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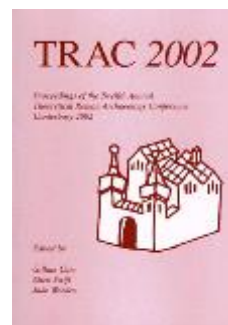
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Transformations in meaning: amber and glass beads across the Roman frontier

Ellen Swift

Introduction

Roman studies often focus on cultural interaction, frequently the relationship between Roman culture and the indigenous culture of an area under Roman occupation. The late Roman period, however, is a period in which we begin to be concerned not so much with indigenous use of Roman culture as Roman use of 'Germanic' culture. There is a significant repertoire of objects, many of them in the category of dress, which can be demonstrated to be 'Germanic' in inspiration. Evidence for this lies in their date and distribution beyond the Roman frontier in the Germanic homelands. There are problems in dating material from beyond the frontier, as it lacks the secure and narrow chronological context provided by coins and other artefacts within the Empire. However, as far as it can be established, a fairly well defined array of 'Germanic' objects are found widely in the Germanic homelands at a date preceding their appearance within the Roman Empire. One example would be the bracelets with thickened terminals known as 'Kolbenarmringe' studied extensively by Werner (1980). There are also some raw materials which can be sourced with some accuracy to the Germanic homelands, such as amber, which was used extensively for beads and which comes from the Baltic coast.

This paper will concentrate on two types of beads which have associations with the Germanic homelands, amber beads and opaque beads with trail decoration. As well as the Baltic origin of the amber itself, some of the shapes in which amber beads occur in fourth century Roman contexts can be demonstrated to be Germanic in style. Similarly, both the shape (annular, jug shaped, cone shaped etc.) and the decorative patterns and colours of opaque trail beads have a long history beyond the frontiers before their appearance within the Roman Empire. This material has in the past been interpreted in several different ways, for example, as 'obvious' or 'evidently'— Germanic material — representing the presence of Germanic people— or as material which has an intrinsic meaning, derived sometimes from the raw materials used. For example, amber and opaque beads with coloured trail, particularly those of unusual shapes, have both been regarded as 'amuletic'.

I would stress here that I am deliberately referring to these objects as 'Germanic inspired' rather than 'originating in', in the sense of produced, in the Germanic homelands. Some of course probably were produced there. For amber beads the raw material at least will have come from beyond the frontier. However, when these objects are found within the Roman Empire, we may not be able to give a definitive answer as to where they were produced. In fact, there is evidence, in the form of a known production centre with manufacturing evidence at Trier, that opaque beads with coloured trail decoration were produced within the frontier by the end of the fourth century. Some probably came from beyond the frontier as well. (Production within the frontiers itself could be regarded as a kind of 'consumption' of the idea of the object, of the style of the object)

Variability in consumption of objects by different groups or in different places can be viewed as as the 'biography' or life history of an individual object, moving in and out of the

pool of consumption and being used and re-used in different ways (Kopytoff 1986). It is also possible, though, to consider the different uses to which the same **type** of object, rather than the same individual item, can be put. For example, a particular type of object, such as a pin, may be produced in the same style for many years, and widely used as a dress accessory used to pin clothing for the first decade of production. It may then continue in production for the next ten years, during which its habitual use might be as a hair adornment. Examining and comparing the contexts in which objects are found at the end of their 'life histories' (for example, when they are deposited as grave goods), might be a useful way to investigate such changes. Varied use of a particular type of object may also occur spatially, across different geographical regions. This type of approach might help us to question interpretations which give a single meaning to items wherever they are found. It should not, though, be confused with the variation in meaning which individual objects may have undergone during their lifespan, which may be related to individual circumstances rather than to wider social trends.

In this paper I will investigate whether Germanic-inspired material within the Empire was consumed in a different way to the way in which it was consumed beyond the frontiers, and examine how this relates to its 'meaning' where we find this material in grave contexts. Much of the data comes from an analysis of 276 bead strings from excavated contexts within the north-western provinces of the Roman Empire, which forms part of a wider study on the appearance and symbolism of bead necklaces in the Roman period (Swift forthcoming). This paper develops the analysis of material from beyond the frontier in more detail, however, and considers the material from a different perspective.

