

A BAL TIC  
WOR LDS  
feature

# The Amber Road

## CENTER AND PERIPHERY

**T**here are a number of places in East Central Europe that claim, with varying degrees of justification, to be the geographic midpoint of Europe. Hranice could well be one of them. If you place the point of a compass in this Moravian, Czech town and draw a circle on the map with a 1 500-kilometer radius, the line ends up running very close to London, Edinburgh, Trondheim, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Istanbul, Malta, Barcelona, Bordeaux, and Paris. But in Hranice it would appear that no big fuss is made about this “central” status; the town’s Web site and tourist brochures do not mention the matter at all, but rather highlight the natural beauty of the area and its beautiful historic buildings as tourist sites.

And on closer reflection, the town’s name seems like a mystification. The Czech *Hranice* means “border” (or “frontier”), which of course suggests periphery rather than center. What border? one might ask. For Hranice lies deep in the Czech Republic, far from any modern crossing points. If you go into one of the town’s three bookshops and take a look at the maps in the local historical literature, the matter becomes clearer: for a long time, this is where the border ran between two of the

**“Fossilized resin can be found in various parts of the world, but rarely of the quality and volume in which it appears in the ‘blue earth’ of Samland.”**

pieces of the puzzle of the strange political configuration known as “The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation” – the Duchy of Silesia, and the Margraveship of Moravia. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Hapsburgs were forced to cede Silesia to Prussia, the area also became a borderland between the two rival German state projects, the Austrian and the Prussian. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Austria established itself there with a military academy, the secondary school at which several people who would later become famous, such as Robert Musil and Rainer Maria Rilke, studied. At that time, the town was known in Europe under its traditional German name, Mährisch Weisskirchen.

The political border belongs to the past, but geographically and hydrographically, Hranice actually occupies an interesting limit position. The town lies in a depression generally known as the Moravian Gate, a valley passage between the winding highlands of the Sudetes (Sudeten) and the Beskids, which constitutes a link between the plains of Northern Europe and the Danube basin. This also means that Hranice is located in the watershed between two inland seas, the Baltic and Black seas. The Oder has its source in the massif Jeseník just north of the town, but Hranice is located at Běčva, which is a tributary of the Morava, which in turn flows into the Danube.

Borders exist to be crossed. They make it possible to control the flows of things; along them, places for mediation and transactions arise. I get a sense of what Hranice was like when I roam through the elongated medieval town center from the old town square past the former Jewish Quarter, with its synagogue, and further up towards the castle, originally built during the Middle Ages, later converted into a magnificent Renaissance palace.

The square by the palace is called Pernštejn Square, which with a different spelling is the same as Bernstein



PHOTO: XX

The re-created Amber Room in St. Petersburg.

Square – in English: Amber Square. In pre-modern, non-standardized German, *p* and *b* were for a long time interchangeable; the writing systems reflected dialectal variations in pronunciation. Here, the feudal lords were called precisely Pernstein/Bernstein. They had their seat a few dozen kilometers to the west, and their Hrad Pernštejn is the knightly castle of Moravian knightly castles, a glistening Gothic eagle's nest, impregnable and strangely preserved. Perhaps Pernštejn Square in Hranice is named after some person in the long series of magnates that have protected (and taxed) the town, perhaps the name simply refers to an important commodity involved in the activity that took place here under aegis of the castle – transshipment, inspection, assessment of taxes.

