

CHAPTER 4

THE AMBER TRAIL IN EARLY MEDIEVAL EASTERN EUROPE

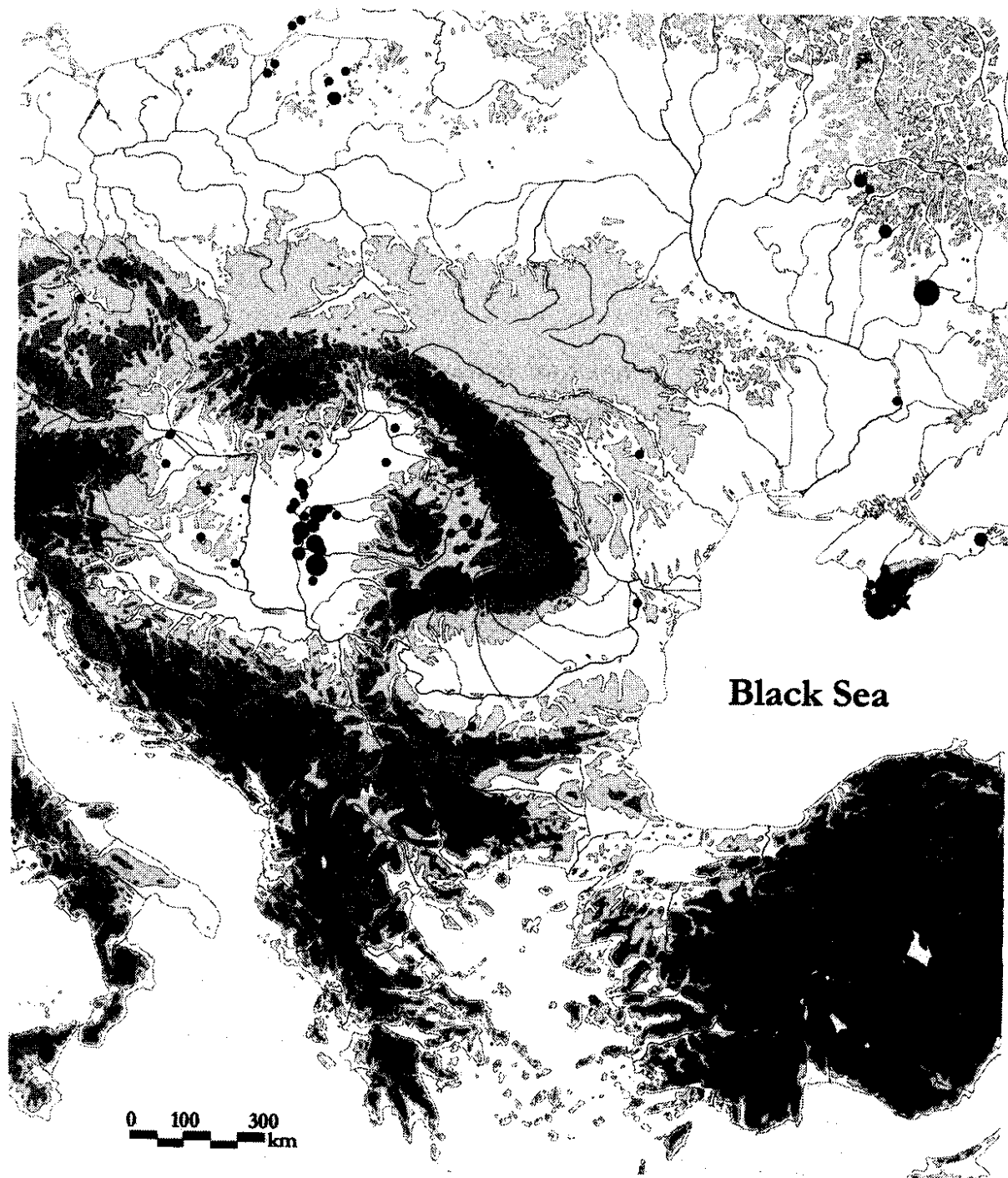
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Critique of the model of commercial transaction, with gift exchange proposed instead to explain the flow of Baltic amber into Black Sea regions as markers of elite status.