Amber beads within the frontier

Amber beads occur in graves together with glass beads quite widely within the Western Roman Empire, and are more commonly found in the Danube provinces than further to the north and west. Graves which contain amber beads generally have a typical range of late Roman goods; such as bracelets, earrings, finger-rings, pins, etc. in typical provincial Roman style, together with other grave goods such as glass and pottery vessels. A few graves contain more unusual finds. For example, at the cemetery of Tokod in Pannonia, grave 5 contained a string of beads including both amber and an animal tooth (Mocsy 1981: Abb.2); and the grave that included amber at Lankhills (Clarke 1979: SF 436) contained a headband. A grave from Cortrat containing amber also had Germanic-inspired items, in the form of a pair of tutulus brooches (France-Lanord 1963). It is clear, though, that the graves containing amber examined as a group in this study largely include typical provincial Roman material, and the above examples are very much the exception.

Considering the evidence from the physical anthropology of the skeleton, where known, overall proportions in the data sample of material from within the Empire were 55% children (including infant and juvenile) and 38% adult female. There were no examples in the data sample of beads in adult male graves. The graves containing a string of beads including amber, which could be defined individually as either adult females or children, were examined as a group. 87% were children's graves and 13% were adult female graves (figure 1). A slight bias towards children might be expected given the overall data profile, but the result is sufficiently pronounced to suggest that, independently of this, there is a strong correlation between glass bead strings containing amber and children's graves.

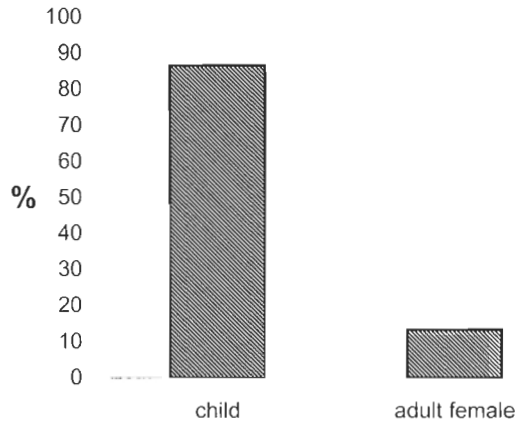


Figure 1. *Bead strings including amber beads in graves with known age/sex*

Amber beads are especially frequent in graves in 'barbarian' Europe, due to its origin on the Baltic coast. Can the same trend be established in graves beyond the frontier? A bias to amber in children's graves within *and* beyond the frontier, or the absence of such a bias in the Germanic homelands, would be of significance in any debate about the cultural identity of burials containing amber found within the Roman Empire.

Amber beads beyond the frontier

Tempelmann-Maczynska (1985) published a study of bead types occurring beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire between the early Roman and Migration periods which can be used to compare trends within the empire with those beyond the frontier. Though she is working in many cases from incomplete and poorly recorded data, especially with regard to the large proportion of cremation burials, 242 graves include sufficiently detailed information relating to age, sex, or both to be useful for the purposes of this study (Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985 Liste 5, 156–162). In addition, the vast majority of the grave contexts she uses can be dated to between AD 250 and 500 (Stufe C2, C3 and D, Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985: 93–6). Her data is therefore roughly comparable with the material studied from within the frontier. Considering just the individual graves which contained adult females or children, 36% were adult females and 64% children (the disproportionate quantity of children stems from the way in which the data was recorded). Cross-referencing this with data available from the catalogue, of those adult female and child graves which contained amber, 44% were child graves and 57% adult female graves. It can be seen that amber beads are in fact more likely to occur in adult female graves than in children's graves, especially when the large proportion of children in the data sample as a whole is taken into account.

Of course, there may be regional patterns which are obscured by looking at a compilation of material from a wide geographical area. Indeed, these might be expected, as there was no unifying political or cultural sphere, as there was within the frontier. The number of graves with amber beads for which the physical anthropology is known is quite small at each site. However, the sites can be grouped into two larger areas: that between the Rhine and the Elbe, and that along the North Sea coast (see figure 2). Detailed information by site is given in the following tables.

