

Amber Trade in the Western Adriatic between the Iron and the Late Archaic Age. Workshops, Artisans and Artifacts, and Exchange Networks

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Amber trade in Italy developed substantially between the Iron and the Archaic Age with the appearance of figured ambers. The different subjects represented reflect the plurality of cultural and commercial relationships established among Greeks, Etruscans and Italic peoples. Among the most active centers, Verucchio played a fundamental role in the sorting of the raw material, but can also be considered one of the main locations for the production of carved ambers and the most dynamic in the redistribution of the finished products. Here, a workshop had to be active, in which craftsmen specialized in amber processing realized a great number of precious artifacts with amber inserts made for a specific client.¹ Verucchio played a key role, situated at a location (a great crossroads) that allowed it to control the traffic of amber and finished products between the Adriatic, the Po Valley, the Tiber valley, and inner Etruria. Here, the Via Maggio Pass takes on great importance, introducing routes that connected Verucchio to central Italy, moving along the Tiber valley, to Tyrrhenian and inner Etruria. Its strategic location near the Adriatic was important because it projected the Villanovan site and its products towards the great cultural and commercial exchanges of the Mediterranean and Europe exploiting coastal paths and practicing the small cabotage navigation.²

Despite the quality of the artifacts created, scarcely any figured ambers were produced at Verucchio. Among the exceptional pieces we may note a fibula decoration, from Tomb Lippi 27, on which there are two addorsed small ducks, a motif widely diffused in the Italic area (Etruria, Picenum, Basilicata) that finds its origins in the Bronze Age, probably linked to the cult of the 'solar boat'. It is a multivalent symbol, both guardian and apotropaic, that was believed to connect the chthonic and other worlds in northern Europe cultures, and was also a symbol of regeneration for Egyptians.³ Particularly interesting is the large parure found at Chiaromonte (tomb 140, dated to the first half of the 7th century BC), composed of a multiple wires necklace with oblong and lenticular beads, associated with a pectoral-necklace formed by two strands of beads. Inserted among the central rows are beads representing small ducks that are comparable to similar examples found in the Artemision of Ephesus. Other specimens depicting the same subject appear in the precious amber girdle with interspersed bird-shaped beads from the Oenotrian female tombs of Chiaromonte and Latronico.⁴

Among the local products, it is useful to focus attention on objects that demanded technical ability, widespread in the assemblages of Verucchio. These constitute a clue to the possibility that Verucchio was an exporting center of amber artifacts between the 8th and the second half of the 7th century BC. We recall the fibulae with a bow composed of amber and bone disks and covered with amber inlays from Verucchio (fig. 1),⁵ of



Fig. 1: Fibula with bow composed of amber and bone disks and covered with amber inlays from Verucchio. Verucchio, Museo Civico Archeologico.

which similar examples are attested at Felsina, Volterra, Marsiliana d'Albegna and Picenum, and one that was reported in Basilicata, in tomb 258 of Chiaromonte, and dated to the first half of the 7th century BC (fig. 2). Examples are also widespread in some Aegean sanctuaries, such as the Artemision of Ephesus and the Athenaion of Lindos.⁶ This is probably the result of importation through gifts and prestige goods-exchange between princes. Deserving of particular mention are the disc-earrings with careened profile and depressed amber center, with bronze, gold and silver wire or ribbon. These are also attested across a wide Adriatic range, including Picenum and Lucania, with a particular concentration in burials at Chiaromonte (see tombs 140, 142, 154, 325 dated to the first half of the 7th century BC).⁷

During the second half of the 7th century BC, the first signs of a decline in the production of amber objects were felt at Verucchio. The settlement seems no longer to be the only site on the Adriatic to control and sort amber and its artifacts. Its role is inherited by Picenum, which becomes one of the most important poles for the acquisition and sorting of raw amber. Among the earliest products – in contrast to Verucchio – are figured ambers. These were probably made by expert carvers coming from other areas and settling in the region. The main stylistic features, such as the large and flattened head and the snub nose, relate to Near-East productions of ivory artifacts attributed to Eastern craftsmen.⁸ Of special interest are the ambers in the Museum of Philadelphia that may come from a warrior's grave at Ascoli Piceno. For their general pose, for the hair – characterized by long horizontal lines on the forehead, also falling on the sides

