# A Heart of Amber, an Essay
by **Sean McLaughlin**

The Balts, that is the old Prussians, and the Latvians and Lithuanians, traded insects in amber over two thousand years ago to the Romans and, before them, to the Etruscans, who sewed them into their children's clothing as protection against the evil eye. Yet in Baltic tradition, insects are not greatly valued in amber unless they are symbolically linked with ideas of regeneration, like a species of spider that one may find, the male of which carries eggs rolled up and tucked into the space behind its right front leg.

That is why a Balt amber master would be more elated in uncovering white pollen that clouds a perfect clarity, or about finding a tip of tiny leaves that jaggedly extends through a little piece, than finding an insect.

The Balts have always prized symbols which represent continuity. They prize life and, in the mythological sense, prize the agrarian cycle that is a life lived with nature.

Their mythology therefore prizes seeds that can lie dormant in a land that is frozen in snow or a tree that can grow from a severed trunk. A field will rise long after its guardian has been displaced. It is the logical placement of value for a people who are still dependent on the natural world.

Yet the placement of value on amber, the belief that it possesses a life-giving energy, was basic to the whole of the ancient world, regardless of mythological differences. It started far earlier than even agriculture, for it started with the Cro-Magnon hunters and gatherers, who saw in it the sun.

In the stone age, small amber ax amulets, resembling those being made by the people in stone, would be put into graves to protect the living and thus speed the guarded dead upon their journey. By amber, the dead were separated from the living, and their spirit, given so great a gift, was induced to travel to the other world in harmony.

Disks made of amber and inscribed with sun rays were laid over the eyes of what some Baltic archeologists believe were shamans and healers, before the bodies were covered with sacred red ocher. In the disk burials, the majority of the faces were not covered, and the head were carefully set looking up at the sky.

Throughout the stone age, pure geometric pendants, shaped like perfect tears, were made and pierced near their top to be worn in both one's life and in their death.

The Greeks, who centralized much Mediterranean mythology, ascribed tremendous value to amber. Their mythology and epics are rich in descriptions of it. One only needs to define the etymology of Ambrosia, the life-giving drink of the Gods, to realize amber's importance.

As Greek mythology expanded throughout Europe and Magna Grecia, amber became synonymous with immortality and was said to be gathered in the garden of the Hesperides, where the famous "golden apples of life" dwelt.

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Where Greek myth did not penetrate, amber was said to exist in great, sacred mountains. Such mountains surrounded even Valhalla. They rose in the isles of the True West. They touched the sky from the very center of the sea.

Into such a realm the Celtic Sun Father, Ambres, came, and amber began to be buried against the central pillars of the Cornish stone monoliths, recognizing the sun as the Lord of Time.

One could go on endlessly.

In Christianity, amber became synonymous with the 'actual presence of God," being equal in that complex symbology to the Pascal Candle.

In Jewish mysticism, amber was once thought to be placed under or to even compose the Temple's foundation stone.

In Buddhist mythology, the purest souls in Paradise have amber-colored faces.

Even today amber still maintains its mystery. Every year, a certain number of special pieces are set aside to be sent to the East, where the tradition that amber represents the souls of tigers, is still widely held by the greatest of the apothecaries. They use that mythology for creating a true healing balm, and for balancing Yin and Yang.

All mythology enters into folklore. There, it is often mixed with older and often differing beliefs.Sometimes it lives on as a superstition or a charm.

The Romans were convinced of amber's effectiveness as a healer and crushed it in honey and rose oil.

Even in a more modern time, Ole Worm, physician to Christian IV of Denmark, who reigned 1588-1648, claims to have witnessed amber breaking apart at the touch of an evil man, going on to imply that amber can only be put to pure purposes.

The giving of amber to a person held in high regard is as old as our legends. Few know that Martin Luther, who suffered from kidney stones, was given an amber cross by a devoted believer, and held it to himself when he was in pain. Likewise, Frederic Chopin used to stoke an amber necklace before performing on the piano. Even Leonard Bernstein, our modern composer, insisted on using a baton whose handle was made of amber.

In the long winder nights of the Baltic, amber is often carved into a heart and given as a gift to one who is cherished and loved.

Here, we give similar gifts on Valentine's day, for the symbol of the heart as a receptacle of love still exists in our culture. But in our store, Baltic Imports, we also recall that for the people of the Baltic, the amber heart is not only a gift of love, but a reminder of one's need for courage and strength. These were the qualities which were symbolically given to the one who would receive the heart.

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It is a gift that pledges love, but which is rooted in the reality of love in the world. Pledging courage and strength, the amber heart offers that pledge as a protection of that very love.

An anonymous sixteenth century Polish writer summed up millennia of tradition, when he wrote in a letter to his loved one about his sweet gift of amber to her, "Amber makes the heart light, keeps bad luck away, and courage strong. It is the remedy of the soul."

***Sean McLaughlin**, an Amber Master, and his wife own two Baltic Imports stores in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and travel frequently to the Baltic area to obtain superior amber. For more information, see **www.BalticImports.com***

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## Announcements

Your editor, **Renata Stachowicz,** has a new e-mail **RESTACHOWICZ@msn.com**
Please make sure to update your records.

We welcome **KAMIL FRYMARK** of Gdynia, Poland as our new webmaster. Slowly the webpage is growing. The indecies to the earlier issues have been posted.

## Calendar

**Kashubian and International Folk Festival**, Brusy, Poland 23rd of July to 28th of July. Write **info@KA-NA.org** for more information

**FEEFHS 2002 Conference**. Federation of East European Family History Societies
Conterence: Discovering Our Links to Europe: An International Genealogical conference. Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. 19th of July to 21st of July, 2002. **www.feefsh.org**

## Web Pages we Like

**http://pixel.cs.vt.edu/library/articles/link/illness.txt** English translation of German illnesses. Many Prussian Church registers are in German.

## In Sympathy

KANA wishes to extend sympathy to **Cecilia Pass** whose aunt who was very interested in genealogy passed away in December 2001.