Table 1: Rhine-Elbe area, graves with known age/sex containing amber beads (compiled from grave catalogues and appendices in Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985)

Site	Child	Adult female	Adult male	Adult other/ sex not known	Adult total
Salem	1	0	0	0	0
Mannheim	0	1	0	0	1
Gundelsheim	1	0	0	0	0
Gerlachsheim	0	2	0	0	2
Werbach	0	0	0	M+F 1	1
Guthmann-hausen	0	1	0	0	1
Gostau	0	1	0	0	1
Grobwirschleben	0	1	0	0	1
Zauschwitz	1	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	3	6	0	1	7

Table 2: North sea coast, graves with known age/sex containing amber beads (compiled from grave catalogues and appendices in Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985)

Site	Child	Adult female	Adult male	Adult other/ sex not known	Adult total
Stuchowo	0	0	1	0	1
Debczyno	2	1	0	2	3
Odry	2	0	0	0	0
Wesieg	0	1	0	0	1
Cielpe	1	0	0	0	0
Elblag	0	1	1	0	2
Lubowitz	6	1	0	3	4
Prucz Gdanski	1	4	3	0	7
Scherben	1	0	0	0	0
Rubokaj	1	0	0	0	0
Lumponen	1	0	0	0	0
Korkliny	1	0	1	0	1
Osawa	0	8	1	0	9
Haven	0	1	0	0	1
Heiligens-hafen	0	1	0	0	1
Szwajcara	2	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	18	19	7	5	31

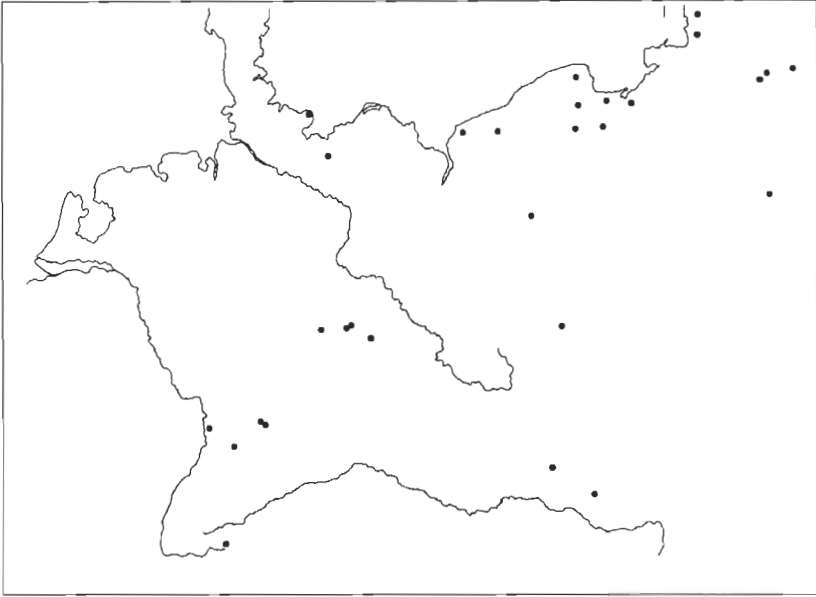


Figure 2. Sites with amber beads in graves with known age/sex (data compiled from Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985).

Naturally caution must be exercised as the graves with information on physical anthropology sometimes form a very small fraction of the total number of known graves. However, there seem to be some noticeable trends when the two main geographical areas are considered. Roughly speaking, in the area between the Rhine and the Elbe, it is twice as likely that amber beads will occur in adult female graves as in child graves. They are not found in male graves. This contrasts with the area of the north sea coast, in which it is equally likely that amber beads will be found in either adult female graves or child graves, and a significant minority also appear in male graves. In neither case, quite obviously, is there any tendency for amber beads to be restricted to children's graves. Nor are there any examples of single sites where this can be suggested, though in part data problems hinder the analysis here.

Opaque beads with coloured trail within the frontier

This type of bead occurs across large areas of the Western Empire in the late Roman period (Swift 2000), though in relatively small quantities. Numerous examples could be cited of bead strings containing a combination of opaque trail beads and provincial Roman style translucent beads in geometric shapes, and as with the amber beads, the accompanying grave goods fall into the normal provincial Roman repertoire. It has been established that there was a production centre for this type of bead at Trier (Schulze 1978: 53) though given its wide distribution spatially and chronologically beyond the Roman frontier (Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985) it must also have been produced outside the Empire.

