

MYSTERIOUS RAW MATERIAL FROM THE FAR NORTH: AMBER IN MYCENAEAN CULTURE*

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Abstract: In the second millennium BC the Mycenaean culture, together with that of the Hittites, Mitanni and Egypt, was one of the most important elements of the civilization networks of the eastern Mediterranean. One of the features that distinguishes the Mycenaean culture from others is the presence of amber, which has occurred in a great number of finds. Furthermore, based on physicochemical analysis, most examples appear to have been of Baltic amber (succinite). Our current knowledge shows us that in this period amber may not always have been sourced from the Baltic area, but we do know for certain that it at least came from regions north of the Aegean. Important questions concerning the presence of amber in Mycenaean culture are discussed in this article. Where did the amber come from, and how was it used? The different types of amber artefacts in Mycenaean culture are also considered.

Keywords: amber, Baltic, Mycenaean culture, amber route

Outline of research history

The question of the presence of amber in Mycenaean culture has been studied since the excavations by Heinrich Schliemann, who, investigating Circle A of the Shaft Graves at Mycenae, discovered the first amber artefacts as early as in 1874 (Schliemann 1878). Not only were they the first to be discovered, but they were also the most spectacular in terms of both typology and quantity.

Subsequent investigations produced more finds at Mycenae (Shaft Grave Circle B, see Mylonas 1973) and other localities concentrated mostly on the Peloponnese. The following features should be highlighted in this context: Dendra, chamber tomb 10 (Persson 1942); Kakovatos, tholos A (Müller 1909); Kaukaunara, tholos 2 (Marinatos 1958); Nichoria, tholos 'Veves' (Harding & Hughes-Brock 1974); Peristeria, tholos 2 (Marinatos 1962); Pylos, tholos IV (Blegen et al. 1973); and Routsis, tholos 2 (Marinatos 1957).

Hence, after the middle of the twentieth century, the amount of information on the presence of amber in Mycenaean culture was substantial. What remained unknown, though, was its origin, and the fundamental question was whether it was Baltic amber (succinite) or some other fossil resin, or whether the material known from the Aegean had heterogeneous origins.

The question was answered by Kurt W. Beck, who introduced a new method of infrared absorption spectrometry into the study of physicochemical structure of amber (Beck, Wilbur & Meret 1964). With the help of this method, he showed that Baltic amber had a special kind of spectrum, clearly different from that of other fossil resins. Using this method, he embarked on a project of systematic examination of amber artefacts excavated in Greece (Beck 1966, 1970, 1996; Beck, Fellows & Adams 1970; Beck & Shustak 1982; Beck, Southard & Adams 1968; 1972). The results proved beyond any doubt that a vast majority of the artefacts from the most spectacular Mycenaean finds were of Baltic origin.

The results of Kurt W. Beck's studies underpinned the first

comprehensive report on Mycenaean amber by Anthony Harding and Helen Hughes-Brock in 1974. One of their major achievements was the compilation of the first catalogue of amber in the Aegean and adjacent areas. Covering Mainland Greece, Crete and other islands, it comprised in total 61 localities where at least 153 assemblages including amber had been recorded (Harding & Hughes-Brock 1974, Tab. 1). In total, these authors recorded at least 3,411 amber artefacts in the Aegean (Harding & Hughes-Brock 1974, table 1).

The next years witnessed the discovery of more sites with amber; these were, however, single finds or comprised several artefacts at most.

Current state of research

The current data, after verification and a bibliographical query, look as follows. In Mycenaean culture, amber is known from 223 locations (Fig. 1). Depending on how specific the available information is, we can tell if these are single burials in collective tombs, complete tombs, cemeteries or sites. All these places yielded at least 3,523 artefacts; however, this number is rather low, allowing for the vagueness of information from many sites (e.g. grave 53 in Ialisos (Rodas) – Maiuri 1926:221, grave S2 in Medeon (Focis) – Papadimitriou 2001:115, chamber tomb in Theby – Harding and Hughes-Brock 1974:166). What is peculiar about them is the fact that in terms of the number of locations with amber finds, unequivocally dated to one of the three phases of Mycenaean culture only (Table 1), the classic phase of the Mycenaean culture (1420-1200 BC) is the best represented, followed by the late phase (1200-1060 BC) and trailed by the early one (1700-1420 BC). A different picture is obtained when the phases are ordered in terms of the number of amber artefacts known from each of them. Here, the Early Mycenaean culture comes first, followed by the classic phase and trailed by the late one (Harding & Hughes-Brock 1974, table 2).

