

# AN HISTORICAL EXPLANATION OF ALASKAN TRADE BEADS

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The source of Alaskan trade beads has long puzzled collectors. The beads are not different in kind from those found in adjacent territories. Many specimens are the same as European glass beads found in Canada, western United States, Africa and other geographical areas touched by trade.

The mystery posed stems from history. How did beads so closely identified with U.S. western expansion, the vast fur trading empire of the Hudson's Bay Company and European penetration of Africa, become characteristic of that far northwest corner of America that was first occupied by Russia?

From the earliest white contact in 1741, when men from Alexei Chirikov's St. Paul, sister ship of Bering's second expedition, vanished on the shores of present day Sitka, the Russian presence along the Aleutians and down the Pacific Northwest coast separated Alaska from the mainstream of American continental history.

Captain Cook's final explorations of 1778 brought back to England reports by his crew of the Russian's thriving sub-arctic trade in the luxuriant fur of the sea otter. There followed four decades of an intensive maritime free-for-all, bringing hundreds of ships from England, France, Spain and the newly independent United States to barter a wide variety of practical western goods for sea otter pelts to be re-sold in a triangular trade for luxury items in China. Early maritime accounts of the 1780's to 1820's mention beads, but more in passing than as a dominant article of trade.

North of the main coasting area where European and Boston men engaged in free trade with the coastal Indians, a permanent Russian post on Kodiak Island served as control point of Russia's fur gathering empire. In 1791 Alexander Baranov stepped ashore to take command of the ruthless operations that were based on the enslavement of Aleuts as marine hunters. Throughout Baranov's iron rule (until 1818) and after, the Russians had small need for trade beads.

Yet the description, "Russian" trade beads conveniently identifies a characteristic combination of beads commonly found in Alaska. Numerous theories have been advanced to explain their presence, that Russia made them, China made them, the English brought them to China from where they were reshipped to Alaska and other conjectures.

The best known is a tube drawn bead with multiple facets, found in varying sizes, colors and opacities, most often a deep rich transparent dark blue and sometimes of compound manufacture of translucent blue over lighter opaque blue core. Also found are clear crystal, amethyst, marine and turquoise blue, green and milk white beads of this hexagonal, octagonal and sometimes seven sided bead. The side facets are the result of marving. End facets have been ground. Different beads vary in appearance and workmanship to a degree that suggests a wide time span and differing fabrication expertise.

In Alaska these beads are often described as Bohemian glass. They are also identified as Venetian, and elsewhere as Hudson's Bay trade beads. In his Handbook on Beads, Van der Sleen says that Bohemia began producing materials for barter by the early 19th Century, a dating that coincides with native Alaska's European contact.

Woodward states that at the time of the transfer in 1867 packages of these faceted blue beads were found in the Russian

American Fur Company warehouse wrapped in coarse gray paper marked "Brussels." He says England, Belgium, France and other countries imported beads from Italy and repackaged them for export. Whether the Russians imported the beads or they came in via the Hudson's Bay Company is still unknown, as is also the question of whether "Brussels" placed the order with Venice or Bohemia.

Second to the faceted "Russian" bead is the Cornaline d'Alep-po, both large and small, the earlier opaque red over translucent green core and the later transparent red glaze over white and over yellow core which appeared early in the 1800's. On a necklace of Alaskan beads I have two, three quarter inch long cylindrical "ox eyes" or Cornaline d'Aleppos of transparent red glaze wound over crude yellow core. Sorenson describes beads of this type found in the American Southwest. In his article, "The Enduring Intrigue of the Glass Trade Bead," one is included in his photograph of "Venetian 'polychrome' or 'flower' beads."

Strands of these identical beads are among the thousands of glass beads currently being brought into the U.S. by importers and African "runners" who are engaged in an ironic reverse trade that will soon empty Africa of the beads that for five centuries helped to empty it of souls.

The addition of two native shell ornaments often sets Alaskan necklaces apart. Glass beads are frequently strung with a long slender tusk shaped shell called dentalium (*Dentalium pretiosum*), a mollusk formerly found off the shore of Vancouver Island. This shell was highly prized and widely traded among the Indians, but because of its fragility, its survival powers seem greatest nearest to its once source of supply.

