

Amber From Chiapas

A Gem With History

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Amber is a very transparent, brilliant fossil resin found in Mesoamerica only in the northern and central highlands of Chiapas. From pre-Hispanic times, amber has been highly valued for making ornaments, and archaeological evidence and historical sources show that trade spread it to far-flung regions like the Central Highlands, Oaxaca, the Gulf coast, the Zoque region of Western Chiapas and the Mayan area.

CHIAPAS'S AMBER

Although there are amber deposits in several parts of the world, Chiapas amber is special. In its natural state it is found in yellow-, red- or gold-colored nodes inside sandy, calcareous marine strata and layers of lignite in geological formations dating from the end of the Oligocene and the beginning of the Miocene epochs, from between 22.5 to 26 million years ago. Researchers have determined that its paleo-botanical origin was the resin of a legume called the *Hymenaea*, an ancestor of the tree known locally as the *guapiñol*.

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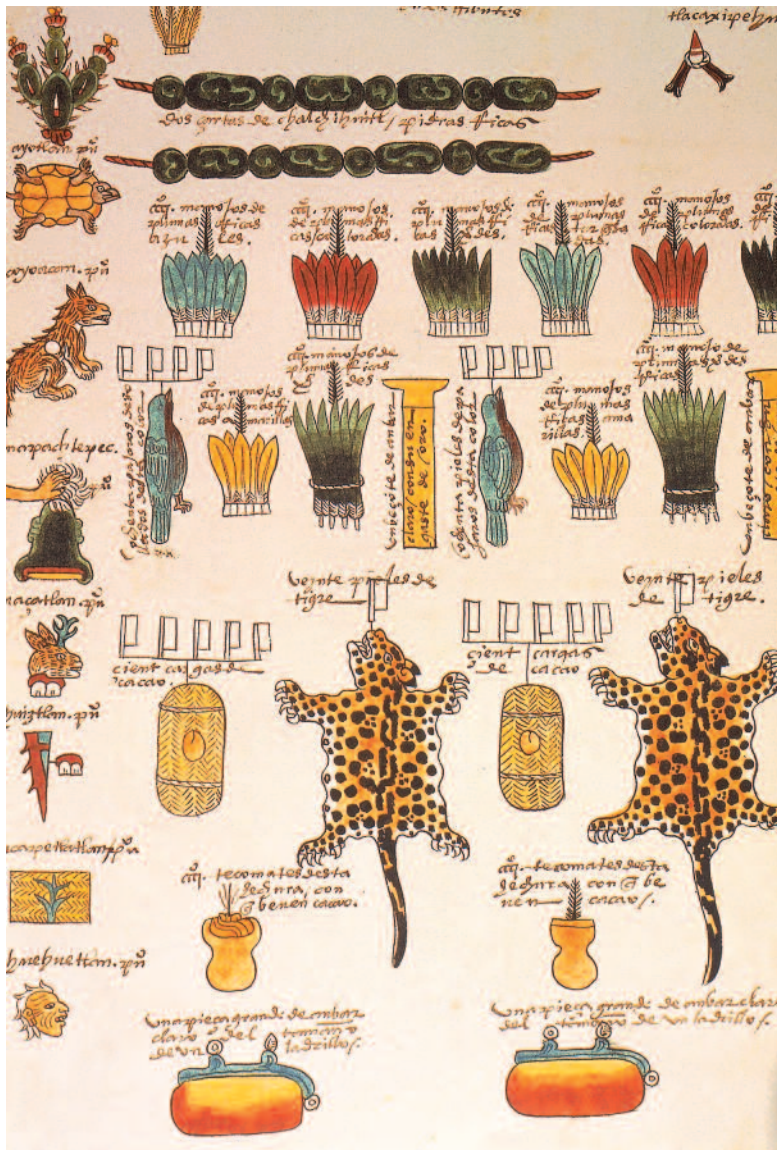


Plate 25 of the Tribute Registry, for the Soconusco province. This province sent tribute to the Mexicas twice a year: "A bezote or lip plug, with its gold setting" and "a piece of light amber the size of a brick".
 Photo: courtesy of Lynne Lowe

For resin to be turned into amber, several factors must be present. Above all, it must resist the decomposition produced by the sun, the rain, the air, extreme temperatures and microorganisms, for example, by being quickly covered by vegetation and soil. It becomes amber after millions of years when the resin hardens and the essential oils are reduced.

Today the deposits mined are found in ravines periodically washed clean by the rain, exposing the amber-bearing strata. Huitiupan-Simojovel, in the mountains of northern Chiapas, is especially famous for its production. Another important source is in Totolapa in the descent toward the Central Depression, and more deposits have been reported in Ostucán and Mal Paso, toward the West. Until our time, amber amulets continue to be used by different indigenous groups in the region to protect children against the "evil eye", although during the colonial period, it was mainly used to make rosaries.

