It is said that Lithuanians, having an innate love of amber, know the value of this Baltic gold; it is in their blood, part of their identity. People from other cultures, whose acquaintance with amber may only be recent, need to understand it. Yet the world of amber is so broad, deep and mysterious that it can always be seen in a different light. It moves the heart, quickens the mind, brings pleasure, wonder, awe, or magic fascination with one of the most powerful symbols of Lithuania, its identity for the world. On opening the treasure chest of ancient myths, one finds that Baltic myths are as old as the world, and amber shines with colours never before seen. There are hoary legends, but also more recent stories, which with time will be transformed into amber folklore. Probably no other people have as many keys to the secrets of amber as do the Lithuanians. Today, amber fulfils more of an aesthetic function, but thousands of years ago, when the ancestors of the present-day Lithuanians were the first to look at amber as a divine gift from the restless floor of the Baltic Sea, it had magic powers. Amulets of amber protected and defended the wearer and ensured success; they were offered as sacrifices to the gods and for the commemoration of ancestors. For the Baltic shore-dwellers, amber was the first and most important merchandise; it was an object of desire for kings, pharaohs, Roman gladiators and for the most beautiful women in the world. Amber opened up broader avenues for commerce and knowledge of the wider world. Amber was also the holy stone used as incense on pagan Baltic altars; it accompanied people in marriage ceremonies and on military expeditions, and was buried with the dead. This unique fossil, a 50 million year old impressive witness to history, still pulses with life today.
Nearly 50 years ago at Šventoji, a complex of Neolithic-Bronze Age dwellings was discovered, together with a treasure trove of amber artefacts as well as amber planchets for trade.

Had it not been for amber and the Europe-wide fascination with its archaeology, it might have taken a far longer time for the unique sandy peninsula of Kuršių Nerija (Curonian Spit), now a UNESCO World Heritage site, to reach the resort status it enjoys today. It was largely amber that transformed the small, humble fishing village of Juodkrantė into one of the top Eastern Baltic Sea resorts, and this in turn inspired other Curonian Spit dwellers to develop their towns into recreational oases.

It all started in the mid-19th century when the peninsula was part of the Kingdom of Prussia. During dredging operations to deepen the shipping lane through the Curonian Lagoon, a vein of amber was accidentally discovered on the bed of the Lagoon. Nuggets of amber fell from every bucketful of sand and mud brought up from the floor of the Lagoon.
Before long, the Stantien & Becker Company launched an amber reclamation operation near Juodkrantė, and between 1862 and 1890, 2,250 tonnes of amber were brought up from the Lagoon floor near Juodkrantė.

**In the process of mining Baltic gold, a small harbour for amber excavating machinery was constructed in a place now known as Gintaro įlanka (Amber Cove). It is a lasting reminder of the legendary treasure of Juodkrantė, which attained worldwide fame.**

Steam-powered machines floating in the Lagoon produced Baltic gold by digging and raising the sand with large scoops and then sifting through it. At the height of the activity, 21 steam-powered excavators would be chugging away in the Lagoon, providing work for about 1,000 employees.

Along with amber stones, the workers occasionally brought up amber artefacts hitherto unseen: buttons with little holes in them, straw-shaped beads, discs and various trapezes. However, what came as the biggest surprise were human and animal-shaped figurines.

At first, no one had a clue that one of the most significant Neolithic-Bronze Age treasure troves of amber artefacts in the world had been discovered. The employees gave the figurines to their family members and loved ones as gifts, and bartered or sold them to visitors to Juodkrantė as keepsakes and souvenirs.

Only three years later, when news of the discovery of this unbelievable cache of amber in the Curonian Lagoon reached the ears of scholars at the University of Königsberg, did the uncontrolled pocketing of amber artefacts cease. Once the Prussian order took effect, the workers were forbidden to remove any finds of amber.

However, strict rules and practices did not stop the thieves: excavation workers and amber sorters imagined ways to hide away pieces of amber, for example, in... a loaf of bread.

Scholars were able to collect and write descriptions for 435 artefacts from Juodkrantė. News of these discoveries became known around the world and had the effect of a bomb exploding in the circles of archaeologists and collectors.