Radan Kvít conducts road research, and is thus a wanderer. For decades, he has studied the landscape of Central Europe, trudging around in muddy fields and scouted out ravines and fords, gathered traces of human wearing down of the terrain from times past. He contends that the old routes are not simply logistical memories; they also have significant symbolic dimensions, can be seen as a complex of symbols. They are bordered by the signs – natural phenom-

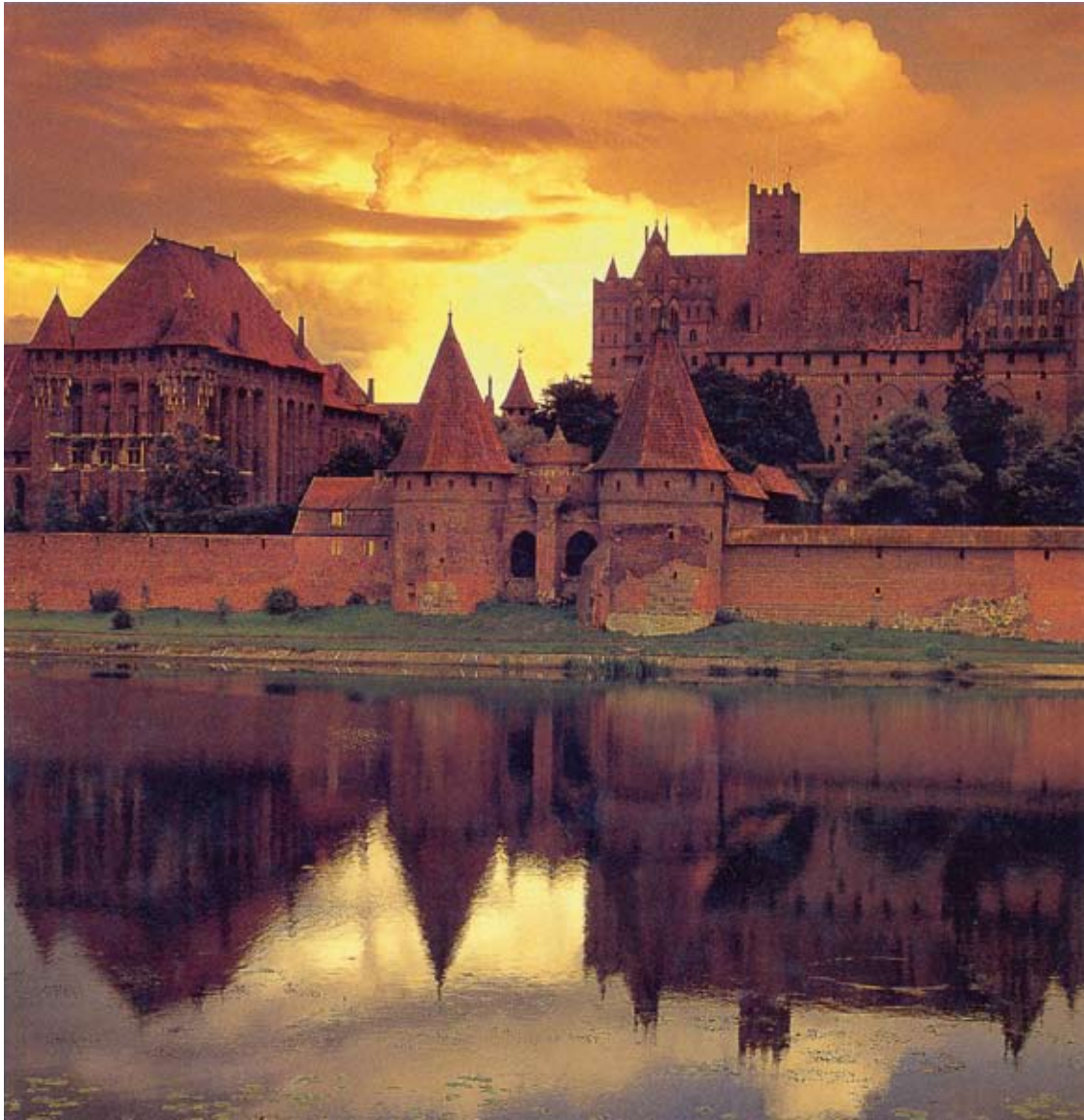
ena that have been given symbolic value, but also deliberately placed, interrelated buildings, and monuments. Before the time of roadmaps, traveling and finding the right path involved following a story, reading a saga. *Duše krajiny*, the soul of the landscape, is thus what Kvít called his book, a rich portrayal from 2003 on old highways. He devotes many pages to what in Czech is called *Jantarová stezka*, the “Amber Road”, and identifies the various segments of it that run through Moravia. I accompany him part of the way and soon realize that here, local history becomes world history.