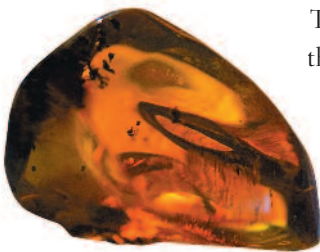


Photo on previous page: Rubén Vázquez

AMBER IN PRE-HISPANIC TIMES

Undoubtedly, the most complete description of pre-Hispanic amber handed down to us is the one chronicled by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún in the mid-sixteenth century, both in his bilingual *Códice Florentino* (Florentine Codex) and in *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain). He writes,

The amber of this land is called *apozonalli*. It is called this because the amber of this land or the stones thus called are similar to the little water bubbles when the Sun creates them as it comes out, which look light yellow, like gold. These stones are to be found in mines in the mountains.

There are three manners of these stones: one of them is called yellow amber. These seem to have a flash of fire inside them. They are very beautiful. The second is called *quetzalapozonalli*. They are thus named because they are yellow with a mix of light green. The third is called *izta-capozonalli*, thus called because they are whitish yellow. They are not transparent nor are they very precious.¹

One of the text's illustrations includes a circular stone to which a stream of water has been added to the top, characteristic of the Nahuatl iconography, with small spiral shells and *chalchihuites* on the ends of the stream. Similar representations appear both in the *Registry of Tributes* and in the second part of the *Mendocino Codex*, on the plate that corresponds to Soconusco; this was the only province that used amber in bulk as tribute to the Mexica Empire, sending two large pieces "of clear amber the size of a brick" every year and two



Piece from the Amber Museum. Photo: Rubén Vázquez



▲ Amber necklace and ear spools found in Monte Albán's Tomb 7 in Oaxaca (according to Alfonso Caso, *El tesoro de Monte Albán*). Photo: courtesy of Lynne Lowe



▲ Mexica traders went all the way to the Chiapas highlands to obtain feathers, skins and precious gems, among them amber (*Florentine Codex*).
Photo: courtesy of Lynne Lowe

Amber lip plug with its gold setting shown in the *Mendocino Codex*. These ornaments could only be worn by brave warriors and chief traders.
Photo: courtesy of Lynne Lowe ▶



long *bezote* lip plugs set in gold. Cotaxtla and Tuxtepec were other provinces that sent these ornaments, which they may have procured through trade.

According to archaeological evidence, the oldest piece of amber comes from the Olmec site of La Venta, dating around 700 B.C. However, during the Postclassic period (from A.D. 900 to 1521) amber was more widely used in Mesoamerica, from Central Mexico to the Yucatán peninsula and the Guatemala highlands.

The pre-Hispanic amber ornaments include pendants, beads, ear plugs, nose plugs and lip plugs. The pendants have a perforation on one end and often follow the natural form of the pebble. Some zoomorphic pendants have also been found by archaeologists, representing ducks' heads, such as in the collar from Monte Albán's Tomb 7.

The beads are more varied, and may be round, tubular or irregular. Different examples have been found in Chiapa de Corzo, Toniná, Chichén Itzá and Las Margaritas. Usually they are made into bracelets or necklaces, and during the colonial period, they were restricted to being fashioned into rosaries.

Amber cylinders found in pairs in funeral offerings in Chiapa de Corzo were part of ear plugs made of amber flanked by jade or shell ornaments. Four pairs of amber ear spools were found in Monte Albán's Tomb 7, and are an example of the ability and delicacy of these peoples' work in amber.

However, the most frequent item from the Postclassic Period were small disks that have been found usually in funeral offerings from the Chinantla in northeastern Oaxaca and from the southern part of the Tehuantepec Isthmus all the way to Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán Peninsula. In Chiapas, they have been found in different areas, including Simojovel to the north and in the eastern highlands, Tenam Puente and Las Margaritas. Thanks to ethno-historical information, we know that these disks were used as nose plugs placed in an orifice created in the septum. This custom was reported among the Chiapanecs, the Tzeltals and the Lacandons, as well as among the Mayans from Yucatán.

For example, Friar Diego de Landa, in his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (Account of the Things of Yucatán) said that the women of the region “pierced their noses through the cartilage that divides the windows in half to place a piece of amber in the hole in order to dress up.”² Several of the sixteenth-century *Relaciones Geográficas* (Geographic Registries) also stated that the Yucatecans, “had their noses opened and in the orifices put amber stones, and these were very few.”³

The Mexicas obtained amber in tribute from provinces they had subjected militarily and through the exchange of gifts among the elites of different peoples and long-distance trade. Mexica traders went to the highlands of Chiapas in order to exchange valuable goods, obtaining feathers, skins and precious stones, especially amber. Very often, however, they had to disguise themselves in order to not be recognized when they entered the area. Barter was carried out with fine cloth, obsidian blades, cochineal and copper needles and rattles, among other items brought from Central Mexico.

Amber *bezotes*, ornaments hung on the lower lip, are frequently mentioned in the Central Mexican sources and are illustrated in the tribute codices. From the descriptions, we know that they were small cylindrical or curved pieces that were inserted into gold mounts and their use was the privilege of great warriors and head traders, making them a symbol of bravery and military prowess.