Juodkrantė and the Curonian coast are still renowned for these objects made almost six thousand years ago. Some amber amulets and human figurines are considered to be the oldest and the most masterful examples of figurative art in Lithuania. Copies of some of them can be seen in the Amber Museum in Palanga.

What is the origin of the unique amber amulets? In the Stone Age, the Curonian Spit was a chain of islands, and it is believed that near Juodkrantė there used to be a significant and long-used religious site. The amber amulets might have been thrown into the water or wetlands as offerings to the gods.

Some of the Juodkrantė amulets are fertility symbols, a few are associated with fishing or hunting. It is thought that the human-shaped amulets may have been worn by soothsayers and represented deified ancestors, guardian spirits of the time seen as rulers of the world.

**At the sale points of amber craft products, little amber figurines can occasionally be found with holes under the armpits.**

Old people say that parents or godparents used to present new-borns with these amulets. They would put an amber amulet in the cradle or hang it near the child's bed in the belief that the amulet would protect the child from the evil eye, disease, and kidnapping, and would make the baby grow strong. It is said that a person would wear the amber amulet they received as a baby for the rest of their life.

This playful little figure could bring not only safety and success for the wearer of the amulet, but was also the sign of a special bond between the child and the parents who gave it. These pendants are still popular today as a unique gift for children.

There are plans to set up an exhibition of 19th century amber excavations featuring an old operational excavator in this legendary place - Amber Cove.
From antiquity, nations acquainted with the magical powers of amber created myths and legends about its origins, and before science definitely answered the question, uniformly attributed the origin of this shining mineral to gods and supernatural phenomena.

One of the stories that circulated in the ancient world concerned the death of the god Phaeto, who tragically was unable to control the chariot of the Sun and set fire to the Earth. The tears of his mourning mother and sisters turned into amber.

Yet the most moving story about amber comes from Baltic mythology and is still recounted today. It is a romantic tale about the sea goddess Jūratė [“jūra” means “sea”], the brave coastal fisherman Kastytis and the Baltic god Perkūnas [his name means “thunder”], under whose gaze this story of love and pain unfolded.

**Long, long ago, at the bottom of the Baltic Sea, there lived a sea goddess of indescribable beauty: Jūratė. Her splendid palace on the seabed was made entirely from amber, with golden doorsteps and roofs covered in amber tiles shaped like fish scales.**

Jūratė’s retinue consisted of sea nymphs and mermaids who had magical voices and could mesmerise and seduce handsome young men with their songs. The nymphs and mermaids caressed the men until they promised to come and live with them on the seabed. Any man that dared to resist their charms had a spell cast on him and was stifled.

However, since the goddess Jūratė was more reserved and rarely set out to lure men, it had been a long time since she had experienced any human affection when she set eyes on a brave, handsome young fisherman called Kastytis, who used to cast his strong nets at the mouth of the Šventoji river. He was the only man that Jūratė noticed or regarded with affection. She would sail
up to the shore in an amber boat with her retinue of nymphs. The nymphs smiled, sang and tempted the young Kastytis in various ways, but he remained unmoved. Jūratė loved him all the more, and was overwhelmed with a great passion for the bold fisherman, forgetting her own supernatural origin.

Kastytis was unable to resist the charm of the supernaturally beautiful Jūratė, whereas the goddess dedicated herself to the mortal man and would come to see him on the shore every evening. The couple would climb to the top of a high hill, still called after the fisherman Kastytis today, and would spend many happy hours together. Their love could be said to be as pure as a drop of clear amber carried on the waves. They radiated happiness like Jūratė's amber palace on the seabed.

However, the all-seeing eye of the god Perkūnas spotted the lovers and condemned the illicit affair between a goddess and a mortal, an ordinary fisherman. In his ire, Perkūnas, god of thunder and lightning, hurled a series of lightning bolts into the depths of the Baltic Sea, smashing the shining palace of Jūratė into tiny fragments. Kastytis paid with his life for failing to resist the charms of the goddess.

Perkūnas also punished Jūratė for breaking the celestial ban on ties with mortals by chaining her to the remains of her ruined palace with the body of her beloved Kastytis at her feet. Grief wrenched Jūratė’s heart while her longing and unending dirges were reflected in the restless energy of the waves on the Baltic Sea.