A vast majority of locations where amber was found, regardless of the chronological phase, are sepulchral sites. Within them, there are about 200 locations in which amber was recorded. Initially (Early Mycenaean period), these were shaft graves and tholoi (Fig. 2). In the classic phase, amber was still found in tholoi,

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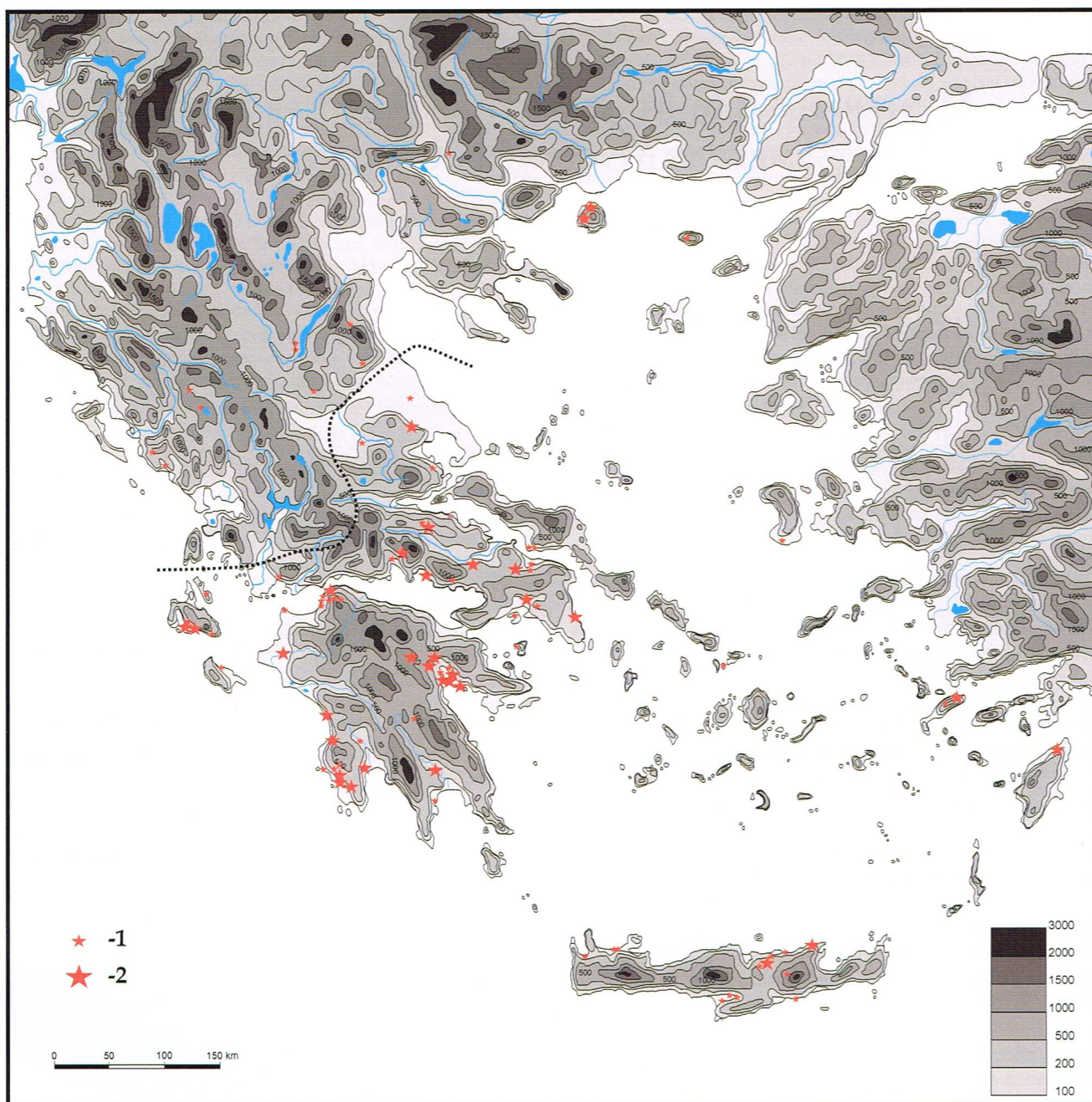