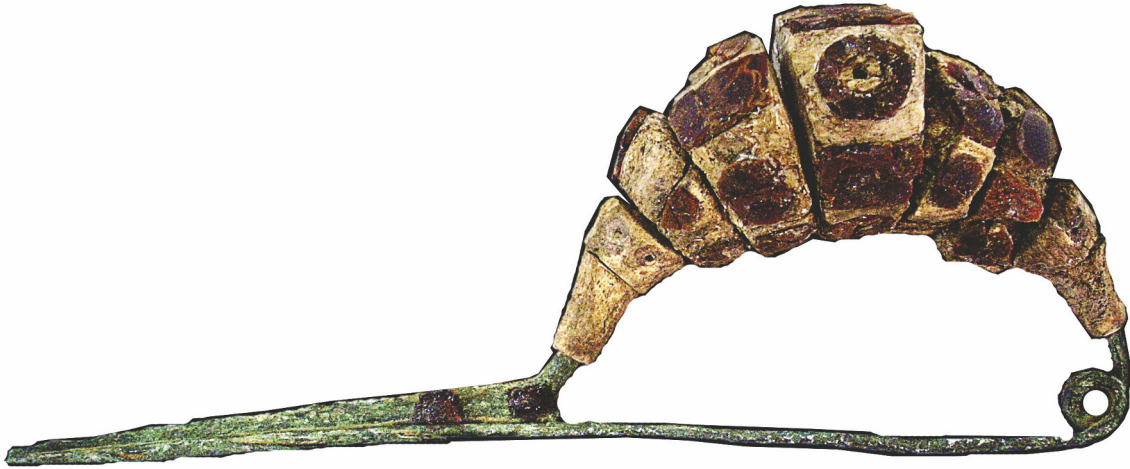


Fig. 2: Fibula with bow composed of amber and bone disks and covered with amber inlays from tomb 258 of Chiaromonte. Policoro, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

of the head – and above all for the crossed arms under the breast (reminiscent of an Assyrian-Babylonian iconography, such as the representations of Ishtar/Astarte), they recall ivory figurines found at Castelbellino and Belmonte Piceno.⁹

Certain features of specimens found in the rich tombs of Apulia and Lucania are clearly connected to ambers and ivories of the Picenum area (see the carving of the eyes, the treatment of hair and face, the head shape and the general pose). The figured amber from Tolve, depicting a crouching male figure with a frontal torso and arms crossed over his chest and curled legs, has a full face, with squat and squashed features, low forehead, almond eyes profiled by a groove, large nose and full lips, and hair rendered by thin parallel and vertical engravings. Commonly dated to the late 6th century BC, the artifact is certainly older, probably a precious family object handed down for generations. It finds close comparisons, for the pose and the treatment of the face, with one of the ambers from Ascoli and with the ivories from Castelbellino.¹⁰ A figured amber found in a rich burial of Minervino Murge, dated to the second half of the 6th century BC and depicting a figure curled up on a frontal head, is equally remarkable. The stylistic features of the head, above all the carving of the eyes, the snub nose and the lips, distinctly recall one of the ivory figures coming from Picenum.¹¹

Between the end of the 7th and the early 6th century BC, figured ambers made with orientaling features appear in many Italic centers on the Adriatic (Felsina, Picenum, Apulia and Lucania). The heads have a peculiar ‘daedalic’ hair style, conceived as a more or less trapezoidal shape, with large amounts of hair arranged in long curls and distributed on the two sides of the head in the form of two triangles that widen towards the shoulders. These are high quality products, made in local workshops by skilled artists of Etruscan and eastern origin, but also supported by the activity of Greek craftsmen, with orientaling training, who worked in ancient Greece, Etruria and Picenum¹². We

must mention some specimens from Felsina (first half of the 6th century BC) most likely made in the same workshop, such as the female heads with polos, long braids on the sides of the face and large eyes, that were used as ornaments of fibulae (the heads form the central part of the bow).¹³ The famous head from tomb 96 of Chiaromonte (late 7th – early 6th century BC) stands out: it was used as a pendant in a magnificent necklace and represents a female head with a polos and sub-aeolic hair-style carved with a triangular outline. The head has an oval face, surmounted by a truncated conical headpiece, decorated by a band-diadem placed at the forehead. The hair is rendered with side bands diverging downwards and horizontal sections carved on the margins. The rendering of the eyes is very distinctive, large and surrounded by a double line at the top. This is the oldest figured amber from the Oenotrian world, probably the work of Greek craftsmen operating in the Etruscan-Tyrrhenian area.¹⁴