A second frequent natural ornament is a disk carved from abalone shell (called haliotis in references on Northwest Coast Indian art), drilled and strung to feature the inner shell's iridescent brilliance. Early traders learned to pick them up along the southern California coast to augment their trade goods. Some were reportedly brought from China by the few traders, mostly English, who outfitted in Canton.

Supplementing the two dominant bead types and typical shell is a variety of colorful, smaller transparent, translucent and opaque beads, attributable in manufacture to Venice and Bohemia (Gablonz-Czechoslovakia). Milliflore and traditional chevrons have to my knowledge not been found, although Jenkins illustrates a technically well made yellow and black chevron, similar to a strand recently acquired from Africa.

Beads attributed to Bohemia tend to be more regular, the product of a more sophisticated, mechanized technology. The consensus seems to be that these better made beads began appearing in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

"Peking" glass beads are also a frequent component of Alaskan trade bead necklaces. Sometimes opaque, but more often transparent, showing the characteristic tiny bubbles, they are usually considered to have appeared around the mid 1800's. This dating coincides with Britain's rising imperial power in the Orient (acquisition of Hong Kong in 1842 — open trade after 1860) and Dr. Liu's suggestion of 1850 as the earliest starting date for Chinese beads in the U.S. The good condition of Alaskan Peking glass beads suggests that bulk import may have occurred there somewhat later.

In 1821 the entire fur trade of Canada was brought under sole

control of the Hudson's Bay Company, a condition of key importance to an understanding of the predominant flow of trade beads into Alaska, as well as to understanding trade bead distribution throughout Canada.

While chartered in 1670, for nearly two centuries the Hudson's Bay Company confined its fur gathering activities to the original Bay area and lands washed by rivers flowing into it. Further south, from the St. Lawrence River to Great Lakes, and up the Mississippi River and its tributaries, the French had from the early 1600's monopolized the fur trade of interior North America.

In 1760 England defeated France in war and took over Canada. For a while the former French fur trade of the north was competitively carried on by Scotch firms based in Montreal. In 1787 they merged into the Northwest Fur Company and began concentrating their energies on exploring the far west. Alexander Mackenzie reached the Pacific in 1792, Simon Frazer and others soon after.

Under the Earl of Selkirk the Hudson's Bay Company was revitalized and extended its activities southward. A period of hostilities between the two companies followed. In 1821 they merged, retaining the Hudson's Bay name and the younger firm's vigor.

Check-mated by the Russians in the Pacific, Great Britain and Russia signed a treaty in 1825 establishing Russian sovereignty above the Portland Canal, present boundary of southeastern Alaska, below which the Hudson's Bay Company established fur trading posts to Fort Vancouver at the mouth of the Columbia River.

This neat division of the coast failed to come to grips with the free wheeling Yankee traders who since Captain Robert Gray's arrival in Alaskan waters in 1788 had been conducting an important trade. Under Baranov this Yankee trade was not only tolerated, but it played a crucial role in maintaining the Russian presence on the American continent. While still at Kodiak in 1801, Baranov would have perished had he not struck a bargain with Joseph O'Cain, mate of the Boston ship, "Enterprise," to exchange furs already collected by his flotillas of Aleut hunters for urgently needed foodstuffs.

Again, a year later at Baranov's new capital at New Arkangel (Sitka) the exchange was repeated and O'Cain threw in his ship, "Juno," sailing off to China with a cargo of furs in a smaller vessel provided by the Russian. This pattern continued in varying degree all during Baranov's term as the resourceful, neglected manager of the Russian American Fur Trading Company. The early decades of the 1800's saw hundreds of U.S. vessels on the far Northwest Coast, outbidding each other with cloth, iron, copper, tanned moose skins, dentalium shell, utilitarian implements and firearms, for sea otter furs brought to shipside by the coastal Indians, and exchanging with Baranov needed supplies for interior furs such as fox and land otter.

