
THE SYMBOLISM OF AMBER IN THE INSIGNIA OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL HIERARCHY IN POLAND

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Abstract

In European, including Polish (especially folk), tradition amber has been valued as a sign of wealth, an apotropaion, with healing properties, and as a sought-after component of jewellery. It was distributed throughout the ancient world by means of an Amber Road. It was known as *electron*, thereby linking the symbolism of a precious stone and metal intermediating between silver and gold. This and other ancient names for amber used in myths, folk legends and religious sources - with the Books of the Old and New Testament at the forefront - introduced amber into new spheres of symbolic meaning. The main subject of the author's interest was to investigate which aspects of amber's symbolism are important in the insignia of the ecclesiastical hierarchy which were made using this material. The question is motivated by the contemporary significance of amber in insignia in Poland. Its popularity is obvious when compared with the past centuries.

Keywords: amber, insignia, ring, symbolism, authority

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to highlight those pieces in the history of amber, and its symbolism, which are of particular importance to its use in the insignia of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the light of the one-thousand year history of such insignia in Poland, the past few decades have seen a marked increase in the use of amber as a material for making ecclesiastical rings, pectoral crosses and crosiers. It is the amber itself — with its age-old tradition, and its symbolism which has been flourishing since ancient times — which unifies the variety of styles and iconographic motifs used when making these pieces. Therefore I became interested in examining which aspects of the symbolism of amber are important in this type of insignia — as a specific category of sacred objects — and their particular types (e.g. ecclesiastical rings, pectoral crosses and crosiers). How can the relationship between the symbolism of amber and that of these insignia and their decoration be described while also taking into account the social and individual context of a particular object.

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2. History of the names and the symbolism of amber

Amber, a substance of organic origin, is a fossilized resin of ancient trees and has been used for body ornaments and clothing since the Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods [1, 2]. In ancient times it was appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, symbolism, as well as the healing and apotropaic properties ascribed to it. Therefore its significance was equal to that of precious stones and two other organic gemstones — coral and pearls. It was mainly found in northern Europe, in the Baltic Sea region, therefore what is now Poland. However, from the very beginning, the demand for amber was so high that it was imported by far away foreign countries [R.V. Dietrich, *Appendix D: Amber Etymology Plus**, 2005, stoneplus.cst.cmich.edu/gemrxAppD.html, accessed 16.06.2017].

Amber was fascinating not only because of its beauty, varying degrees of transparency and colour — ranging from a creamy white, through different shades of yellow, to brown and dark red — but also because of its properties, which distinguish it from precious stones, corals and pearls. Amber has a warm touch, which corresponds to its cheerful sunny colour. If rubbed, it becomes negatively charged and attracts small particles, e.g. paper. With stronger rubbing it gives off a pleasant aroma, and produces aromatic smoke when burnt (due to its acid content) [2, p. 272]. Sometimes, amber contains organic matter as inclusions — tiny animals or plants, mainly insects, enclosed within a transparent block.

Since ancient times its origin has been associated with resin — the ‘tears of trees’, a belief which has been taken up in legends. Testimony of this today are the diverse names given to amber in many languages, not only European, and the cultural connotations of these names [3; 4; stoneplus.cst.cmich.edu/gemrxAppD.html; F. Causey, *Ancient Carved Ambers in the J. Paul Getty Museum*, Getty Publications, 2012, <http://museumcatalogues.getty.edu/>, accessed 19.06.2017]. Citing but a few of the most important will help explain the symbolism of amber in the insignia of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The connection between amber and resin — the sticky ‘juice’ of trees — is indicated by its Latin name, *sucinum*, derived from the word *sucus* – juice [5]. The Romans described amber more poetically, as the tears of the Heliades — *Lacrime Heliandum*. According to the Greek myth, Phaethon, the son of Helios, was struck down by one of his father’s thunderbolts to save the Earth from being scorched because he was unable to control the horses of the Sun chariot. The Heliades — Phaethon’s sisters, who grieved for their dead brother — were turned into poplar trees, and their tears were turned into amber [6; Eurypides, *Hippolytos uwieńczony* (*Hippolytos Stephanophoros*), J. Kasprówicz (transl.), wolnelektury.pl, accessed 01.02.2017]. In Christian tradition, amber was also associated with tears in folk etymology. A legend from the Kurpie region (northern Masovia, Poland) entitled *Where did amber come from?* (in the dialect: *Skiela wzion się burstyn?*), explains that amber was the tears of men who were punished by the deluge; however the appearance of the amber varies depending on the moral condition of the person who is weeping. Therefore the