A fine artifact is the crouching male figure, with Daedalic hairstyle and hands clasped to his knees, that was found in tomb 122/1977 at Rutigliano and dated to the late 6th century BC (fig. 3). It is the most ancient specimen discovered in central Apulia, earlier than



Fig. 3: Sculpture depicting a crouched male figure, with Daedalic hairstyle and hands clasped to his knees, from tomb 122/1977 of Rutigliano. Taranto, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

the burial in which it was found, handed down within the aristocratic group (the many holes indicate its repeated reuse). It reveals stylistic affinities with the Chiaromonte head, especially for the setting of the figure and the physiognomy of its face, with the two side braids of curly hair that recall Greek-eastern productions of the 7th–6th century BC. It shows close affinities to some Rhodian and Samian figured *balsamaria*.¹⁵

At the second half of the 6th century BC, sculptures of the highest stylistic level, depicting complex compositions with one or more figures and human heads, appear in South Italy. These artifacts were produced by itinerant Etruscan craftsmen, influenced by Greek-eastern carvers, who had arrived in Etruria from Ionia to escape the Lydians and Persians.¹⁶ Two carving schools have been identified: the ‘Satyr and Maenad Group’ and the ‘Armento Group’. Two different stylistic tendencies were noted in the first, probably corresponding to the activity of two different workshops.¹⁷ The school of the first series seems to prefer clearer and more defined forms and lines;¹⁸ the ambers of the second stylistic trend are characterized by softer and more sinuous lines. Among the ambers of the second style, the double-sided sculpture from Canosa, depicting a young man on a quadriga and a young man fighting a sea monster, deserve attention for the accuracy and refinement in the rendering of details, as well as for their sinuous lines and delicate features. The figures of this group are included with perfect harmony in the often irregular and contrasting volumes of the amber piece, highlighting the great plastic sensibility and the technical skill of the artisan.¹⁹ Very fine, in this sense, are the sculpture depicting a Satyr and Maenad from Canosa at the Louvre Museum (fig. 4), and that showing a wrapped woman with a nude young boy in her arms that was found in a rich tomb from Tricarico in Basilicata; this last is very probably a *kourotrophos* (fig. 5). We must note, above all, the folds of the dresses made with the skillful use of the relief and engraving, and the sinuous and soft lines of the bodies and faces, adapted to the volume of the amber.

The ambers of the ‘Armento Group’, probably referring to two different workshops, are distinguished for their ‘rounded style’ that consists of an ovoid face, small and elongated almond eyes underlined by a slight incision, and by thin and minute features with well-defined plastic volumes. The workshops start around the middle of the 6th century BC, and are located at Armento and Braida di Vaglio, dominant indigenous sites that were able to attract foreign craftsmen (Etruscan and Greek-eastern) who brought life into local workshops.²⁰ This school produces standing kouros (e.g. those from Armento preserved at the British Museum and Louvre) and standing korai, depicted with a fold of their elegant and complex drapery in their left hands.²¹ The kore of the Getty Museum is one of the finest examples and the general pose shows close stylistic affinities with the small Etruscan bronzes that represent similar subjects (see, above all, the kore from Covignano at the Museum of Copenhagen) and also the amber kore from Pontecagnano.²²

Within the production of the ‘Armento Group’, we can also distinguish a particularly refined craftsman, the ‘Master of the Winged Sphinx’. The figures he created – recum-



Fig. 4: Sculpture depicting a Satyr and Maenad from Canosa. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



Fig. 5: Sculpture showing a wrapped woman with a nude young boy in her arms found in a rich tomb from Tricarico. Policoro, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.