To this day, when storms whip up the Baltic Sea, white-crested waves wash tiny pieces of the amber palace ashore, and as the immortal Jūratė still grieves over her lost love, her amber tears are washed and dispersed by the waves over the sandy beaches of Lithuania. Fine pieces of clear amber tossed out by the mournful sea symbolise the pure and beautiful love between the remarkable goddess Jūratė and the bold but humble fisherman Kastytis.
A TRADE WHICH ATTRACTIONED PUNISHMENT

Once amber is dug up and exposed to air it can last about 300 years, but it slowly oxidises and disintegrates.

Amber fishers today

Gintarautojai – amber gatherers
The amber fishers, or gintarautojai [“gintaras” means “amber”], are a living part of the seashore heritage, preserved and venerated for thousands of years in Lithuania – they are representatives of a rare, exotic and dangerous trade. Their activity and adventures have long been shrouded in legend, and they carefully guard their trade secrets, transmitting them from generation to generation.

Today, anyone can walk along the Baltic shore and gather amber, or try their luck netting the waves for the gemstone, but it was not always thus.

In the Middle Ages, most of the present-day Lithuanian coast, which had formerly belonged to the Baltic people, was conquered by the Teutonic Knights, who forbade the gathering of amber along the seashore. The invaders monopolised almost the entire trade of processing and selling Baltic gold.

A Royal decree applied for hundreds of years to coastal areas making it obligatory to hand over to the Government all amber that was found. The privilege of collecting amber was granted only to registered amber collectors upon payment of a fee. In the early 15th century, the fee was paid in salt: for each piece of amber found, an equivalent weight of salt had to be paid. Tax agents closely followed the amber gatherers on foot and horseback.

There were also the so-called “amber courts”, which meted out severe punishments for misappropriation of amber. 2 pounds (about 700 grams at that time) of illegally collected amber could merit flogging or even death by hanging, whereas greater amounts could lead even to that most horrible of medieval tortures: death by being broken on “the wheel”. It is said that as late as the 19th century, some larger seaside towns had executioners to carry out the death penalty for the unauthorised collection of amber.

At one point in history, it was illegal even to walk along the beach, and a person caught doing so would have been punished, even without amber. Up to the beginning of the 19th century, amber could be collected only by hirelings or serfs, who had to swear not to keep even the tiniest piece of amber and to report anyone who did so. Accomplished informers would be rewarded with exemption from military service, while thieves would be sent into the heat of battle as raw recruits.

Only in 1867 were people allowed once again to gather amber freely along the Baltic coast or to fish for it, although for a while longer amber could be sold only to the Government.

It is believed that there are several dozen people in Lithuania who make their living from gathering and selling amber. Rain or snow, day or night, whenever the wind and storms are right, amber fishermen rush off to their secret favourite spots to fish for amber. This difficult and tiring job is not only uncommon, but also dangerous, since an amber fisherman can be knocked over by a wave and washed out to sea. It is also bad for one’s health: many elderly amber gatherers often complain of joint disorders.

However, Baltic gold seekers feel that all this is justified by a modicum of success: on a good day they can gather enough amber to pay for a wedding breakfast.

The Baltic gold should be collected just after a storm, not during the storm. When the waves die down, sea currents roll the much sought-after amber gems along the seabed. Birds help to discover where amber has been deposited. It is likely to be found in places where birds gather after a storm, and where the waves are seen to be carrying debris. Amber can also be found where the sea has deposited mounds of seaweed and driftwood in a ribbon along the shore. But it takes an old expert of this rare profession to sense the real “amber wind” which can herald amber gems as large as a fist gleaming in the waves...

The largest piece of amber in Lithuania ever to be found in the Baltic Sea weighs 3.8 kg.
TRACES OF THE AMBER ROOM IN LITHUANIA

A fragment of the Amber Room reconstructed
In 1997 German Police caught the son of a former Nazi soldier trying to sell an authentic fragment of a mosaic from the Amber Room.

The Eighth Wonder of the World, one of the biggest secrets of World War II – these are but two of the many references to the renowned mystery-shrouded Amber Room that people have been searching for since the end of the Second World War. The threads of the mystery lead to Lithuania.