beauty of amber is related directly to the spiritual beauty of a person: “amber which was as clear as tears and transparent was formed from the tears of innocent people, small children and other poor souls — for passions [feelings], as medicines, as corals for freaks and for other beautiful and pleasant things. While amber that was darkened, opaque, cloudy, good for using as incense, pipes, snuffboxes, or handles for walking sticks, was made from the tears of sinners who repented and regretted their sins. Whereas the tears of bad people, the blasphemers, and drunkards, produced dirty amber — which was unusable — suitable only for paint, tar and other shameful things.” [*Skiela wzion się burštyn? (the Kurpie legend written down by A. Chętnik)*, in Z. Bziukiewicz, *Bursztyn kurpiowski*, http://www.kurpie.com.pl/index_pliki/page0002.htm, accessed 10.05.2017] So the transformation of tears into amber preserves the content and value of the moral experience that created it — for the high-minded it becomes a lasting remembrance, and for the wicked — a reminder and a warning, deprived of beauty and value.

In antiquity, the most common name for amber was the Greek word *elektron* and its Latin equivalent *electrum*. Amber was not the only material the ancient Greeks called *elektron*; they also used this name for enamel made from melted glass, and for metal alloy. Similarly the Latin *electrum* — meant amber, and bronze, or a mixture of gold and silver (in the proportion 4:1) — which has the colour of amber [5, p. 219] or so-called white gold, and also a kind of metal and a “delicate bronze” [7]. The origin of this term is associated with the Sun, called *Elector* — “the Shining One” — by the Greeks [4, p. 81]. The term *elektron* appeared for the first time in the *Odyssey*, which also contains the beginnings of *elektron*’s solar connotations, both regarding the meaning of amber and also gold — with colour playing an important role. Anna Ryś points out that the symbolism of amber which is connected with the Sun relates to the myth which claims it came from the tears of the Heliades [8].

Both in Judaism and the Christian tradition, amber is a symbol of clarity. Such is the meaning of the Prophet Ezekiel’s biblical vision of God: “And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire. Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man.” (Ezekiel 1.4–5) The metaphor of amber among fire is an introduction to the vision of God and the four living creatures, so amber is a prelude to, and a sign of, God’s presence. The next part of Ezekiel’s prophecy reads: “Then I beheld, and lo a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appearance of his loins even downward, fire; and from his loins even upward, as the appearance of brightness, as the colour of amber” (Ezekiel 8.2) — and was clearly interpreted as relating to Christology in medieval commentaries [9]. Saint Gregory the Great (d. 604) commented on Ezekiel’s words in relation to the First Epistle to Timothy (I Tim. 2.5), saying that Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and man, like amber is between gold and silver. Like amber, which joins gold and silver, the brightness of silver grows, while that of gold pales, in the

same way the divine nature of the only Son of God is connected with our human nature. In this union *humanitas* grows in the glory of His majesty, as silver shines thanks to gold, whereas the glow and power of true divinity are restrained by the human eye, like gold pales in relation to silver. (...) God became a persecuted man, like amber in fire (Gregorius Magnus, date of publication unknown). In early modern times, Ezekiel's prophecy was reinstated in the *Roman Breviary* amended at the Council of Trent [*Breviarium Romanum ex decreto Ss. Concilii Tridentini...*, https://archive.org/stream/breviariumromanu04turo/breviariumromanu04turo_djvu.txt, accessed 15.06.2017].