Unification brought to the Hudson's Bay Company one of its most able leaders, George Simpson, who by 1829 had completed a second inspection tour of posts from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific. He was quick to grasp the significance of the Yankee trade in Russian American waters.

In his report from Fort Vancouver to London he exclaimed that "the honor, dignity and character not of the Fur Trade alone, but of the Honble, Hudson's Bay Company must be considered in some degree clouded while a few contemptible American Adventurers are allowed to Monopolize the Trade of our Coast, and through that channel extract the Riches of our interior country."

Simpson's proposed solution was to squeeze out the Americans by "depriving them of the benefits arising from their dealings with the Russians. To this end we have it in view to propose furnishing the Russian Fur Company, regularly with all the British manufacturers they require deliverable at New Arkangel, at whatever we can get above 33 1/3 p. Cent on prime cost. . ."

Implementation proved even more advantageous. Following a decade of conflict and negotiation, the Russians leased outright

to the Hudson's Bay Company all trading rights from Portland Canal to Cape Spenser, the whole of present day southeastern Alaska, for annual rental of 2,000 land otter skins and needed supplies of grain and meat. In 1840 the English company took possession of a Russian stockage on Wrangell Island at the mouth of the great, traversable Stikine River which reaches into the Canadian interior, renaming it Fort Stikine. The contract was renewed after ten years and continued in effect until the U.S. bought Alaska in 1867, thus securing the entire northwest coast from further encroachment under terms that had opened the entire island archipelago to Hudson's Bay Company goods.

Russia's willingness to yield control of so vast an area throws light on her non-existent trade relations with the "Kolash," as the Russians called the Tlingit and Haida population of southeastern Alaska, the main region of reference in discussions of Alaskan trade beads. Across the high coastal mountains, the Athapaskan Indians figure geographically as Canadian. The Tlingit and Haida were hostile and the Russians armed and watchful as they conducted from Sitka their fur gathering operations farther north, using fleets of Aleut hunters in their small skin covered canoes.

Even as trade prospered at Fort Stikine and the Tlingit and Haida chiefs amassed wealth, measured primarily in Hudson's Bay blankets, the English also took care, trading from the Fort and periodically visiting the Russians at Sitka.

Thus, Russian-Indian hostility, the scarcity of Russian ships calling at Sitka (41 arrivals between 1804 and 1849; a record 14 between 1848 and 1852) and the increasing friendliness in subsequent decades between English and Russian administrators, point strongly to the Hudson's Bay Company as primary source of Alaska's trade goods supply from approximately 1829, when the Americans quit the coast, to U.S. purchase in 1867.

With the transfer everything changed. During the first decade liquor and gunboat rule destroyed the spirit and during the second, the missionaries, who by comparison were an improvement, completed destruction of the old Indian culture. By the mid-1880's came the tourists, lured by competing railroad tycoons to travel their new trans-continental rails and "See Alaska" in their expeditiously supplied tourist steamers.

By this time the Tlingit and Haida had learned the value of money, which they demanded, rather than beads, for bracelets fashioned from silver coins, tightly woven spruce root baskets and tall stories for which they charged by the hour. They relinquished quantities of beautiful carved masks and artifacts to assorted collectors and to the enterprising merchants who flocked into the territory to open curio shops along the steamer route at Ketchikan, Wrangell, Juneau, Sitka and other picturesque villages.

Unlike the trader of the Southwest who came with the railroads to trade with the Indians, the Alaskan merchants wooed the tourists, although it is reasonable to assume that the Indians traded some of their native arts for store goods as well as buying it with money. This commercial exchange, based primarily on money, has continued into present day, absorbing the shock of gold prospecting hordes at turn of the century and evolving into a rough, frontier economy based on fishing, canneries and lumber.

Against this brief backdrop of history the sources of Alaska's different bead types do not seem so obscure. The coasting trade of the late 18-early 19th century can account for uncharacteristic beads. It could in part explain presence of the earlier opaque red over translucent green core Cornaline d'Aleppos.