The Amber Room was an artistic masterpiece created by German and Danish craftsmen for the King of Prussia, Friedrich I in the early 18th century, and valued at 8 million dollars. The walls of this impressive work of art were adorned with amber mosaics and gold leaf attached to amber panels in a special way so that the amber refracted light reflected from the gold in a variety of hues. The walls and ceilings of the Amber Room were decorated with frescos, ornaments or sculptured scenes.

In 1716 Friedrich Wilhelm, son of Friedrich I, made a gift of the Amber Room to the Russian Tsar Peter I. The fine work of art was installed in the palace of the Empress Catherine in a suburb of St Petersburg. However, during World War II, after attacking Soviet Union, the Germans dismantled the gift of the Prussians and shipped it to a palace in Königsberg. However, at the end of the war the Wonder of the World was nowhere to be found. The Amber Room became a kind of mirage, a treasure much desired and sought after, but with a curse attached: many of the most assiduous searchers disappeared in mysterious circumstances...

One of the rumours still circulating today is that the Amber Room was secretly dismantled and hidden somewhere along the Baltic coast. This hypothesis gained strength from the fact that the last known whereabouts of the masterpiece was a city in close vicinity – Kaliningrad (Königsberg).

In 1998 the eyes of all believers in the Amber Room legend and treasure searchers turned to the quaint little fishing village of Preila, on the Curonian Spit in Lithuania. It took more than a year of intensive negotiations with the Lithuanian Government for German treasure hunters to get permission to dig up a small patch of ground on the edge of the Curonian Lagoon.

The search had been inspired by the testimony of an old German man, who had spoken out about his unusual experience in Preila in 1944 during World War II. A young fellow then, he and some friends had chanced to notice some boats pull in near Preila. Working quietly, the crew had unloaded 24 huge metal-lined wooden boxes and brought them secretly ashore. The mysterious cargo had then been hidden in ice cellars, deep below the ground. The locals used to dig such cellars in autumn and fill them with ice from the Lagoon in winter to be able to keep their fish catch cool during the warm season.

Once the boxes had been safely buried, the mysterious wayfarers had disappeared. The incident long remained a riddle to the witnesses, as it had happened in that same year of 1944 when the Amber Room had last been seen before vanishing.

During the 1998 expedition, the coast was explored and several underwater areas were searched by building a caisson, pumping out the water and digging up the seabed; but it was all in vain. The enthusiastic Germans found nothing there, but that does not mean that nothing is to be found...
Amber was mentioned in the tenth century B.C. in Assyrian cuneiform texts, where it is stated that in the sea where the North winds mix (Persian Gulf), merchants collect pearls; while in the sea where the Pole Star shines (Baltic Sea), they collect yellow amber.
What lengths we humans can go to and what endeavours we can pursue when we want to obtain the ever-so-coveted Northern Gold, is amply illustrated in a 19th story about an incredible method of searching for amber.

The story began in Paris, France, in 1867, when two German business partners and friends, Friedrich Wilhelm Stantien and Moritz Becker, were visiting a remarkable technology fair. Their company, employing dozens of workers, had been excavating amber on the Curonian Lagoon seabed near Juodkrantė for five years, but having retrieved tens of thousands of kilograms of amber they were still dissatisfied with the output. The businessmen wanted to make their magic goose lay more golden eggs.

In Paris they set their eyes on a very innovative thing for that era: a diving suit. The shrewd amber magnates were aware that attempts to extract amber from the sea floor with divers had been made (on the Semba peninsula in the Kaliningrad area) as far back as 1725, however unsuccessfully due to the primitive diving suits available and the great danger they represented for the divers. However, they thought that with the invention of airtight diving suits, everything could change...

The businessmen brought some diving gear to Juodkrantė along with two French diving instructors. After giving some instruction to the locals, the Frenchmen, less resistant to the Baltic coast climate than the hardy locals, decided to leave, as they considered that the cold climate and water as well as the perpetual winds created unacceptable conditions.

During the years 1869–1885, the German-owned amber excavation company had up to 50 small vessels from which it conducted amber-gathering operations. It also had 60 diving kits and 300 men to dive in search of amber on the seabed.

