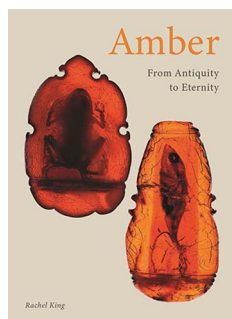




Book Reviews

RACHEL KING. 2022. *Amber: from antiquity to eternity*. London: Reaktion; 978-1-78914-591-5 hardback £30.



“Where do I usually begin when I am describing amber to somebody else?” This is the opening sentence of Rachel King’s book on this key archaeological material—and I ask myself the same question about the book itself. The volume brings together a rich collection of hundreds of notable, fascinating and sometimes also obscure stories “showing the richness, longevity and depth of humanity’s engagement with amber” (p. 9). Rachel King, Curator at the British Museum, is a widely respected specialist in amber and its reception in the early modern world. This professional orientation is clearly visible in the book’s predominant focus on the last few centuries.

The book comprises eight main chapters with references, a selective bibliography and an index. The starting chapter, ‘Amber: what, when, where,’ delivers the basics about amber as fossilised tree resin and its study. The most important form of amber in European history is succinite, or Baltic amber, which formed 48 to 34 million years ago. Using infrared spectroscopy, succinite can be differentiated from amber sourced from elsewhere through the presence of the so-called ‘Baltic shoulder’ on the FTIR spectrum. The chapter also highlights the role of amber within ancient ecosystems, as well as the ability of the resin/amber to trap and preserve animals and small creatures, and ending, of course, with a mention of the movie, *Jurassic Park*.

As it was retrieved from the sea, the recognition of amber as fossilised tree resin came late. Chapter 2, ‘Legend and myth’, considers the earlier narratives created in order to explain the origins of this mysterious substance. These legendary origins span from the tears of Phaethon’s sister, Heliades, crying for his death, to the search for the River Eridanos as the possible source-region (during the Renaissance, focused mainly on the River Po), to amber as the “hardened urine of a wild male lynx” (p. 39). It was not until the sixteenth or seventeenth century AD that its actual origins were established.

The third chapter, ‘Ancestors and amber’ is, for me, the most questionable part of the work. Twenty-eight pages seem too few to cover the 40 000+ years for which people have collected, shaped and used amber, and to which hundreds of books and research papers have been devoted. Inevitably, important detail is lost. For example, Figure 28, purportedly showing the “Ancient and medieval routes for the trade of amber” (p. 59), ignores the latest research, and provides an inadequate picture of the various ‘Amber Roads’ discussed in many scientific works (the term itself only coming into existence around the start of the nineteenth century). In particular, this figure neglects the best-known part of the Amber Roads: the connection between the central/eastern Baltic coast (via Moravia) and Carnuntum/Vindobona in

Austria, and continuing on to Aquileia on the north Adriatic coast. This route is well evidenced from antiquity onwards, attested by thousands of archaeological finds. This amber route, mentioned by Pliny the Elder, was already long established by Roman times, and is highly visible in the archaeological record from the end of the Bronze Age, probably starting *c.* 2000 BC. The earliest amber artefacts known from China are dated *c.* 1300–1200 BC, contemporaneous with the start of the European Late Bronze Age. The statement that “most European histories of amber begin with the Roman era” (p. 61) prioritises written sources (e.g. Pliny the Elder) and cannot be supported. At the very least, the huge quantities of amber that flowed across Europe during the Early Iron Age period in the first part of the first millennium BC, but undoubtedly starting centuries before, cannot be ignored—the many thousands of artefacts from cemeteries such as Verucchio in Italy are well known and should have been acknowledged.

Chapter 4, ‘Unearthing amber’, offers basic information on where and how amber was found, collected, commercially mined, sorted, selected and exchanged—both legally and illegally. In the 1980s, for example, up to 820t per year was mined at Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg) alone. An important fact is that, in many countries and regions, amber was the property of the state or king(dom) and the collecting of especially larger pieces by private persons was forbidden until the middle of the nineteenth century AD. As explained in Chapter 5, ‘Making and faking amber’, like many other commodities and raw materials, amber is found commonly in some places, while rare and therefore more valuable in others. And this is exactly the reason that “amber has been copied, imitated, simulated, forged and faked” (p. 97) in multiple ways—as a raw material, as pieces of amber containing insects and other trapped creatures and ‘spectacular’ inclusions, and also as finished artefacts. The oldest of these ‘fakes’ date back some four millennia.