### ROSARIES AND POLITICS

Samland has been called the most remote area of Europe, but, curiously, it lies in the continent's most central location. The remoteness in this case is more of a historical than geographical nature. Samland, the peninsula (sometimes known simply as Sambia in Latin documents) between the shallow Curonian and Vistula Lagoons, in the southeast corner of the Baltic Sea, was – along with neighboring Lithuania – the part of medieval Europe that was last to come under the control of

the Roman Church. It was in the 1220s that the Teutonic Knights first began to take control of this area; with a particularly strict regime, they forced the pagan local population, the Baltic Prussians, to eventually submit to the cross.

The Order of the Teutonic Knights of St. Mary's Hospital in Jerusalem was formed in 1190 in the Holy Land during the Third Crusade, originally in order to run a hospital for the crusaders from the German Empire, but the philanthropic purpose was soon transformed into something military and mercantile. It was recognized at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century that the era of the Crusades was ebbing in the Middle East, and attempts were made to find new fields of activity in Europe. One can wonder about the willingness of the leaders of the Order to travel to regions by the Baltic Sea that were, compared with the Levant, barren, inhospitable, and under-developed; but in 1226, when the Polish Duke Konrad I of Masovia requested their help against the intractable Baltic Prussians, they launched a massive campaign. Under the leadership of Hermann von Salza (the grand master of the Order, 1209-1230), who was honed at power plays, this effort resulted in the founding of the so-called State of the Teutonic Order, which



The Cathedral of Aquileia.



Equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius at the Capitolium in Rome.

Marienburg.

came to be the dominant political factor in the Baltic area until the end of the Middle Ages.

This change is usually seen as part of the general easterly expansion that characterizes the German Middle Ages. Landless, young noblemen (Junkers) sought a living by colonizing East Central Europe, which at that time was still sparsely populated. The expansion of German urbanism in the same direction went hand-in-hand with this process. But as far as Samland and the surrounding area are concerned – what would later be known as Prussia, and then East Prussia – I believe that there was an additional factor that contributed to the surprising attractiveness of the area: amber. One can imagine that von Salza, during his voyages across the Mediterranean – he also had time to participate in the Fifth Crusade, along with the mythical Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen – frequently fingered his prayer beads of glittering amber and realized that the attribute of holiness needed its own special production service by the Baltic Sea. In the State of the Teutonic Order, amber became a *regale*, and all finds became the property of the rulers. The production of rosaries made of amber beads became one of the primary sources of income for the state. Thus, the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century meant not only an ideological problem but also an economic problem. The demand

for rosary beads was drastically reduced. The secular Duchy of Prussia instead had to encourage production of extremely “profane” jewelry and ornaments.

### BURNING STONE

On the coast of Samland, people have been beachcombers since the Stone Age. After stormy weather in particular, it could be rewarding to comb the long stretches of sandy beaches. Chunks and small pieces of amber would wash ashore. Some were gunged up in tangled strands of seaweed and required laborious cleaning, others were already shiny and rinsed clean and could immediately be processed into jewelry, ornaments, or ritual objects. It was believed that amber was a gift from the sea, but in reality it’s a matter of 35-50 million-year-old memories of submerged forests – the resin of fossilized conifers, consisting of various types of pitch, succinic acid, and essential oils. Fossilized resin can be found in various parts of the world, but rarely of the quality and volume in which it appears in the “blue earth” of Samland, a sand layer located about ten meters below the level of the beach, ending under water six hundred meters out in the sea.

