Faya Causey
ex. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
ORCID: 0009-0005-2140-317X

Some Thoughts on the Human Valuing of Amber, Past and Present

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Kilka uwag o wartości bursztynu dla ludzkości dawniej i dziś

Niniejszy artykuł podsumowuje dwa obszary ostatnich badań autorki dotyczących wartości oraz różnych zastosowań bursztynu na przestrzeni wieków – od neolitu po czasy współczesne – i ich przenikanie się w toku badań. W ramach projektu "University of Pennsylvania Human Flourishing" bursztyn został przeanalizowany pod względem jego pozyskiwania, podejścia artystycznego, produkcji, zastosowań i sposobów dzielenia się nim, w tym eksponowania go na ciele oraz wystaw – prywatnych i publicznych. W kontekście wykorzystania bursztynu w Afryce i przez afrykańską diasporę skupiono się na dwóch ostatnich znaleziskach archeologicznych z historycznego cmentarza w Nowym Jorku (na którym chowano zarówno ludzi wolnych, jak i pozbawionych wolności) oraz z zamkniętego dawnego nabrzeża Rio di Janeiro Valongo Wharf, związanego z transatlantyckim handlem niewolnikami. Analiza obejmuje trwający od tysiącleci handel i wyzyskiwanie Afryki, jak również afrykańskiej diaspory.

Abstract

This paper summarizes two areas of recent scholarship by the author concerning human appreciation and its various uses of amber from the Neolithic to the present and how they were intertwined in the research. As part of the University of Pennsylvania Human Flourishing project, amber was considered in light of its sourcing, artisanal approaches, manufacture, usages, and manners of sharing including bodily display and both private and public exhibition. For the subject of Amber, Africa and the African Diaspora, the focus was on two recent archaeological finds from an historic cemetery in New York (wherein were buried both freed and enslaved persons) and from the closed Rio di Janeiro Valongo Wharf site associated with the transatlantic trade in enslaved people. The analysis included the millennia-long trade to and usage in Africa as well as in the African diaspora.

Amber, for thousands of years, has been a much sought-after material for adornment, medicine, incense, religion and uses we might call magical, as well as for its remarkable inclusions of flora and fauna. Throughout history, its rarity and attributed beliefs about the substance significantly contributed to its high value in trade, gifts, deposits, dedications, and burials. Pharmaceutical cures and divine associations are documented throughout cultures from earliest times. In ancient Greece, ancient Italy, in the Middle Ages through to the modern era, its exchange value has been compared to that of gold, silver, crystal, the finest silks, to frankincense and myrrh, and to various currencies. While various kinds of documents and literature have provided essential evidence about amber's use by humans in the historical past, a significant amount of evidence is the result of archaeological finds and their publication. Contemporary research on human interactions with amber is also a rich source for understanding its appreciation and usage.

My lifelong fascination with and research into amber and its human valuing has led to wonderful invitations to lecture and for their consequent publication. In 2017, I was honored to receive invitations to speak at two then-upcoming international conferences. For the Gdańsk *Amberif 2018* international symposium *Amber. Science and Art*, I presented "Amber and Africa," an overview of my recent investigations into the trade to and usage of Baltic amber in Africa from Middle Kingdom Egypt through the 19th century and the role of amber in the Transatlantic African Diaspora.[1] For a 2019 conference on the visual arts organized by the University of Pennsylvania Humanities and Human Flourishing project, in my lecture, "Amber: The Magic Rubs Off," I surveyed the various roles played by amber in human prospering with evidence ranging from the deep past to the present day.[2] Early on, the research and preparation for these conference topics intersected and mutually informed the two lectures.

Crucial to both enterprises were the publications of recent archaeologically retrieved amber objects, mainly body ornaments, from two sites inextricably linked to the transatlantic trade in enslaved people: the New York African Burial Ground (which included both enslaved and free people, in use during the 17th–18th centuries and closed in 1795) and the Rio di Janeiro Valongo Wharf (where objects pertaining to African use, including religious worship, were interred between 1811–1831). These two finds were at the heart of both my 2018 Gdańsk keynote and for an expanded lecture on amber and Africa which I presented in 2022 at

[1] See Faya Causey, *Amber and Africa* [in:] *Amber. Science and Art. Amberif International symposium,* Abstracts, eds. Ewa Wagner-Wysiecka et al., Gdańsk 2018, pp. 143–144 and Faya Causey, *Amber, Africa, and the African Diaspora* [in:] *Motion: Migrations. Proceedings of the 35th World Congress of Art History*, 2023, ed. Claudia Mattos Avolese, pp. 340–355, http://www.ciha.org/sites/default/files/files/V4_Motion_%20Migrations_35%20World%20Congress_CIHA_full%20volume_compressed.pdf [accessed: 27.11.2025].

