

## Introduction:

The tomb of the Princess of Chen of the Liao Dynasty of China, buried in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, contains an unusually high quantity of amber. The Liao Dynasty, ruled and founded by the Khitan people, was in the process of adopting Chinese cultural practices, including burial practices, which differs greatly from traditional Khitan burial and death practices. The Imperial Liao tombs incorporated some burial practices of the earlier golden age of China, the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). Placing the contents of the tomb of the Princess of Chen in the context of the contents earlier Chinese Tang tombs, contemporary Chinese Song (960-1279 CE) tombs, and the relationship between the Khitan people and the Chinese Empires, I aim to answer two questions.

First: what does the amber contents of the Liao tombs tell us about their culture with regards to adopting and adapting Chinese customs and preserving traditional practices?

Second: what was the significance of the presence of the amber to the Khitan Liao people, and to the Royal Court?

## Methods:

#### A. Data analysis of North East Asia tombs:

**A.1.** Tombs with known grave goods, of those which dynasties they belong. **A.2.** Tombs with amber listed

in grave goods, of those which dynasties and periods of time they belong.

#### **C. Expressions of** commerce and foreign trade in the tombs:

**C.1.** Tang, Liao, and Song dynasty tomb architecture and grave good philosophy comparison.

**C.2.** Diplomacy and the international gifting, foreign gifts buried in the tombs.

### **B. Physical Qualities of the Amber:**

**B.1.** Liao import of Amber

**B.2.** Correspondents and missives between China and Central Asia.

**B.3.** Five element (wu xing) theory and relationship with the colour preference of the Liao in their amber.

### **D. Literary analysis and** possible uses for the amber.

**D.1.** Examining possible uses for the amber pieces found in the tombs.

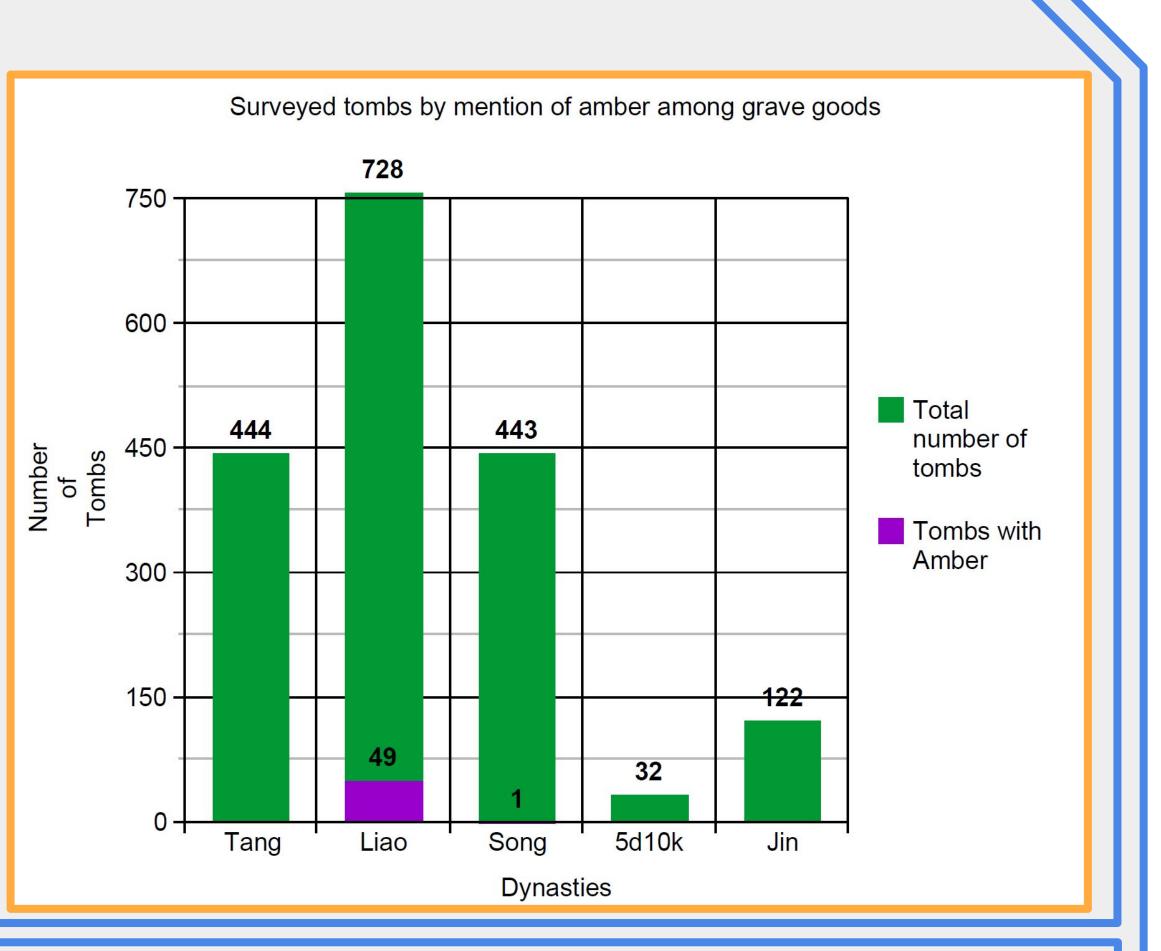


wo Sets of Amber Beads in Chengguo Princes Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 1002

## **Results:**

**A.1.** The Liao tombs make up 41 % of the surveyed Tombs. Of which 87% contain reported grave goods.

**A.2.** Approximately 7% of Liao tombs contain reported Amber, 8% of Liao tombs with grave goods reported contain amber. Compared to 0.03% of Song tombs with reported grave goods which contain amber.

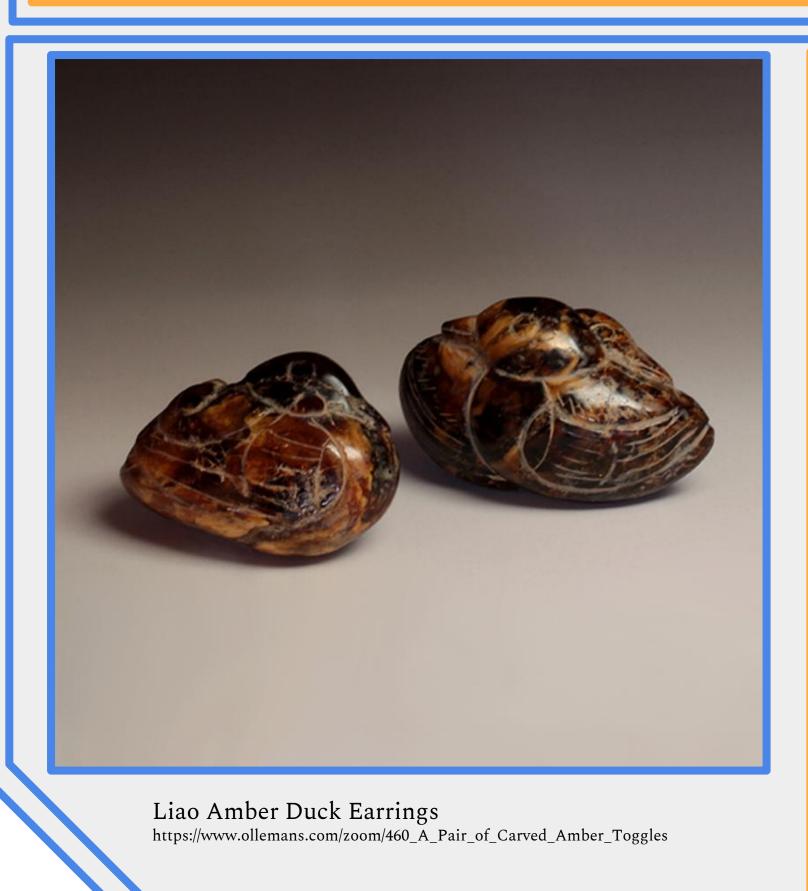


**B.1.** Liao Empire imported Amber in massive quantities through three main modes, the first was demanding tribute from favourable peace negotiations with Song Dynasty. Second was importation through vast merchant and trade network reaching as far as Syria and the Baltic Sea. Thirdly, through gifts from foreign nations and tribute/taxation from producers within and near the empire.

**B.2.** Central Asian Islamic missives indicate the Chinese would import Baltic amber due to its deeper colour. Also indicates the Chinese would use the amber to "ward against the evil eye".

