

Munro Translation of Lucretius

Post by "Cassius" of September 4, 2021 at 8:34 PM

8

INTRODUCTION

above, he nobly maintains the reputation claimed for his countrymen in that style of writing. The sixth book is unequal like the fifth: the beginning as far as 95 is very unsatisfactory and confused, as has been pointed out in the notes. Then follow some hundred verses in which the nature and working of thunder and lightning, the formation of clouds rain and the like are described. This portion is most carefully elaborated. There is not much room for the highest virtues of poetry; but still great qualities are here brought into play, quickness of observation and power of describing what is observed, vivacity of narrative, fine perception of analogy and much ingenuity of speculation: the language is simple, terse, direct and telling. Most of these merits are displayed in greater or less measure even in the flattest and most prosaic portions of the poem; but the verses here spoken of are not of this number. Quite recently I was glad to find the opinion I had long entertained of this section of the poem confirmed by the greatest of German critics in Riemer's *Mittheilungen ueber Goethe* II p. 645; and this is not the only place in which Goethe expresses the most unbounded admiration for our poet. What follows is not so satisfactory: Lucretius has to include a great variety of questions in a very limited space. These seem to be selected sometimes at hap-hazard: nearly 200 lines are given to the magnet, lively verses enough and very ingenious, but out of all proportion to the subject-matter. The description of the plague of Athens concludes the book: it is manifestly unfinished; and though it contains much noble poetry, it suffers from the unavoidable comparison with the austere beauty and simple grandeur of its original, which the poet has not always understood and from which he has sometimes departed without good cause. He has shewn himself here both too much and too little of a physician: he is too technical for the poet, too inaccurate for the philosopher.

through Munro's

efore someone to
with:

I am posting this mostly as a joke because I have been saying on the Lucretius podcast that I am looking forward to the part about magnets, but I do think there's an interesting point here. To me, the issue of magnets probably was indeed something Epicurus and Lucretius thought was important, because it is probably the closest-to-home instance of "action at a distance" that we have directly in front of us. The ability of one magnet to influence another could easily be described to be magical, and I suspect that the Epicureans wanted to take special care to come up with a non-supernatural explanation of the phenomena. So contrary to Munro I do think magnets warrant special attention 😊

Post by “Godfrey” of September 4, 2021 at 8:57 PM

From Richard McKirahan's Philosophy Before Socrates:

"Aristotle reports that Thales believed magnets possess soul because they move iron, and infers that he judged the soul to be a thing that causes motion.¹⁸ [Aristotle, On the Soul 1.2 405a19 = DK 11A22] Thales also held that amber (which has magnetic properties when rubbed or heated) possesses soul.¹⁹ [Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers 1.24 = DK 11A1]

It is hard to know what to make of these statements. The idea that the soul is the principle of life was widespread in Greek thought. The presence of soul makes a thing alive; when a living thing dies, it no longer has a soul. Thus, Aristotle held that plants and animals possess souls. He held further that motion is characteristic of life, especially in his broad sense of “motion,” which includes growth and changes in quality—“motions” which even plants possess. Thus, the presence of soul, and therefore of life, implies motion.

Thales attributes soul to things not normally thought to be alive. Is he proposing a version of hylozoism, the view that matter has life, so that life is found in all things whatever? Also, since magnets and amber cause other things to move, is Thales’ point that the notion of soul should be extended to include things that themselves are motionless but make other things move?"

Post by “Cassius” of September 4, 2021 at 10:42 PM

Wow i've never heard that they were considered to have souls, or that Aristotle thought that plants have souls!

Post by “Godfrey” of September 4, 2021 at 10:53 PM

Me neither, I just happened to be reading that!

Post by “Godfrey” of September 4, 2021 at 10:58 PM

"Soul" in this sense almost sounds like "life force." I wonder if the concept has evolved over time?

Post by “Don” of September 5, 2021 at 12:36 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

"Soul" in this sense almost sounds like "life force." I wonder if the concept has evolved over time?

I would assume they're talking about ψυχή psychē in Greek or anima/animus in Latin. Those are slippery terms, and it could be misleading in my opinion for them to just translate those "soul." There's a lot of baggage with that English word.

Post by “Godfrey” of September 5, 2021 at 3:32 AM

This is from DL Book 1, Mensch translation:

24 And some, including the poet Choerilus, say he was the first to declare that souls are immortal. He was the first to discover the course of the sun from solstice to solstice, and the first, according to some, to say that the size of the sun is one seven hundred and twentieth part of the solar circle, <and that the size of the moon is the same fraction of the lunar circle.> He was the first to call the last day of the month the thirtieth, and the first, as some say, to reason about nature.