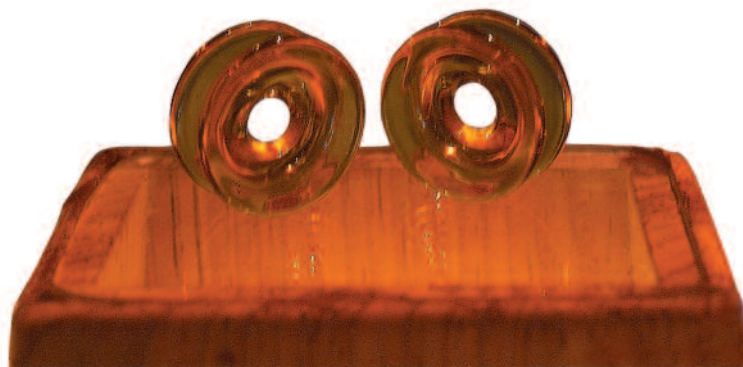
It is important to point out that, despite their wide distribution in the pre-Hispanic period, the problems of preserving and identifying archaeological amber pieces make their study more complex. Usually, the surface of the objects is altered by rust, changes in color, cracking and even, in extreme cases, being pulverized, which makes their correct identification difficult. However, it is clear that amber continued to be an important luxury product for a very long time, probably not only because of its external qualities, but above all because of a series of beliefs, concepts and associated symbols. Undoubtedly the detailed study of this kind of archaeological materials will contribute to greatly enriching our knowledge of Chiapas’s pre-Hispanic past. ■■

NOTES

¹ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, J. García Quintana and A. López Austin, eds. (Mexico City: CNCA-Alianza Editorial Mexicana, 1989), p. 790.

² Fray Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, C. León, ed. (Mexico City: Conaculta, 1994), p. 132.

³ *Relaciones histórico-geográficas de la gobernación de Yucatán (Mérida, Valladolid, Tabasco)* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Mayas-Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas-UNAM, 1983), p. 124.

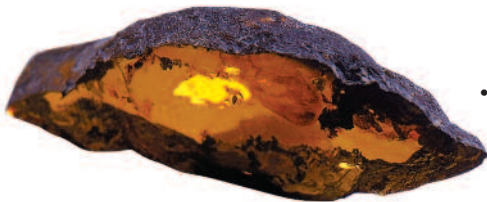


The Amber Museum. Photo: Rubén Vázquez

CHIAPAS AMBER TODAY

A FEW FACTS

- The municipalities of Simojovel de Allende, Huituipan and Totolapa in Chiapas are Mexico's main producers of amber today, accounting for 90 percent of production nationwide. Internationally, the pieces from Simojovel, together with those from the Dominican Republic and Santo Domingo, have the finest color.
- Extraction falls mainly to local indigenous; Zoques, Tzeltals and Tzotzils that live in the area. They work in open-pit mines or underground, but in both cases technology and tools are inappropriate, making it necessary to invest a great deal of work and effort to extract small quantities of the resin. About 292 kilograms of amber are mined in Simojovel every month.
- Between January and May, the indigenous spend all their entire work day extracting amber; after that, production drops because of the rain and planting and harvesting seasons, which last the rest of the year.
- Family members manually select, clean and polish the amber. It is then carved by artisans and commercialized in Chiapas's important cities, mainly in the form of jewelry.



PROTECTION AND CURES

- Amber is used as an amulet to protect children from the evil eye: babies wear amber bracelets from birth. It is also said that a piece of amber, preferably a gift, protects anyone who wears it. When striae appear inside the piece, making it look as though it were shattered internally, it means that it has protected the wearer from some danger and should be replaced with another unblemished piece.
- Amber is also said to have curative powers. Indigenous groups used to mix it with honey, oil and alcohol to massage aching muscles or make salves for many different illnesses.
- Recipes have been handed down to us that include amber dust among their ingredients to cure kidney and gall bladder ailments, coughs, asthma and rheumatism.

Photos in this page: courtesy of Lynneeth Lowe

The dust can only be obtained by polishing the amber, making it difficult to get, which is why local wisdom recommends that the patient wear an amber necklace for a cough or an amber belt for kidney trouble and not take them off even to sleep.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE REAL AMBER

- It is important to be able to tell real amber from plastic and glass imitations. Amber turns blue when put under a black light. It also produces static electricity when rubbed, making it possible to lift small pieces of paper. Burning it to see if it is amber or plastic (the latter burns more quickly) is not recommended because real amber is also damaged by the flame.
- You should avoid purchasing amber containing insects said to have been trapped there millions of years ago. There are very few authentic pieces of this kind, and they obviously would cost a fortune.

Information obtained at the Chiapas Amber Museum, located in the former La Merced Monastery. The exposition includes a brief explanation about what amber is; its different types and colors; how it has been used since pre-Hispanic times; and how it is extracted. Pieces from different historic periods are on display showing the creativity of artisans and carvers who have worked in amber.



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