[2] See Faya Causey, *Amber: The Magic Rubs Off* [in:] *Visual Arts and Human Flourishing (The Humanities and Human Flourishing)*, ed. Selma Holo, Oxford 2024.

the 35th CIHA (International Committee for Art History) World Congress in São Paulo.[3] Critical, too, for the preparation for these lectures (and subsequent publications) was a 2017 meeting with Professor James Walvin, a noted scholar of the history of slavery. His then-newly published *Slavery in Small Things: Slavery and Modern Cultural Habits* had not only become a popular book but also must-read for many scholars. The book title reflects Walvin's thesis that a new kind of understanding regarding the impact of slavery is accomplished by examining seemingly insignificant everyday objects and cultural practices that were directly tied to the trade in enslaved people. He highlights how slavery permeated society in ways beyond just the plantation level and how commonplace daily objects such as tea, sugar, maps or beads, for example, can be seen as eloquent witnesses to their millennia-long exportation to Africa, to the African diaspora and the incumbent tragic story of the trade in enslaved people from Africa to the Americas. Also essential in the lead-up to the two research--lecture-publication projects was the opportunities to learn of contemporary amber (and amber imitations) usage in Africa and amongst descendants of the African diaspora in the Americas and in Gdańsk to discuss with amber artisans, purveyors, researchers, and conference organizers about the creation, use and public presentation of contemporary amber objects from jewelry, sculpture, decorative arts, to clothing ornaments.

Amber and Human Flourishing

As I have recently proposed in my lecture and essay for the Human Flourishing and the Arts project, those of us who work on any aspect of amber might refer to the positive outcomes derived from the endeavors as the 'amber effect.'[4] This is attested by other amber specialists of all kinds – cultural historians, gemmologists, art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, paleontologists, and biologists. And it is a normal part of amber conferences or fairs or clubs – there are many worldwide – where academics and jewelers, hobbyists, and collectors all congregate and exchange information and share their curiosity and interest and admire new finds, new research, and new creations. Each year, one can attend meetings of The Dead Bug in Amber Club (Connecticut), the above--mentioned annual Fair in Gdańsk, Poland, or the annual, giant Tucson Gem

[3] The literature on both the New York African Burial Ground and the Valongo Wharf site is extensive. Sources consulted are in the bibliography. For the Valongo Wharf site, the contributions by Araujo and Lima have been especially critical and are also given in fn. 6 & 7. For the African Burial Ground, see the important assessment by Cheryl J. La Roche and Michael L. Blakey, *Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground*, "Historical Archaeology" 1997, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 84–106, https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25616540 [accessed: 27.11.2024].

[4] Much of this section quotes paragraphs in my essay in the 2024 *Visual Arts and Human Flourishing (The Humanities and Human Flourishing)* volume.

Show, or the regular (before Covid-19) archaeological-historical conferences such as *The Amber Road*[5] which is focused on the routes of the ancient to medieval trade in amber. These are just a few examples. At each one, presenters will meet collectors, owners, workers, and scholars – historians, paleobotanists and paleoentomologists and other scientists. Jewelers and other craftspeople working with amber not only can be found at such meetings but also enjoy interactions at art fairs and studio visits. This is not to say that all amber fans are unaware of the possible illegal issues surrounding the contemporary mining and trade of the material.