**B.3.** Every Dynasty has a set of five colours associated with elements. The Liao Imperial colour is Purple, or red-blue "紫". This colour is associated with Immortality in buddhist doctrine, and Supremacy in Confucian doctrine.





**C.1.** Liao tomb design is not an exact replica of Tang design, however is much closer in style with Tang dynasty Tombs rather than contemporary Song tombs. Song tombs were becoming more humble, and simple in comparison with Liao and Tang. Both Liao and Tang incorporate expressions of foreign trade.

**C.2.** The Liao set up a large trade network, upon the death of member of the Liao imperial family, local nations and tributaries would send representatives and gifts. The family would choose which gifts would be place in the tomb. The Tang also practiced receiving diplomats and gifts at state funerals.

## University of Victoria, Program of Medieval Studies. dc.calveley@gmail.com

# The Liao Dynasty and their Amber; from the Empire to Tomb By Duncan Calveley



**D.1. Religious:**Many of the amber pieces were found in tombs and Buddhist sites (some of which were used to temporarily hold bodies of the dead). Many amber pieces were carved into religious usage and imagery including lions (Gautama Buddha), Bodhisattvas, and prayer/meditation beads. These items are pieces of immortality brought into the afterlife through tombs.

Symbol of trade/wealth/power:Liao imports and international gifts symbolize their Imperial reach. The Qidan were once gifters/tributaries to the Tang, now that the Qidan Liao have gifters/tributaries is a symbol of empire the Liao resonate with. Comparing how the Liao developed a far-reaching trade modeled after the Tang system is a component in their developing identity and a connection to the Tang empire. The amber is a commodity sought after by the Liao, but they adopted a Tang based economy, the Liao are adapting both the Qidan and Chinese identities in this regard

#### What does the amber found in the Liao tombs tell us about it's significant to the people.

Symbol of power and Wealth: Imported amber was an expensive luxury, many amber goods were decorative, worn on the body, or held in hand. They were obvious status symbols both visually and aromatically. Symbol of Liao identity: Amber usage witnessed a significant increase during the Liao, as well has Liao religious, Imperial, and mortuary connections to Liao identitv

Symbol of connection to Tang legacy: Qidan people adopted and adapted many Tang practices, in doing so they were forging a connection to the Tang, and using the connection to establish their inheritance of the Mandate of Heaven and achieve legitimization as a Chinese empire. The amber found in Liao tombs is an excellent example of this.

Medicinal, Magical, religious: Amber may have been used as protection from evil spirits. Heavily Associated with tombs and afterlife, and has associations with Buddhist imagery. Amber also had a medicinal use, and was thought to imbue with spirit of the tiger

Medicinal:Liao amber hollow vessels share a medicinal usage with Tang equivalents. Amber may have been used as aromatic medicinal, to bring about vitality and the spirit of the tiger.





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### **Conclusion**:

The amber found in many Liao tombs is deeply associated with the Liao dynasty. Making up the clear majority of tomb found amber in northern China between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. This amber both a luxury item of the Qidan people, also embodies the sinofication of the Qidan into the Liao. The amber imported to Liao from the Baltic region is desired for its deeper colour possibly associated with the Liao Imperial colour of purple.

The Qidan people before establishing an empire of their own were a tributary of the Tang Dynasty, an empire which the Liao, and Song dynasties both had looked back to, with differing ideologies and results when handling the legacy of the Tang. To both dynasties their interaction with the lost Tang Empire acted as a form of legitimation.

For the Liao, the possible aromatic and medicinal use of amber, its placement in lavish Tang style tombs as a symbol of foreign trade and as a daily hand-held luxury good, and in the form of religious statuettes are all examples of Liao use of amber as a connection to, and legitimation as heirs of the Tang Empire. The amber in the tombs are an intermixing of Qidan identity and Chinese imperial legitimation.

### What next?

There are some additional avenues of research to pursue, I will be examining whether or not there is a gender relationship between the amber the occupant of the tomb, and if so what it is. In addition there are additional possibilities for usage of amber such as medical and fashionable I will pursue .As well attempting to find answers to the origins of the Liao fascination with amber. Examine the material desires of neighbouring North East Asian nomadic people for possible desires for amber. Finally there is a wealth of Chinese language academic work to consult.

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