Beginning in the late 18th-early 19th Century Van der Sleen notes the appearance in Rhodesia of cylindrical, oval and globular wound beads of transparent red over thick opaque white and sometimes yellow kernel, in sizes ranging from five to fifteen millimetres. While manufacturing origin is still uncertain, he points to the increased influx of Venetian beads into Africa during the 19th Century. This same era, he says, brought the "well known cornerless blue drawn hexagonals."

The British are doubtless not the sole distributor of Cornaline d'Aleppos or these faceted drawn beads, but their simultaneous occurrence in area of British influence in Africa and the Canadian and Alaskan regions of Hudson's Bay trade, suggest that they are an important one.

The evidence is abundant in old photographs, pamphlets, travel guides and advertising posters of Alaska's flourishing tourist trade from the late 1880's into the early decades of the 20th Century. Curio shops were far more numerous than today in this, now backwater region of early European contact. From their ads it is apparent that the shop merchants of the day loaded their shelves with novelties and adornments that people buy when on holiday.

Bead production in Czechoslovakia rose to peak output during this period and these, as well as beads from Venice, enjoyed a popular market that exceeded the limited concept of trade goods. The J.F. Sick & Co. of Rotterdam sent out salesmen with bead trays, color photographs of which are in the Corning Glass Museum Library (unfortunately not dated) showing plain, striped and milliflore glass and semi-precious stone beads available from their sources in Czechoslovakia and Venice. One strongly surmises that the enterprising Alaskan merchants, no less than their counterparts elsewhere, managed to stock them, if not from Sick, from others.

The popularity in the United States of Peking, or Canton glass also increased during this period of rising affluence. During the 1920's in particular, Peking glass beads were in vogue. One can reasonably assume that Alaskan merchants stocked these attractive sales items also, possibly importing them direct, but more likely from Seattle or San Francisco with which, prior to air travel, Alaska was closely linked by steamship.

The Indians of Alaska have been spared the shame of reservation confinement. Through their vast labyrinth of inland waterways they have been free to move about at will. Their sophistication is such that for many years great numbers of them have loaded their boats as Fall darkness approaches to spend their winters in Seattle and San Francisco. As full participants in Alaska's commercial economy they have long had the option to buy, rather than obtain through barter, whatever material goods and luxuries they might choose.

FIG. 1



Prior to U.S. purchase, the events of history show that trade goods, including beads, came into Alaska through trade, primarily English. After the transfer money took over as the main medium of exchange. The old adage, "Money talks," is particularly true in Alaska where a "civilized" life style requires import of basic necessities. As consummate creators of artistic work, Alaskan Indians of the tourist era were far more often the vendors of their own decorative wares than the duped recipients of non-negotiable trade items.

In comparison with other native cultures, trade beads are not abundant in Alaska. The Indian custom, even today although the heritage is fatally depleted, of safeguarding clan arts as heirlooms, explains the co-existence of older bead types with the new. The absence of a trade economy in Alaska suggests to me that after the late 1880's, most of the beads were simply bought by Alaska's native inhabitants who then as now compete as earners and spenders of money.

That Alaskan trade beads reflect Alaska's unique history should not be surprising. History, like archaeology, is one of the tools we must use to establish bead origins, dispersals and dates. There is really no substitute for knowledge — of specific regions, of the exploits of the great European trading empires whose five century race for riches transformed the world.

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All photographs taken by *Brandt Magic*.

