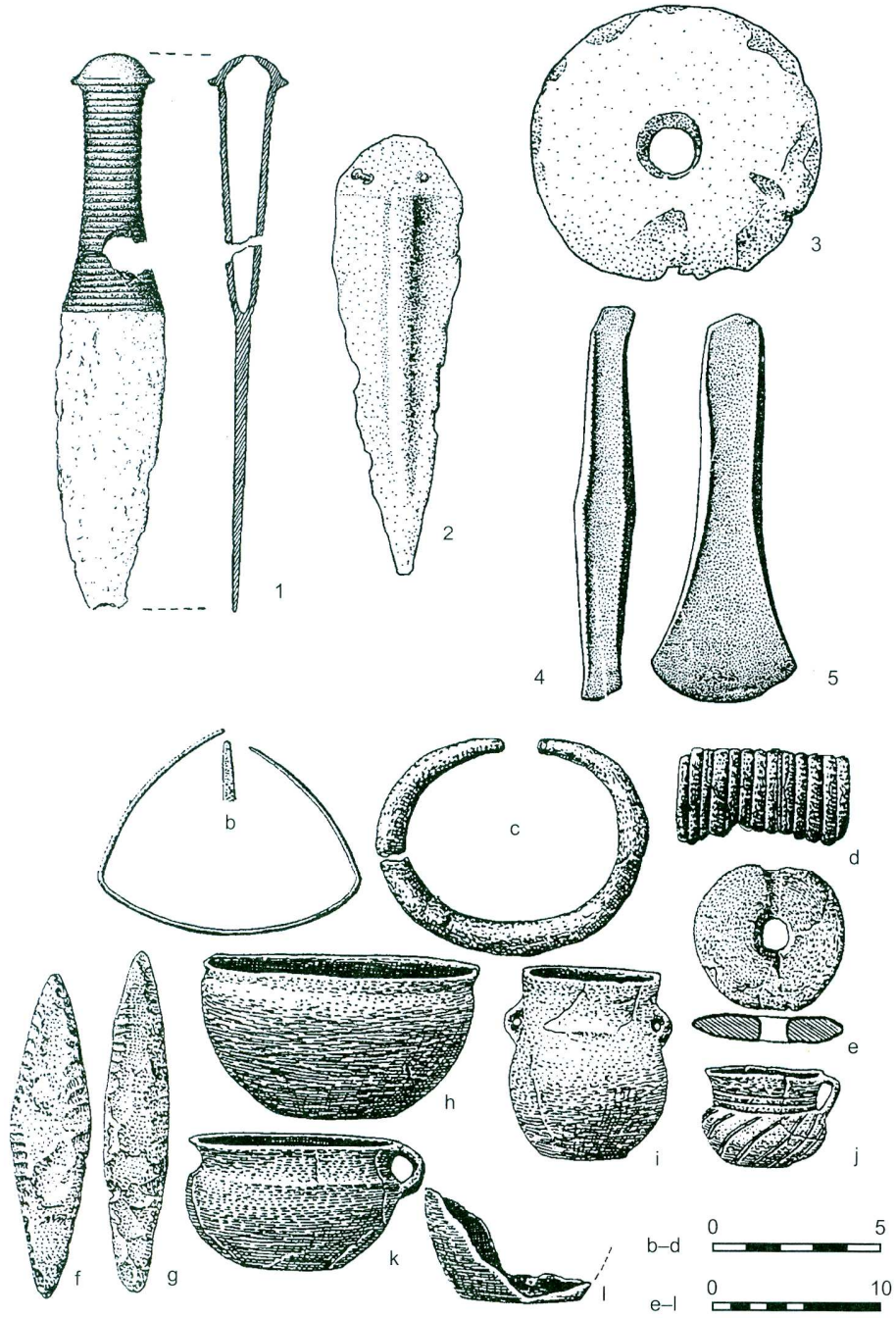


Fig. 6. Examples of early Bronze Age inventories including amber objects from the northern border of the Únětice culture. Numbers: Przysicka Polska (Schwenzer 2004), letters: Szczecin-Plonia (Bukowski 2002)

(Fig. 5), specifically with the following cultures: Únětice (Bukowski 2002), Otomani-Füzesabony (Marková 2003) and Tumulus (Hachmann 1957; Marková 2003).