Until I was invited to take part in the University of Pennsylvania project, I had not considered taking my own research, writing and observations to another level of analysis nor had I considered formalizing my ruminations, examinations and conversations about amber's positive effects on humans. In the essay for Humanities and Human Flourishing initiative, I commenced considering how the humans who study or interact with the material could provide evidence for amber's contribution to flourishing. The amber 'fishers,' scientists who analyze the geology, chemistry, physics, and biological inclusions, the historians, anthropologists and sociologists who study its usage, the artisans who work with it, the collectors and conference organizers who spread knowledge about it in various ways – these are people for whom amber is the starting point for a sense of well-being and a desire for greater knowledge and collaboration. I found that once engaged in thinking about the larger subject – in short, amber and human flourishing – I was also learning more about positive psychology, the analytical nodes of the engagement and activities of involvement outlined by the University of Pennsylvania team (including immersion, embeddedness, and socialization) and a hypothesis began to form: interaction with amber has with few exceptions a positive aspect, and in sum, is a positive enterprise. In order to substantiate these ideas, I divided up into six groupings of individuals involved with amber. and designed a questionnaire with a few questions to learn more about their experiences and thoughts. These questions derived from my own experiences with studying amber but also from conversations with others who were focused on the material. Then, my working list of queries was refined by consultation with the materials published by the project specialists. After becoming familiar with the relevant literature provided by the University of Pennsylvania team and of understanding how the mechanisms and outcomes from the project might direct and inform my questions, I looked for what might be the metrics for a quantification of the happiness, of the well-being of individuals who own amber, who use or wear amber, who work the material, study and publish it, or arrange conferences, meetings or shows centered on amber. It seemed important to consider how people working with amber, collecting it, studying it and communicating about it consider

[5] Organised by C.I.V.I.A (International Research Centre for Ancient Roads).

how their engagement is (or is not) positive and associated (or not) with human flourishing. For the empirical study, I formed six groupings of people working with amber: scholars of amber making and usage, from antiquity through the 19th century; scholars of ancient to modern medicine in Europe; specialists on amber usage in Africa, ancient through contemporary periods; researchers working on amber inclusions of fauna and flora: paleontologists, geologists, and chemists; contemporary jewelers and other craftspeople who work with amber; and amber conference organizers. For each of these groups, I engaged 30 individuals (five in each group) to discuss their work and thoughts in light of my hypotheses that "studying or working with amber is a positive experience for themselves as well as for others" and that "their artistic products or scholarly work or collecting or public promotion through conferences aid in or are part of human flourishing and well-being." Responses from three participants for the Human Flourishing and the Arts project included a curator, an artist, and a conference organizer I interviewed in 2018 in Gdańsk. Their responses were originally published in the 2024 book. Anna Sobecka, an art historian and museum specialist (but not an amber specialist to begin with), in curating her first show of contemporary amber art recounts how different are the present-day forms and approaches to the ancient resin as compared to traditional artisanal amber-working on the Baltic. During her *Amber Contexts* exhibition lead-up, Sobecka visited numerous studios. She was repeatedly told by artists how pleasant amber was to work with, especially since the carving and polishing of amber gives off a pleasant smell, distinguishing it from all other jewelry materials. Each nugget or amber is unique, and this is reflected in contemporary creations as she has celebrated. For the last decade Sobecka has been wearing contemporary amber jewelry and in her words: when wearing amber jewelry, one can be sure not to meet a person with an identical necklace, earring or ring. The material invites diverse and individual approaches to the beautiful material. Amber artist and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź Andrzej Szadkowski explains: "The magic of amber, as an image of nature in the aspect of art, is particularly inspiring… a modern amber work considers all of the elements of fine arts, from the sculptural interior of the solid, color, light, and the miniature three--dimensional inclusions with the result that a multifaceted artistic creation has a sensorial impact on the senses. The balsamic smell, the warm touch, and its energetic-healing effects are palpable. Amber makes people feel beautiful, calm and happy." Ewa Rachoń, founder and for many years director of the annual *Amberif* Fair, records her fascination with amber artists and scientists: "I have watched how the artists take raw, dusty nuggets, immerse them in water, observe them carefully, the surfaces and then look deep inside searching for the best sculptural form, anticipating the best display. They taught me the love of amber, the warmth it gives in touch, the energy it transmits, the colors it conceals, the tracking of small ants and other insects that may have hidden the secrets of nature's prehistory. I also have been extremely lucky to meet scientists studying

the flora and fauna and chemistry of amber and those studying the history of interpersonal contacts across the centuries when amber was exchanged for highly valued items from other cultures, enriching local communities and others on the exchange routes."