Fig. 6: Crouching sphinx with head looking back from Braida di Vaglio. Potenza, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

bent sphinxes, sirens, harpies or crouching animals with faces looking back – are characterized by surfaces and undulations realized with softer and more flowing outlines, especially in the treatment of the faces, which are rendered with delicate strokes.²³ The winged sphinx from Braida di Vaglio (fig. 6) and the crouching bull with human head (Acheloos) from Armento are his most fine works (fig. 7), showing a particular sensibility and skill in the rendering of features with an alternating use of relief and engraving. In the rendering of the face, the sphinx also finds comparisons with the similar subjects represented on the Etruscan golden fibulae.²⁴ A little bronze depicting a crouching bull



Fig. 7: Crouching bull with human head looking back from Armento. London, British Museum.



Fig. 8: Small bronze representing a crouching bull with human head looking back from Monte Sannace (?). Bari, Museo Archeologico della Città Metropolitana.

with human head (fig. 8), probably from Monte Sannace, shows considerable stylistic affinities in the softness of lines and volumes with the amber from Armento, a center located more than 200 km from the Apulian site. They provide clear evidence for the existence of such types of objects that share, besides their function, identical models and the same artist training and methods and, above all, the same artistic influence. The small bronze was made to satisfy a local aristocrat's specific request by a travelling craftsman who knew models and iconographic patterns that were widespread during the Archaic age in South Italy and Etruria, thanks to the contribution of the artisans of the Ionian school. It is possible that on the original amber of the British Museum it was created a mold made by a craftsman who then reproduced it in bronze, perhaps in several copies, since there is another identical bronze example found in Basilicata.²⁵

Picenum also specialized in the creation of crouching animals, such as lions or lions attacking prey, which were used as fibula ornaments of Picenum style. The Greek-eastern stylistic features suggest on-site execution by Ionian craftsmen, who would have been attracted by the easy acquisition of raw amber at sites controlled by the aristocracies. The considerable quantity of figured ambers, especially at the major coastal sites, suggests that workshops were located in these centers to exploit river valleys as communication routes. Foreign craftsmen created carving schools for their local customers, and adapted their work to local taste and forms. Crouching felines are known in Sirolo and Belmonte Piceno, among which we distinguish the famous fibula core

representing a lion and a lioness.²⁶ Crouching animals with heads looking back are also produced in Basilicata by the ‘Armento Group’ and by the ‘Master of the Winged Sphinx’ and it is very probably that the specimens from Picenum were created by the craftsmen of the ‘Armento Group’, given as a “gift” to local princes.²⁷ They show a great plastic sensibility in the treatment of volumes, underlined by soft and sinuous lines. These specimens were very appreciated from the Italic aristocracies and spread quickly among the most important indigenous sites.

The crouching animals or those with everted heads back are also a well attested type in Felsina, now one of the main centers for production of amber objects in the northern Adriatic. These artifacts find their prototypes in northern Syrian ivories. This confirms the close connection between the processing of amber and ivory and the influence of Eastern motifs. The link is further attested by an ivory figure of northern Syrian production (9th–8th century BC) at the Metropolitan Museum that represents a crouching bull with its head looking back.²⁸ The stylistic similarities between the Felsina artifacts and the crouching animals of Basilicata are remarkable: it is clear that these are two distinct productions that have common reference models, and that motifs may have circulated in both areas via itinerant craftsmen.²⁹

Notes

¹ For a specialized workshop in Verucchio see: Gentili 2003; Malnati 2007, 122 f.; Nava 2007, 27 f.; von Eles 2009, 31–41, with further bibliography.

² On Verucchio and Marecchia Valley: Gentili 1987, 7–36; Forte 1994, 26–29; Sassatelli 1996, 249–271; Naso 2000, 85 f.; Gentili 2003.

³ For the symbolic meanings of duck or sea birds, see above all: Bianco 2005, 91–93; Bianco 2011, 71–73; Causey 2011, 91–93; Causey 2019.

⁴ Notable are the artifacts coming from South Basilicata for which see: Bianco 2005, 91–96; Montanaro 2018, 364 f., with a rich bibliography.