Prestige goods of Scandinavian origin have often been excavated along the northern frontier of the early Byzantine Empire. For instance, several dress accessories (brooches and buckles) and bracteates found in sixth-century burial assemblages in Hungary display ornamental patterns that are most typical for the so-called Animal Style I, a tradition characteristic of the ornamental arts of early medieval Scandinavia.¹ Conversely, eagle-headed buckles produced in the region of present-day Hungary have been found on sites in Mazuria (northeastern Poland) that have been dated to the 500s.² Artifacts from the Middle Danube region have also been found in rich warrior burials in the Baltic lands, such as Taurapolis in Lithuania and Warnikam in the Kaliningrad *oblast'* of Russia.³ The focus here is on a different type of prestige goods: amber beads. Against commercial conceptions of an Amber Trail, this essay argues that Baltic amber reached eastern Europe as a status marker acquired through inter-elite gift exchange.

The standard method employed in characterization studies of amber, namely infrared spectrography, can discriminate roughly between Baltic amber and amber from other European sources (Sicily, Germany, or Romania), although it cannot pinpoint the exact place of origin, nor can it distinguish artifacts made of drift amber from those of mined amber.⁴

The distribution of amber beads in eastern European sites shows two clear clusters; one is along the left bank of the Middle Tisza River, not far from the present-day border between Hungary and Romania, and the other—with an even larger quantity of beads—is in Crimea, where the sixth- to seventh-century cemetery in Suuk Su produced over 1,200 specimens (map 4.1).⁵ Amber beads were also found in great quantity on sixth-century sites in the Caucasus region, especially in large cemeteries.⁶ In general, more amber beads have been found with female than with



Map 4.1 Distribution of amber beads in late fifth- and sixth-century burial and hoard assemblages in eastern Europe. Smallest circle up to 5, thereafter up to 20, 50, 100, and 300 specimens. Star: over 1,000 beads.

male burials.⁷ Only a few characterization studies have been conducted, but Emma Sprincz has sampled 105 beads from third- to sixth-century cemeteries in Hungary and found that all specimens were made of Baltic amber.⁸

The most common beads in Hungary are disc- or barrel-shaped, cylindrical, spherical, or elongated, and, in virtually all cases, handmade (rather than lathed). Most beads found on fifth- to sixth-century sites in Lithuania are also handmade, irregularly shaped, and often unpolished.⁹ A pile of amber consisting both of manufactured beads and raw amber, found in the grave of an eighteen-year-old woman in Hódmezővásárhely-Kishomok (Hungary), suggests that at least some amber reached the Middle Danube region from the Baltic in raw form and that beads were then manufactured locally (although no sixth-century amber workshop has so far been identified in Eastern Europe). In other cases, amber may have been hand-processed in the Baltic region and sent to the Danube region in bead form. Whatever the efforts locally invested in the processing of raw amber, the distribution of beads shows that few specimens were redistributed into neighboring regions. The clusters of finds in the Middle Tisza and Crimea strongly point to the existence of limited areas of consumption, if not also production. Access to amber beads seems to have been restricted to specific groups in specific areas. Indeed, amber beads used as female dress accessories may have served as markers of group identity.¹⁰

How did amber reach the territories of present-day Hungary and Crimea, two regions in which it seems to have been in high demand in the mid-sixth century? During the first three centuries CE, amber traveled along the trade route linking the Baltic coast to the Roman provinces in central Europe and to the Adriatic coast.¹¹ That route remained in use in the mid-fifth century, as indicated by amber deposits found along the river Vistula.¹² But by 500, although amber still appears in central and southeastern Europe, the most conspicuous feature of its distribution is a general fall-off in quantity from the Baltic zone, particularly in those areas closest to the Baltic amber sources, as shown in table 4.1. Table 4.1 tabulates amber finds based on published archaeological reports. Because it is impossible to pinpoint the exact source of the amber, the distances are calculated as straight-line map measurements from the find spots to the nearest point on the southeastern Baltic coast. Furthermore, only amber beads identified as such in both the texts and the illustrations of the archaeological reports have been taken into account, which excluded from analysis amber beads appearing in an indistinguishable mass together with glass or carnelian beads. The numbers given in table 4.1 are thus to be viewed as minimal, and bear no implications for the overall volume of amber in circulation.