25 Aristotle and Hippias say that he attributed souls even to inanimate objects, arguing from the magnet and from amber.

Unfortunately I can't find ψυχή in any Greek version online but it's likely due to my ignorance 🙄 [Don](#) do you have a Greek to English comparison to verify that that's the word?

Post by “Cassius” of September 5, 2021 at 7:08 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

There's a lot of baggage with that English word.

Yes as with Godfrey's comment the main issue is probably "immortal" or maybe "divine."

There's presumably no issue with looking for some more precise definition of "life," just as when Lucretius talks about the mixture of elements necessary for life, so long as we always keep in mind that what we're talking about is mortal and absolutely natural.

Post by “Don” of September 5, 2021 at 8:27 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

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word?

[24] Ἔνιοι δὲ καὶ αὐτὸν πρῶτον εἰπεῖν φασιν ἀθανάτους τὰς ψυχάς: ὧν ἔστι Χοιρίλος ὁ ποιητής. πρῶτος δὲ καὶ τὴν ἀπὸ τροπῆς ἐπὶ τροπὴν πάροδον εὔρε, καὶ πρῶτος τὸ τοῦ ἡλίου μέγεθος <τοῦ ἡλιακοῦ κύκλου ὡσπερ καὶ τὸ τῆς σελήνης μέγεθος> τοῦ σεληναίου ἑπτακοσιοστὸν καὶ εἰκοστὸν μέρος ἀπεφήνατο κατὰ τινος. πρῶτος δὲ καὶ τὴν ὑστάτην ἡμέραν τοῦ μηνὸς τριακάδα εἶπε. πρῶτος δὲ καὶ περὶ φύσεως διελέχθη, ὡς τινες.

Ἀριστοτέλης δὲ καὶ Ἰππίας φασὶν αὐτὸν καὶ τοῖς ἀψύχοις μεταδιδόναι ψυχῆς, τεκμαιρόμενον ἐκ τῆς λίθου τῆς μαγνήτιδος καὶ τοῦ ἡλέκτρου.

Yep, I've underlined the ψυχή forms in the Greek. Interestingly, the word used for "lifeless, inanimate" in that last paragraph is ἀψυχοίς apsykhois "not-psykhē/un-psykhē"

[Cassius](#) may be interested to know that τῆς λίθου τῆς μαγνήτιδος is tēs lithos (rock .. As in Neolithic) tēs magnētidos (of Magnesia)