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Fig. 1. This illustrates the center section of an Alaskan Indian glass trade bead and shell necklace (bottom), together with a strand of Hudson's Bay Co. transparent dark blue faceted beads (sixth row from top) and four strands of bead types currently being imported into the U.S. from West Africa, that are also found on Alaskan and Northwest Coast Indian necklaces. Rows 1 and 3: These strands of well-made yellow and black striped glass beads of chevron construction were recently purchased by the author from an African dealer. A similar, shorter yellow and black chevron is shown in the Alaskan Trade Bead article by Jenkins.<sup>1</sup> The beads here are of 4 layer construction: opaque white core, opaque red, white and black. The straight yellow stripes appear to be applied rather than revealed through grinding. End faceting differs from four sharply beveled facets to an all around, evenly ground beveling. The irregularity of size, striping and faceting suggests (to author) handcrafted Italian rather than mechanized Czechoslovakian workmanship. Rows 2, 4, 5: An assortment of Cornaline d'Aleppo beads in varying sizes, shapes, colors and fabrication techniques, recently bought by the author from a young African dealer. All the beads have white centers, mostly visible at the ends, but on some the centers are almost concealed by an overlay of the transparent and translucent red exteriors. This widely distributed bead type is illustrated and described by Mary Elizabeth Good<sup>2</sup> as follows: An "opaque barrel shaped bead of compound construction of crimson red over opaque white . . . a later form of the Cornaline d'Aleppo, recovered at Devil's Canyon (Okla.), 1820-1834, and Fort Laramie (Wyo.), 1834-1875." (Good's bead specimens are from the Guebert site in Illinois which was occupied continuously by the Kaskaskia Indians from 1719 to 1774 and thereafter intermittently to 1833.) Row 6: An excellent description of this "Russian" and/or "Hudson's Bay Company" bead is also given by Good<sup>3</sup>: "Translucent royal blue, barrel shaped bead of simple construction made from hollow cane which was hexagonal in cross-section. Hand cut facets on each end, leaving central facets around the bead . . . appeared in the Western Great Lakes trade, 1760-1820, and in Wichita (Oklahoma and Texas) sites from 1806 to 1840's. Large specimens of this bead are diagnostic of the Northwest coast trade." The beads shown here were purchased in 1963 by the author in a very long strand from

an antique dealer in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, who described them as "old Hudson's Bay Company stock." Row 7: A strand of large Cornaline d'Aleppo beads, also called "ox eye," of both barrel and round shapes, purchased by author from African dealers. All of wound construction of transparent red over both white and yellow opaque cores. Diameters of round beads from 10 to 20 mm; diameters of cylinder beads from 10 to 18 mm; length 16 to 26 mm. Van der Sleen<sup>4</sup> suggests that Cornaline d'Aleppo came from Venice. Woodward<sup>5</sup> suggests they were so named because of Italian export association with trade center of Aleppo (Syria). Good<sup>6</sup> illustrates and describes a specimen of this type: "This opaque olive shaped bead of mandrel wound, compound construction is translucent crimson red over opaque white. Present in the trade at Wichita sites after 1820; also found at Fort Laramie, 1834-1875. Row 8: A typical assortment of mixed, mostly blue glass beads currently being brought into the U.S. from Africa. Often identified as "Dogon," a West African tribal people in Mali, but as they are not characteristic of African manufacture, the identification more likely designates Dogon territory as a contemporary source of supply. The blue loops, or annulars (4 by 12 mm) are described by Van der Sleen<sup>7</sup> as the beads worn by the chiefs who met Livingston at Victoria Falls (1855). Construction is a single winding of ca. 4 mm wide glass strip with the join mark usually visible. Hole size usually exceeds thickness of the rim. These mixed strands often include colorless annulars and less frequently annulars of opaque white, transparent amber, violet and green. Intermixed with the annulars are various other opaque and translucent blue hexagonal drawn beads of both simple and complex (dark over lighter blue centers) construction. Some of these appear to be the cornerless dark blue hexagonal beads described by Van der Sleen.<sup>8</sup> Two of this type are shown; they are six sided, but not faceted at the ends. Row 9: Detail of Alaskan Indian trade bead and shell necklace strung in more elaborate version of traditional native design, featuring the long thin white dentalium shells favored by Northwest Coast Indians and native cut halotis (abalone) shell pendant. The necklace combines three simpler necklaces obtained from dealers in Northwest Coast Indian material, plus two small blue faceted beads found by author on shore of a now deserted Southeastern Alaskan island. Shown here are two large dark and four small lighter versions of the faceted blue bead called "Russian" and "Hudson's Bay." Good's<sup>9</sup> description: "Translucent blue faceted barrel shaped bead of compound construction which has inner layer of