It wasn’t simply because of its beautiful color and texture that amber caught the attention of ancient

peoples. It also had a number of surprising properties. It could burn and evaporate, hence Low German’s *bernstên*, from *bernen*, to burn. Rubbing it yields a pleasant aromatic scent, and also makes it negatively electrically charged, giving it the ability to attract light objects such as human hair and pieces of paper. Thus, the word *electricity* derives from the Greek name for amber, *ēlektron*. (The English word *amber* stems from a medieval confusion of the stone with the secretions from the sperm-whales that came ashore, which were a popular raw material for things like perfume.) As early as antiquity, amber oil and succinic acid were extracted from the stones, which were thought to have medicinal properties. The Roman Pliny the Elder wrote extensively about the healing properties of amber; “in a pendant around the neck, it will heal fever and illnesses, crushed and mixed in honey and rose oil it will help against earache, and mixed with Attic honey it will also cure weakened eyesight.” That amber sometimes contained remarkably well-preserved encapsulated insects and plants simply added to the fascination.

As a result, it became a medium of exchange and an important commodity, which early on found a market in the Mediterranean. The Baltic and Slavic words for amber (*gintaras*, Lithuanian; *dzintars*, Latvian; *jantar*, Russian and Czech) are thought to derive from Phoe-

nician's *jainitar*, which probably meant marine resin. A large quantity of gems has been found in the royal tombs at Mycenae that have been chemically determined to be Baltic amber, or *succinit*, which is the scientific name, from the Latin *succinum* (*succinic* acid is thus "acid of amber"). In Imperial Rome a huge demand arose; here people wanted *succinum* for jewelry as well as temple adornments and palace interiors. The historian Tacitus speaks, a bit condescendingly, of how the barbarians by the northern seas aimlessly wander collecting the coveted substance, which they call *glaesum*, and which the Romans then quite meritoriously know to import, process, and market. And it is the Gothic, Germanic word for amber he gives us, which we recognize in the modern word *glass*. For in Tacitus's time, before migrations stirred up the European pot, the coastal areas in that corner of the Baltic were Gothic.

## SALT JUNCTIONS

But how did this *glaesum* reach Rome, how was it transformed into *succinum*? It is probably best to begin by dismissing Tacitus's picture of the aimless barbarians on the beaches of Samland. In Tacitus's time, the processing and trade in amber already had a history going back several thousands of years, and surely had its specific organizational forms, with political consequences. Indeed, it may even have been amber that drew the Goths to this part of the Baltic, if they in fact were from Scandinavia – a notoriously contentious matter. There was an amber road, and it was important that it be maintained and monitored. Various monitors presented themselves over the years.

Kalisz is said to be Poland's oldest city. The evidence for this comes from the mathematician and geographer Claudius Ptolemaeus (Ptolemy) of Alexandria, who, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, mentions a place by the name of Kalisia.

That the area was, for millennia, an important meeting place is clear, even if the town of Kalisz as such was established later, in the Middle Ages. For here two major European routes cross: one that goes from the southeast to the northwest and conveys a bodily food stuff, *salt*; and one that went from north to south and transported a particularly spiritual, symbolic, and aesthetic necessity, *amber*. The salt was transferred from the salt lands of Halychyna (Galicia), to salt-poor North-western Europe; and amber, to *succinum*-thirsty Rome.

In his thought-provoking book *Salt*, cultural historian Mark Kurlansky suggested an interesting and fruitful perspective on a culture whose identity has been strangely elusive for historians and archaeologists: the Celts. It should be pointed out that the modern use of the name Celts – which was introduced by the craze during Romanticism for druids and harps – is a misunderstood re-use of the Greek *keltoi*, which was never a precise ethnic designation. Ancient people knew the Celts as *Gauls*. According to the historical handbooks there appear to have been Gauls almost everywhere in Europe during the last millennium before Christ, not just in the areas which the Romans called *Gallia*. The picture is muddled. Were they a people, an empire, a language group, a religion?