Within the confines of the Únětice culture we may distinguish two stylistics of amber products (Czebreszuk 2006). The first is connected with the northern borderland of that culture (for simplicity's sake later referred to as north-Únětice). The main role here was played by (solar?) discs, occurring only in rich graves (especially in barrows) in the context of products made of gold and bronze (Fig. 6). The following discoveries belong to that group: Przysieka Polska (Schwanzer 2004), Szczecin-Płonie, Skarbienice and Łęki Małe (to all others, see: Sarnowska 1969). Thus amber was at that time one of the elements within the confines of a wider cultural phenomenon, characterised by – among others – princely graves (Helmsdorf, Leubingen, Łęki Małe), fortified settlement centres (such as Bruszczewo, see: Czebreszuk, Müller 2004) or rich metallurgy of zinc bronze (Rassmann 2004).

The other style, south-Únětice like (Fig. 7: 1, 3), composed mainly from necklaces amber beads and bronze (copper) spirals (Breuer, Meller 2004; Czebreszuk 2006). We should emphasise here that amber products have different status in both stylistics. In the north, they constitute an element of the graves located the highest in the prestigious, social and political hierarchy (barrows, where amber co-occur with gold, bronze, i.e. other “strategic” materials); whereas the southern stylistics is connected with graves which contain standard equipment and most often are burials of women (Bukowski 2002; Czebreszuk 2006).

In the Otomani-Füzesabony culture, occupying the area the upper Tisza Basin, amber products stylistics continues south-Únětice patterns. Amber objects are found in graves which belong to vast burial grounds. Necklaces are made from richer set of elements (Fig. 7: 4). Apart from amber and simple spirals we find faience, teeth of wild animals and other metal pendants (Olexa 2002).

The Tumulus culture, which is known mainly from the areas situated in the vicinity of the Alps, creates entirely new style of amber products. Besides beads (elements of necklaces) we find here so-called spacer-plates (Hachmann 1957; du Gardin 2003). They indicate the presence of new patterns in the form of complicated amber necklaces, reconstruction of which was introduced by R. Hachmann many years ago (Fig. 7: 2, Hachmann 1957).

In the stages of supra-regional spreading of amber, which are presented here above, there comes a characteristic breakthrough moment. It takes place somewhere around 2000 BC, between Bell Beakers and Únětice stages. Earlier (Globular Amphorae culture and Bell Beakers) amber was an element of far reaching exchange within the confines of monocultural network, first Globular Amphorae culture and later Bell Beakers (Czebreszuk 2003). A completely new situation appears in Central Europe together with emerging early Bronze Únětice culture. It was an element of a wider system of far-reaching exchange embracing Western Europe together with the British Isles, Southern Europe, the Balkans as well as the Aegean zone (Harding 1984: 67–87). Through Únětice culture amber reaches the main cultural centres of the Old World. For example, in Aegea not

long after 2000 BC, the first civilisation on the European continent was formed, i.e. the Mycean culture. One of its main prestigious materials was Baltic amber (Harding, Hughes-Brock 1974).

Summing up, it is beyond question that together with the Únětice culture amber enters the exchange network which goes beyond one cultural structure, and covers whole Europe and the eastern part of Mediterranean area.