Fig. 1 Overall diffusion of amber finds in the Aegean. 1 – single amber finds; 2 – more than one amber object found (Czebreszuk 2011, fig. 15).

although chamber tombs dominated (Fig. 3). In the late phase of the Mycenaean culture most finds were located primarily in the latter (Fig. 4). The changes in deposition locations must have been the cause of the discrepancy between the number of artefacts (greatest in the early phase) and the number of sites (greatest in the classic phase). In the early phase, amber was known chiefly from shaft graves, which survived intact until modern times, while in the classic phase, amber occurred predominantly in tholoi and chamber tombs, which for the most part had been robbed already in antiquity (Czebreszuk 2011:123). It can therefore be safely assumed that the greatest number of amber goods were used and deposited in the classic phase of the Mycenaean culture.

There are very few settlement finds (i.e. comprising only objects that were lost) or ones originating with votive contexts. Among

votive finds, emphasis should be put on the presence of amber in the sanctuaries at Delphi and on Delos – both devoted to Apollo in the Greek world. This is an important clue pointing to the mythological contexts of amber (specifically, its solar connotations). On the other hand, we know of Apollo's northern connections (his mother's birthplace, ties to the Hyperboreans; see Bouzek 2007).

Regarding typology, beads strongly dominate, of which there are over a dozen varieties (Czebreszuk 2011:77-92). The most common are spherical flattened beads (comprising at least 759 in total, for all data see: Czebreszuk 2011), followed by lentoid (256), annular (179) and spherical beads (149). Less frequent are ellipsoid (24), bicone (30), cylindrical (18), barrel-shaped (21) and Tiryns-type beads (38). Finally, single specimens of other types

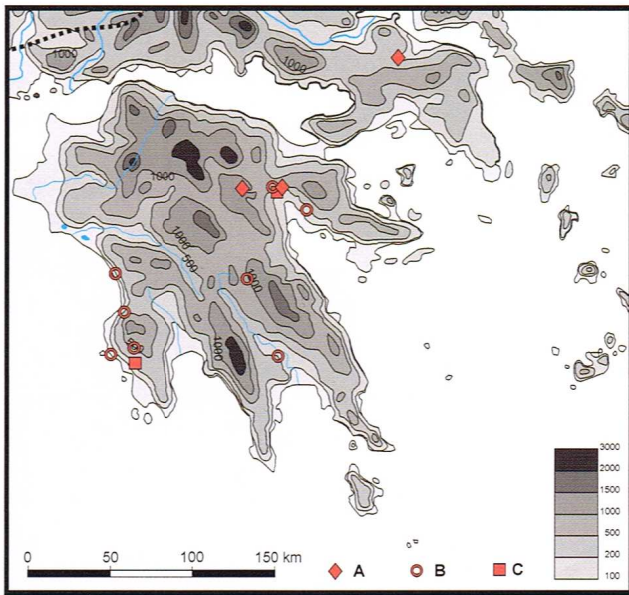


Fig. 2 Amber finds dated only to the early phase of the Mycenaean culture (from this period from grave finds only). A – chamber tombs; B – tholoi; C – shaft-grave circles (Czebreszuk 2011, fig. 22).

are known as well, such as Allumiere (2) or amygdaloid beads (10). Other types of amber goods associated with the Mycenaean culture include pendants, discs and the most spectacular spacer-plates (with simple and complex arrangements of perforations), both flat and others (Czebreszuk 2011: 92-97).

