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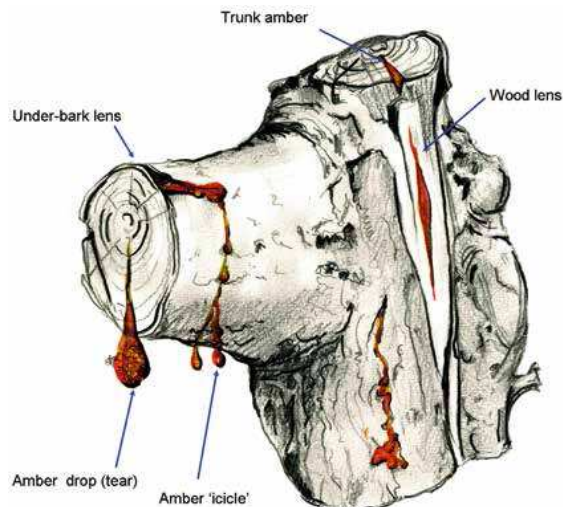
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## The Culture of Amber in Scotland

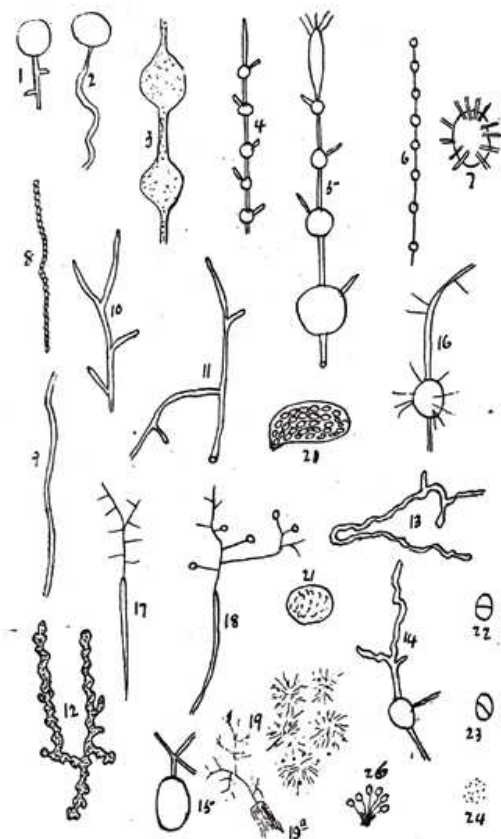
Dr Neil Clark (UK)

The last place most people will associate with amber is Scotland. Yet, it is the place where some of the oldest inclusions (from the Carboniferous) in tree resin have been found.

Amber is defined differently by different cultures. Its precise origin is unknown, but is fossilised tree resin and not the sap. Some consider Baltic amber (or succinite) as the only true amber, but most would accept that other fossilised tree resins (such as the amber from the Eocene of the Dominican Republic, or the Cretaceous amber from the Isle of Wight) also exhibit similar properties. It may



*The amber tree. (Artist: Kamai.)*



*Inclusions in Carboniferous 'amber' from Scotland (Smith, 1894).*

be surprising to some that the oldest 'amber' (also known as middletonite) to have been found with inclusions was found from the coalfields of Ayrshire in Scotland. John Smith published this discovery in 1894, describing the inclusions as parts of coniferous plants and fungi. Although the actual specimens John Smith studied are now lost to science, new research using some of the more modern techniques like 3D X-ray imaging, which looks at opaque amber, may eventually reveal evidence of such inclusions in this type of resin. There are also folklore and traditions associated with amber in Scotland, but, as yet, no sources for any amber (post-Carboniferous). So where has all this amber-lore come from? It was most likely brought by visitors and immigrants from Scandinavia and northern Europe over the millennia. Scotland has had strong historical and commercial links with these Baltic and other northern amber states that is reflected in the place names (such as John O'Groats or Valtos) and language (words like 'Kirk' or 'Bairn').

In prehistoric times, during the later Neolithic until about 3,700 years ago, amber use in the British Isles was still rare. However, Neolithic finds are known from Scotland at this time. Four irregular beads of amber, associated with jet beads and an axe, were found in a burial mound (over 4,000 years old) at Greenbrae, near Cruden in Aberdeenshire. In the past, the presence of amber in Neolithic burials has been used as evidence for trade with Europe. However, the fact that this amber is irregular in

shape and is unlike amber being traded elsewhere in Europe, might suggest that it was not traded, but rather collected and worked locally.

The amber itself is the exact same Baltic material that was being worked in Europe at that time, but floated a cross the North Sea to Britain. This is not unusual, as amber frequently washes up on the east coast of England and it even sometimes makes an appearance in Scotland. In the

northern parts of the Baltic region, the Vikings dominated the sea trade routes in the eighth to the tenth centuries. Amber was an important commodity for the Vikings and was used for jewellery, gaming pieces and religious artefacts. Amber grave goods of this period are quite commonly found associated with Viking burials, including the British hoard from the Knowe of Moan in Orkney. The Vikings were not alone in the Baltic Sea for long though as, in the eleventh century AD, the Curonian pirates from Lithuania and Latvia grew in power and challenged the Vikings, frequently plundering the Scandinavian coast. Both the Vikings and the Curonians became rich partly from their spoils and from trade in amber with the rest of Europe.