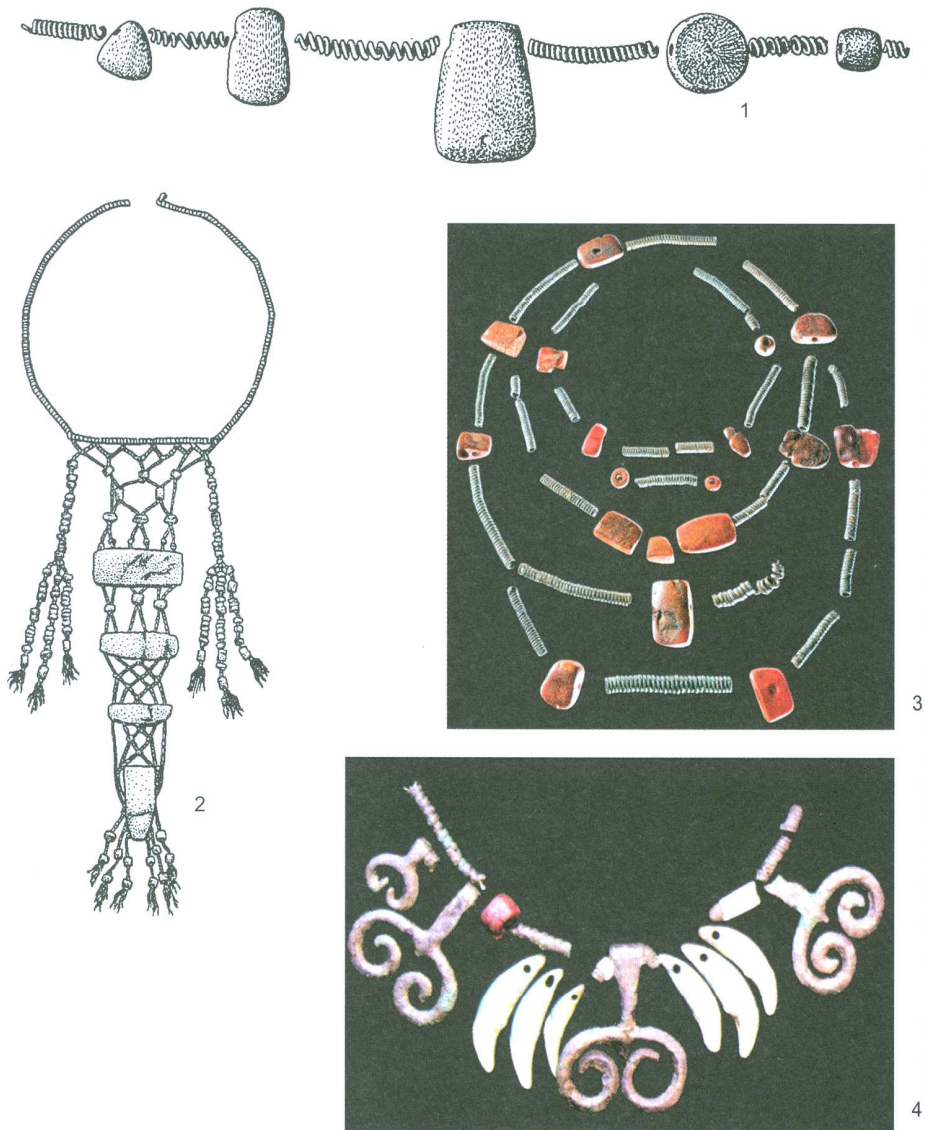


Fig. 7. Examples of artefacts made with the use of amber. The Únětice culture: 1 – Wrocław-Gądów Mały (after Bukowski 2002), 3 – Halle (after Breuer, Meller 2004). The Otomani-Füzesabony culture: 4 – Nižna Myšla (after Olexa 2002). The Tumulus culture: 2 – Asenkofen (after Hachmann 1957)

The evidence for close (most probably direct) contacts between the population of the Únětice culture and amber-bearing areas on the south-east Baltic Sea would be not only numerous imports of Únětice metals (Sobieraj 2004), but also a unique finding of an Únětice-like amber dagger model from the vicinity of Nidzica (Fig. 8: 2) (see: Ritzkowski, Weisgerber 1999: 144; Sobieraj 2004: 72). That discovery indicates that metal objects, especially daggers, were perceived by the local inhabitants as very prestigious.