Table 4.1 Quantity of sixth- and seventh-century amber in eastern Europe in relation to the distance from source

Distance in km. from the nearest point on the southeastern coast of the Baltic Sea	Number of beads
0–250	23
251–500	0
501–750	9
751–1,000	318
1,001–1,250	189
1,251–1,500	1,692
1,501–1,750	6
1,751–2,000	1
2,001–2,250	16
	Total: 2,254

Table 4.1 reveals that almost all sixth- and seventh-century amber beads known from archaeological assemblages in eastern Europe have been found within a distance of 750–1,500 kilometers from the Baltic coast. Between ca. 500 and ca. 700, amber reached present-day Hungary and Crimea in far greater quantities than before, and the boundary of its distribution extended further south to the Black Sea shore in Crimea and to the Caucasus region. The quantity of amber, however, decreased markedly in those regions of eastern Europe closest to the Baltic coast. There were now greater quantities of amber farther away from the source than there were close to it, with a vast region in central and eastern Europe completely devoid of amber finds. This finding nicely dovetails with another pattern of distribution that has been established for the territory of present-day Lithuania. During the fifth and sixth centuries, funerary amber appears in Lithuania more frequently within a range of 75–100 kilometers away from the coastline, than it does on sites located either on the coast or much farther away (100–200 km.).¹³

The spotty pattern of distribution of amber beads revealed in table 4.1 cannot be fully explained through the paradigm of commercial exchange that currently dominates thinking on relations between southeastern Europe and the north, and which has been articulated by Nils Åberg, Joachim Werner, and Michael McCormick (among others). Åberg suggests that Scandinavian finds in Hungary indicate a commercial network in existence in the sixth century between Gotland and Italy, in which the territory of present-day Hungary played a major role.¹⁴ Werner interprets

the presence of so-called Slavic fibulae in mortuary assemblages in northeastern Poland as evidence for the continuation, after 600, of trade relations along an Amber Trail established in the 500s between the Danube region and the amber-rich region of Mazuria, although he simultaneously blames Avars and Slavs for interrupting, shortly after 600, regular trade relations between the Danube region and the Baltic coast.¹⁵ In his book about long-distance trade as a major factor in the growth of the European economy, McCormick maintains that (at some point after 700) a new network of trade routes emerged between the Mediterranean and the upper and middle Danube following the southern segment of the ancient Amber Trail.¹⁶ Following two centuries of apparent disruption caused by Lombards and Avars, Charlemagne's destruction of the Avar "kingdom" in the late eighth century brought back to life the ancient trade route.¹⁷ Trade along an Amber Trail is even invoked to explain the presence of artifacts presumably of Lithuanian origin on sixth- and seventh-century sites in Belarus and the neighboring regions.¹⁸

The distribution of sixth-century finds, though, in relation to sources on the Baltic coast (as shown in table 4.1) suggests an exchange system very different from the down-the-line trade postulated for this period by Åberg, Werner, and McCormick. The presence of amber in sixth-century burial assemblages in central and southeastern Europe cannot be interpreted as trade, but must be accounted for otherwise.¹⁹ Here I would like to pursue an explanation based on noncommercial models that have been advanced to illuminate exchange systems in traditional societies.²⁰ In the last few years the study of early medieval trade has played a major role in the search for a "post-Pirenne paradigm" as an overarching model to explain the transition from the classical to the medieval world.²¹ The basis of this revival of interest has been the theoretical and methodological introduction of archaeology to the field of economic history. Karl Polanyi's classical distinction between reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange has been adopted and much elaborated to assess the significance of "Dark Age economics."²² Philip Grierson's equally influential critique of traditional approaches to commerce in the Dark Ages has received comparatively less attention from archaeologists.²³ To be sure, Grierson's thesis that during the early Middle Ages gift giving prevailed over "true" monetary commerce has been contradicted by extensive research on trade centers such as Birka, Hedeby (Haithabu), and Dorestad, all of which emerged ca. 700 as points of exchange for commodities such as precious metals and gems, tableware and glass, wine, textiles, and weapons.²⁴ But Grierson's conceptual distinction is fundamental for understanding some of the archaeologically observable phenomena. Following Marcel Mauss, he understood gift giving as a