However, even with diving equipment that was modern enough for those times, the work was difficult and dangerous. At first the divers, working in murky, cold water in the face of constant danger, only inspected the seabed and the lagoon floor. Yet they achieved their goal: they found that the vein of amber adjacent to Juodkrantė was 5 metres in depth, starting 2.5 metres below the level of the sea floor. So work moved along under the water, on the water and on the shore. The divers worked on both the sea floor and the lagoon floor.

However, they were unaware of the heavy price to be paid for the much-desired rock of the Sun. No matter how modern the diving equipment was for those times, pressure at those depths affected the divers’ lungs and ears; some of them even went deaf.

Nevertheless, the divers did a splendid job: the brave men in their diving suits explored large areas of the seabed and found deposits of the so-called blue earth (the amber layer). After that, special machines with crowbars and shovels continued to excavate the amber.

The era of the frogmen continued for almost twenty-five years until the end of the 19th century, when the amount of amber retrieved started to dwindle (in 1882 only 7,864 kg was dug up). For this reason and due to the damage being done to the seabed and seashore, the Prussian Government terminated the contract with the amber mining company.

These representatives of perhaps one of the most unique professions in Europe have left an extraordinary mark on the history of the Curonian Spit and the amber trade. So far, no 21st century mavericks have been willing to repeat the activities of the amber frogmen on the bottom of the Baltic Sea and the Curonian Lagoon in persistent search of the golden amber stones sparkling in the murky depths.
In ancient Lithuania, before marriage the bridegroom would gather yellow amber and make a necklace, which was placed around the bride's neck at the marriage ceremony by a soothsayer. The brides would present their chosen one with an amulet of red amber. At the marriage ceremony, the newlyweds would be 'incensed' with amber smoke.

It is believed that the soothsayer's apprentice - the herbalist - used to wear an amber pendant containing herbal inclusions to help him communicate with the spirits of the plant world, so that he could correctly prescribe the required herbal remedies in the right dosages.
A thousand years ago the Baltic seacoast of Lithuania was a hotbed of nasty wars and skirmishes. The ever-present threat of dangerous conflicts constantly hovered over it. That was the era of the legendary Vikings, who ruled the Baltic Sea and its coasts from the eighth to the eleventh century. However, not only Scandinavian pirates were famous for their warrior skills, boldness and wealth.

Baltic Vikings. These people, assimilated into the main Lithuanian population during the Middle Ages, had previously been the most powerful and affluent Baltic tribe, the direct opponents of the bearded invaders from the North. Among the Baltic tribes, they were also the most frequently mentioned in the oldest surviving written sources of Northern Europe, especially in the immortal Scandinavian sagas.

The sagas contain depictions of dreadful battles against the Kuršiai, who sailed in boats very similar to Viking warships and did not yield an inch when fighting against the famous longships (dragonships). There is a record of prayers being said in at least one Danish coastal church including the words: “God, save us from famine, pestilence and the Curonians.”

In the cemeteries of affluent coastal villages, several dozen of the most mysterious amber amulets, comb-shaped pendants, have been found. They are about 4–7 cm in length and 3–5 cm wide, masterfully carved from amber in the shape of a tiny comb. They have mysterious round dimples and inscriptions or ornamentation. The pendants are triangular, rectangular or semi-circular and have comb-like teeth carved or scratched into one of the sides.

These amulets are found exclusively in warriors’ graves, attached to a belt buckle or the handle of a sword or battle knife. Just one amulet was found in each grave. No other nation or people in the world have ever had this type of symbolic little comb carved from Northern Gold.

The old amber craftsmen in seaside towns are slowly but steadily unfolding the story of the amber combs, a story that first goes back to the world of folk tales. In ancient Lithuanian folk tales, the comb was primarily associated with security. Passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation, the meaning Curonians attached to the comb has survived over the ages in people’s memory, gradually turning into a lovely tale motif: a warrior fleeing from the enemy, or an orphaned child running away from a witch, throws a comb over the shoulder and an impenetrable forest instantly springs up where the comb fell, keeping the villain away.

However, to understand why a comb – a device designed to arrange hair! – should be the motif for one of the most powerful amulets of the warring Baltic Vikings, you need to dive into the sea of mythology.