Some of the types are chronologically significant. For example, spacer-plates are found only in the Early Mycenaean culture (between 1700 and 1420 BC) while beads of the Tiryns and Allumiere types concentrate in the late phase (1200-1060 BC) (Harding & Hughes-Brock 1974; Czebreszuk 2011).

In terms of geography, we observe a continuous spreading of amber within the Mycenaean *oecumene*. In the early phase, it is found only in the Peloponnese (plus one find from Thebes in Boeotia), especially in Argolis and Messenia (Czebreszuk 2011, fig. 22). By the classic phase, amber had spread throughout the Mycenaean world as far as southern Thessaly in the north and Crete in the south (Czebreszuk 2011, fig. 23). In turn, after 1200 BC, amber goods are found in regions directly bordering on the Mycenaean world, in particular in the north. At the same time, amber becomes significantly more sparse in the Peloponnese – an area where the material was found earlier in the greatest number of places (Czebreszuk 2011, fig. 24).

Highly meaningful in this respect, the changes in amber

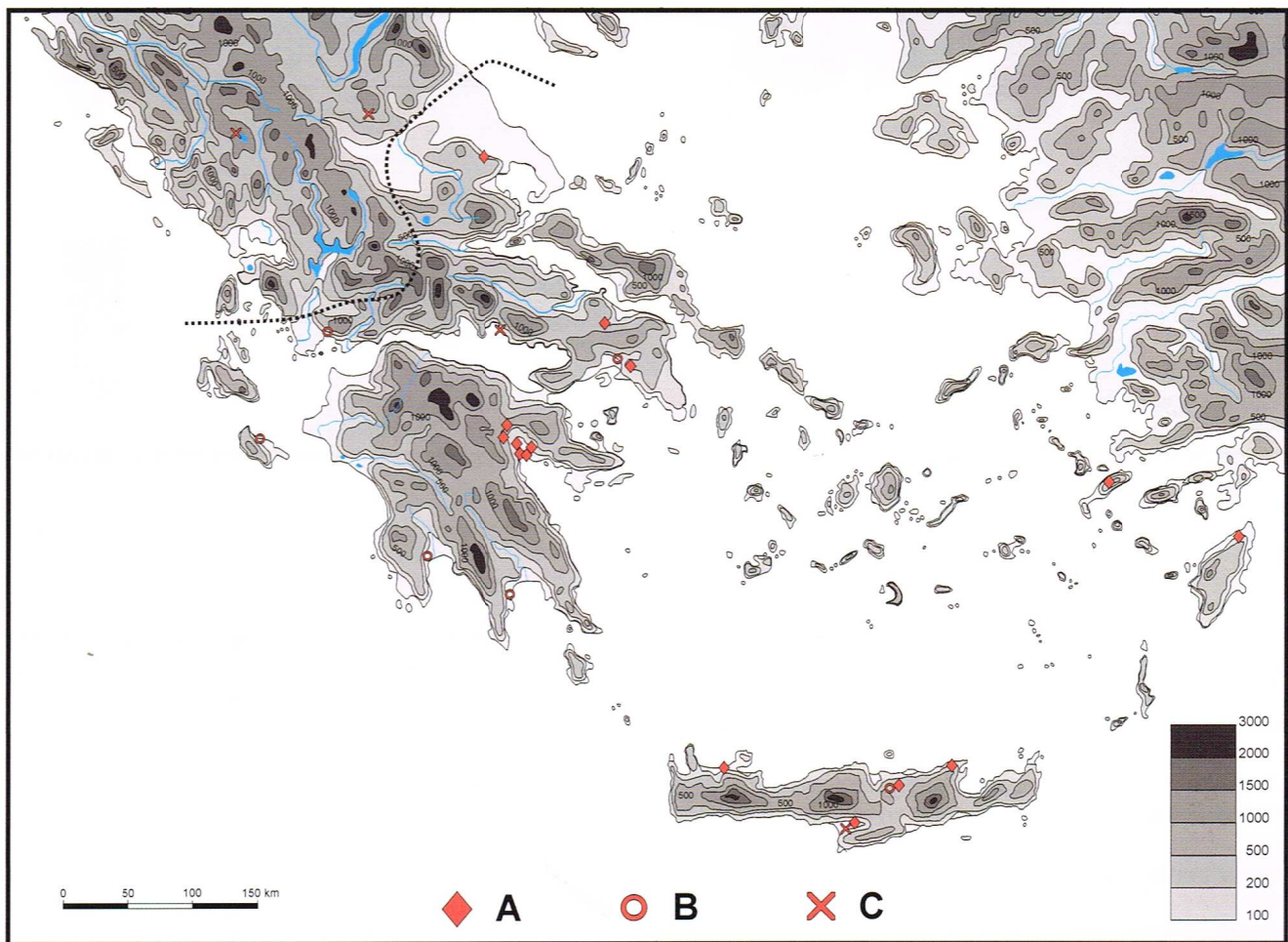


Fig. 3 Grave finds comprising amber artefacts assigned to the classic phase of the Mycenaean culture. Finds identified only as coming from a burial ground/grave have not been included. A – chamber tombs; B – tholoi; C – other grave types (Czebreszuk 2011, fig. 28).