Martin (1976: 30) and Burger (1966: 145) both observe that, at the sites of Augst and Sagvar respectively, opaque beads with a coloured trail appear to be associated with the graves

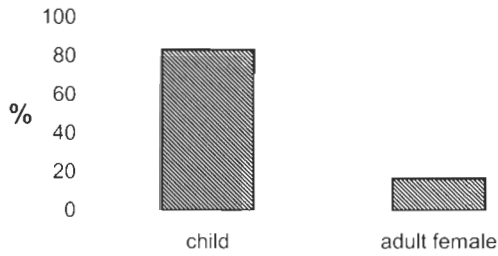


Figure 3. *Bead strings including trail beads in graves with known age/sex*

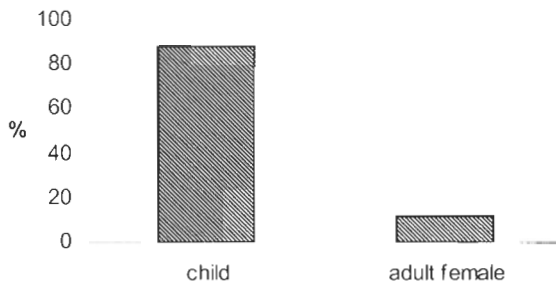


Figure 4. *Trail beads (including single finds) in graves with known age/sex*

of children. This trend can also be demonstrated more widely. Of the graves in the current study which could be defined as adult females and children, 83% of the trail beads were found in childrens graves and 17% in adult female graves (figure 3). Against a background of 55% child graves and 38% female graves in the data sample as a whole, beads with coloured trail appear to be strongly associated with child burials. This data can also be compared with data drawn from Swift (2000), which lists the occurrence of trail beads as single finds in graves (Swift 2000: 297–9). Broadening the data sample to include single finds in graves as well as strings of beads in graves, of the graves with trail beads which could be defined as adult females or children (27 graves), 88% were child graves and 12% were adult female graves (figure 4).

Opaque beads with coloured trail beyond the frontier

Comparing this with the distribution of this type of bead in graves of known age and sex beyond the frontier (using data drawn from Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985) there is a notable contrast. Beyond the frontiers, trail beads do not appear to be associated with children's graves. Showing similar trends to those for the amber beads, in the Rhine-Elbe area they appear most often in adult female's graves, whereas on the north-sea coast they occur more or less equally in adult and child graves. Site distributions are given in figure 5 and details of the individual sites below:

Table 3: Rhine-Elbe area, graves with known age/sex containing opaque trail beads (compiled from grave catalogues and appendices in Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985)

Site	Child	Adult female	Adult male	Adult other/ sex not known	Adult total
Gerlachsheim	0	2	0	0	2
Gostau	0	2	0	0	2
Grobwirschleben	0	1	0	0	1
Niemberg	1	2	0	0	2
Zauschwitz	0	0	1	0	1
Zedau	0	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	1	8	1	0	9

Table 4: North sea coast, graves with known age/sex containing opaque trail beads (compiled from grave catalogues and appendices in Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985)

Site	Child	Adult female	Adult male	Adult other/ sex not known	Adult total
Hamfelde	0	0	1	0	1
Debczyno	3	3	0	0	3
Dingen	1	1	0	0	1
Preetz	0	2	0	1	3
Pritzler	3	0	0	0	0
Cielpe	1	0	0	0	0
Elblag	1	0	0	0	0
Lassahn	1	0	1	0	1
Lubowitz	3	1	0	0	1
Prucz Gdanski	0	2	0	0	2
Schernien	1	0	0	0	0
Weslory	0	1	0	0	1
Haven	0	1	0	0	1
Heiligenshafen	1	0	0	0	0
Szwajcara	0	2	0	0	2
TOTAL	15	13	2	1	16

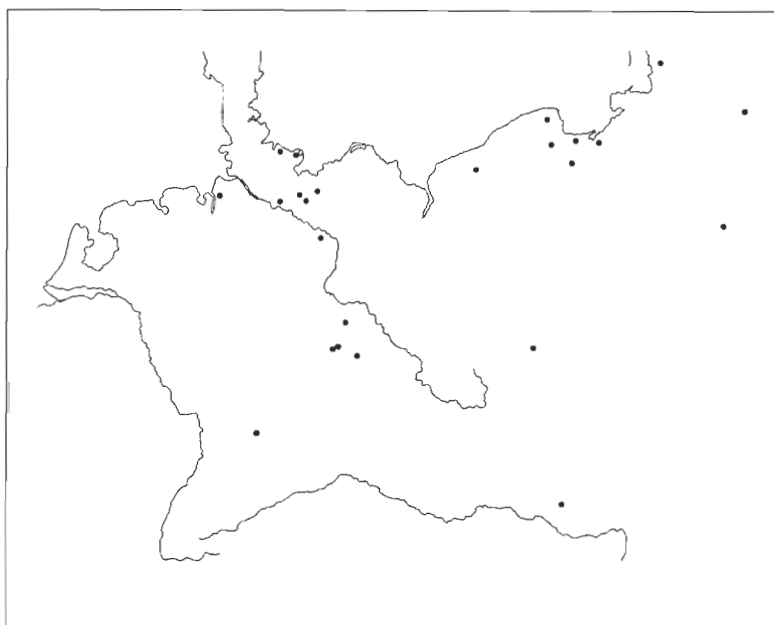


Figure 5. Sites with opaque trail beads in graves with known age/sex (data compiled from Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985).