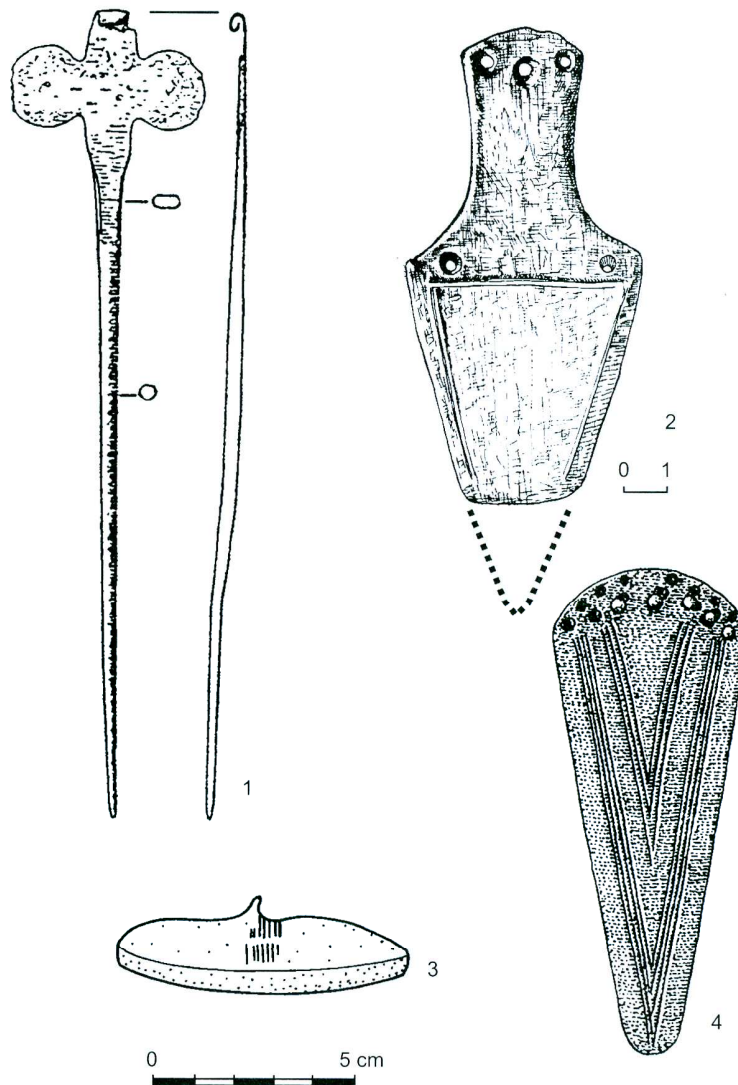


Fig. 8. Selected early Bronze Age artefacts from lower Vistula and Kuyavia: 1 – pin from Kleszczewo (after Bokinić 1995), 2 – amber dagger model from Nidzica (after Ritzkowski, Weisgerber 1999; Sobieraj 2004), 3 – gold head ornament from Wąsosz (after Czebreszuk 1998), 4 – gold dagger blade (halberd) from Inowrocław (Sarnowska 1969)

On the lower Vistula, we find also some other objects dated for the same period, i.e. metal products of a distant genetic provenance, for example: a gold pendant from Wąsosz (Fig. 8: 3), genetically connected with the British Isles (Czebreszuk 1998, Fig. 8); a gold halberd from Inowrocław (Fig. 8: 4) (Machnik 1978, Fig. 46: 3) (probably of the same provenance); or bronze winged pin from Kleszczewko (characteristic of the Alpine zone, Fig. 8: 1, see: Bokinić 1995). Their presence on the analysed area allows to formulate a hypothesis, that the areas on the south Baltic Sea joined the network of far-reaching exchange not later than about 2000 BC. On the “mental map” of people from the beginnings of the second millennium BC there existed a destination point which was the source of “the northern gold”. The point was undoubtedly located on the Baltic Sea.