⁵ Regarding the most refined productions at Verucchio see: Forte – von Eles 1994; Boiardi – von Eles 2003, 107–124; Gentili 2003; Boiardi et al. 2006, 1590–1597; Bentini – Boiardi 2007, 127–137; von Eles 2007a, 71–83; von Eles 2007b, 149–156; Iaia 2007, 25 f.; Malnati 2007, 123 f.; von Eles 2009; von Eles et al. 2009, 210–219; Negroni Catacchio 2011, 79–84; von Eles – Trocchi 2015, 99–104, with rich bibliography. For the diffusion in the Adriatic area: Naso 2000, 86–92; Bergonzi 2007, 87–95; Iaia 2007, 25–36.

⁶ For the fibula from Chiaromonte see: De Siena 2012, 1301 f.; Montanaro 2018, 366 f. For the testimonies from the Aegean sanctuaries: Naso 2006, 358 f.; Naso 2013, 259–278, with bibliography.

⁷ For the earrings: Bianco 1998, 241–244; Bianco 2005, 89–96; Montanaro 2018, 366 f.

⁸ On the leading role of Picenum in amber trade and working: Naso 2000, 88–93; Negroni Catacchio 2011, 91 f.; Montanaro 2018, 367–369, with a rich bibliography. For the question related to Picenum ivories: Bisi 1992, 128–139; Rocco 1999; Naso 2000, 128–134. 198–200; Rocco 2001, 103 f. 229 f.; Di Filippo Balestrazzi 2004, 63–67. 91–94, with other bibliographical references.

⁹ For the figured ambers from Ascoli Piceno at Museum of Philadelphia see: Warden 1994, 134–143; Naso 2000, 132–134; Negroni Catacchio 2001, 101–103; Di Filippo Balestrazzi 2004, 62–64; Negroni Catacchio 2011, 91 f.; Montanaro 2018, 367–369.

¹⁰ The amber from Tolve was studied by A. Russo (Russo 2005, 114–116). See also Bottini 2007, 235 f.; Montanaro 2016, 37 f.; Montanaro 2018, 370 fig. 10.

¹¹ For the amber from Minervino Murge: Corrente 1993, 23 f.; Montanaro 2012, 61 cat. I.5; Montanaro 2016, 37 f.; Montanaro 2018, 370 f.

¹² For the daedalic ambers see above all: Mastrocinque 1991, 101–114; Mastrocinque 2005, 45 f.; Nava 2007, 27 f.; Montanaro 2016, 36 f.; Montanaro 2018, 370 f., with further bibliography.

¹³ These are the fibulae from tomb 26 of Piazza Azzarita at Bologna: Malnati 2007, 124 f., with bibliography.

¹⁴ For the daedalic head from Chiaromonte see: Bianco 2005, 99–101; Bottini 2007, 235 f.; Bianco 2012, 86–89; Montanaro 2016, 36 f.; Montanaro 2018, 371 f., with a rich bibliography.

¹⁵ The amber pendant from Rutigliano and its funerary assemblage are illustrated in: Masiello 2004, 16–18, 42 f.; Masiello 2007, 245; Riccardi 2010, 348 f.; Montanaro 2012, 46 f. 72 cat. II.B.6, pls. 21–22; Montanaro 2015, 88–90, 182; Montanaro 2016, 36 f.; Montanaro 2018, 373 f., to which reference is made for a complete bibliography.

¹⁶ See, above all, for the diaspora of the Ionian artists, probably coming from the cities of Samos, Colophon and Ephesus: Mastrocinque 1991, 113–118; D’Ercole 2002, 160–170; Mastrocinque 2005, 45–48; Nava 2007, 28 f.; D’Ercole 2008, 16–18; Causey 2011, 104–106; D’Ercole 2013, 26–28; Montanaro 2016, 39 f.; Montanaro 2018, 374 f.; Causey 2019, 67–90, with further bibliography.

¹⁷ Towards the existence of two different stylistic groupings within the figured ambers of the ‘Satyr and Maenad Group’ see: D’Ercole 2002, 175–181; Montanaro 2012, 127 f. 199–202; Montanaro 2016, 40–43; Montanaro 2018, 374–377, with a complete bibliography.