special form of transaction in which goods were transferred from donor to receiver, with the consent of the former, for social prestige rather than for material or tangible profit. The logic of gift giving is thus fundamentally different from that of trade, for the only “profit” one can hope to gain from making a present is to place the receiver in one’s debt.

Despite the great potential this idea has for understanding the role of “exotic” artifacts in the representation of social status and power, the archaeology of early medieval gift giving is in its infancy. Old Roman coins or brooches deposited in sixth-century graves of the so-called *Reihengräberkreis* cemeteries and usually found in purses attached at the waist may have been small presents of apotropaic value, much like the contorniates Late Roman aristocrats were exchanging in Rome and Ravenna on various ceremonial occasions such as the New Year, birthdays, or weddings.²⁵ It is indeed ceremonial gifts that appear most prominently in written sources, but archaeologists have so far not explored all the possibilities offered by ceremonial contexts, despite the growing interest in material symbols, meaning, and practice.²⁶ Gifts, and not commodities, may provide a new avenue of research for scholars interested in such diverse phenomena as mortuary rituals, the representation of power, or matrimonial alliances. Despite the existence of some exploratory essays, much more work is needed before we can understand the complex articulation of noncommercial practices and trade in early medieval economics and politics.²⁷

To build an alternative explanation for the particular distribution of amber finds in sixth- to seventh-century eastern Europe, one must first consider the relationship between the circulation of amber and its deposition. There are theoretically two possibilities: either the circulation coincided in space with the deposition, or it was an expansion of the practice of depositing amber in areas where it had been circulating from an early date. A careful examination of the archaeological record shows that the latter possibility cannot be easily dismissed. In Hungary, there is evidence of reuse of prehistoric amber pendants during the Avar period (ca. 570–ca. 700).²⁸ Elsewhere, the evidence of recycled amber is even more compelling. All amber beads found in the sixth- to seventh-century Shoinaiag cemetery, as well as on the contemporary cult sites at Borganäel and Iuvakaiag in the Vycheгда River region of northeastern Russia, although undoubtedly of Baltic origin, cannot be dated later than ca. 300, and must thus be viewed as recycled material.²⁹ The lathed beads found in a sixth-century burial in Miętkie (northeastern Poland) had been in circulation for at least fifty years before their deposition.³⁰ Finally, the amber bead carved in the shape of an African head found in a sixth-century female burial in Hódmezővásárhely (Hungary) is clearly of early Roman origin.³¹

In all other cases, however, the archaeological record suggests that amber artifacts were deposited with individuals on burial. This is particularly true for handmade, irregularly shaped beads, which appear in much greater quantities than lathed beads and have no analogies in earlier periods. No analogies are known in the lands by the Baltic Sea for the disc- and barrel-shaped beads, or for the elongated beads, found in burial assemblages in Hungary or Crimea, often in more than two specimens per burial.³² Such beads were most likely produced locally and within the confines of the household, as suggested by their occasional association with pieces of raw amber. It appears likely that, in regions located at a considerable distance from the source, the deposition of amber was in direct relation to the amount in circulation. Conversely, where no archaeologically visible deposition of amber occurs during that same period, the conclusion can only be that amber was not circulating at all.

