

Amber and the Ancient World

Faya Causey. Los Angeles, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011. 144 pp. ISBN 978-1-60606-082-7. \$25.00.

Adrienne Frie

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

In this well-written and beautifully illustrated catalogue, Faya Causey aims to move modern readers beyond seeing amber as simply a visually appealing material by showing that amber was considered a magical substance in ancient times due to its organic nature, marine origins, and the myths that surrounded it. Causey supports this central thesis with archaeological and historical evidence from around the Mediterranean, drawing significantly on Greek documentary evidence, as well as Middle Eastern and Egyptian sources. The main body of evidence is drawn from the Etruscan amber that is the centerpiece of the collection possessed by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. In her analysis, Causey also provides an excellent overview of the origin and formation of amber, its properties, as well as how it was accessed and traded throughout prehistoric Europe.

As an exhibition catalogue, this work is written for a general audience, though archaeologists and ancient historians will appreciate the volume as a succinct overview of amber as a substance and its role in the pre-Roman Mediterranean world (ca. 3000-300 B.C.E.). Causey begins with a brief introduction (Causey 2011:11-14) to set amber apart from the gemstones it is so often associated with and to highlight some of the difficulties that arise in the recovery and analysis of ancient amber—difficulties which have led to it being frequently overlooked in discussions of prehistoric material culture. She then provides useful background for general readers in “Jewelry: Never Just Jewelry” (15-20), discussing how historians and archaeologists understand the role of jewelry in pre-modern periods as not solely decorative, but laden with and communicative of cultural meaning. Causey highlights the probable amuletic character of much ancient amber jewelry, though she is hesitant to call the items she discusses “amulets,” since such use, while likely, is by no means certain (18-20). This provides a neat segue into the ancient conception of amber as a “magic” substance in “Amber Magic?” (20-28). While understandably uneasy with the use of the word “magic” to describe amber, Causey thoughtfully presents magic as the only concept broad enough to include the ancient

conceptions of amber as protective, medicinal, linked to fertility, symbolically rich, and ritually potent with divine associations. These three chapters provide the groundwork to support her central thesis that amber was considered a magical substance that was completely unique in the ancient world. Background on the nature, distant marine origins, and characteristics of amber as an organic substance is provided in the chapters “What is Amber?” (28-34), “Where is Amber Found?” (34-37), and “The Properties of Amber” (37-44). These chapters provide a succinct but comprehensive overview for both general audiences and academics alike.

The next three sections situate amber in the ancient Mediterranean and illuminate how it was perceived by drawing on Classical sources. “Ancient Names for Amber” (44-49) sheds light on historic perceptions of amber via its various names in different places and times, while “Color and Other Optical Characteristics: Ancient Perception and Reception” (49-52) uses primary source material to illustrate which characteristics of amber were particularly noted by ancient authors and how this may have related to the use and perception of amber as a magical substance. “Ancient Literary Sources on the Origins of Amber” (52-62) provides a well-researched overview of the various myths surrounding the physical and geographical origins of amber and traces some key themes including, “The death of divine or heroic youths, the mourning of the young, the sun..., and the sea” (Causey 2011:58). “Amber and Forgery” (62-65) in turn is a thought-provoking discussion of both ancient and modern methods for creating amber substitutes, a topic which is not often addressed in historical and archaeological scholarship on amber. “The Ancient Transport of Amber” (65-66) is an unfortunately brief coverage of how amber was transported between northern Europe and the Mediterranean. This brevity is confusing not only because there is a wealth of literature on the subject, but also because it is still a matter of contention and continuing research (Bouzek 1993, 1998, 2009; Czebreszuk 2007; de Navarro 1925; Palavestra 2007). “Literary Sources on the Use of Amber” (Causey 2011:66-70) and “Amber Medicine, Amber Amulets” (70-88) respectively discuss the historical and material (both archaeological and iconographic) evidence for the varied use of amber in the ancient Mediterranean. “Archaeological Evidence for the Use of Figured Amber: Three Periods of Abundance” (89-111) present the evidence and conclusions of Causey’s study of the amber at the Getty and how it fits into the larger picture of amber use in the ancient Mediterranean. She divides the evidence temporally into the Bronze Age, the Early Iron Age and the Orientalizing Period, and the Archaic up to the pre-Roman period. The final chapters, “The

Working of Amber: Ancient Evidence and Modern Analysis” (111-125) and “The Production of Ancient Figured Amber Objects” (125-131), both focus on the ancient crafting of amber, which is associated with the working of wood and bone or ivory in the ancient world. Centers of amber production in the ancient world are also discussed, as well as shifting aesthetics of craftsmanship—specifically the shift from shaping amber to suit the figure represented to allowing the shape of the original amber nodule to dictate the form of the final product.

Scholars may be disappointed that the amber artifacts that were the central feature of the exhibition are not discussed in detail; however, there is an online segment of the exhibit that presents both high-quality photographs and a detailed analysis of all the objects (<http://museumcatalogues.getty.edu/amber/>). Unfortunately this is only noted briefly in the acknowledgments, so it is easy to overlook—an oversight for such a thorough study. A short technical report, “Analysis of Selected Ambers from the Collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum,” detailing the composition, preservation, and treatment of the amber objects is also included online.

In sum, despite its relative brevity, *Amber in the Ancient World* provides a cogent introduction to the use of amber in the pre-Roman Mediterranean for both laymen and scholars of history and archaeology interested in ancient amber. The inclusion of studies of ancient amber treatments is an intriguing new area of investigation and a welcome addition to the abundant studies continuing to demonstrate that most ancient amber from Europe is in fact succinate, or Baltic amber.

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