opaque sky blue glass. The outer layer of glass is hexagonal in cross-section. Facets were hand cut on each end. Found in Wichita sites dates 1767 to 1840's; Fort Laramie, 1834-1875." Supporting the pendant next to the small white quartz beads, and above the small faceted blues, are tiny Cornaline d'Aleppo beads. Elsewhere on the necklace are larger ones. Again, Good's<sup>10</sup> description: "Opaque brick red barrel shaped beads of compound construction. The core of this bead is translucent green, the middle layer is opaque red, the surface is a very thin layer of clear glass. The bead surface is smooth, sometimes with a soft gloss. . . Present at Rochester Junction, 1675-1760; Western Great Lakes, 1670-1706; Oklahoma, Texas and other sites, 1760 into 1840's." The necklace also includes a number of the later, red over white Cornaline d'Aleppos and two cylinder shaped "ox eye" versions of the transparent red over yellow core. Articulating the pendant is a single, colorless faceted bead that is also illustrated by Good:<sup>11</sup> "Small barrel shaped cane bead of compound construction having an inner layer of opaque white glass and an outer layer of six sided clear glass that is faceted on the ends. It is present in Wichita sites, 1780 into 1840's."

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10. Good, Bead specimen 127.
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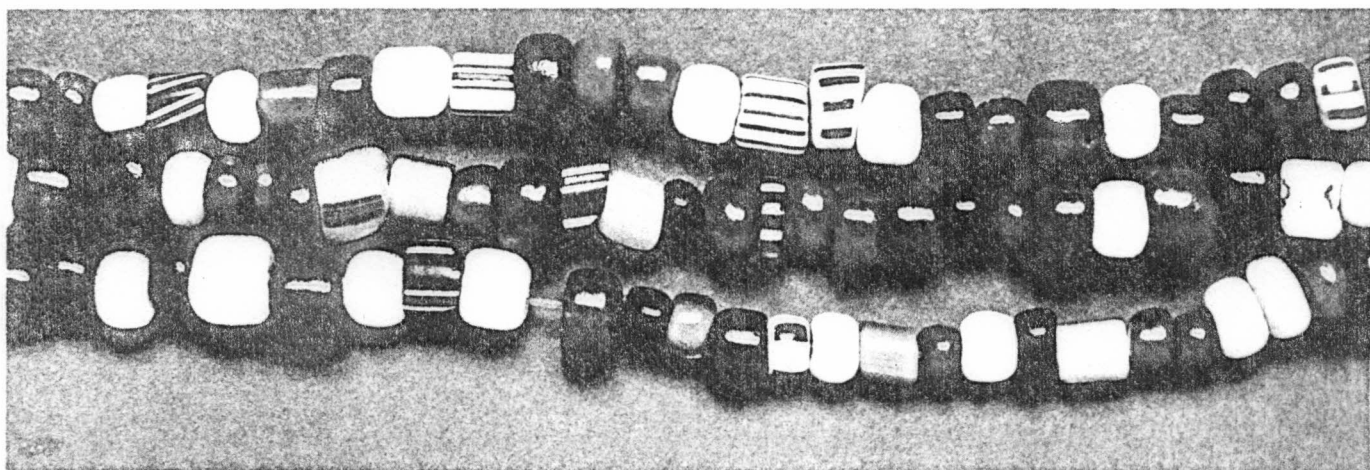