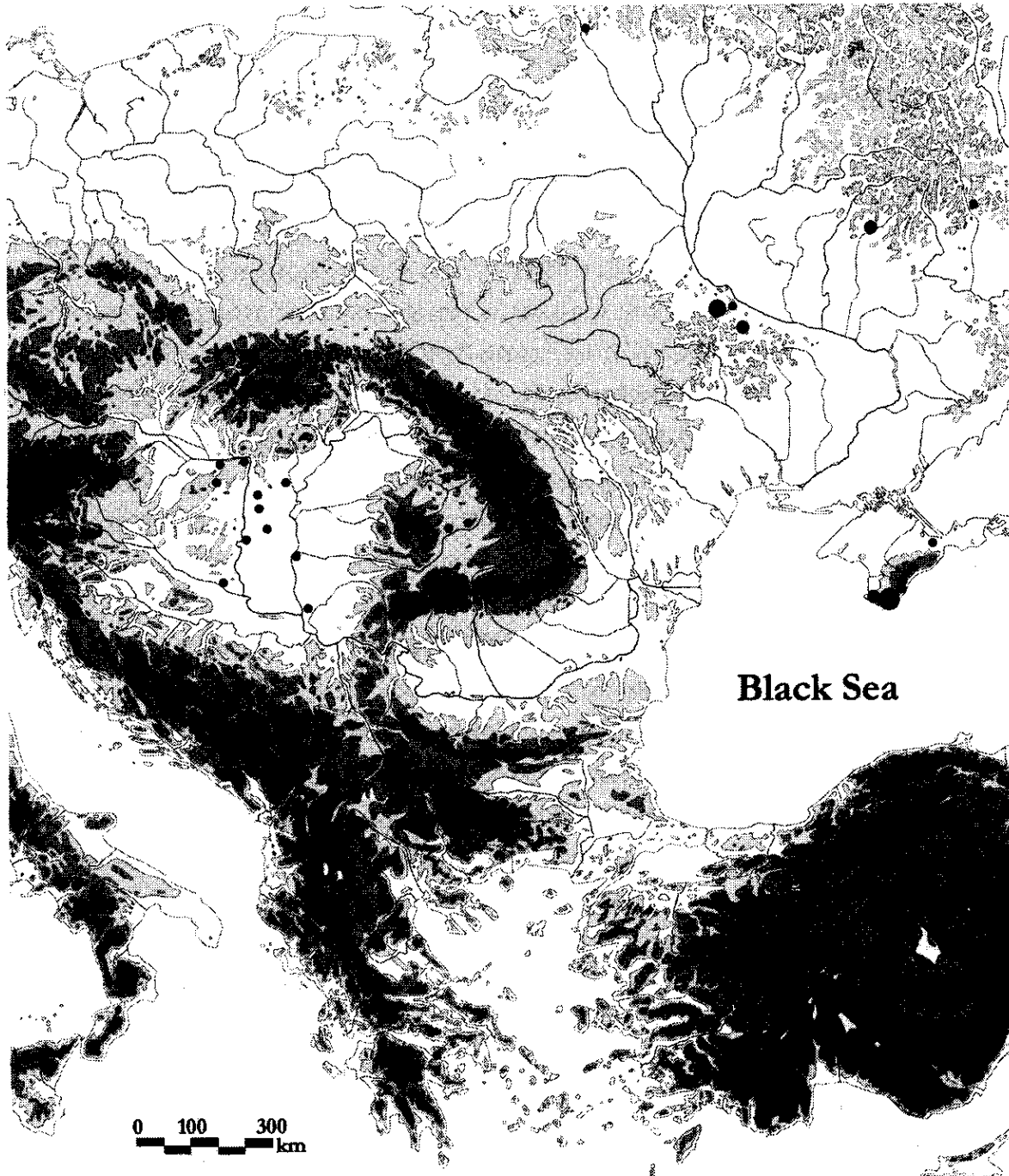
We have seen that sixth-century amber is found in particularly great quantities in Hungary and Crimea. Both regions are known for large cemeteries, in which members of the elite were buried together with other members of the community, and accompanied by considerable wealth in the form of silverwork and lavishly produced goods, often of foreign origin. Contacts between elites in these two regions at a great distance from each other have long been documented, and newly published materials indicate that, throughout the sixth century, each area maintained relations with the more northerly regions near the sources of amber.³³ But between the sources of amber on the Baltic Sea coast, on one hand, and the Middle Danube region and Crimea, on the other, there is a vast corridor completely devoid of amber finds. To be sure, parts of that region may have been only sparsely inhabited during the first half of the sixth century. However, amber is remarkably absent from sites in central and eastern Poland as well as western Ukraine, which have otherwise produced abundant material dated to the sixth century.³⁴ There is no amber on any of the many sites of the so-called Tushemlia or Kolochin cultures of the upper reaches of the Dvina and Dnieper Rivers, respectively.³⁵ Only one amber bead is known from the remarkably rich cemetery in Proosa (Estonia), which has been dated to the sixth and early seventh century.³⁶ No specimens are known from the many contemporary sites excavated in northwestern Russia and in Finland, and amber is absent from settlement sites of the so-called Pen'kovka culture of the forest-steppe belt of southern Ukraine.³⁷ By contrast, Baltic amber is conspicuously present on sites further to the east in the region of the Middle Volga and Kama Rivers and at the foot of the Ural Mountains.³⁸

