

AUDRONĖ BLIUJENĖ.
LIETUVOS PRIEŠISTORĖS GINTARAS
(LITHUANIA'S AMBER IN PREHISTORY).
Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2007, 560 pp.

Amber has practically become a national characteristic of Lithuania. Small pieces of it are washed up on the shores of the Baltic Sea, souvenir shops are full of amber, and there are amber museums ... Today we often no longer even reflect upon the time that amber began to be so strongly established in our lives. Up until very recently, there were no special studies on the use of amber in ancient times; satisfaction was taken simply from works of a general nature or from bibliographies. This situation began to change after academic conferences were held in 2001 in Lithuania and Latvia on the use of amber in prehistory, and the conference papers were published (Baltic 2001; Amber 2003). Audronė Bliujienė's work appears to end the entire process of getting acquainted with amber in prehistoric periods by organically synthesising all the known data about it from the oldest times to the end of the Iron Age (the 12th century in Lithuania). The synthesis has turned out to be uncommonly impressive. Probably no prehistorically used material in Lithuanian archaeology has merited such a thick monograph, even though neither iron nor flint, for example, can be compared to amber by their widespread use. This thick monograph about amber is a 560-page, medium-format book, of which 429 pages constitute the main text (with 264 illustrations, some of which are in colour, including maps), with the remaining pages comprising 21 appendices, lists of references and sources, people and place name indices, and a thorough (36-page) summary in English. Amber is discussed systematically in the book, with long chapters devoted to a historiography, the most important amber finds from the 19th to the first half of the 20th centuries, amber find sites in Europe, the gathering and mining of amber along the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea (the Sambian Peninsula and the Lithuanian coast), amber's place in the communities of the Balts by epoch (in the Stone Age, especially the Neolithic and Early Metal Age, and separate periods of the Iron Age: the Roman, Migration and Viking periods). It concludes with rather brief conclusions (five pages). The entire text is permeated with a

background in the usage of amber in Europe, which the author has gleaned both from various and widely encompassing sources of literature (the bibliography lists 788 references), as well as from direct contact with scholars researching amber and an acquaintance with amber artefacts stored and preserved in museums, or with textual or graphic material characterising them. Understandably, a more comprehensive discussion of such a huge work in a review is not possible: a separate article or even a booklet would have to be written. But to do so is neither necessary nor conceivable: for those books' portions in which the author is a synthesist, in which she summarises others' data, one would have to enter into polemics with the actual authors to whose research data the author refers, while for the parts in which the author is also the research question's investigator, very versatile and thorough material is invoked, to which it is also not possible to add anything more essential. We can only repeat the book's essential conclusions: amber artefacts became widespread in the eastern Baltic Sea region in the Neolithic, later their quantity significantly decreased, then they started to increase again in the third century and reached their maximum number in the fifth to sixth centuries, while they are later found in great number only among the Western Balts (especially the Curonians). These conclusions are drawn based on scrupulously collected material, of which the abundance also accounts for the size of most of the corresponding chapters. Amber is most broadly (in 88 pages) described for the Neolithic, while other epochs receive slightly less attention: the Early Metal Age 63, the Roman Period 81, the Migration Period 31, and the Viking Period 56 pages. Knowing that the author's scientific theme of interest is the Middle to Late Iron Age, it is noticeable that the author is mostly inclined toward a synthesis in the book, and boldly moves into periods about which she knows less. Such audacity is supplemented by at least three official consultants who are all specialists in precisely those periods which the author has researched the least, and who, we must assume, made some things more accu-

rate while the book was still in manuscript form. These chapters are so strewn with various types of references that at times they begin to interfere with the text (for example, on p. 227 almost every sentence in the text has a reference to literature, illustrations, appendices, or a footnote at the bottom of the page). There are 168 references in the book that did not fit into the book's main text, as well as eight more in the appendices. The very references to literature used often direct the reader away to several other works (on the same p.227, one footnote cites seven references, three two references). Finally, nearly all the references are presented at the end of a sentence, and when this sentence is long and polysemantic, which is often the case (eg pp.421–422), it is rather difficult to determine which reference belongs to what. Similar examples prompt us to wonder whether such an abundance of references really was necessary, or if it would have been possible to manage with a smaller number. A synthesis does not need to absorb every known fact in the field: that is more a matter for reference books or encyclopedias.