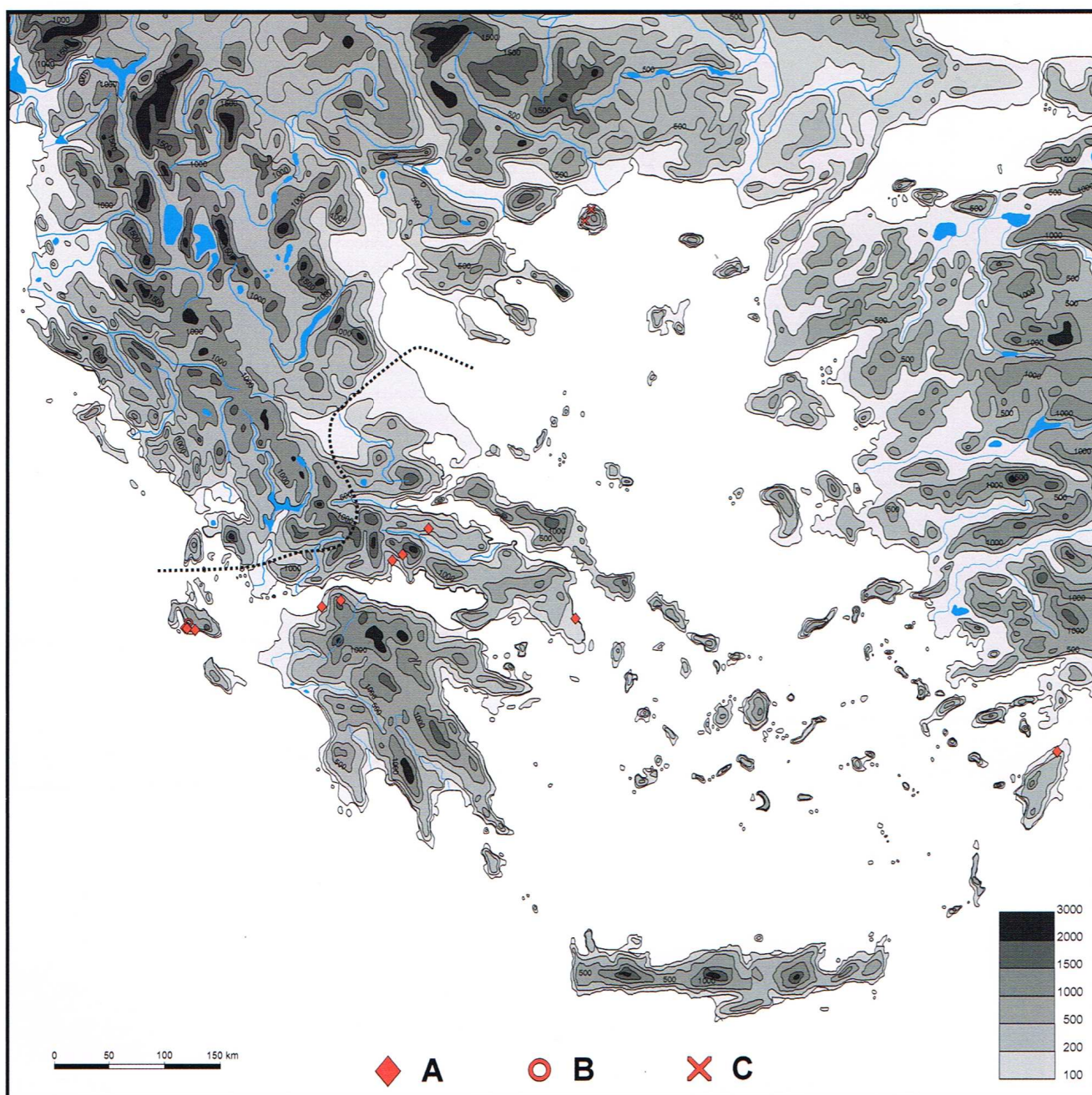


Fig. 4 Grave finds comprising amber artefacts assigned to the late phase of the Mycenaean culture. Finds identified only as coming from a burial ground/grave have not been included. A. chamber tombs; B – tholoi; C – other grave types (Czebreszuk 2011, fig. 29).

presence on Crete (Table 1) follow the changes in sovereignty over the island. For the Early Mycenaean period, when Crete was still Minoan, we do not have any reliably dated amber finds (Czebreszuk 2011, table 13). The same is true for the Late Mycenaean phase. Only in the classic phase, when the island was controlled by the Mycenaeans and the Mycenaean culture was in full bloom, are many amber finds recorded on Crete.

Amber routes to the south

The question of the transfer of amber from the Baltic coast to the south must have been a highly complex one (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005:236). Nonetheless, owing to major progress made in research, it was possible to take up the issue of cultural mechanisms and ways of Baltic amber transfer to the south,

especially to the Aegean. The issue has been widely discussed in the literature under the heading of the study of amber routes (see the classic work by J.M. de Navarro, 1925). At present, in the literature on the subject, several versions of the amber route in the Bronze Age are discussed (Fig. 5). They are as follows:

- a. The westernmost sea route, passing west of southern Italy, reaching the southern coasts of France and Spain, following the Atlantic coasts of Portugal, Spain and France as far as the British Isles. The route could have been closely tied to the import of Cornish tin. Amber, in this case, was a side factor (Czebreszuk 2011:158).
- b. A western sea and land route which took a similar course as far as the mouth of the Rhone, where its land part began, and