Even now some superstitious old people do not let their children or grandchildren throw away loose hair off a comb; the hair must be burnt. Otherwise, if it falls into evil hands, the hair can be used to cast a spell or a curse on the owner of the hair.

Amber combs lead to the oldest known legends about the servants of evil and people’s struggles against them. One of the Baltic tales tells of a hero who overcomes an evil dragon by building walls of fire, water and forest. This may have brought the Kuršiai to choose the image of forest as a wall or barrier safeguarding one from evil. The forest in turn can be associated with hair!

In Lithuanian, an idiom “to comb the forest” means to search intensely for something or someone, particularly a missing person in danger. Thus the amber comb may suggest a mythological forest springing up in the place of the comb thrown over the shoulder, the forest being an image for hair.

This amulet provides protection from evil and danger, not only to oneself, but also to one’s country. Old people joke that Curonian warriors surely did not make or buy the combs themselves; they were gifts from loving women to their husbands, brothers or children. Women have always known about magic and spells – about white magic in this case.
In ancient times it was believed that our present Sun was the second of two. The gods had lowered the first one into the sea, where it cooled off, hit the bottom and shattered into innumerable pieces of amber – thus Sun Rock.
Perhaps the most common Baltic amber artefact, which craftsmen especially like to make and offer for sale as jewellery, is a disk, also called a “little sun”. The most valuable are those marked with rows of tiny dots pointing in four directions.

**Each type of ancient amber amulet (amulets protect) or talisman (talismans bring success) has its own purpose and occupies its own place in the culture of the old world.** Lentil-shaped disks play a particularly important role, because their appearance has remained unchanged since the Stone Age. These disks, adorning the necks of so many Lithuanians, are like a link between our ancestors and the present. They come from a centuries-long period when people believed the world to be flat, suspended on two intersecting poles, so it is no accident that our ancestors chose the disk shape to represent it.

The gleaming yellow amulet could also symbolise the Sun, which we see as a disk. In the Stone Age, amber disks were commonly placed on the closed eyes of the deceased as a symbol of sunlight to shine on them after death.

At the same time, the disk could represent the Moon, since the heavenly body ruled the world, determining the rhythm of life, work and leisure.

This might seem rather straightforward if it weren’t for those mysterious rows of tiny dots pointing in four directions, perpendicular to each other. One interpretation is that the ancient people had a notion of the world being divided into four cardinal directions, which they depicted on this pendant as a miniature model of the world. Alternatively, it may have represented the four seasons of the year or perhaps the four phases of the moon, or morning, evening, day and night.

Some scholars are inclined to think that the system of dots was a type of calendar, symbolising two equinoxes and two solstices.

The disks encode yet another message passed on from generation to generation, a message which tells us about the worldview of our ancestors who lived thousands of years ago. One may think that the hole in the middle of the disk is just for practical purposes, for hanging the disk on a string, but the old people of the coastal region will tell you that it is a symbol of immortality.

The cyclic nature of the world and life was, and continues to be, a phenomenon that makes people pause and reflect about the essential things in life: the Sun and the Moon, day and night, birth and death. The hole in the disk can be seen as symbolically linking two polarities. The living are on one side of the disk, or the world, and after death they pass through the hole to the other side, and the wheel of life continues to turn. Such a philosophy hides in a seemingly simple amber artefact. Small wonder that Lithuanians still refer to death as “passing to the other side”.

Another amber artefact similar to the disks were amber spindles (flywheels): like tiny millstones produced from Baltic gold, which dance while spinning yarn. Amber spindles would also be placed in a deceased person’s coffin as a symbol of interrupted life and as a work tool for the afterlife. Flywheels dappled with various ornaments are also among the most popular artefacts that Lithuanian amber craftsmen like to make and offer for tourists.

Amber pendants shaped like disks or spindles are coming back into fashion as unique jewellery reviving the myth of the flat Earth and the cyclical nature of life. The transformation of the warm, magical mineral into a multi-meaning talisman seems to convey the true weight of amber, which is not measurable in grams.
THE EXTRAORDINARY ODYSSEY OF AN INSECT

A beetle-shaped amber artefact: a copy
The famous Amber Way, which led from the Baltic coast to Rome and even to Egypt, can be represented by one little amber insect. The Balts turned it into a legend of kinds, which keeps researchers of the ancient world in Lithuania on their toes.