Kurlansky points out that the Gauls were "masters

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of salt"; the name is derived from the stem *hal* or *gal*, that exists in several languages – including Greek – which means precisely salt (the Latin pronunciation slid towards *sal*). The Gauls were thus "the salt people". Place names throughout Europe speak volumes about the history of salt mining and extraction that the Gauls controlled; the German cities of Halle and Schwäbisch Hall arose around ancient salt sources. The Austrian name Hallein means "salt works", the nearby Hallstatt "salt place". And not far from them there is even Salzburg. And then of course we have the important provinces of Galicia in Poland/Ukraine (in Polish: *Galicja*, Ukrainian: *Halychyna*) and Galicia in northern Spain. These Gauls should perhaps be thought of as a cosmopolitan salt trading aristocracy, a kind of continental Hansa that had river valleys and mountain passes as its fairways. A certain cultural uniformity may have been formed because of these salt interests, much like the bourgeois guild spirit of the medieval trading cities around the Baltic Sea, or like the upper-class culture that tied together the European nobility of the early modern period. We can thus find "Celtic" elements in archaeological material from highly diverse parts of Europe, without this necessarily implying there was a common language or an established ethnicity. A more solid culture may have begun to be formed during the collision with the emerging Roman Empire, but it was then dissolved because of the Romans' successful policy of conquest and Latinization.

My detour onto the salt road was precipitated by the thought that the city name Kalisia/Kalisz also could be an allusion to Gallic activity. For it is the salt men that are thought to have provided the trade and transport along the Amber Road during antiquity with its efficient organization. Here in Kalisz I begin to understand how the route stretched along the river valleys and over the lowest points of the watersheds. From Samland, the route went first towards the southwest in the direction of the estuary of the Vistula. The Teutonic Order – with the support of amber revenue – built its main office at a strategic point in the region, the enormous Castle in Malbork (German: *Die Marienburg*), with a bridge within the castle built over the Nogat, a branch of the Vistula.

From there, one could follow the Vistula upstream to Thorn/Toruń, where one crossed the river in order to cross, via the old trading place Kruszwica, the Warta, a tributary of the Oder, which was reached at Konin. In Konin, a medieval road marker is preserved, a stone pillar dated 1151, which indicates the halfway point from Kruszwica to Kalisz.

What was it like to travel this route? Imagine col-

umns of packhorses, protected by armed guards – those brought along, hired, or added by local rulers – caravans of sorts, quite simply, even if the word sounds unfamiliar in a European context. A network of roads for vehicular traffic hardly existed north of the Danube. The Amber Road was rather a route of beaten paths. Here and there, accessibility over swamps and marshland was improved with landfill and corduroy roads. At places such as Konin and Kalisz, there were guest houses for safe overnight stays.

From Kalisz south one could choose a western branch that led to Breslau/Wrocław, or one to the east that led directly down to the Moravian Gate. After reaching the watershed at Hranice, one could follow the Morava river valley south towards the Danube, which in Roman times was the Mediterranean world's front-lines – here ran the *limes*, the fortified border.

## BORDER MEN AND ROMANS

**Such as bathing appears to thee – oil, sweat, dirt, filthy water, all things disgusting – so is every part of life and everything.**

(Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 8:24)

The shadowy people of the forest were called *Marcomanni*, frontier men. Ambushes at ravines and fords; silent arrows that suddenly bored into oak trunks. The Romans made punishing and forbidding intrusions to the north along the mysterious tributaries. Dangerous missions for the legionnaires, over the *limes* – the limit, the threshold.

In 179 AD, Emperor Marcus Aurelius personally commanded the legions guarding the border. At night he wrote. In Greek.

**That he who is discoursing about men should look also at earthly things as if he viewed them from some higher place; should look at them in their assemblies, armies, agricultural labors, marriages, treaties, births, deaths, noise of the courts of justice, desert places, various nations of barbarians, feasts, lamentations, markets, a mixture of all things and an orderly combination of contraries.**

(Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 7:48)

The frontier city Carnuntum on the south side of the Danube had bath houses, amphitheatres and mosaics. Gladiatorial games entertained the 60,000 inhabitants. On the streets, the Mediterranean and continental European met: togas and trousers. Wine (and later viniculture) took the leap northward across the Danube, the amber was rowed over for further transport to the Mediterranean. The town was originally Celtic; the name comes from the Celtic word *cairn*, which means "rock".