The distribution of the sixth-century amber finds in eastern Europe shows that amber was in high demand in some regions and of no use in

others. A commercial network for the distribution of amber south- and eastward from the Baltic Sea shore would have produced a much more dispersed distribution, not unlike that of the early Roman period. The concentration of finds in Hungary and Crimea may have something to do with local conditions. By the sixth century, the Middle Danube region and Crimea were characterized by forms of society in which valuables of any kind, amber or otherwise, played a major role in defining social hierarchies.

Relatively large cemeteries in the Middle Danube region abound in artifacts used as status markers, many of which appear more often in women's than in men's graves. Among the most important were silver eagle-headed buckles, lavishly decorated with niello and cabochons, and equally luxurious silver or gilded brooches of the Aquileia and Gurzuf classes.³⁹ Both artifact categories also occur in contemporary funeral assemblages in Crimea, where the standard aristocratic female dress consisted of a large eagle-headed buckle at the waist and two silver brooches on the shoulders, in addition to several necklaces of amber, carnelian, rock crystal, and glass beads.⁴⁰ Most female skeletons found in such rich burial assemblages display clear signs of artificial skull deformation, a practice introduced in the early 400s and maintained as a status marker during the 500s.⁴¹

An explosion of conspicuous displays of exotic goods is associated with the "emblemic styles" that often appear at critical junctures in a region's political economy, when changing social relations impel displays of group identity.⁴² This was clearly the case of the Middle Danube region that witnessed a continuous conflict between Lombards and Gepids throughout the first two thirds of the sixth century.⁴³ Ethnoarchaeological studies have demonstrated that material culture distinctions are in part maintained in order to justify between-group competition and negative reciprocity. On the other hand, between-group differentiation and hostility is often linked to the internal differentiation of age and gender categories.⁴⁴ While eagle-headed buckles, brooches of the Aquileia or Gurzuf class, as well as amber beads may have been used to mark ethnic boundaries, they were all at the same time employed to mark the status of aristocratic (married) women within one and the same group. During the sixth century, the maintenance of social hierarchies and of group boundaries in the Middle Danube region was thus closely tied to the consumption of prestige valuables, which in turn gave great social significance to contacts with elite groups elsewhere. Extensive contacts with distant groups served to deliver rare and foreign objects that became fundamental components of status display, as elites now strove to legitimize and "naturalize" the inherent inequality of the emerging system of social relations.