3. BETWEEN JUTLAND AND SAMBIA

In the existing literature on the subject, the researchers attached more importance to the Jutland centre, as the destination point – the source of most of the amber material present in prehistoric circulation. The Sambian centre was rather perceived as of the secondary importance. That view was expressed in a classic work by J.M. de Navarro from 1920's – 1930's (de Navarro 1925), and later repeated by other scientists rather unanimously. Undoubtedly, there are some facts that speak for Jutland: extraordinary cultural dynamics of the communities inhabiting that area, as well as observed in archaeological resources miscellaneous and numerous connections between that region and many other European regions, visible as early as from the beginning of the Neolithic (Klassen 2000). Moreover, those connections increase in time, to reach – in the beginning of Bronze Age (about 1700 BC) – its culminating point within the confines of Nordic culture phenomenon: the only centre existing in Europe at that time, which had its own stylistics of bronze products, and at the same time was devoid of any source of raw materials in the form of metallic ore (Vandkilde 1996).

Those cultural arguments have not lost their relevance and I do not intend to question the importance of the Jutland centre in distribution of amber in Europe. However, it does not change the fact that the Sambian centre has been underestimated within the confines of the models of that process presented in the literature. To have a complete picture, we should observe that the Jutland deposits fail to have primary (Tertiary) character. Also the archaeological remains of the contacts the local people had with that material are very specific. Comparatively the most amber findings and traces of processing are connected with the Neolithic, and precisely with the Funnel Beakers culture communities (Ebbesen 1995). The presence of amber is much less intense in the findings of the Single Graves culture, whereas only solitary examples are discovered from the late Neolithic (Czebreszuk 2001, 57).

The situation in the Sambian centre is quite different. It had an access to the largest and easily accessible deposits of the first-class raw material, which still remain the core of the amber extraction in the world. Moreover, we possess a vast archaeological register of amber uses in culture of the people inhabiting that part of Europe. Starting from the Mesolithic (Loze 1988: 43-47), through all the stages of the Neolithic (Loze 1975; Mazurowski 1983), until the beginning of the Bronze Age (last investigation shows that s.c. Rzucewo culture has partly Early Bronze chronology, see: Sobieraj 2004: 71), there exist numerous traces of mining, processing and use of various amber products. The most abundant remains of processing are connected with a developed stage of the local variation of the Corded Ware culture (Mazurowski 2005), and are dated for the turn of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC.

Another group of data indicating the importance of the Sambian centre are the one connected with culture. As it was already mentioned above, we observe there inflow of products of a distant cultural provenance as early as at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. That phenomenon becomes more and more visible in the later stages of prehistory. On the turn of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age, the researchers notice creation of the connection line between the area located in the Gulf of Gdańsk and Italy (Bukowski 1993; Dąbrowski 1993; Malinowski 2006). The sources from the beginning of our era are even more spectacular (Wielowiejski 1980), because it is certainly not by accident, that an equestrian from times of Nero went for amber not to Jutland, which was geographically closer to the borders of the Empire, but to much more distant regions located in the Vistula river-mouth.

RECAPITULATION

The data presented above allow slightly different view on the question of mutual balance, in the cultural sense, between two main centres of amber acquisition: the Jutland and the Sambian ones. The situation was definitely more complex, than suggested by the classic model proposed by J.M. de Navarro. The information presented above is sufficient to approach the importance of the Sambian centre with greater attention. The centre seems to become significant comparatively early, and certainly after 2000 BC is commonly known in the mental map of the Old World. It holds this position in later epochs. Therefore, not surprisingly Gdańsk is currently the greatest centre of amber production in the world.

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