Marcus Aurelius, the philosophical and philanthropic Stoic, felt forced to make tough and barbaric campaigns in order to maintain the Roman regime beyond the Danube. But he did not just sit safely behind the fortifications of Carnuntum; he followed the legions. Parts of the *Meditations*, his self-reflections, are written in a military encampment "among the Quadi at Granna",

at the Hron River deep in what is now Slovakia: “Surely you have at one point seen a severed hand or foot, or a head, lying separated from the rest the body.” Villages burned to the ground, slave transportation, drawn-out trade negotiations in a confusion of tongues with the chiefs and warlords.

When you travel between Vienna and Bratislava along the southern bank of the Danube, and pass the town of Petronell-Carnuntum, where the preserved remains of Carnuntum are located, Devín Castle, perched on a cliff, stands out on the northern bank of the river in a dramatic profile against the evening sun: a barren mass of rock, sculpted by water and wind, crowned with the remains of the fortifications of various empires. Adjacent to the cliff and its castle there is an affluent – the Morava/March makes its tribute to the Danube.

A place for reconnaissance, for keeping an eye on the unpredictable people beyond the border. The Romans built a support point on the Devín rock, in foreign territory on the north bank of the Danube.

**Of human life the time is a point, and the substance is in a flux, and the perception dull, and the composition of the whole body subject to putrefaction, and the soul of a whirl, and fortune hard to divine, and fame a thing devoid of judgment. And, to say all in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and vapor, and life is a warfare and a stranger’s sojourn, and after-fame is oblivion.**

(Written in Carnuntum. *Meditations* 2:17)

It was important to have an overview of the confluence of the two rivers for several reasons. It was along the course of the Morava that the merchants that brokered the highly coveted golden-red splendor from the northern beaches traveled. In the time of Emperor Nero, an expedition was dispatched in order to find out where the glowing amber actually came from. The traffic had to be protected from looting and disruption. Shouldn’t one be able to incorporate the amber country into the empire? The scouts eventually returned, well-stocked with succinum, but they advised against any military adventure. The amber coast was too far away, and the routes through the pathless forests would be impossible to control. Better, then, to work at a distance, by proxy and federations, *foederati*.

The Romans also determined to a large extent how things would be in the areas *beyond* the limes. They divided and ruled in the changing pattern of alliances and conflicts that spread over the stateless Forest of Europe. When one reads in the works of Tacitus and other Romans of the Germanic peoples, one can get the impression that there were stable nations and ancient traditions. But many of the “tribes” Tacitus lists were products of political events that went back only a few generations.

The Romans were involved in the creation of these “German peoples”; they arose from the particular conditions and needs generated by the border. The popular name Marcomanni seems originally to have been a sort of *professional designation*, on analogy with the Gallic masters of salt: the frontier men (or “border men”)

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were people that had developed special skills as border guards, merchants (for example merchants of amber) and brokers. They ran a kind of protection racket in no man’s land and might demand tributes from both the Romans, who needed them as guarantors of border security, and from the original inhabitants, who very much wanted access to the Roman luxury goods, and in addition very much wanted to avoid being exported to the south as slaves. Those who could not pay the protection money were of course sold to the Roman slave traders. In this matter, the Marcomanni had basically no scruples; human-trafficking was perhaps the most important border trade.

The Romans showered the cooperative bosses of the frontier trade with honors; made them dependent. But every now and then these *foederati* became so wealthy and influential that they became a threat to Rome.