Map 4.2 Distribution of amber beads in seventh-century burial and hoard assemblages in eastern Europe. Smallest circle up to 5, thereafter up to 20, 50, 100, and 300 specimens.

century, amber beads appear in larger numbers in female burials, often accompanied by rich grave goods, such as silver earrings or glass beakers and drinking horns.⁵⁰ There is ample evidence of contacts between Mazuria and the Avar elites in the Middle Danube region.⁵¹ After 600, amber probably traveled southward in the same way as before, namely through gift exchange, and a few artifacts and ornamental styles moved northward from the territory of present-day Hungary. That burial

assemblages excavated in Hungary and dated after 650/660 contain a larger quantity of amber beads than those dated to the Early Avar period strongly suggests that such exchange continued well into the 600s, in spite of the possibility that some amber beads in circulation in Hungary were by then fifty to one hundred years old. The gift amber may have been offered in raw form, only to be processed locally and redistributed among members of the regional elite.

During the seventh century, amber beads continued to appear in Crimean cemeteries, but also in hoards of bronze in Right and Left Bank Ukraine.⁵² As in the earlier period, amber beads were used as markers of social status. Baltic amber also reached the Caucasus, either along the Dnieper River or along the Volga and the Don Rivers. In fact, the largest number of amber beads have been found in that region in burial assemblages dated after ca. 600, leading some scholars to argue that, by 600, the Amber Trail had shifted eastward from the Lower Vistula to the Biebrza and Narew Rivers, and to stress the increasing importance of the Mazurian Lake region of northeastern Poland in seventh-century long-distance exchange linking the Baltic Sea to Crimea and the Caucasus region.⁵³ Yet, exchanges along this route were unidirectional, with few, if any, counter-gifts moving from south to north. For instance, no "Slavic" bow fibulae of Werner's class II C (probably first produced in Crimea) have so far been found in Mazuria.⁵⁴

The disappearance of amber from archaeological assemblages in the Middle Danube region cannot be dated earlier than ca. 700 and must be understood as an interruption of contacts with elites on the Baltic Sea coast. This coincides in time with the abrupt break in amber deposition in Crimea, a phenomenon that may equally be interpreted in the light of the interruption of contacts with the north, because of the rise of the Khazars in the Lower Dnieper steppe.⁵⁵ By that time, burial had also ceased on most, if not all, cemetery sites in the Mazurian Lake region. Dramatic changes were meanwhile taking place in Lithuania. All inhumation cemeteries in the region of the Courland Lagoon on both sides of the present-day border between Lithuania and the Kaliningrad *oblast'* of Russia were abandoned after 600. Shortly thereafter, new cremation cemeteries appeared at completely different locations and with completely different grave goods.⁵⁶ Contacts with the south broke down as social and economic changes brought about the demise of the elites in the region of the Baltic Sea coast. Although contacts between the Middle Danube region and southern Poland continued after 700,⁵⁷ amber no longer moved southward. The demise of the Avar elites around 800, following the military defeat inflicted by the Frankish armies, had no effect on the revival of the Amber Trail. Whatever the effects of the Carolingian

conquest on the regions of present-day Poland, when the distribution of amber began to expand again, the Middle Danube region was not part of that expansion. No Amber Trail linked the Frankish eastern borderlands to the rising ports-of-trade on the southern and eastern Baltic coasts. The East European “dirham zone” never extended into the Lower and Middle Danube region, and only a few isolated dinars have been found in Late or post-Avar assemblages.⁵⁸

In early medieval eastern Europe, amber helped define unique social hierarchies, and the breakdown of long-established exchange networks was the consequence, not the cause, of the demise of competitive elites that had been responsible for its widespread consumption in the sixth and seventh centuries. Insights such as this can help lead the study of early medieval exchange in eastern Europe out of the impasse in which it has long been stuck. Much debate has been sparked by the recent search for a “post-Pirene paradigm” as a model to explain the transition from the classical to the medieval world. The revival of interest in early medieval trade, however, has obscured other forms of exchange, the understanding of which cannot be based on either the Pirene or the post-Pirene paradigm. Most of these debates have not introduced new thinking on such exchange phenomena as gift giving, nor have they drawn on important recent work by sociologists and anthropologists. Instead, they have simply stressed the centrality of commercial exchanges. In contrast, I have drawn on recent developments in the study of medieval gifts to offer a new paradigm for approaching the topic of exchange in eastern Europe.⁵⁹