As noted at the beginning of this essay, participating in the Human Flourishing and the Arts project between 2018 and the publication of the ensuing paper in 2024 coincided with my further research on and writing about the amber objects from New York and Rio di Janeiro. This is reflected in the CIHA lecture I delivered in Sao Paulo in 2022, published in 2023 as "Amber, Africa and African Diaspora." In this final section of this paper, much is derived from that publication.

Amber, Africa and the African Diaspora

The Amber, Africa, and African Diaspora project's starting points, as noted above, were the African Burial Ground, located in today's Lower Manhattan at what was formerly known as the "Negro Burial Ground" and the "Valongo Wharf site" in Rio de Janeiro. It is estimated that up to 15,000 Africans were buried in African Burial Ground between the end of 17th century and 1795, when it was closed. Both enslaved and freed slaves were interred there since 'negroes' could not be buried in churchyards. Excavation was completed on a partial section of the burial ground site by July 1993. Despite the limited number of graves excavated, this section sample demonstrated that many of the human remains, of children, women, and men, were well preserved. Among these, Grave 340 stands out: the woman was at least 40 but perhaps as old as 60, the deceased's teeth were modified, and she was buried with 112 beads and cowrie shells in the form of a waist belt including the single bead of amber. While some have suggested that the amber bead may have been acquired in North America, it is more likely that the bead had an African provenance.[6] In this author's opinion, the shape of the bead is comparable to many 18th-century faceted ambers made in Germany or London. It is significant that the deceased was interred with the belt positioned on the body as it was in her life, thus playing similar many of the same roles in ceremonies of death and post-burial: of wealth, status, and protection.

[6] Tania Andrade Lima, *A la recherche du Valongo: le quai des esclaves à Rio di Janeiro, XIXième siècle* [in:] *Archéologie de l'esclavage colonial*, eds. André Delpuech, Jean-Paul Jacob, Paris 2014; Tania Andrade Lima, Marcos André Torres de Souza, Glaucia Malerba Sene, *Weaving the Second Skin: Protection Against Evil Among the Valongo Slaves in Nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro*, "Journal of the African Diaspora Archaeology & Heritage" 2014, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 103–136; Tania Andrade Lima, Valongo, *An Uncomfortable Legacy*, "Current Anthropology" 2020, vol. 61, no. Suppl. 22, pp. 317–327.

The excavation and primary publication of the Valongo Wharf were led by Tania Andrade Lima.[7] The Wharf, built in 1811, was adjacent to the biggest market of enslaved people in Brazil in what is today's port zone of Rio di Janeiro. This market operated from 1779 until 1831 – the year in which the trade was banned. By 1843 the site was covered over, and an embankment built. The work in 2011–2012 uncovered the old area and the ambers are amongst a range of small objects excavated from the two major dumping areas found at the site – finds which likely came from one or more kinds of deposits. The thousands of the small objects are today classified with terms such as jewelry, beads, ornaments, adornments, talismans, amulets, charms, or apotropaics. The finds are of a range of materials: blue and white glass beads, shells, corals, crystals (including chandelier elements and perfume lids), but also rock prisms, flakes, and cores, plant fiber and copper rings, *figas* of bone or wood, animal horn, teeth and claws, crucifixes, coins, medals, rattles, and keys. The majority appear to have been originally worn on the human body, next to the skin, in the hair, or attached to garments.

The history of the importation and use of Baltic amber in Africa is millennia--old and this must be taken into consideration when assessing its value, importance and use through to the present.[8] The jury is still out about the evidence from ancient Egypt. There is some agreement about the painted tribute scenes in the New Kingdom Tomb of Rekhmire (that is, mid-second millennium BC) where strings of beads appear to be amber. But a text from the reign of the New Kingdom Pharoah Thutmose III – is registered a delivery from Greece of "a great heap of amber which is measured by the heket, making 36.692 deben (about 3424 kgs)." Even today, at a time when amber is industrially mined, that is a significant amount of amber! Another strong case for Baltic amber in Egypt was made by Professor Sinclair Hood: he identified a string of resin beads in Tutankhamun's tomb as very as those of the Bronze Age Tumulus Culture of Central Europe. They have never been tested, but the size and forms are identical.[9]