The term *lyngourion* — which functioned in antiquity alongside the more common name *elektron*, signifying amber deriving from Liguria, which was distinguished by its extraordinary transparency — had connotations with therapeutic and apotropaic powers [10]. Its use was confirmed in the third century BC, on the south side of the Acropolis — in the Asclepeion — and in Delos in the sanctuaries of Artemis and Eileithyia (Latin: Lucina), goddesses associated with childbirth, light and the Moon [<http://museumcatalogues.getty.edu/>]. The cults of these deities, especially that of Asclepius, which spread throughout the Roman Empire in the early centuries of Christianity, influenced the later symbolism of amber. Marian Banaszak wrote: “Help in misfortune and the uncertain fate of man's destiny was sought not only in magic, but also in prayers to the deities. In sickness they turned to the god Asclepius, to whom miraculous healing was attributed, and votive offerings were made in his numerous temples. This belief in Asclepius lasted long after the introduction of Christianity and people still had to contend with it in the fourth century.” [11] However before being renounced, this respect for Asclepius was reflected in Christian writings. In the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, Pilate's response to the high priests and scribes who accused Jesus of healing under the power of devil, that it was not to cast out unclean spirits by a devil but by the god Asclepius [*Gospel of Nicodemus*, English version, marduk70.w.interia.pl/nta.html, accessed 16.06.2016]. It should be remembered that Asclepius, son of the sun god, Apollo, and a mortal woman – Coronis, was cut from his mother's womb (who was killed by Artemis' deadly arrows) after she had been laid on a funeral pyre to be consumed in the flames [R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 1955, www.24grammata.com/wp.../Robert-Graves-The-Greek-Myths-24grammata.com_pdf, accessed 12.06.2017]. He is therefore associated with the most important properties of amber: the relationship between the Sun and fire, and also the power of healing. The transparent *lyngourion* thus symbolized healing, a successful birth — coming into the world and beholding the light of the Sun.

Another term for amber is derived from the Arabic word *anbar* which in medieval Latin was translated as *ambra*, and in Old English and Old French it took the form amber [*Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php>, accessed 05.04.2017]. Initially, it meant amber — a valuable organic substance extracted from the sea (sperm whisker) used to make perfume. This name refers to the aroma which is given off by amber when it is rubbed.

The terms used for amber in the Middle Ages, along with its ancient names, were derived from the firm belief in its nature and symbolism and it was also Christianized. The name *electrum* was used in analogical meanings, e.g. in the sixth century, in the first encyclopaedia from this epoch: *Etymologiarum sive originum libri I–XX*, Liber XVI. *De Lapidibus et Metallis*, Isidore of Seville described amber in the book about stones and metals. He explained, that amber (*sucinus*), “as we are told by the Greeks, has the colour of brown wax, and is referred to as the juice (resin) of trees, which is why it is called ‘amber’”. He emphasized the sunny nature of amber. He quoted the myth of Phaethon as the basis for naming it *electrum*. Many poets called the Sun *Electro* (the Shining One), while amber was called *Electron*, because the rays of the Sun shine brighter than gold and silver (XXIV,1). In relation to amber, Saint Isidore also wrote that “some people call it *harpaga* (literally ‘hook’) because, once it has received the spirit of heat from being rubbed with the fingers, it attracts leaves and chaff and the fringes of clothing just as a magnet attracts iron” [10, p. 324]. The last meaning is particularly important with reference to the symbolism of the crosier in all the instances in which it was made using amber, since the upper curvature of the episcopal staff signifies the pastoral power of drawing the faithful to the Church.

