**Amber Trail**

The Amber Trail was a trade route that once connected Mediterranean countries, including ancient **Rome**, with the Baltic Sea. Baltic amber was known to the Italian Etruscans as early as the beginning of the last millennium BCE, but the **trade** in this "gold of the north" on a large scale was developed by the Celts in the last centuries BCE and the early centuries CE, opening amber routes to the Romans. From the 1st to the 3rd century CE, it symbolized the growing power and influence of the Roman Empire.

The main Amber Trail, along which Roman merchants traveled for amber, connected the Mediterranean basin with the shores of the Baltic Sea and played a decisive role in trade contacts. It also determined the development of towns located along it. Thanks to it, the Romans could indirectly influence the internal policies of the northern European peoples. Amber was a valuable commodity for exchange as far back as the late Neolithic period. It was called the "gold of the north," "Slavic gold," or "Baltic gold" and was widely used in medicine, ornamentation, and magic. It also interested ancient writers and scholars (including Homer, Sophocles, Plato, and **Pliny the Elder**).

The Amber Trail, like other historical trade routes, followed natural "corridors," such as river valleys. The exact route of the trail has not been definitively determined. It is believed to have started in Aquileia on the Adriatic, one of the Roman craft centers. Initially, the trail led through **the Moravian Gate**, then turned north, passing through Silesia, eastern Greater Poland, and Kujawy (crossing the Vistula at Otłoczyn near Toruń) to **the Baltic Sea**.

It can be assumed that the main route of the trail, starting from the turn of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, ran from Vienna (Vindobona) through Brno, Kłodzko, Wrocław, Kalisz (Calisia/Kalisia), Konin (Setidava), Bydgoszcz, and Świecie to Gdańsk.

The peak of the Amber Trail's prosperity occurred after the Roman conquest of the areas along the middle Danube in the 1st century CE. The most abundant amber trade took place in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, when more and more merchants set out for the amber treasure. Settlements along this route developed, playing a very important role in the socio-economic development of Europe.

Long-distance trade along the amber route was represented mainly by large Roman companies engaged primarily in crafts and trade, organizing north-south trade expeditions, exchanging goods with the peoples of the Danube lands. Further, merchants, bankers, workshop owners, and other entrepreneurs, as well as smaller traders and peddlers accompanying the army on the move, were involved. They sold **food** and various everyday items to soldiers, acquiring war loot from them in return.

Wine, Roman feastware, and fabrics were traded, and furs were exchanged for goods. Local representatives traded amber and other local products with foreign merchants. Tribes in the Baltic region probably also imported bronze and brass products from the Empire's territory. Meander motifs, which became widespread in the Odra and Vistula river basins, may have arrived earlier through the Celts. Raw materials and goods purchased by local traders for further exchange with foreign merchants were stored. For example, skins and furs were stored in wooden buildings, while amber, so as not to weather, was stored in underground pits. Thus, in exchange for garment fasteners or belt fittings, or fabrics, amber bags, mainly from beavers, and skins were transported back south from Polish lands, and wood was exported. To maximize profit, merchants ventured far north, where **prices** for Roman products probably increased, unlike local products. The difficulties in obtaining amber and the risks borne by trade caravans reaching far dictated a high price for this metal. Sometimes the price of an amber product was higher than the "price" of a slave, depending on the size of the processed raw material. In the Empire, Roman authorities ensured the safety of travelers, while in northern countries, the authorities of tribes and tribal unions took care of this.

The sites of long-distance trade, where Roman products delivered from distant parts of the Empire, exported to Danube countries, were urban centers located at the intersections of major communication routes, next to legionary camps. In addition to trade places surrounded by halls, there were also postal and customs stations. In these centers, Roman goods were somehow distributed, which were intended for northern peoples.

**Roman Amber**

The only work preserved by Pliny the Elder is Naturalis historia ("Natural History"), a kind of encyclopedia in 37 books describing, among other things, cosmology, geography, botany, physiology, and mineralogy. It is a vast mine of knowledge from Roman times. Pliny the Elder begins his story about amber in "Natural History" as follows:

*Next in regard to luxuries, though of the female sex, but which are yet objects of luxury, is amber; all these vessels hold a middle place between gems and ordinary stones.*

*– Pliny the Elder, Natural History, XXXVII.11*

From Pliny the Elder, we learn that the Romans dyed amber with goat tallow, shellfish dye, or the root of madder, known to us more as a **centuria** or common madder. Pliny also mentions that ambers rubbed with oil burn brighter and longer than flax core. Amber was also used to counterfeit expensive transparent stones, especially amethysts.

Among the ambers, it is said that the Romans considered white amber to have the most exquisite scent. This, as well as those of a waxen color, apparently had no price. On the other hand, the yellow-colored amber was considered the most beautiful.

The Romans also used amber in medicine. Children were tied to it as amulets. According to **Callistratus**, at any age, amber works well against madness and urination problems. Its special variety called "chryselectrum," somewhat golden in color, tied around the neck, was supposed to cure fevers and other diseases, rubbed with honey and rose oil for ear diseases.

Furthermore, Pliny observes:

*In Corinthian vessels we admire the bronze, mixed as it is with gold and silver, in works of art and elegance (…), pearls we esteem, because they are worn on the head, precious stones because they are on the fingers, lastly, in all other objects of luxury we are attracted either by display or by actual use, in amber, alone, it is its very substance that is valued.*

*– Pliny the Elder, Natural History, XXXVII.12*

**Roman Amber Expedition**

The aforementioned Pliny the Elder describes one of the expeditions that took place during the reign of **Emperor Nero**. Nero sent one of his subjects to bring him the precious stone. Considering the distance from the Baltic Sea to Rome, his journey probably lasted about two months, assuming he traveled about 30 km per day. The expedition had the character of an official state expedition, rather than a private trading initiative. Certainly, the Romans became better acquainted with new lands and peoples inhabiting them. Here is how a certain Roman knight describes the expedition, as recounted by Pliny:

*It has recently been ascertained that the coast of Germany, from which amber is brought, is distant from Carnuntum in Pannonia 600 miles. There still survives a Roman knight who was sent by him for this purpose through the command of Nero. He inspected the marts and the amber-producing regions, and brought back such vast quantities of amber, that even the network, which was placed as a protection to the wild beasts and to defend the podium, was composed of amber in every mesh. The arms, too, the tents, and everything else that was used in the course of a single day, was made of amber, for the purpose of adding variety to the exhibitions on each successive day. The largest piece of amber weighed thirteen pounds [4.25 kg].*

*– Pliny the Elder, Natural History, XXXVII.11*

According to scientists' hypotheses, the expedition set out from Carnuntum (present-day northeastern Austria) and, after covering about 900 km, reached the Baltic Sea, at the mouth of the Vistula, and even the Sambia Peninsula, known for its abundance of amber. Scientists shape their conclusions about the route based on excavations and other sources.