In a small ancient cemetery in Western Lithuania, some intriguing 4th century amber pendants in the form of insects were discovered. About the size of a man’s thumb, they were found in the burial site of a boy and a horse. To understand the meaning of this unusual decoration, one needs to examine some aspects of the Pharaonic era in Egypt.

In this way an Egyptian legend was born: a holy insect, which rolled the Sun across the sky. The Egyptians held their holy insect to be a symbol of the Sun God and rebirth. For this reason, scarab-shaped pendants were placed in the sarcophagi of mummies. These amulets were widely known and in fashion even before the birth of Christ in Southern European parts of the Roman Empire, where amber was highly esteemed and desired. Therefore it is not surprising that the production of amber beetles can be also traced in the famous ancient Roman amber-working and commercial centre Aquileia, near the Adriatic Sea. Amber pendants in the form of scarab beetles on luxurious necklaces were also found in ancient Italian and Etruscan culture.

The Baltic insect also has its history. It is believed that the pendant was not a direct import from Aquileia, but was made by local people. However, it is surprising how images of a desert-dwelling scarab beetle could have appeared in this remarkable country of forests, rivers and lakes.

Nature offers a key. The maybug, or cockchafer, an insect surprisingly similar to the amber insects, is quite widespread in Europe. A characteristic feature of this insect is that its larvae live underground for three or four years. When the adults emerge, they darken the sky like a cloud of locusts, then mate and die en masse. In certain years, the entire beach along the Baltic coast is covered with the dead insects. Let us try to imagine what primitive people, who had very little understanding of the laws of natural science, would have made of all this one-and-a-half thousand years ago... Whatever was not understood was traditionally held to be divine.

One explanation of the maybug motif being chosen for pendants is that the insect spends part of its life underground, then emerges to the surface and, like a soul liberated from the subterranean world, flies off to heaven. As an image of the possible incarnation of the soul and a symbol of the soul’s transit into another world, an amber effigy of the insect placed in the grave with the deceased was probably believed to help the soul liberate itself from the dark and glide into the expanses of the sky, accompanying the soul into eternal life.

In Baltic culture it is still popular to associate certain insects with supernatural powers. Children and old people like to refer to ladybirds as “Dievo karvytė” (“God’s little cow”). The fireflies that are all aglow on summer nights have a symbolic meaning during the ancient Rasa (Dew) or St John’s Night festival. So the idea of sacred insects was far from new to Baltic culture.

Of course, it is difficult to affirm or deny the amber insect’s links with the Egyptian scarab beetle, but in the world of mythology both insects share the same symbolic meaning, that of intermediaries between Heaven and Earth. The unique aspect of this is that the insect-shaped amber pendants from Lithuania allow us to understand clearly how strong the links between totally different cultures could be. The Balts were not an isolated people with no knowledge of the world. They were receptive to new ideas, and the amber trade connected them to the wider world.
Baltic amber attracts not only amber admirers and tourists, but also criminals. In Lithuania, an exceptionally large piece of amber called the Sun Rock has a detective story attached to it, which is still popular and has become almost a 20th century legend. The Sun Rock, named for its sun-like shape and yellow colour, is one of the largest pieces of amber in

The Sun Rock at the Amber Museum
Europe, weighing 3,526 kilograms and is usually kept in the Amber Museum in Palanga, which was established on the grounds of the famous Count Tiškevičius’ estate.

This unique nugget became famous because of being stolen. The distinctive-looking Sun Rock, which originated in the amber mines of the Königsberg region, first became a target for thieves in 1990. The robbers hid in the Museum just before closing time, disabled the antiquated alarm system and stole the most valuable exhibit in the Museum along with 75 other amber items. The thieves were tracked down a year later.

In 2002 the famous piece of amber was stolen again. This second robbery was organised so cleverly that it resembled a film scenario, and the police called it the robbery of the century. Some people also call it the robbery with the most ridiculous outcome...

