The Magical Power of Amber

**In ancient times, amber was considered an incredibly mysterious stone. Its origin and properties remained unexplained for a long time. Numerous written and oral accounts attempted to explain the phenomenon of the formation of this beautiful stone. Its surrounding aura of mystery eventually led to it being attributed with magical properties.**

**The significance of amber in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times**

Amber was known in ancient Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and even China. Amber pendants found during archaeological excavations, adorned with geometric ornaments, incisions, and sometimes depictions of humans and animals, could serve as amulets used in hunting magic by prehistoric inhabitants of the Baltic countries, ensuring fruitful hunts. On the other hand, flat pendants with a motif of intersecting cross points could be associated with the cult of the sun god. In the Neolithic period, amber votive offerings were found under houses, protecting inhabitants from all sorts of misfortunes.

Ornaments made of this stone, associated with cults and beliefs, were known to all significant European cultures, as well as cultures of the Middle and Far East. In ancient Rome, amber was popular as a decorative material, and it was also attributed with protective powers. Until the end of the 4th century AD, it was considered a symbol of luxury and wealth. Pliny the Elder wrote in his "Natural History": "It is made by a juice flowing from trees of the pine kind, just as gum flows from the cherry, and resin from the pine. It spouts there from the result of an excess of fluid, solidifying under the influence of cold or time, or else of sea water, when in the spring the stormy waves wash it off the islands. Anyway, it is thrown up by the waves on the shore, proving to be incredibly light, so that it seems to hang in the water, and does not settle at the bottom." The heyday of this stone in the Roman Empire was initiated by the famous expedition of the director of gladiator games during the reign of Emperor Nero. The huge amount of amber brought back then allowed for the organization of games "in amber setting". However, it was most often used for making jewelry, which, in addition to decorative values, also had a protective function, preventing tonsillitis and other throat ailments. It was also used to treat fits of madness and problems with urination. Rubbed with Attic honey, it was said to help with ear and eye ailments, while ground into powder or ingested with fragrant resin, it was believed to counteract stomach ailments.

Greek physicians like Hippocrates, Areteus of Cappadocia, and Galen, as well as scholars of the Islamic world like Ibn-al-Gazzar and Avicenna, prescribed amber to patients in the form of pills or mixtures, prepared from powdered amber with the addition of honey, milk, water, beer, or wine.

In the medieval period, amber was regarded as one of the six medicines with the highest therapeutic efficacy. Saint Hildegard of Bingen recommended consuming amber in the form of a tincture on beer, wine, or water for abdominal pain, and on milk for bladder diseases. Other medieval physicians recommended it against diarrhea, for treating bleeding, coughs and dryness, eye diseases, toothaches, and as a means to increase fertility. The Teutonic Knights, who conquered the "amber coast", especially valued the white variety and attributed medicinal properties to it. Albert of Hohenzollern sent a barrel of white amber to Martin Luther for his kidney ailments. The court physician of Prince Andreas Aurifaber, in his scientific treatise "Succini historia", included nearly 50 examples of amber's application in various ailments. Nicolaus Copernicus used it to alleviate heart ailments, as evidenced by the original prescription, written by the hand of this great astronomer, found in the library of Uppsala University.

In 1546, the German scholar Georgius Agricola conducted dry distillation of amber, resulting in the production of turpentine, calophony, amber oil, and amber acid in the form of white crystals. The latter was initially considered a salt, only in the late 17th century did the English chemist Robert Boyle determine that it was an acid. Amber oil, most valued by Agricola, was used to treat syphilis, kidney stones, and colds. It was also included in the well-known sobering remedy Aqua Luciae. The Polish physician and botanist Stefan Falimirz wrote in the herbal "On herbs and their power" that this stone could "cheer up the hearts, drive away heart pains, and break spells". Medical guides recommended wearing a ring with amber, preferably on the little finger of the left hand, as its effect was most effective then, and also fumigating amber smoke on areas affected by the plague epidemic. Warsaw physician Jan Karol Jerzysław Freyer, author of the first Polish monograph "On Amber", was familiar with many medicinal preparations containing amber. He listed various specifics such as artificial musk for nervous sufferings, amber acid for hysterical ailments, nervous apoplexy, paralysis, and convulsions accompanying gangrene, amber tincture, and amber oil. He also reported that in England, doctors recommended fumigation with amber in the case of tuberculosis.

**Amber in Folk Culture**

The largest deposits of fossil amber in Poland were located in the basin of the Narew River, in the Tuchola Forest, on the Kashubian Lake District, and also in Masuria. The lands inhabited by the Kurpie were poor, and among the scarce, over-Narew riches, the most important was this stone. The local population became so strongly connected with the processing and exploitation of this resource that the mineral permanently entered the history of the material and spiritual culture of this region. It influenced the emergence of its ethnographic distinctiveness and for many years conditioned its economic development. Old traditions of amber artistry were preserved in folk culture primarily in the Kurpie region, where this art survived until 1905-1915. It survived to a much lesser extent in Kashubia, Warmia, and Masuria.

Ambers also became an element of Kurpie and Kashubian folk costumes, although jewelry with these stones was also worn in other parts of the country. According to Adam Chętnik's estimates, in the years 1900-1910, women in the Kurpie region owned about 100,000 strands of beads.

Ambers were most often ordered for young girls, before their marriage, sometimes they were a gift from a husband. According to local tradition, it was inappropriate for a bachelor to give them to a maiden unless it was an official declaration of his feelings. In that case, accepting such a gift indicated reciprocity and was a kind of agreement to further shared life. In Kurpie families, amber jewelry was passed down from generation to generation. It also constituted an important part of the wedding attire.