With the establishment of Islam in northern Africa and the development of long-distance trade across the continent by merchantmen, amber, especially in the form of beads, but also as a raw material (to be used in medicine and incense), is reported as a trade good in the trans-Saharan trade by at least the

[7] See Ana Lucia Araujo, *Sites of Disembarkation and the Public Memory of the Atlantic Slave Trade* [in:] A *Stain on Our Pasts: Slavery and Memory*, eds. Abdoulaye Gueye, Johann Michel Trenton, New Jersey 2018, pp. 137–169; Lima et al., Weaving the Second Skin…; Lima, *A la recherche du Valongo*…; Lima, Valongo, *An Uncomfortable Legacy*…; Tania Andrade Lima, *Por una Arqueología Decolonial de las Ciudades*, "Urbania: Revista Latinoamericana de Arqueología e Historia de las Ciudades" 2023, no. 12, pp. 1–11; Tania Andrade Lima, *Práticas Espirituais Esquecidas: Memória para a Resistência das Religiões Afro-brasileiras*, "Vestígios: Revista Latino-Americana de Arqueologia Histórica" 2023, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 125–150 and Jérome Souty, *Les lavages du quai des esclaves du Valongo*, "Cahiers d'Études Africaines" 2018, vol. 58, Cahier 229(1), pp. 25–68.

[8] Sinclair Hood, *Amber in Egypt* [in:] *Amber in Archaeology: Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference on Amber in Archaeology*, eds. Curt W. Beck, Jan Bouzek, Liblice 1990, pp. 230–235.

7th century of the Christian calendar. Amber from the European north was joined in trading and wearing with the beads from the glass-making centers of the Islamic world – which had inherited their traditions from ancient Near Eastern and Classical centers. Historians have noted the important accounts and documents that reveal a significant role for worked amber (mainly beads from Cairo) in North Africa as well as to the sub-Sahara from the 7th century CE onwards. This is assumed to be because of the preference for amber as the material for prayer beads. And amber in medicine and healing has an ancient and documentable history from this early date on the continent of Africa.

Until now, a large body of documentation for the use of amber in northern Africa has been untapped in regard to the study of the ancient resin: the mass of documents from the Cairo Genizah. From the 9th to the 19th century, the Jewish community of Fustat (Old Cairo) deposited at least 280,000 old and obsolete writings in a purpose-built storeroom in the Ben Ezra synagogue.[9] Such storerooms can be found in all synagogues and are intended to preserve any scrap of paper on which may is written the word 'God.' Sacred, such pieces of paper or parchment were and are considered too holy to discard. Eventually, such holy writings were intended for burial in the cemetery. Occasionally, though, this fate eluded these assemblages as was the case with the treasures in the Cairo Genizah (fig. 1).

These fragmentary manuscripts outline a 1,000-year continuum (870 CE to 19th century CE) of inhabitants of North Africa – Jewish, Christian, Muslim – and comprise the largest and most diverse collection of medieval manuscripts in the world. They are written in various languages, especially Hebrew, Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, and Arabic.

Among the manuscripts that mention amber is a medical text, a leaf from a larger pharmacopoeia, that describes the preparation of a drug, including camphor, saffron, frankincense, wax, and amber. Figure 3, dating to 1119 CE, is one of the earliest examples of an engagement deed found in the Genizah; it mentions one amber ring and a portion of small pieces of amber. It is the earliest known example in the world of such a deed and is written in Judaeo-Aramaic, Hebrew, and Aramaic. At the bottom, in Aramaic, is a ketubah, a formal Jewish marriage contract of 1337 CE guaranteeing a bride certain future rights, including property. A string of 72 amber beads is mentioned.[10]

Dating much later are travelers' reports of the use of amber, both in North and sub-Saharan Africa.[11] As Stanley Alpern outlines, beads were among the all-time most popular imports to Africa from medieval times on, and in strong evidence in the 17th–19th centuries. Once the trade in enslaved people unfolded,

[9] For the Cairo Genizah and the documents, see Cambridge University Digital Library, Cairo Genizah section.

[10] Stanley F. Alpern, *What Africans Got for Their Slaves: A Master List of European Trade Goods*, "History in Africa" 1995, vol. 22, pp. 5–43.