The amber trade was begun by the Phoenicians in around 1000 BC [2, p. 274]. At that time, the first import routes were marked out, first from Jutland through Pomerania, to the Black Sea. In the early Bronze Age these routes were extended significantly; there were amber storehouses as far away as in Assur in Mesopotamia and in Troy. In the next centuries the most important cultures at that time — the Etruscans, the Celts (who marked out the amber route used during the Roman Empire), and the Romans, who founded Aquileia (later a centre of the amber craft) — participated in the amber trade [4, p. 38-42; 12]. There was a marked increase in the trade between Italy and the countries of the Danube river basin, the Germans, Slavs and Balts in the second century AD. According to the Roman historian Pliny the Elder (XXXVII, 12) during his time the price of an amber figurine, no matter how small, exceeded the price of a healthy slave, thus testifying to amber’s prestige.

Due to the development of the Amber Road, trade in amber spread throughout Europe to the Near and Far East. It was the main communication route which, in ancient times, Roman merchants had used to travel to the lands north of the Middle Danube to buy amber and slaves. Thanks to the Amber Road, Baltic amber was already known in Italy in the Iron Age [9, p. 160]. During the extensive migrations which accompanied the transition to the Iron age, the Amber Road was moved further east and branched out in three directions. The main destination became Constantinople instead of Rome. In the Middle Ages the interest in amber fell significantly, and the quality of the products dropped [2]. The trade was revived in the fourteenth century and reached its apogee during the Renaissance.

Throughout the whole of its history, amber was used for adorning clothes and as body ornaments, leaving aside other types of handicrafts; above all it was used for making pendants and rings — mounted like gems, or it was used for making rings in which precious stones were mounted (like in the amber ring, with a now empty galley which had once been set with a gem, northern Italy, first–fourth century AD [2]).

3. The genesis of amber insignia in Poland

In the Cosmas of Prague's *Chronicle* from the years 1110–1125 we have a message that amber was to be used in the same way as precious stones to decorate the gold plaque that was prepared to buy back the body of Saint Wojciech [Adalbert] in 1039. Together with the body of the martyr and his brothers (who had been murdered in Prussia in April 997), in addition to a heavy golden crucifix: “three heavy gold plaques were placed near the altar where the sacred body was laid. The largest plaque, five cubits long and ten wide was richly decorated with precious stones and crystal-like amber. On the edge of the plaque was the inscription: «this work of art weighs as much as three hundred ransoms of gold».” [13] Amber and other jewels, regardless of their price and brilliance, make you realize that the remains of Christian martyrs are more precious. It symbolizes tears of mourning, but also the glory of the future patron saint of Poland.

Archaeological discoveries in today's Poland testify to the fact that in the Middle Ages amber was used to make objects that helped establish the tradition of insignia, even if in themselves they were not insignia. One of the oldest sacred objects, of high artistic merit and connected to the cult of Christianity was found in Ostrów Lednicki (an island on Lake Lednica) — a *staurotech* (a form of reliquary) dating from the tenth or the first half of the eleventh century. It was made of gilded bronze in the form of a cross and framed in “jet, or a kind of black amber”, according to Nadolski [14] after Lehmann. This customary name for jet lignite is derived from its similarity to amber in origin (from prehistoric trees), properties (straw, warmth, flammability) and ascribed protective properties. Some authors, like Julius Solinus (third age), realized that a jet and amber are two different substances, but many authors did not distinguish them. For example, Thomas, the Bishop of Sarepta, described the black jet found in England and the bright — in Prussia, the German word *burnsteyn* [4, p. 170–171].

The *staurotech* alludes to the accomplishments of the best goldsmiths' workshops in the Byzantine Empire and Eastern Pomerania, where designs from the east were very popular at that time. It may have been given to Bolesław the Brave by the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III, who stayed in Lednice en route to Gniezno [14]. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this *staurotech* (or its lid to be more exact) was used as the model for the pectoral cross made for the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp, as a souvenir of his

meeting with young people in Ostrów Lednica — one of the oldest centres of Christianity in Poland.