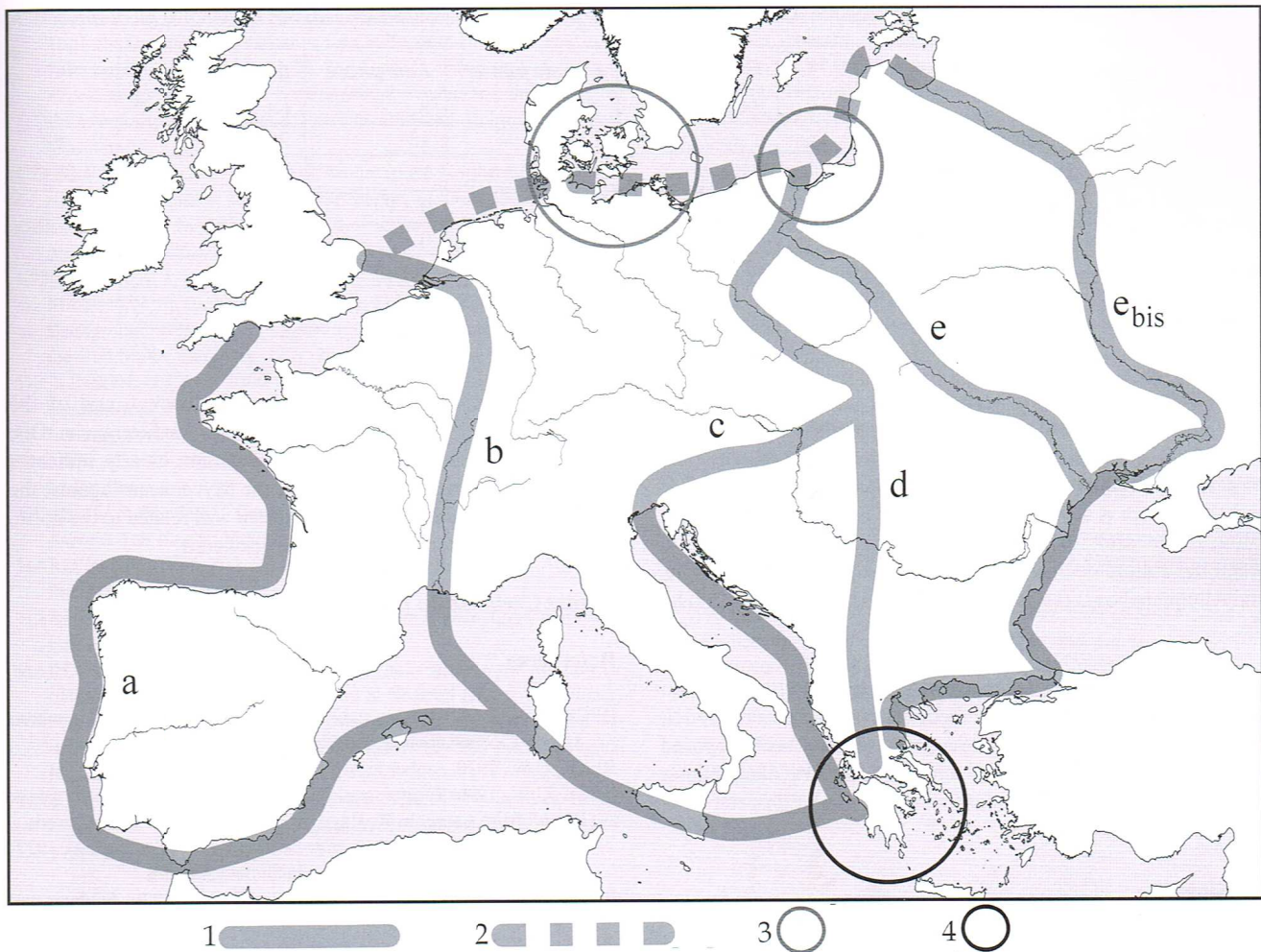


Fig. 5 The routes that Baltic amber followed to reach the Aegean (Czebreszuk 2011, fig. 32).

followed the river north until the basin of the Rhine to cross the channel to England or follow the coast of the North Sea as far as Jutland (Bouzek 2007).

Both routes were associated with the mythical 'Hercules' Route' (Evans 1928:170), which is linked by the cited author to the spreading of, above all, tin v-perforated buttons and copper halberds in the Aegean (Evans 1928:169-174).

c. A central sea and land route which followed the eastern coast of the Adriatic as far as the region of *Caput Adria*, where its land leg began. The course of the sea leg has been absolutely uncontroversial since the 1920s. Both J.M. de Navarro (1925) and A. Evans (1928:174) were in full agreement on the issue. Their view has been reiterated by later researchers in the literature on the subject (Harding 1984; Czebreszuk 2009). However, more difficult issues, namely the course of its land leg and destination in the north, remain unsettled.

d. A relatively rarer conception concerns a land route only, crossing the Balkans as far as the Carpathian Basin and continuing further north (Czebreszuk 2001). Different authors stress the major difficulties it might have encountered, if only the ease with which it could be blocked in many 'critical points' as, for instance, numerous mountain passes or river gorges (Bouzek 1985:221).

e. An easternmost sea and land route which crossed the Aegean Sea and the Dardanelles, followed the western coast of the Black Sea as far as the mouth of the Dniester River and continued upstream to the Vistula River basin. The land leg is sometimes plotted even more to the east, taking advantage of the Dnieper and Dvina rivers. This classically eastern outline of the route was suggested by M. Gimbutas (1965, fig. 15, 1985). It may have been especially attractive in the declining stages of the Bronze Age (recently: Harding 2005:299; Czebreszuk 2009).