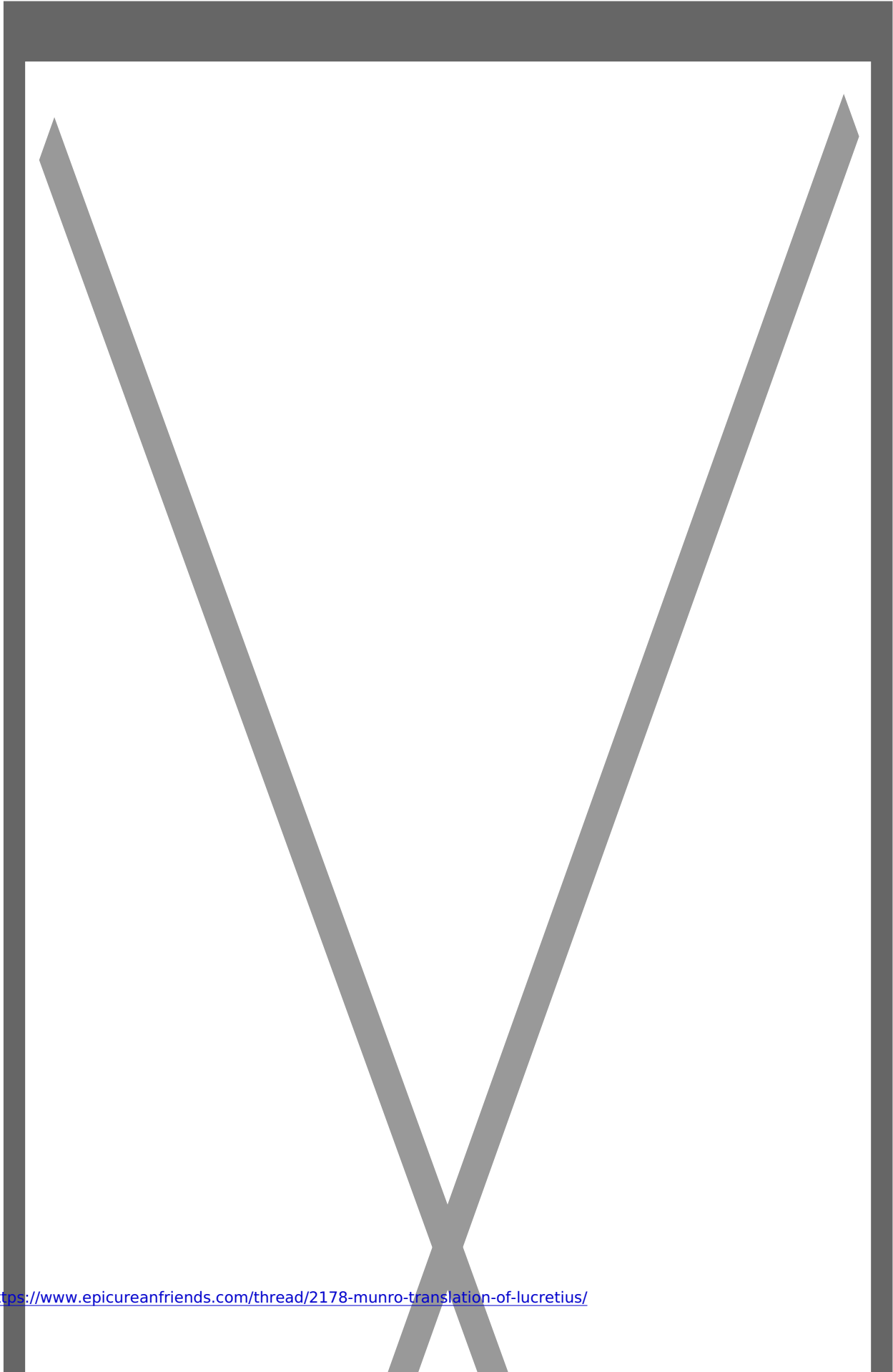
Post by “Martin” of September 6, 2021 at 2:08 AM

Richard McKirahan is inaccurate with amber (cf. comment #2). The rubbing of amber on fur incurs electrostatic charges, which is not a magnetic phenomenon.

Post by “Godfrey” of September 6, 2021 at 3:19 AM

There seem to have been varying opinions on this point. From footnote 41 in this article:

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[The Properties of Amber](#)

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"The early Greek philosopher Thales of Miletos is credited by Diogenes Laertius as the first to recognize amber's magnetism: "Arguing from the magnet and from amber, he attributed a soul or life even to inanimate objects" (Diogenes Laertius 1.24, vol. 1, ed. and trans. R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library 184 [London, 1993]). E. R. Caley and J. C. Richards, Theophrastus on Stones (Columbus, 1956), p. 117, argue that this claim rests on shaky ground; that Thales was the first to mention the property can be inferred only indirectly from Diogenes Laertius's statement: "Aristotle and Hippias say that, judging by the behaviour of the lodestone and amber, he also attributed souls to lifeless things." Caley and Richards consider the possibility "that it was Hippias who said that Thales understood the attractive property of amber, but there is no way of confirming such an inference because the works of Hippias are not extant." Plato (Timaeus 80c) alludes to amber's magnetism but denies that it is a real power of attraction. Aristotle does not mention amber in the relevant section of On the Soul (De Anima 1.2.405A). Thus, following Caley and Richards, Theophrastus is the earliest extant account. If Thales did describe amber's static electricity, he may have done so based on his observation of wool production, which used amber implements: distaff, spindle, and whorls. I owe this observation to Schwarzenberg 2002, who calls attention not only to the famous wool of Miletos, but also to the number of extant seventh-century spinning tools. Pliny notes that Syrian women used amber whorls in weaving and that amber picks up the "fringes of garments," and also comments on amber's electrostatic property. But, unlike Plato, he thinks its magnetic property is like that of iron. Plutarch (Platonic Questions 7.7) explains that "the hot exhalation released by rubbing amber acts in the same ways as the emanations from the magnet. That is, it displaces air, forming a vacuum in front of the attracted object and driving air to the rear of it": De Lapidibus, ed. and trans. D. E. Eichholz (Oxford, 1965), p. 200, n.b."

Post by "Godfrey" of September 6, 2021 at 3:25 AM

Apparently there was lively debate in ancient times as to what exactly amber is, and it's origin:

<https://ambers.netlify.app/intro/9/>

Post by "Cassius" of September 6, 2021 at 6:58 AM

Wow very interesting on amber - now I am confused myself where it comes from!

