

BOOK REVIEW

Amber and the Ancient World. By FAYA CAUSEY. Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012. Pp. 144. Hardcover, \$25.00. ISBN 978-1-60606-082-7.

Faya Causey has studied the subject of ancient amber for a long time. Ever since her 1985 Berkeley dissertation, “Studies on Greek, Etruscan and Italic Carved Ambers,” she has engaged with the subject in a serious way, providing her well-trained eye to catalogue descriptions, analysis and re-evaluation of several major collections of major art. So it seems only fitting that she should have written this small but authoritative text on amber, prepared as an introduction to the online catalogue of Ancient Carved Amber in the J. Paul Getty Museum.

For some reason, amber exhibits evoke a natural curiosity that is not found in most ancient art. Causey’s book is divided into roughly three sections, ranging from the scientific properties of amber to its production and use in ancient Italic and Etruscan art.

Her first chapter deals with the creation and use of amber in ancient jewelry, defining what the scope of ornament and decoration had been for ancient men and women. She then deals with the employment of amber in magic and religious spells, commenting on Pliny the Elder’s lengthy list of uses for amber. She comments on how pieces of amber were also included in burial contexts. Here she discusses the composition of amber: unfortunately, as a resin produced from the bark of trees, there is no set way to determine how old a piece of amber is, because of variations in the composition of the resin. Most importantly Causey explains all the possible types of detritus that can be included in the hardened resin, such as bacteria, fungi, worms, snails, insects, spiders and even some small animals.

Her next section discusses the various geographical contexts in which amber is found, claiming that the sea beds of the Baltic Sea are most plentiful, but she also mentions the ancient sources that list Sicily, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan as places that were amber-rich. Her most illuminating chapter examines the scientific properties of amber, which includes its rare magnetic ability, which was used in the earliest experiments with electricity (which gets its name from the ancient

Greek name for amber, *elektron*). For the enthusiast, the photographs on pages 42–3, showing two Etruscan examples of carved amber, a translucent portrait head with an archaic smile and an embracing satyr and maenad, beautifully illustrate the variety of carving in this delicate medium.

Causey next changes direction and focuses on amber in its ancient context, particularly the sources that name *elektron* in Greek or *glaesum* in Latin, sometimes slightly absurd, as when she cites a graphic illustration in a medieval bestiary showing amber as the product of lynx urine. She includes a useful compilation of ancient literary sources ranging from Pindar to Herodotus and Ovid to Martial. She discusses how amber was spread and how it was used, including attempts to deceive collectors; even Leonardo da Vinci knew the exact recipe of making fake amber from hardened egg whites. She explains the complex process of transporting amber through the Mediterranean, showing that there was no single route and that there is no literary evidence for the amber trade until the time of Pliny the Elder. If there is any fault to this chapter, it is that her discussion is relegated to Italian routes across the Adriatic Sea, when perhaps there were more developed routes along the silk route through Asia. She concludes with chapters on amber medicine and amulets, archaeological evidence for the use of figured amber, the working of amber, and the production of figured amber objects.

This is a text for a wide audience, ranging from ancient historians to enthusiastic collectors and educators. The sumptuous array of photographs is a feast for the eyes and also highlights the details that might ordinarily be overlooked in many of these tiny examples. A few minor critiques of the book are that it is slightly disorganized and the title is a little misleading since it focuses exclusively on Italic and Etruscan pieces. The bibliography and source citations are extensive and scholarly. Often the subject of amber is neglected in general surveys of ancient art and this is a welcome addition to anyone curious about this remarkable and beautiful material.

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