[11] See Rachel King, *Amber From Antiquity to Eternity*, London 2022, pp. 151–155 for additional discussion of the trade and use of amber in Africa and the African diaspora.

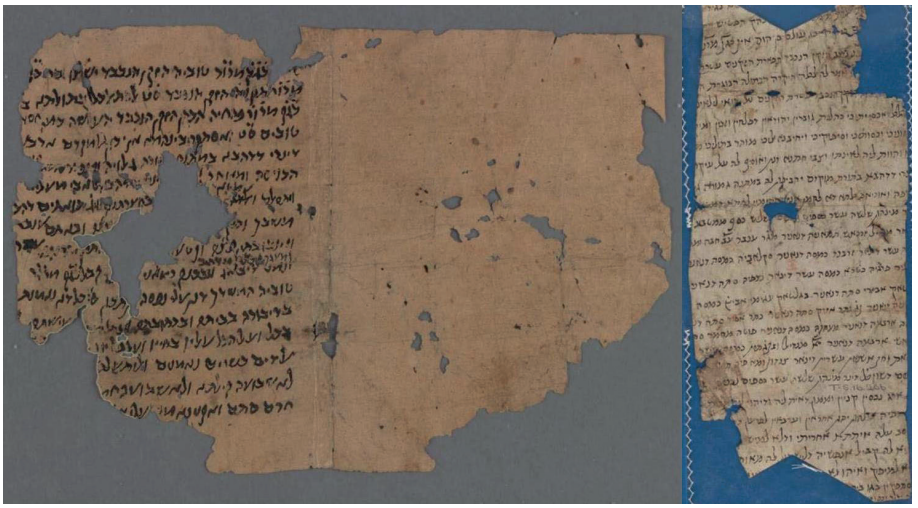

Fig. 1. Two documents from the Cairo Genizah in the Cambridge University Digital Library site. Top: Engagement deed, scribe and couple named, L-G Misc. 42, paper, in Judeo-Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, dated 1119 CE. Bottom: Part of a ketubba (legal document) T-S 16-206, vellum, in Aramaic, dated 1337 CE, Cambridge University Library. Part of a ketubba of an unnamed bride and groom. A chain with 72 amber beads is recorded

a new, tragic, and sobering story begins, one that is known through business records and other transactions: African, European, and New World. "Many billions [of beads] landed in barrels, case, and casks… Some came loose, but the usual rule was to pre-string them and sell the strings in clusters or bundles."[12] It is to be remembered that over one-half of the exports to Africa in the trade in enslaved people were foreign goods transshipped through London and amber from the Baltic, Germany and later Sweden were among the cargo.

In this illustration by Jean-Baptiste Debret (fig. 2) of sixteen different enslaved women representing the diversity of African heritage in Brazil, made 1815–1831 and published in 1834–1839, was part of a commission by the Portuguese court.[13] In dress, jewelry, and hairstyle there is significant variety. Some of the jewelry elements appear to be of amber.

Senegambia is a case in point, and just one excavated burial site, Diakhité, (active from the 18th century until abandonment in the mid 19th) is illuminating. Marie-Joseph Opper and Howard Opper wrote in 1989, "Amber beads and faceted crystal beads were among the most expensive items in precolonial Senegambia." As the Oppers outlined, the bead evidence from the burial supports period reports such as the famous 1763–1764 travel account by the

[12] Alpern, *What Africans Got…*

[13] Jean-Baptiste Debret, *Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Bresil ou Sejour d'un Artiste Francais au Bresil depuis 1815 jusqu'en 1831*, 3 vols, Paris 1834–1839.

Fig. 2. J.-B. Debret, Negro Slaves from Different Nations, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library, New York Public Library Digital Collections

Abbé Jean-Baptiste Demanet: "Yellow amber is a must… Coral and amber serve to make necklaces and belts for kings, their wives, and for all who can afford them. They interpret these necklaces and belts wide in the form of rosaries with beads of coral, amber, fine crystal and fancy glass beads…".[14] And critical to our understanding of amber beads in Africa and the African diaspora is the Oppers' reminder of cultural continuity from their above-noted essay: "As elsewhere in West Africa, the heirlooming of beads seems to have been a common practice at Diakhité… and such heirlooming of personal material continues to be an important cultural aspect among Senegalese women."