FIG. 2

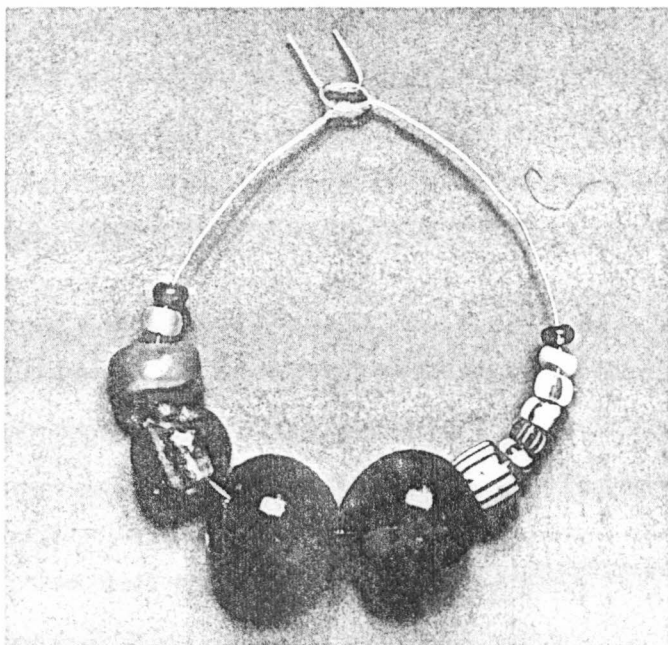


FIG. 3

Fig. 2. Section of long strand of multi-colored glass beads (ca. 4 x 6 mm) bought 1956, in Venice containing numerous bead types that are similar to beads found in Alaska. Row 1: White cylindrical bead with thin blue stripes (toward center) of compound construction: opaque white, opaque red, transparent blue core; similar to cylindrical white bead (Fig. 3) next to Peking glass bead, with thin white stripe, opaque white, opaque red, translucent blue-gray core. Row 2: Thin black and yellow striped disk shaped bead (toward center) is same chevron construction of black, white, red over white core as Alaskan chevron identified by Jenkins and as chevron (Fig. 1, Row) from Africa. Others: Although difficult to distinguish without color, the contemporary Venetian necklace contains a number of single color beads of simple construction that except for evidence of wear, are similar to author's Alaskan beads, including: dark, medium and robin's egg blue beads, both transparent and opaque; shiny black, translucent and opaque white beads. The most notable similarity is irregularity of shape, suggesting individual, hand fabrication. Cornaline d'Aleppos on the modern strand, all red over white core, are a brighter, more transparent red than those from Alaska (Fig. 1, Rows 2, 4, 5).

Fig. 3. Assortment of beads from Alaska (l to r): two simple beads (2 x 3 mm) translucent jade green and colorless; opaque moss green; yellow and two emerald green "peking" glass beads (10 x 12 mm); compound bead: blue stripe on white, red, blue-gray core (Fig. 2, Row 1); tiny compound blue stripe on white over light blue core; multi-stripe on simple black bead; two blue multi-stripe on white over light blue core and gray-blue core; tiny, simple translucent yellow and transparent rose red beads.