Chapter 6, ‘Accessorizing with amber’, considers amber as made into jewellery, from the perspectives of “maker, marketer, consumer, gifter and wearer” (p. 123). The chapter is mainly concerned with the late modern era—the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries—and has a global remit, with examples from the Near East, China, India and Africa. In Chapter 7, ‘Artistic ambers’, an overview of amber as a material for freestanding art objects is presented, starting with descriptions of late medieval devotional figurines (e.g. Jesus Christ and the saints) and altar-pieces. The chapter concludes with the various ways by which amber was obtained in early modern Europe, as a raw material (e.g. in apothecaries) or as finished artefacts; both proved difficult as only few “approved official merchants were authorised to sell amber” (p. 187).

The final chapter, ‘Lost ambers’, focuses on the many important pieces of art made of amber that have been lost due to poor preservation conditions and a lack of knowledge about the conservation of amber. Many masterpieces—the most famous example surely being the so-called ‘Amber Room’—were lost or destroyed during the Second World War. Nonetheless, the author concludes that “perhaps the greatest loss that Baltic amber ever experienced was loss of its mystery”, with the identification of its origin as a fossilised tree resin in the mid-1700s.

To sum up, the volume is a typical museum-shop book aimed at a wider audience of interested general readers, presenting a broad spectrum of topics. It is full of diverse information

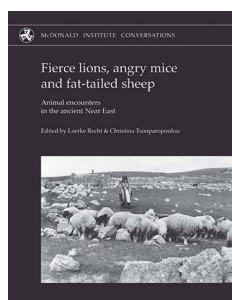
and interesting stories presented in a light, readable form, but brings nothing new for the more specialist reader.

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LAERKE RECHT & CHRISTINA TSOUPAROPOULOU (ed.). 2021. *Fierce lions, angry mice and fat-tailed sheep: animal encounters in the ancient Near East*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research; 978-1-913344-05-4 eBook Open Access.



The present volume contributes in a consequential way to the prodigious growth in human-animal studies, with its focus on a time and place—the ancient Near East—that is gloriously rich in terms of human-animal relations. The goal of the volume is to move away from the dichotomy between humans and animals and to foreground their varied interactions in a shared environment, in which nonhuman animals are actors rather than acted upon.

Of the 23 contributions in the volume, the great majority—15—deal with Mesopotamia. Egypt, Syria-Palestine and Anatolia are the focus of two articles each, and a further contribution is surveying Semitic toponyms derived from animal names. The geographical imbalance perhaps owes to the volume's origins in a conference. The individual chapters utilise a wide range of approaches: faunal (Alhaique *et al.*, Kalaycı & Wainwright, Greenfield & Matney, Devillers, Greenfield *et al.*); textual (Verderame, Vilela, Mouton, Arbøll, Battini, Sövegjártó, Dirbas, Watanabe, Kozuh); iconographic (Devillers, Greet, Battini); anthropological (Goulder); or some combination of these (Fadum & Gruber, Erskine, Nett, Kozuh, Brachmańska, Popova & Quillien, Tsouparopoulou & Recht). Unsurprisingly, dogs receive the most attention, with at least eight chapters scrutinising their roles as companions, work animals, symbols and in ritual/religion. Equids and birds of various varieties are the subject of several chapters each. Temporally, the chapters address material ranging from prehistory through to the first millennium BC, with the majority of contributions based in the third and second millennia. These chapters are organised neatly into sections under the rubrics 'Animal agency and human-animal interactions', 'Animals in ritual and cult', 'Blurred lines: humans as animals, animals as humans', 'Managing animals', 'Animals in society and as a resource', 'Symbols of power: birds', and 'Companions and working animals: equids and dogs'.

While a few of the chapters parse the texts for evidence or present site-specific archaeological findings, others take more innovative approaches to investigating human-animal encounters.