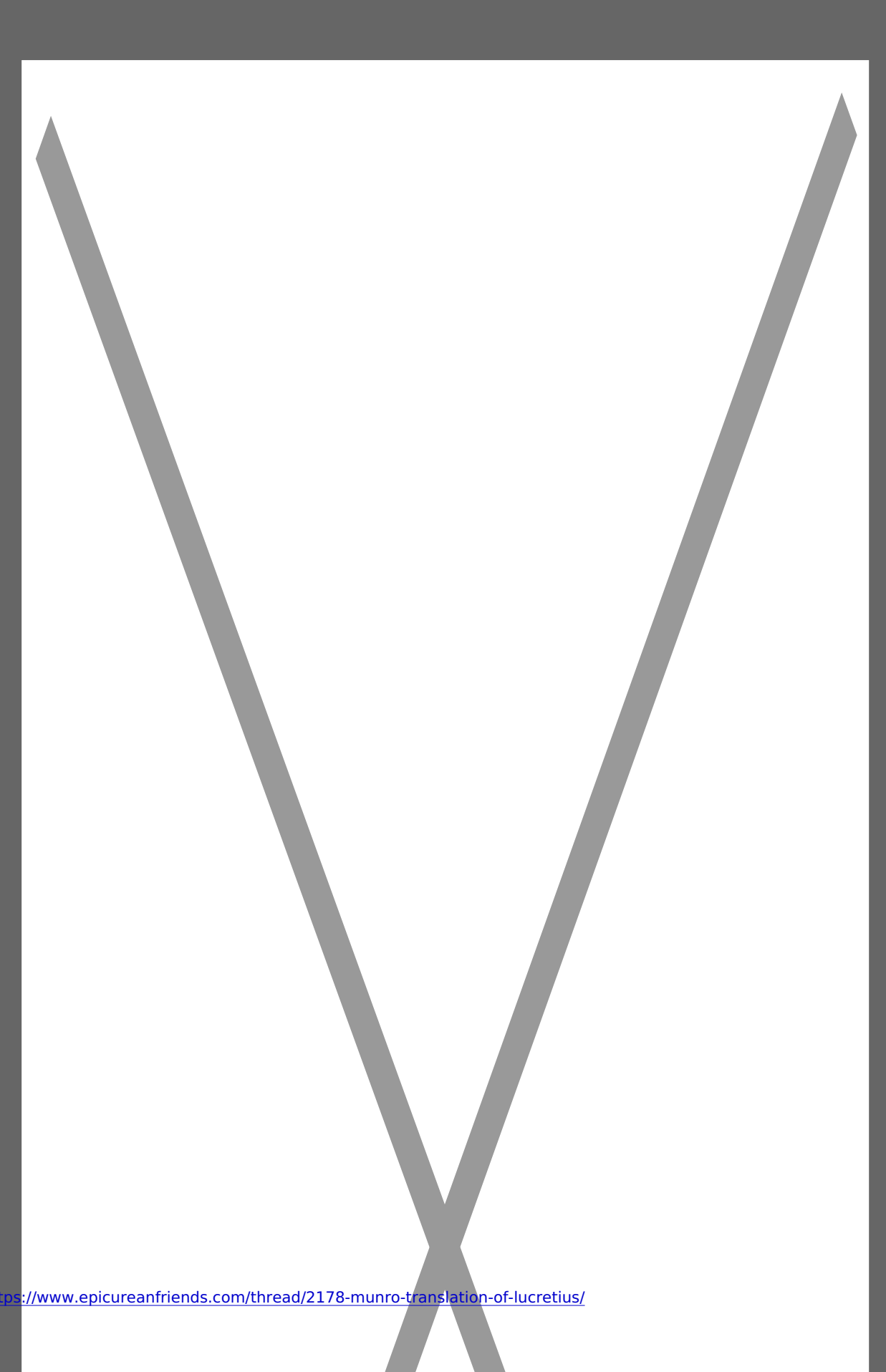
Post by “Don” of September 6, 2021 at 7:11 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Wow very interesting on amber - now I am confused myself where it comes from!

Wikipedia to the rescue 😄

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[Amber - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

I was unaware of the Latin and Greek variations on electrum and connection to electricity!