¹⁸ For the amber sculptures belonging to the first stylistic trend see: D’Ercole 2002, 177 f.; Montanaro 2012, 59–61 cat. I.1 and I.6; Montanaro 2016, 40 f.; Montanaro 2018, 374 f., with many bibliographical references.

¹⁹ For the sculptures of the second stylistic trend see: Mastrocinque 1991, 135 f.; Negroni Catacchio 1999, 280 f. 290 f. figs. 4, 7; D’Ercole 2002, 163 f.; Bottini 2007, 232–235; Godeaux – Chambre 2011, 195 n. 238; Bottini 2012, 5–14; Montanaro 2012, 59–63 cat. I.2 and I.7; D’Ercole 2013, 22–29, 39–49; Montanaro 2016, 40–43; Montanaro 2018, 375 f.

²⁰ For the figured ambers belonging to the ‘Armento Group’ see: Bottini – Setari 1998, 469–471; Bottini 2007, 232–237; Montanaro 2016, 51–55; Montanaro 2018, 380 f.; Montanaro 2022 in press, with the complete bibliography.

²¹ For the amber *kouroi* preserved in the museums of London and Paris: Strong 1966, 65 f. n. 41; Mastrocinque 1991, 107–109; D’Ercole 2013, 19–21, with a rich bibliography.

²² For the *kore* of the Getty Museum see: Causey 2010, 12–24; Causey 2011, 100–103; Causey 2019, 137–144, cat. 8, with a rich bibliography. For the small bronze of Copenhagen: Riis 1957, 31–40. For the amber *kore* from Pontecagnano: Bonaudo et al. 2009, 203 f. fig. 17; Montanaro 2016, 51 f. fig. 17.

²³ For the ‘Master of the Winged Sphinx’ see: Mastrocinque 1991, 135–137; Bottini – Setari 1998, 470 f.; Negroni Catacchio 1999, 284–291; Mastrocinque 2005, 50 f.; Russo 2005, 117–119; Bottini 2007, 236 f.;

Nava 2007, 28 f.; Montanaro 2016, 55–59; Montanaro 2018, 381–385; Montanaro 2019; Montanaro 2022 in press, with a rich bibliography.

²⁴ For the Braida's sphinx and the other amber pendants from the same burial see: Bottini – Setari 1998, 469 f.; Bottini – Setari 2003, 101–103; Russo 2005, 117–119; Tagliente 2005, 73–78; Bottini 2007, 233–237; Setari 2012a, 83–86; Setari 2012b, 92–95, with many bibliographical references. For the crouched bull with human head from Armento: Strong 1966, 77 n. 68; Mastrocinque 1991, 129–135; Russo 2005, 124 f.; Bottini 2007, 235 f.; Montanaro 2018, 382 fig. 19; Montanaro 2019.

²⁵ For the little bronze from Monte Sannace: Montanaro 2019.

²⁶ For the production of figured ambers in Picenum during this age: Negroni Catacchio 1989, 662 f.; Mastrocinque 1991, 73–88; Naso 2000, 198–202; Negroni Catacchio 2001, 100–103; Landolfi 2001, 263–280. 358–360; Landolfi 2004, 73–78; Landolfi 2007, 171–184; Negroni Catacchio 2011, 91–95.

²⁷ For the 'Master of the Winged Sphinx' see: Mastrocinque 1991, 135–137; Bottini – Setari 1998, 470 f.; Negroni Catacchio 1999, 284–291; Mastrocinque 2005, 50 f.; Russo 2005, 117–119; Bottini 2007, 236 f.; Nava 2007, 28 f.; Montanaro 2016, 55–59; Montanaro 2018, 381–385; Montanaro 2019, with a rich bibliography.

²⁸ For the ivory crouching bull at the Metropolitan: Montanaro 2018, 385 f. fig. 25, with bibliography.

²⁹ For the production of animals with everted heads in Felsina: Negroni Catacchio 1989, 662 f. figs. 466–467; Mastrocinque 1991, 140 f.; Malnati 2007, 125 f.; Montanaro 2018, 385 f., with a rich bibliography.

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