Nevertheless, the author's erudition in research questions concerning amber is truly encyclopedic. Besides the already mentioned chronological coverage, there is also territorial (from England to Siberia, from Egypt to Finland) and thematic (amber find sites, mining, processing, trade, artefacts) coverage. All of this is not done superficially, but rather by taking up a great number of facts, that are presented in concentrated form in tables. It could be said that the latter constitute an atlas of archaeological find sites of amber, in most of which we find statistical data not only from the various periods of the Iron Age (Appendices 4, 10, 12, 19), but also from the Neolithic (Appendix 2) and the Early Metal Age (Appendix 6). Satisfaction is usually taken from more than just the Lithuanian material in the appendices. Regardless of the fact that they are only auxiliary material to the book's text, certain appendices could have been more informative in connecting their actual references with the book's respective illustrations, and in explaining some of the abbreviations used. Appendix 9, which contains unexplained abbreviations (M, V, TM) in its list (p.430), is especially difficult to understand in this respect. The last abbreviation, in combination with copious numbers and plus signs, gives the impression altogether that the information is of a nonhumanitarian profile, even though, all in all, that is how the bead types are indicated in the corresponding work of M. Tempelmann-Mączyńska.

However, a work's essence is not made up of its appendices. The most interesting and important from a scientific viewpoint is the work's investigative part. In this respect, the periods that the author herself researches are especially important. So what is new that

is revealed in the chapters devoted to the Middle to Late Iron Age?

Both chapters are among the shortest in their coverage. Their texts are even shorter because they contain abundant illustrations (28 and 44, in 37 and 56 pages respectively) that often take up an entire page or consist of two or even three parts. So the text is markedly more concentrated here. In the Migration Period chapter, most attention is paid to beads, which were found mostly in the lower Nemunas region. These beads are discussed according to their separate groupings, which are named (Basonia type, long cylindrical form with grooves, step-cut, oblong with slanting edges, oblong and slightly truncated biconical, asymmetrical). However, a clear typology is difficult to imagine from them. This is hindered by an absence of their physical parameters (for oblong beads with slanted edges [p.360]), the variety of their features (step-cut beads are flattened spherical, disc-shaped, semicircular, conical with a rounded top, cylindrical [p.353]), and finally by the absence of a unified typological table (there are only references to individual pictures). In this way, by their stylistics, the characterisation of Migration Period beads is also more fitted to earlier chapters and is more of a review.

We also have a similar situation regarding the later period. The title used by the author (the Viking Period and the Early Middle Ages) is intentionally not written in this critique, because it is inaccurate. The inaccuracies begin with the end of the Migration Period. Although a special footnote, No 145 (p.337), is designated for its chronology, the seventh century would be the desired ascription for the end of the period, holding the later period as somehow indefinite (the transition from the Late Migration to the Viking Period). Meanwhile, it is clearly known that the Viking Age in European history began only at the very end of the eighth century, and that was not in Lithuania, but in Great Britain, far from Lithuania (Kazakevičius 2006, p.301). This chronological muddle in the chapter on the Late Iron Age allows talk of even the sixth century (pp.371, 376, 378, and others), ie a 300-year movement backward of the Viking Period in Lithuania (if we follow the discussed work), while the chronological coverage of the period in the conclusions is indicated correctly (p.428). Nor is this the only place in which Lithuania's prehistory does not correspond with its periodisation in Europe. The beginning of the Early Middle Ages in Europe is the fifth century, in Lithuania the 13th century (Zabiela 2001, pp.22, 24), while in this book it is apparently somewhere around the second half of the 11th to the 12th century, ie after the Viking Age. While this was avoided in the characterisation of the period, it was done for the earlier periods.

Due to this chronological confusion, it is difficult to characterise the tendencies of amber usage in the Viking Age and in the time after it. Because the custom of cremating the dead spread at this time, known data about amber from graves is incomplete. Nevertheless, it appears that amber was used mostly in west Lithuania (especially among the Curonians), where, aside from beads, there were also amulets and even parts of tools (ie spindle whorls, tools for weaving sashes, even an awl handle [p. 410]). Upland Lithuanians (Aukštaičiai) also liked to decorate their horses with an amber bead, although not universally.