The legendary Marcomanni oligarch Marbod was to a great degree a Roman product. He spent his youth in Rome, spoke Latin, and became an acquaintance of Augustus. Back at the territory on the Main in central Germania, which until then belonged to the Marcomanni, he found that the possibilities for the traditional operations had deteriorated considerably because of the Romans’ campaign (which later collapsed) to incorporate the land between the Rhine and the Elbe. So he moved the operation to Bohemia and Moravia around the year 9 AD. Intertwined with the local Celtic/Gallic aristocracy, and in league with the Quadi, who dominated parts of Moravia and Slovakia, the Marcomanni then became an important factor along the central part of the Danube. In the 160s AD, their protection racket became too keenly felt in northern Italy; this led to Marcus Aurelius’s protracted Danube campaigns. Large military camps were built on the north side of the river; the emperor was obviously attempting to out-manuever the difficult to control frontier men by moving the border further north. But when Marcus Aurelius died in 180 AD, the plans were abandoned. The Marcomanni remained, but it is significant that when the Roman Empire eventually dissolved and the border disappeared, the frontier men also disappeared in the early medieval borderlessness. They are not mentioned after the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that they changed names and became the core of the Bavarii, the ancestors of the Bavarians.

## TOWARDS THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Amber Road had existed for thousands of years when the Romans entered the Central European scene as prefects of a hitherto unseen caliber. The old routes and paths south of the Danube were now incorporated into the Roman road network. The limes did not pre-

vent the north-south trade, the trade in fact intensified. Carnuntum can be thought of as a place of transshipment, where Northern Europeans exchanged their loads of amber for Roman wines or luxury items such as bronze vessels or glass; Roman trading operations and “forwarding agents” took over the amber baton. From Carnuntum, which was in the province of Pannonia Superior, a route ran south through what today is the border region between Austria and Hungary, passed the citadel of Scarbantia (Sopron) and the Roman colony of Savaria (Szombathely), then turned off to the southwest and, via Emona (Ljubljana), reached the Adriatic Sea at Aquileia.

In 181 BC, in the coastal country of the Veneti between the Po estuary and Istria, the Romans founded a colony that had military significance as well as significance for trade policies. It was here that Marcus Aurelius had his primary base during the campaign against the Marcomanni. As a fortress, Aquileia was the key to the northern Italian plains; as a trade center it was the final destination of the amber as a raw material. In Aquileia, much of the imported amber was processed into jewelry, amulets, talismans and idols, and art objects. The size of the city (about 100,000 inhabitants) and its unusually cosmopolitan character – even by Roman standards – is probably the reason that it became one of the Empire’s first centers of Christianity. Just a few years after the Christ cult had become the state religion, the city’s bishop, Theodorus, built a cathedral the mosaic floors of which are preserved in the cathedral as it exists today. During the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the bishop of Aquileia took on the title of Patriarch, with claims to take the position in rank right below the pope. But the city – which had been invaded by Attila the Hun in 452 – was depopulated after the invasion by the Lombards in 568, and was soon transformed into an insignificant village. The Patriarchate was tenacious, but in the end was transferred to Venice in 1451. At that point, Aquileia consisted of little more than the cathedral.

According to one of the founding legends of Venice, it was fleeing residents of Aquileia that founded the lagoon city. This is in all likelihood a myth, but Venice in many respects did indeed take over the role Aquileia had had as a point of contact between Central Europe and the Mediterranean world. Perhaps it is no accidental occurrence that the Teutonic Order ran its network from a palace in Venice until 1309, when its seat was moved to the emerging Marienburg. The combination of crusades and amber was good business, both for the Venetians and for the Order.

## AMBER KING OF SAMLAND

At the end of 1700, Frederick III, Elector of Brandenburg, succeeded – after ten years of negotiations – in obtaining a favor from his feudal lord, the emperor in Vienna. Frederick was “at a time of his choosing, on the basis of his duchy, Prussia, to be permitted to declare himself, and be crowned, king”.

The elector immediately set to work. In Berlin, three hundred wagons were loaded with coronation appurtenances, whereupon the court, with the help of three thousand horses in brutal winter weather, began to move towards Prussia. On December 29, Frederick arrived with his entourage at the old castle of the Cru-



The Danube and the Morava by Devín.