Local products dating from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries include small amber crosses, found in Gdańsk. They were part of the sacred ornaments worn by clerics and lay people in Christianized centres in the Piast state [H. Kóčka-Krenz, *Następstwa kulturowe chrystianizacji państwa Piastów*, 2016, <http://chrzest966.pl/chrzest-polski/>, accessed 16.06.2017]. The pectoral cross became an episcopal insignium in the sixteenth century. However, the crosses, of various shapes, worn around the neck, only began to be used as pectoral crosses in the second half of the twentieth century; they were often framed in silver (more rarely in gold) and they were enlarged.

Episcopal rings made using amber were a rarity up until the twentieth century. The oldest Polish example may be a Romanesque gold ring, set with a honey-coloured amber stone, which was found in Poznań Cathedral in 1953, in tomb no. 157 [15]. It is not known whether the dignitary buried there was a bishop because no remains of a crosier were found [16]. Earlier archaeological finds include an amber ring dating from the twelfth to thirteenth century in Kruszwica and two small amber crosses discovered in Szczecin and Gdańsk (from the first half of the twelfth century) [16, p. 68–69].

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, objects made from amber, both sacred and secular, regained their popularity, especially in Germany and Russia [1; 2, p. 274–276]. Another thing which survived was a subconscious belief in the extraordinary apotropaic powers of amber; in Germany this belief died out under the influence of the Reformation. The conviction that it possessed unusual properties explains why small items of worship (figurines of the Holy Virgin) [*Bursztynnictwo, bursztyniarstwo*, date of publication unknown, glossary in *Encyklopedia Gdańska*, http://www.gedanopedia.pl/?title=BURSZTYNNICTWO,_BURSZTYNIARSTWO, accessed 20.05.2017] and rosaries were often made of amber [3, p. 82–83].

In the seventeenth century, the Bay of Gdańsk region was a recognized centre of European amber where sacred and secular pieces of outstanding representational value were produced. Due to the increasing size of the objects made, their enhanced forms and the techniques used for their execution, and due to their function and iconography, they were able to fulfil the needs of clients, even those from the highest echelons of society as well as clergymen and laymen of various denominations [http://www.gedanopedia.pl/?title=BURSZTYNNICTWO,_BURSZTYNIARSTWO].

Because of Poland's loss of its statehood in the late eighteenth century, until it regained its independence in 1918, it was deprived access to the amber deposits in the Prussian partition. As a result of these unfavourable conditions, insignia decorated with amber were rare. This is why the ring of the bishop of Przemyśl, Saint Józef Sebastian Pelczar, dating from 1880, is so exceptional — gold with an ivory bas-relief bust of the Holy Virgin on an amber background [<http://www.sercanki.org.pl/muzeum.html>, accessed 07.06.2016].

In the interwar period, the Free City of Danzig (in Polish Gdańsk) was not part of the revived Polish state; however the German amber workshops flourished. In the years 1926–1945 the company Staatliche Bernstein-Manufaktur Königsberg operated here and its goal was to improve the quality of the products, also thanks to the designs of qualified artists. (The State Amber Factory [Pol. Państwowa Wytwórnia Bursztynu] in Królewiec [now Kaliningrad, Russia] was run by Poles.) In 1945 the German workshops ceased to exist and their rich collection of amber products was taken to Germany, thus limiting their impact on later production in Gdańsk [17, 18].

After the Second World War, and in particular, after Gomułka's thaw of 1956, the search began for new designs. According to Kwiatkowska [18], the period in which work was based on the products of the pre-war manufactory ended symbolically with the exhibition of medallions made by Paweł Fietkiewicz in the state gallery Desa — in 1964. Nevertheless, throughout the whole of the Polish People's Republic, amber, like the rest of the arts and crafts industry, was largely subordinated to the State.