Notes

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2. Vladimir I. Kulakov, “Mogil’niki zapadnoi chasti Mazurskogo Poozer’ia kontsa V-nachala VIII vv. (po materialom raskopok 1878–1938 gg.),” *Barbaricum* 1 (1989): 183 [148–276] and fig. 20. For eagle-headed buckles,

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 5. Csallány, *Archäologische Denkmäler*, pp. 45–64 (Szentés-Nagyhegy and Szentés-Kökényzug); 74–94 (Berekhát); 154–66 (Szőreg); 173–93 (Kiszombor).
 6. For Suuk Su, see N. Repnikov, "Nekotorye mogil'niki oblasti krymskikh gotov," *Izvestiia imperatorskoi arkheologicheskoi kommissii* 19 (1906): 1–80; N. Repnikov, "Nekotorye mogil'niki oblasti krymskikh gotov," *Zapiski Odesskogo obshchestva istorii i drevnostei* 27 (1907): 101–48. For the Caucasus region, see Vera B. Kovalevskaia, *Khronologiia vostochno-evropeiskikh drevnostei V-IX vekov: Kammenye busy Kavkaza i Kryma* (Moscow: Institut Arkheologii RAN, 1998), pp. 28–32.
 7. Audronė Bliujienė, "Lithuanian Amber Artifacts in the Middle of the First Millennium and Their Provenance within the Limits of the Eastern Baltic Region," in *Proceedings of the International Interdisciplinary Conference: Baltic Amber in Natural Sciences, Archaeology, and Applied Arts*, ed. Adomas Butrimas (Vilnius: Vilniaus Dailes Akademijos Leidykla, 2001), p. 175 [171–86].
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 10. Florin Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c. 500–700* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 196.
 11. Jerzy Wielowiejski, "Bernsteinstrasse und Bernsteinweg während der römischen Kaiserzeit im Lichte der neueren Forschung," *Münstersche Beiträge zur antiken Handelsgeschichte* 3.2 (1984): 69–87; Annalisa Giovannini, "Le ambre di Aquileia: connotazioni generali e correlazioni culturali," in *Roma sul Danubio: Da Aquileia a Carnuntum lungo la via dell'ambra*, ed. Maurizio Buora and Werner Jobst (Udine: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2002), pp. 159–64.

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15. Joachim Werner, "Slawische Bügelfibeln des 7. Jahrhunderts," in *Reinecke Festschrift zum 75. Geburtstag von Paul Reinecke am 25. September 1947*, ed. Gustav Behrens and Joachim Werner (Mainz: E. Schneider, 1950), p. 167 [150–72]; Joachim Werner, "Zu den Bügelfibeln aus den völkerwanderungszeitlichen Brandgräberfeldern Masuriens," *Germania* 62.1 (1984): 74–77.
16. Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 693.
17. McCormick, *Origins*, pp. 78, 370.
18. Jerzy Okulicz, *Pradzieje ziem pruskich od późnego paleolitu do VII w. n. e.* (Wrocław/Warsaw/Gdańsk/Cracow: Ossolineum, 1973), p. 565; Ia. G. Zverugo, "Slaviano-litovskie kontakty v srednevekov'e (po materialam belorusskogo-litovskogo pogranich'ia)," in *Problemy etnogeneza i etnicheskoi istorii baltov: Tezisy dokladov, mart, 1981*, ed. Regina Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė (Vilnius: Institut Istorii, 1981), p. 26 [24–27].
19. Paul M. Barford interprets one aspect of the distribution as a deliberate rejection of neighboring cultural models, in "Identity and Material Culture: Did the Early Slavs Follow the Rules or Did They Make Up Their Own?" *East Central Europe* 31.1 (2004): 99–123.
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 30. Kulakov, "Mogil'niki," pp. 183, 233 fig. 17/3.
 31. Bóna and Nagy, *Gepidische Gräberfelder*, pp. 63–64, 119 fig. 58/37.
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