The majority of the trail beads types listed by Tempelmann-Maczynska are not types which occur within the Empire. The remainder are those which are found on both sides of the frontier, but even among graves which contain these types of beads, there does not seem to be a bias to child graves. At Debczyno in Poland, for example, many of the beads are of types which are found within the Empire, but there is no bias towards child graves (see Tempelmann-Maczynska 1985: 275 for catalogue details of the exact types, listed by her typology numbers).

Conclusion

There are some similarities in the pattern of consumption of amber beads and opaque beads with coloured trail as grave goods across the Roman and non-Roman areas. For example, in all areas they are more strongly associated with female than with male, and therefore have some role in gendered display at death. However, from the data under consideration here, a strong correlation between these types of beads and child graves apparently exists only within the frontier, despite the fact that the bead types themselves are Germanic. This is a useful example of the fluidity of meaning attached to material culture, in which the same types of objects may possess different 'meanings' which are context-dependent; the objects being 'consumed' in different ways in different areas.

Consumption of an object depends inevitably on its **value**. This value is not an intrinsic quality, but something given to the object. Isherwood and Douglas (1996) discuss the

relationship between the value of goods and a particular society. Values given to objects tend to be largely comparable within a society. We could say that a particular 'culture' is constituted of, among other things, a body of material culture which is broadly valued in the same way, in that it can be used in the construction of meanings which are communicable. (Objects may also, of course, have other 'layers' of private meanings or meanings which may be subversive or perceived only by a sector of a society, but this is beyond the scope of this paper).

Material culture patterning in which particular types of object tend to occur in a particular type of context, i.e., the use of some types of beads in childrens burials at sites across a wide area of the north-western provinces, implies that these objects have a well-defined and specific meaning which is widely recognised. The coincidence of object type and the practice carried out, namely deposition in a child's grave, is more likely to evidence a shared culture than the simple presence or absence of an object type in itself.

Possible cultural meanings for beads beyond the frontier, beyond that of gender signifiers, are harder to establish. This may result from a poorer data set beyond the frontiers. It could also be argued that objects are less likely to have specific meanings which are the same across broad geographical areas in the Germanic homelands because these areas were politically and perhaps culturally fragmented.

However, the status of amber as a 'found' material which has one particular source perhaps suggests another factor which may be significant, namely, rarity value. It could be suggested that the differing rarity value of amber beads in different areas may contribute to their consumption in divergent ways. Where amber is a relatively common material, on the north sea coast, there appear to be fewer constraints on its use and its role as a gender marker is less secure. Where it is less common, between the Rhine and the Elbe, it seems to become a material more strongly associated with gender-specific identity. Within the frontier, where its value is now possibly that of an exotic rarity, the pattern of consumption at burial becomes even more strongly constrained; the 'meaning' of the object is narrower and more securely defined. Roughly similar factors may be operating in the case of opaque beads with trail decoration, though for these we know less about the source area and the patterning beyond the frontier is less well defined.

The exact relationship between children and beads of these types remains unclear. It may be the case that these beads were deposited in childrens graves as amulets, or they may merely have been objects which were associated with children for other reasons. They may have been worn by children in life, or only deposited with them at death. However, explanations which assume that the presence of these beads indicates that the occupants of the graves in which they are found were Germanic can now be questioned. These objects were inspired by Germanic culture and some of them may have been made beyond the frontier. However, it is apparent that they cannot universally be taken to be signifiers of 'Germanic' identity. Their usage within the frontier, which appears to diverge from usage in the Germanic homelands, suggests quite a different meaning. It is evident that the continuity of an object type through space is not matched by exact continuity in meaning, and differences in perception of or value given to the object at burial, which may be related in this case partly to their rarity value, overrides what have often been considered to be 'intrinsic' qualities and/or uses and meanings.

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