Gierłowski wrote that the earliest attempts to create sacred works of art using amber were made “in defiance of the state authorities, such as the endowment of the tabernacle and monstrance in the Catholic parish church in Żarnowiec [Kaszuby in Pomerania] in 1950” [W. Gierłowski, <http://polskijubiler.com/pokaz.php?id=1032>, accessed 13.06.2017]. In the 1960s tabernacles ornamented with amber were made for churches in Gdańsk and Żuławy. It is something of a paradox that the most significant motivation for this type of production came from the east. “A little later, but on a larger scale, the Russians began using amber as the predominant material in sacred objects intended for the Russian Orthodox Church. Towards the end of the 1970s, the Metropolitan Bishop of Leningrad [now St. Petersburg] was given amber insignia: a crosier, scepter, and an orb. In the mid-1980s, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Alexy II was given similar insignia, albeit more ostentatious. This was a sign that communist ideology was weakening as were attempts to use the Orthodox Church as a political tool to further imperial Soviet aspirations.” [<http://polskijubiler.com/pokaz.php?id=1032>]

In the 1970s episcopal insignia in Poland were also made from amber. They represented the search by artists to make use of native raw materials in the field of sacred art. The output of goldsmiths working in the Polish part of the Pomeranian region became distinctive and the best artistic traditions were continued. It was also a reflection of the strong position of the Catholic Church in Polish society, especially when compared to other countries which came within the sphere of Soviet influence. After the election of a Polish Pope, John Paul II, the enthusiasm and hope directed towards the Bishop of Rome influenced cordial relations between lay people and members of the Polish episcopate. Polish religiosity during the reign of Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) created favourable conditions for the emergence of amber (and other) insignia in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The most important of these was the episcopal ring made using amber dating from 1975 year which was given to the

Bishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła. After he was elected Pope, the ring was transferred to the Archdiocesan Museum in Kraków. Since then it has been published as being by the goldsmith using signature MPF [19]. This description corresponds to the monogram used by husband and wife co-workers Maria (1934–2015) and Paweł Fietkiewicz (1930–2015) — precursors of the so-called Polish School of Amber and Silver [1, p. 133]. From 1975 they operated an amber-workshop in Sopot. Apart from the ring made for the future Pope, their artistic achievements include other episcopal insignia. At an exhibition marking the forty-fifth anniversary of their collaboration, two of their pectoral crosses were displayed: the first one was made for Kazimierz Kluz, Suffragan Bishop of Gdańsk (in the collection of the Archdiocesan Museum in Gdańsk-Oliwa) and the second for Bishop Michał Warczyński (property of the Diocese of Greater Poland and Pomerania of the Evangelical-Augsburg Church in Sopot) [20; *Bursztynowy Jubileusz Marii i Pawła Fietkiewiczów. Wystawa autorska z okazji 45-lecia twórczości*, <http://mhmg.pl/pl>, accessed 08.06.2016].

4. Conclusions

Elektron, the only “precious stone” mentioned by Homer [8], which combines the properties of an ore, stone and organic matter, was the meeting point between the world of animate and inanimate matter, minerals and plants, and animals. This duality combined with the symbolism of the Sun and brightness and its magnetic properties — has Christological connotations. Amber seems to be an attractive material for expressing the spirituality also in the twentieth and twenty-first century, which is so entangled in carnality, not only because it alludes to the ‘timelessness’ of celestial bodies, but also because it relates to the nature of the earthly world and can represent the human element.

The pre-Christian tradition of using amber and its symbolism have proved susceptible to the modifications brought by monotheistic religions and the folk traditions which grew out of them. In the period immediately following the adoption of Christianity by Mieszko I, amber was used for making objects which, even if they did not serve as insignia, became part of the canon of works of art connected with the history of the Church in Poland. Amber was used infrequently in episcopal insignia until after the Second World War, partly because of its unavailability as a raw material or due to the socio-political situation, but above all because of the traditions of the Church which relied on the symbolism of various kinds of gems, as well as ‘precious stones’. Sapphires and amethysts were used primarily for episcopal rings (amethysts having become exceedingly popular since early modern times) while precious emeralds were reserved for the insignia of cardinals [21]. However, the canons conditioned by symbolism were gradually relaxed, especially in the twentieth century. Modern art in the post-war period resulted in a return for the search for new forms and materials, such as amber, even in such a traditional field as insignia.

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