Why was amber of such importance to these communities? Was it because it looked like a ray of sunlight that had solidified into rock? Was it because it had the appearance of gold and yet had a fraction of the weight? Or was it because it was easily carved, burned well and effused vapours that gave a sense of wellbeing? Perhaps it was a combination of all of these properties that resulted in the myths and legends that surround amber.

One property, which is well known of amber, has resulted in its everyday use around the world – its use as a medicine. It is still used today in many countries, but was certainly used in mainstream medicine until the 1950s in the West as part of the embrocation for treating whooping cough. Ever since man discovered amber in prehistoric times, it is likely that it was used in some way as a medicine. The Greek physician Hippocrates was one of the first to record the use of amber in medicine, but it is likely that it had been used in this way for a considerable time before that. It is not unknown for other fossils to be used as medical cures. In the early eighteenth

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century, the Scottish author Martin Martin of Marrishadder recorded Jurassic ammonites and belemnites being infused in water to relieve dysentery, diarrhoea, tuberculosis, worms and cramps on the Isle of Skye in Scotland. In fact, on Skye, a piece of amber, now in the National Museums of Scotland, was used to relieve failing eyesight until at least the eighteenth century by rubbing it on the eyelids. There are several beads and amulets of amber (called *lamma* in Scotland) that were used to cure a variety of ills. One from Argyllshire was recorded as being used to cure poor eyesight and another one as a Highland charm to cure cattle from a host of diseases. Other countries in Europe, and elsewhere, also have a history of using amber for curing illnesses in a similar manner.

In 1502, Camillus Leonardus, an Italian astronomer, mineralogist and physician, suggested that if you place amber on your wife as she sleeps, "all her evil deeds will be revealed". It is not clear from his writings how this manifested itself, but it is hard to imagine that it would have worried too many wives.

At the same time as the amber business was beginning to flag in Prussia in the sixteenth century, it was popular for the women of the east coast fishing villages of Scotland to wear a necklace of amber beads. They also hung amber beads on their children to protect them from evil. The MacDonalds of Glencoe had a set of amber beads that were used to cure blindness. Elsewhere, amber beads were also used as a cure for sore eyes and sprained limbs. In about 1575, on the Buchan coast, a huge piece of amber was reputedly washed ashore: "*arrivit ane gret lomp of this goum in Buchquhane, als mekle as ane hors*" ("... arrived a large piece of amber in Buchan, as big as a horse"). Although the text was originally written in Latin by the Bishop John Leslie of Ross in his book on the history of Scotland of 1578, it was translated into the Scots language by Father James Dalrymple in 1596. It may be that the Latin text was mistranslated and that it just said that there was a truly big piece of amber washed up on the shores of Buchan, rather than one the size of a horse. Perhaps, this large piece of amber was broken up to be sold as talismans to the fishing vill ages.



Amber bead used to heal failing eyesight on the Isle of Skye. (Artist: Kamai.)

In late eighteenth century Scotland, a smuggler called Carnochan from Galloway in the south had an oval amber bead that he wore around his neck. It was over 2cm in diameter and 1.3cm thick, with a silver ring through the perforation. The story goes that Carnochan removed it from a *bing o'eththers* (mound of adders), which were busy making the amber bead. The snakes would writhe together in midsummer and produce a 'bubble' in the form of a ring. They would then hiss and blow, throwing the ring up into the air with their tails, upon which the ring would harden like glass. It was thought that whoever possessed such a stone would prosper and be able to heal ills. This is strikingly similar to stories told by many cultures, including that of the Lapps, of 'powerful' snake-stones. Carnochan wore the amber bead on a ribbon around his neck and used it for curing *backgaun weans* (sick children), *elfshot kye* (diseased cattle), and *sick beass* (sick animals), and as a talisman to avert the effects of the 'evil eye'. For the bead

to be used, it was dipped three times in water, which was then given to the sick child or animal to drink. Carnochan lost it while digging for worms in his garden one disastrous day and his luck left him. His smuggling booty and hiding place were found, and he died in poverty. Many years later, one of his grandchildren found it in the garden. To see if it was still possessed by healing powers, it was used in an attempt to cure 'Jean Craig's cat'. Sadly, the cat died and so it was thought of no more use and was eventually given to Dr Robert de Brus Trotter of Perth. What happened to it subsequently is unknown, but there are several such beads in museum collections in Scotland.

Although Scotland is not well known in the myths, legends and science of amber, it has both a social history and scientific contribution to make to our understanding of this magical and sometimes elusive material.