

BRANNON, Peter A.

Glass Beads

Among the very earliest references to the exchange of goods with the American Natives for services rendered, or for commodities bought from them, mention is made to glass beads and mirrors. It is not always indicated that these mirrors were glass, and inasmuch as a large number of copper and brass disks are found, it is not unlikely that most of the early ones were not glass. Certain it is, however, that the Spanish, British, and French traders brought to America great quantities of glass beads. During the period between 1915 and the present time, members of the Alabama Anthropological Society, in doing research on the sites in the central part of the State, have taken out literally millions of beads, and because of the fact that there appears to be by far more objects of this character in our hands, in Alabama, than perhaps in the entire United States combined, Dr. R. P. Burke has undertaken a Check List describing and listing, sometimes with a definite title, these several characters, kinds, shapes, and qualities of objects.

Published herewith Dr. Burke has described in detail, varieties and sub-varieties, and suggestion is made that students interested in this subject through-out America might profit in the exchange of information by using the numbers here shown, and where they are described, and designations set out, mutual benefit may result.

Powell, in his book on British glass, makes the statement that it was not until about 1650 that "curious things for ornaments" were being made in England. It is a well known fact that the Venetians were manufacturing beads many years before this, and the Egyptians were making beads quite 1500 years before the birth of Christ. Certain writers on glass have attributed the manufacture of beads to the Chinese around 1000 A. D., and that same type is found here in the Gulf Country, so it is not unlikely that the greater portion of our beads are Italian or South European made. Of course, note is taken of those which may probably be Egyptian or Chinese. Numerous references to Indian Traders Journals indicate the trading of beads and those references extend from the coming of the Spaniards in the 1500s. Charles Town traders had established bead prices and the Spanish trade regulations in the mid-seventeen hundreds, had fixed bead prices that seem to have been measured by the "strand" and seem to have, even that early, given common names, rather than technical names. For example, the French, in the 1730s, at St. Louis, carried stocks of "Porcelain beads". The Spanish carried "Barley Corn beads". The Check List herewith takes note of such technical names as "Chevrons", "Bugles", and "Jets", where the resemblance is so characteristically typical the word "water melon" being used for "chevron", because that fruit, if such it may be called, is practically unversally known to Americans and the bead is a miniture replica. The Overlays, in the shape of tubes were referred to by the French as "Bugles" quite early in the industry. Inasmuch as they were entirely alike the small Chinese "Firecrackers", it was deemed advisable to so designate this type

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which is without doubt a variety of the Cornaline, made first at Aleppo in Syria. The Alabama Anthropological Society has made no effort to express an opinion as to where certain types of beads were made. Dr. Burke, in his Check List, records and describes the item, in no case assuming to fix its origin. Inasmuch as Italian glass blowers went to England, and Dutch glass blowers were brought to Jamestown, and inasmuch as the Hudson's Bay Trading Company did an enormous business in America in beads, it would seem that the cautious student should not arbitrarily attempt, with the information at hand, to say that the black bead overlay with terra cotta red and commercially known as the Cornaline de Aleppo were the out-put of factories in Syria. I am rather disposed to think that they were made in England. At least, the later ones. The pearly, translucent, crystal, oblong, oval, drop-like ones, and the rich blues and ambers are more likely Venetian than otherwise.

All found in the Gulf Country are rather much clouded, technically sick, and in many cases, richly irridesced. This adds materially to the beauty of them (except possibly in the case of Ambers). As found, they are frequently in place as strung, frequently alternating in colors and arrangements, and in the case of the small ones, show they were used as bead work. Early portraiture, notably that of McKenney and Hall, illustrates the wearing of them by the natives, and the colors as found by us one hundred years later, are strikingly similar even though the object itself has disintegrated. The natives no doubt used bought glass beads along with the native-made ones, for lying side by side are those of glass, clay, and those of shell. There must have been a wooden or bark or native seed in use at the same time, for if strings or strands are encountered, frequently there are missing places, indicating that one of the objects has totally decayed.

Obviously many of the small ones, particularly the dark blues and blacks have escaped attention in taking them from the surface, but as a rule the worker carries away much of the dirt and washes this through a sieve, thus securing most of the material. These ornaments are frequently found in connection with silver and copper pendants and earrings and such, and the aboriginal's use of them must have been identical with our current manner.

Peter A. Brannon
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