Piece of amber.



Detail from the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome.

saders in Königsberg. Coronation ceremonies commenced on January 15, 1701. Four heralds, twenty-four trumpeters and two timpanists rode through the city, followed by sixty noblemen and a cavalry squadron. Golden commemorative coins were thrown into the crowd. Wine flowed from fountains. The people were fed with a roasted ox, stuffed with lamb, rabbits, geese, and other birds. Frederick III of Brandenburg was now Frederick I, “König in Preußen”.

The spectacle marked the establishment of the modern Prussian state, but it was also the culmination of an enormous cultural-political effort. Since his accession to power in 1688, Frederick had single-mindedly striven to give his realm the status of a modern territorial state. Via extensive patronage, Berlin, a mediocre county town with 30,000 inhabitants on the spartan outskirts of the German Empire, would shine as the new Athens. Artists and scholars were recruited; vast collections of art and antiques were brought in. Frederick wanted to bring the continent’s cultural heritage to the sandy banks of the Spree, where the new power – established upon the permanent and legitimizing piles constituted by the ancient heritage – would surpass the Hellenes and the Romans.

“The King in Prussia” also reigned over Samland, something Nero had once dreamed of in vain. The glowing gift of the beach became an important marker of identity, the *regale* of the Teutonic Knights still carried great weight, and even until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ornamental objects of amber were the standard gift of the Prussian kings to other royal houses of Europe. Perhaps as evidence that he outshone Nero and the latter’s legendary *Domus Aurea* (“golden house”) in Rome, Frederick I had his craftsmen decorate an entire room in the palace in Berlin in amber, in the magnificent baroque classicism that was the trademark of the Prussian state. During a visit to Berlin, Peter the Great was impressed by the splendor of the amber, and Frederick’s successor, the prosaic soldier-king Frederick William I, who had little interest in aesthetic showiness, gave away the decorations to the Tsar. It was installed in the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, but was later moved to Tsarskoye Selo.

During the Siege of Leningrad, the Amber Room was dismantled by the German occupiers and taken to Königsberg Castle, where it was stored in its disassembled condition. In the final stages of the war, the old Königsberg was destroyed during the British bombardment and the Soviet ground attack, and turned into the backwater of Kaliningrad. The blackened remains

of the castle were demolished. The fate of the Amber Room is unknown. Numerous more or less improbable theories abound in popular historical literature.

In connection with the restoration of the palace in Tsarskoye Selo, work was begun in 1976 on a reconstruction of the Amber Room, whose whereabouts are still unknown. The Russians now had control of Samland, where the classic deposits in Palmnicken (renamed Yantarny) had been industrially processed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After German reunification in 1990 and the establishment of new German-Russian relations, the restoration project acquired an altered political significance. The re-created Amber Room was opened in 2003 in connection with St. Petersburg’s 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the presence of President Putin and Chancellor Schroeder.

Amber ended up conjoining, once again, seemingly incommensurably great realms. My excursion along the Amber Road has given me a different and, in two senses, interdisciplinary perspective on the broader European picture. The focus of the traditional historical narratives and atlases on the kingdoms, borders, and boundaries does not do justice to the many thousands of years of connections that stretch across the continent. The limes was no Iron Curtain, the Celts not simply harp players. The Amber Road, as it was organized by the collaborative efforts of the Romans and the Celts/Gauls, was a lasting inter-European system for mutual cultural and economic exchange. The inhabitants of the North probably knew more about the Romans than the Romans knew about them – this is apparent immediately when you read Tacitus’s ethnocentric depictions. There was reciprocity. The beach dwellers of the Baltic acquired beautiful things from Aquileia, with the help of the frontier men. And one can imagine adventurous voyages of Scandinavian mercenaries and pilgrims heading home along the route through Hranice, Konin, and Kruszwica – the shortest route from Rome to Scandia. ≈

anders hammarlund

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