Most likely several such routes were used at the same time, for it can be assumed that the people who travelled the trans-European routes of the second millennium BC drew on the experience of their predecessors, modifying the network to meet their needs. The most important of such modifications involved the inclusion of the amber-bearing centre on the lower Vistula/Sambia (Czebreszuk 2007) which enabled the British Isles to communicate better with the Continent. In this context, amber could have reached the south by many routes with varying intensity.

This 'network' model of amber transfer to the south is substantiated also by the fact that all northern centres (from the British Isles to the south-east Baltic coast) were permanently joined by a route following the coasts of the North and Baltic seas, the beginnings of which reach back to the local Mesolithic (Czebreszuk & Szmyt 2012). Nonetheless, in this context and the current state

Table 1 Chronology of amber finds unequivocally dated to a single period of the Mycenaean culture, by geographical areas

Geographical area	Early phase	Classic phase	Late phase	total
Peloponnesus	34	22	8	64
Central Greece	1	12	13	26
Ionian Islands	0	1	13	14
Islands in the Aegean Sea	0	7	9	16
Northern Greece	0	2	0	2
Crete	0	11	0	11
total	35	55	43	133

of research, it can already be suggested in some cases which routes grew in importance and when this occurred. Two of such cases are undeniably the relationship between the British Isles and the Aegean in the course of the early Mycenaean culture (routes 'a' and 'b'), which is shown by circulation of spacer-plates (Maran 2004; Czebreszuk 2011: 116-123) and ties across the Adriatic when the culture declined (route 'c'), see: dispersion of Tiryns and Allumiere beads (Harding 2000:190-191; Czebreszuk 2009a, fig. 7).

In the studies aimed at reconstructing the cultural mechanism of amber transfer to the south, the most comprehensive model, spanning the broadest territorial range as well, has been proposed by K. Kristiansen and T.B. Larsson (2005, in particular Chapter 5), who have made amber an aspect of the trans-European treks of members of the elite.

Conclusion

Amber, no doubt, carried a special religious and prestige meaning for the societies of the Mycenaean culture. This could be seen especially in the early and classic phases of this culture, when amber occurred chiefly in the richest contexts of shaft graves and tholoi believed to have been the burial places of Early and Classic Mycenaean elites. In the later stage, a tendency can be seen of amber becoming ever more socially available, which is testified to by a large number of finds in chamber tombs. With the Catastrophe of 1200 BC (for a very useful overview see: Dickinson 2006:41-57), the geographical and social distribution of amber changed as well. It became sparser in core Mycenaean regions (particularly on the Peloponnesus) and could be found also in grave types other than tholoi or chamber tombs (Czebreszuk 2011, table16).

Also worth mentioning is the fact that amber was a specifically 'Mycenaean' raw material in the Mediterranean. It did not move freely to other civilization centres of the eastern Mediterranean such as the state of the Hittites, Mitanni, Mesopotamia, Palestine or Egypt, with which the populations of the Aegean maintained constant and lively cultural and trade contacts (Czebreszuk 2011:169-170). The appearance of amber in any of these centres is on each occasion related to the presence of other Mycenaean characteristics.

Equally meaningful, the place of amber within Aegean cultural relationships, in particular between the Minoan and Mycenaean worlds, is illustrated by the fact of its appearance on Crete when the island was overrun by the Mycenaean (Czebreszuk 2011: 67-68); ergo, for the Minoans it did not carry any cultural meaning.

Hence, there is no doubt that the relationship between amber and the Mycenaean culture was rather special and was one of

its identifying characteristics against the background of the network of civilization centres of the eastern Mediterranean. One can venture even further and say that amber clearly indicates that the identifying characteristic of the Mycenaean against the background of the eastern Mediterranean was related to the north. Exactly how far north remains to be answered.

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