The Sun Rock robbery was planned by a man from Western Lithuania, and his accomplice. As if following instructions in a criminals’ handbook, they first carefully inspected the premises of the Museum, studied the surroundings in the scenic Birutė’s Park and began planning the robbery. The thieves had even calculated how many minutes it would take for the police to arrive after the alarm went off. They had also observed the Museum during the night, spying to see whether the guard would come out on patrol.

The burglars decided to break into the room they wanted via a second-floor balcony. On the first attempt they chose a quiet spot in the park and cut up young pine trees to make a ladder of the required length.

On a dark September night the robbers put their plan into operation by “spiking” the driveway leading up to the Tiškevičius Manor where the Museum was housed. They set a trap for the police with a homemade “hedge-hog” to puncture car tyres, consisting of nails driven through a sheet of tin and covered with leaves. They had also cut down some sizeable trees and used them to block access tracks. The burglars locked all the external doors of the Museum to ensure that the night watchman did not leave the premises.

All the rest happened at a lightning speed: in 20 seconds the mastermind burglar climbed up, used an axe to smash the glass of the balcony door, got into the Museum, grabbed the Sun Rock and used a rope he had specially put in place to come quickly down from the balcony. By the time the police arrived, the robbers’ trail had already grown cold...

Carrying the unique amber nugget, the thief ran along the shore in the water, not wanting to leave any trail for dogs. He had fixed in his mind the location of a big tree, where he buried the human-head-sized piece of amber and returned home with his accomplice. The next day, the thieves returned to Palanga, dug up the museum treasure and took it home. At first, the Sun Rock was kept buried in the back yard of one of the thieves; later, it was moved to the house.

The plan was to sell the Sun Rock to a rich Arab sheikh for one million litas. However, the media decided to offer 20,000 litas for information about the Sun Rock and the thief made a crucial error. Having heard about this reward, he decided to return the exhibit in exchange for the offered money. The thief arrived at the Museum to get a reward, however he walked straight into a police ambush and was arrested. Now the Sun Rock is back in its place.

The first written mention of amber occurs at the same time as the mention of our Baltic ancestors, whom the Romans called Aestii. The Roman author Tacitus, who lived 55–120 A.D., wrote that the Aestii collected amber – which he called ‘glesum’ – in shallow parts of the Baltic Sea and along its shores, and that they brought it to distant lands and sold it there.
During the Soviet period, comprehensive information about succinic acid was kept strictly secret, since the acid was used in rehabilitation therapy for cosmonauts and divers. In other words, it was used in situations where subjects had to withstand great physical and psychological loads.

Amber essence has been used in Lithuania since antiquity, and obtained through a beautiful and symbolic ritual that comes from the Curonian Spit. The people there netted crows to supplement their diet. Upon catching a crow, they had to kill it by biting through its skull, thus killing the bird in a flash. Then they would rinse their mouths with the light yellow solution. Strong alcohol extracts succinic acid from amber fragments, making it possible for the body’s metabolism to absorb them.

Amber tincture was made using a special process. Fine amber ‘teardrops’ had to be collected along the beach in person, because it was believed that only amber collected personally was suitable for the process. Then several glasses of amber fragments were poured into heavily salted seawater. Amber specks would float to the surface of very salty water, but the other small debris would sink. The amber was skimmed off and placed in fresh (not salted) water, in which the amber specks would sink and contaminants would float to the surface and be skimmed off. Then pure amber would finally sparkle in the palm of the hand. It then needed to be placed in the sun to dry, so that the little yellow and orange teardrops could absorb energy from the sunlight.

Only amber which had undergone this process was added to strong, clear alcohol. It was then kept for a few months or up to half a year to infuse. The drink became light yellow in colour and acquired a smell like pine sap – with greater or lesser intensity, depending on how long it had been kept. Even today, many Žemaitijans or coastal dwellers like to treat their guests to this unique drink.

There is a good reason for the most preferred amber being natural, non-processed and non-heat-treated, for it is only then that amber contains what may be described as the spirit of amber: the amazing amber (succinic) acid. People have known of its magical effect on a person’s health and sense of wellbeing since ancient times.

Of the several hundred types of amber found around the world, the Baltic type has the highest concentration of succinic acid, and is therefore held to be the most valuable.