Contemporary documents of the trade in enslaved people from Africa include significant information in bills of lading and memoirs. These are painful to read. One merchant reported receiving a "male Negro" in return for thirteen beads of coral, half a string of amber beads, 28 silver bells and three pairs of bracelets. Captain Canot, the notorious trader in enslaved people active in the mid-19th century, in his memoir, recounts a list of gifts presented at Timbo for enslaved people: Several packages of blue and white calicoes, ten yards of scarlet cloth,

[14] Marie-José Opper, Howard Opper, *Diakhité: A Study of the Beads from an 18th–19th Century Burial Site in Senegal, West Africa. Beads* "Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers"1989, vol. 1, pp. 15 and 19 for these quotes from Demanet.

Fig. 3. Postcard of Foulah Woman, Senegal, private collection

six kegs of powder, 300 pounds of tobacco, six muskets, two strings of amber, a gilded sword, and several packages of Spanish fly. Canot is also the first to describe another use for amber (one still popular today amongst the Fula), the decoration of a Fula woman's hair, which was plaited all over her skull and then adorned "wit amber beads and copiously anointed with vegetable butter, so the points gleamed with fire."[15] By the end of the 19th century in Africa, especially in areas with significant numbers of travelers, photographic postcards of local inhabitants in "traditional dress" document traditional amber use, especially in French--speaking North African countries, Algeria, and Morocco, and in West Africa. An early 20th-century postcard of a Fula woman illustrated here (fig. 3) exemplifies the role of amber in adornment.[16]

This is just one more record of amber objects with possible connections to ancestors, objects potentially imbued with an authority, with a social function, a point of access into the social world of the past.

A necklace in the Smithsonian National Museum of African art is an exemple of the many lives of amber beads.[17] This necklace, last worn by an Ait Atta woman in Morocco. As the museum notes in its online text, necklaces such as this "…were worn especially for weddings, but for other public gatherings, as well, a woman's beaded jewelry ensemble would have made a dazzling and impressive visual statement. It would have reflected, as well, a woman's status and the prominence of her family… since the beads were usually old and reused for many generations. Indeed, women's jewelry from this region functions as portable wealth, as individualpbeads of coral, amber, and stone can be sold when a family needs money, something that is preferable to parting with an entire piece of jewelry."

[15] Theodore Canot, *Captain Canot; or Twenty Years of an African Slaver. Being an Account of His Career and Adventures on the Coast, in the Interior, on Shipboard, and in the West Indies*, ed. Brantz Mayer, New York 1854, p. 19.

[16] Postcard with inscription: "*1364. Afrique Occidentale, Etude No. 43, Femme Foulah (Senegal). Collection Generale Fortier, Dakar*", private collection.

[17] Smithsonian Institution, Museum of African Art, https://learninglab.si.edu/resources/view/198356 [accessed: 27.11.2024].

The contemporary marketplacep(including online advertisements), popular photography and anthropological study substantiate traditional roles for amber. For example, among the Yoruba, amber is essential for the Orisha Oshun, whose worshippers and priests still today wear her distinctive amber beads. In contemporary Cuba, some of the necklaces used in the Afro-Cuban Rule of Santería require honey-colored amber beads. The necklace for Ochosi, Oxun, for example, ritually requires a single amber bead in the string. (Might this usage shed light on the single amber bead of grave 340 of the African Burial Ground?)

I continued to ponder what the "small things" from the African Burial Ground and the Valongo Wharf can tell us. I carry on asking questions inspired by Walvin's approach and that of present-day researchers and makers and users of amber can illuminate their accumulation, making and ultimate functions in burial can be illuminated by what is known of past and current usage. How are they connected to international trade and to enslavement? Which uses did they embody before and after their trade, use and subsequent functions? What pleasure and significance did they offer their makers, their owners, those who used the amber for in-life ritual purposes, those who may have placed the amber in graves? As for the original makers and wearers of these amber objects, can we look back from the present and propose that our modern positive approaches to amber finding, working, use, study, and sharing (in display, publications, lectures, for example) might be applicable to their past use and appreciation? And since their disinterment, how do they function? Might we even consider them as miniature sites of memory? Do their uncovering and display allow them to continue to work, now, today, in new ways of sorrow and mourning, of remembrance and protection?

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