Looking at this book as a whole, a certain inconsistency is clearly noticeable. If a large part of it up to the Roman Period inclusively is written weighing the available material and considering it well, then the subsequent part of the book is more reminiscent of a work written in a hurry both in its textual part and in its illustrations. The latter, incidentally, are overfilled with material unrelated to amber, and in places create the impression of an artificially inflated book. For example, from the triple Fig. 245 that takes up three pages, the illustrated amber artefacts consist of only two tiny beads (p.396, No 3) which are repeated once again in another illustration (p.395, Fig. 244). There are many mistakes in the maps. Especially unreliable is the map on p. 340 (Fig. 195). In it, No 2 (Baliuliai) is found somewhere deep in Byelorussia, even beyond Lake Narutis, while it is, in fact, near Žeimena, northeast of Pabradė. Maudžiorai (in the Kelmė district) is shown near Kaunas (No 31), to where Rūdaičiai (Kretinga district) (No 60) has also been moved. And Mazkatuži (Latvia, Liepāja district) (No 32) appears somewhere in the Telšiai district. More examples could be pointed out. For example, in Fig. 117 (p.173) of the rather thorough map of Late Neolithic find sites, Kretuonas (No 26) and Žemaitiškė (No 41) are also represented near Lake Narutis, and Lynežeris (No 28) and Margiai (No 29) in southwest Lithuania. Some places are marked incorrectly, even on the small Roman import map (p. 264, Fig. 158): Betygala (No 7) is on the left bank of the Dubysa and further north. The examples presented show that we should employ the maps in the book carefully, and only to illustrate the general diffusion patterns of the artefacts.

Another confused area is the place names, which are abundant in the book (the index alone takes up 12 pages [pp.512–523]). Since nearly all (and not only all) of Europe's names are used, it would have been expedient to keep to some kind of single system (either to Lithuanianise everything or to leave the original, or to combine one and the other), rather than to present every one of their possible versions. Alongside the Lithuanianised versions we also find the originals

(eg Västergötland, Bohuslän [p.164]) and the half-Lithuanianised, with letters from the original spellings (eg Ålborgo [p.162]). East Prussia's (especially the Kaliningrad area's) names are written in the old traditional way, and in the Russian postwar style, and in double or even multiple ways (eg a quadruple version on p.263). Administrative districts (including from the past [as in East Prussia]) are shown in some places and not in others. If this medley could not be controlled in the text, then it should at least have been done in the index. For some reason, by the way, the latter does not include the abundant place names mentioned in the appendices. While the Lithuanian reader can somehow make sense of these names, for the foreigner its usage becomes problematic right away. Both in the place names and in the maps, a slipshod job on the part of the publishing house is clearly noticeable, which generally spoils a quite attractive book. Apparently for the same reason, nothing is mentioned in the English summary about the book's first two chapters ("Amber in Lithuania's Historiography" and "Between Opinion and Reality"), although the second also could be interesting to the foreign reader. Meanwhile, the short text that goes beyond the book's chronological boundaries about archaeological finds of amber during the State Period (p.424) is not only rather widely presented in the conclusions, but is also submitted almost in its entirety in the English summary (p.559).

There are also insufficiently elucidated and debatable things in the book. This includes archaeological cultures which are usually presented only by name. This poses no problems to specialist archaeologists, but the book will be widely used, not only by archaeologists. So it will remain rather unclear, for example, precisely what Bogaczewo Culture is, and how it differs, say, from Wielbark Culture. With the great number of references to the corresponding literature in the book, we find not a single reference opposite the archaeological cultures which would characterise the respective culture in at least the most general features. Among the debatable things, worth mentioning is Lamata Land. The land is not universally acknowledged (it is even questioned, for example, in a work summarising the Lithuanian ethnogenesis [Lietuvių 1987, p.133, footnote at the bottom of the page]) and we find nothing about it in the majority of encyclopedias (eg not even in the *Mažosios Lietuvos enciklopedija* [The Encyclopedia of Lithuania Minor]) specially devoted to this region (Vilnius 2003, Vol 2). Of course, a book about amber could not amass absolutely everything, but in this case a few explanatory sentences to the reader about how the author understands Lamata Land would have been very beneficial. After all, room for a significantly clearer characterisation of prehistoric periods

appeared in the book (eg for the Bronze Age on p.191, footnote 73), which is only an advantage.

In conclusion, it must be noted that the mentioned mistakes and inconsistencies still do not overshadow the book's scientific and cognitive value, even though they may hinder a proper grasp of it. Bliujienė has presented readers with a fundamental synthesis that will clearly not lie very long on the bookshelves in shops and will define our view of amber in Lithuania's prehistory for the next several decades.

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