Post by “Martin” of September 7, 2021 at 2:26 AM

The ancient Greeks are of course excused because they did not yet have a sufficiently worked out theory of electromagnetism. They were the giants who started it, and on whose shoulders Maxwell and the likes stood when they worked it out. What I referred to was "*(which has magnetic properties when rubbed or heated)*", which appears to be an insertion of Richard McKirahan, who lives in our time and should have referred to electrostatics.

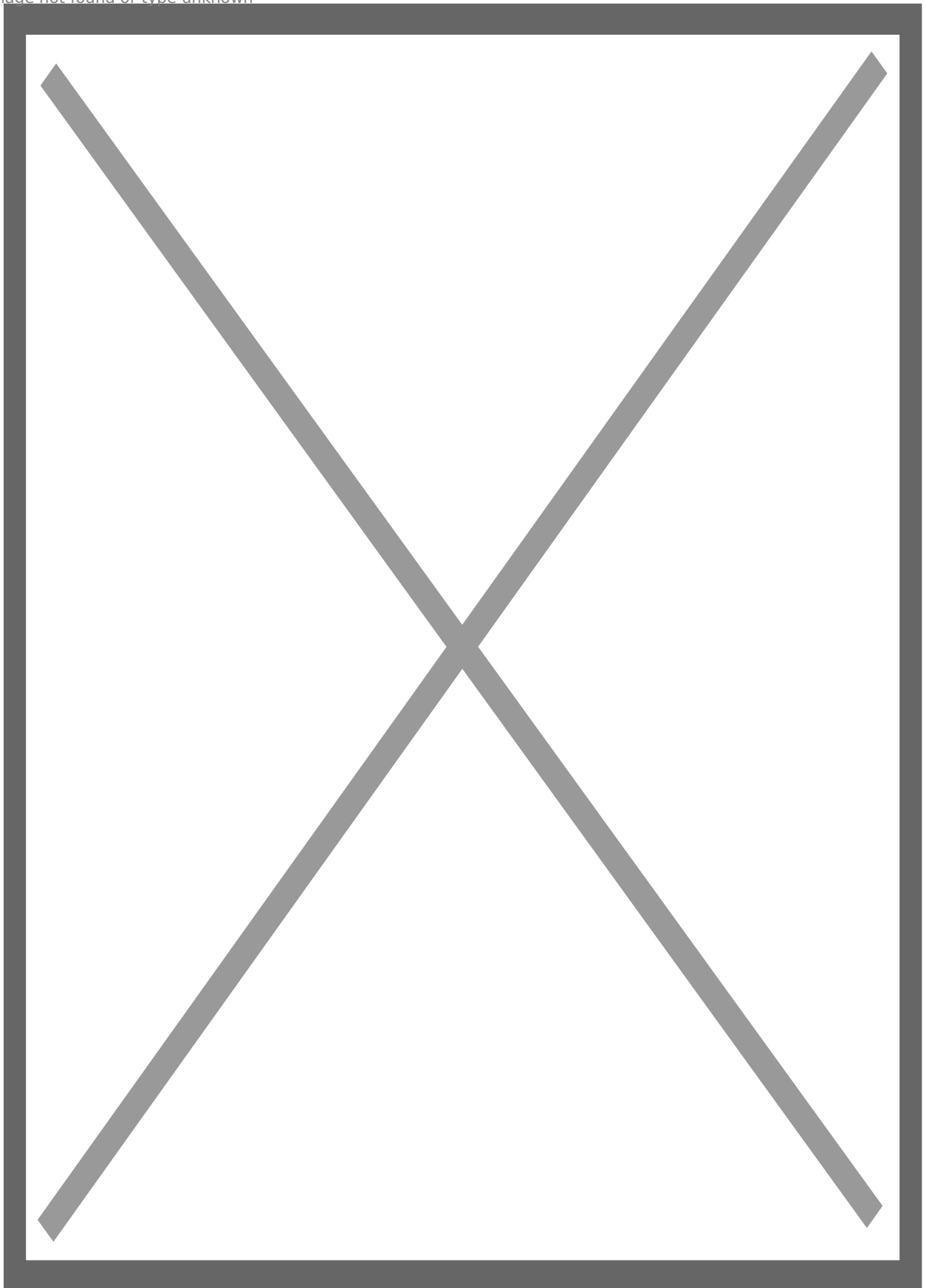
Post by “Martin” of September 7, 2021 at 2:32 AM

In case you travel to Copenhagen, I recommend to visit the Amber Museum there.

Post by “Cassius” of September 7, 2021 at 7:05 AM

looks very nice!

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[Copenhagen Amber Museum - Wikipedia](https://en.m.wikipedia.org)
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