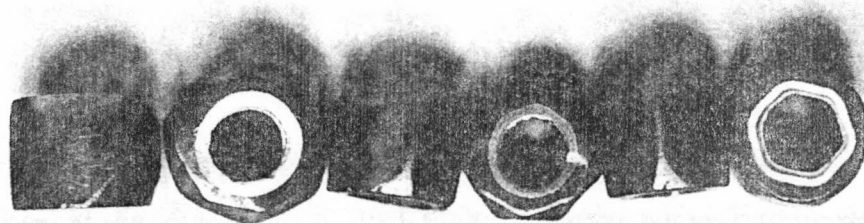


FIG. 4

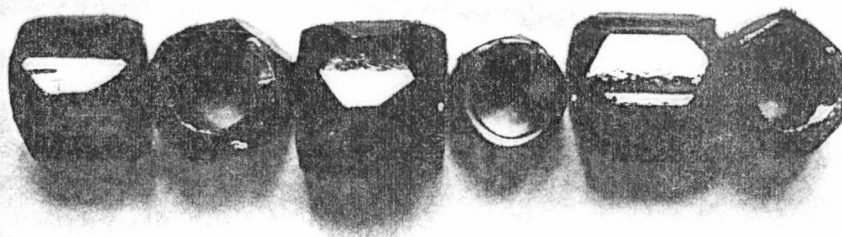


FIG. 5

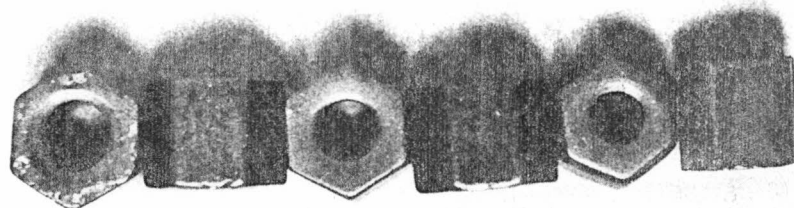


FIG. 6

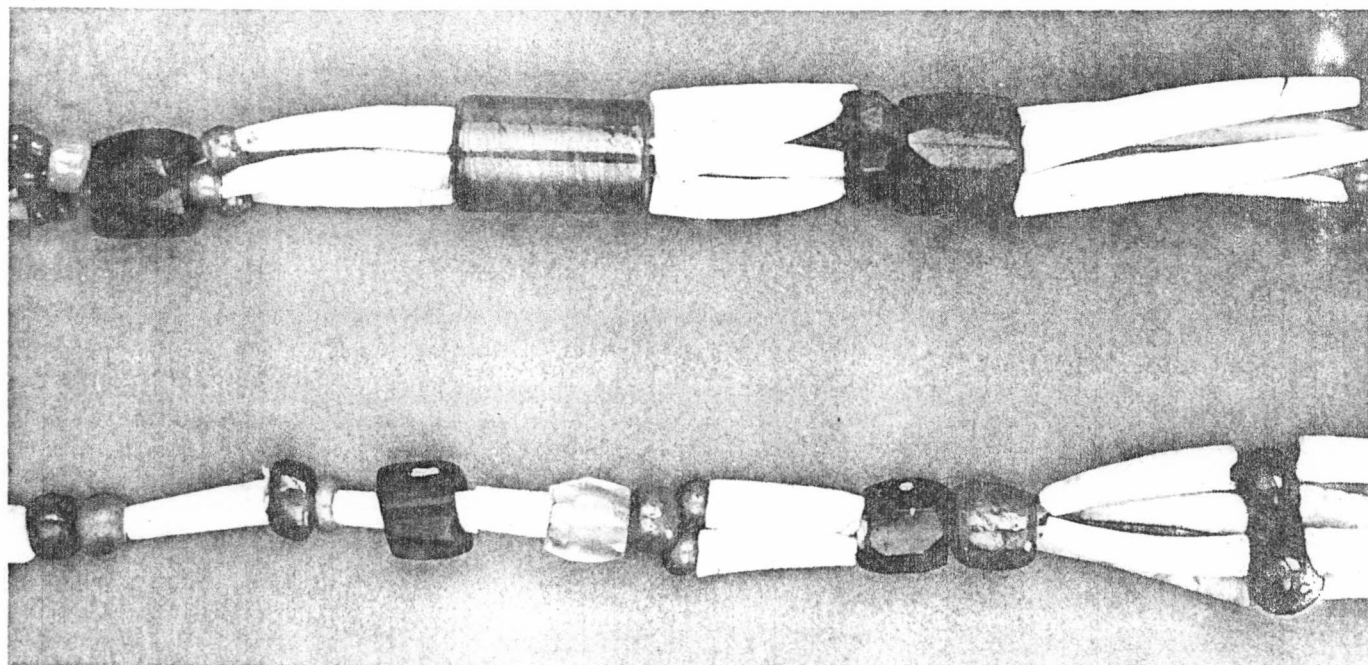


FIG. 7

Fig. 4. Dark blue faceted beads, called "Russian" and "Hudson's Bay," of compound construction, transparent/translucent royal blue over lighter opaque blue core, identical to bead described on Alaskan necklace (Fig. 1, Row 9). These six examples were included in strands of mixed blue beads obtained by author from African dealer.

Fig. 5. Five transparent royal blue faceted beads of simple construction, called "Russian" and "Hudson's Bay," found in Alaska and North America (Fig. 1, Row 6). (Author's note: While many faceted blue beads of compound construction, fourth from left, are found on African strands, examples of single construction "Russians" obtained by the author from African sources are far fewer, more uniform and have more complex faceting.)

Fig. 6. Opaque royal blue, hexagonal beads found on mixed bead strands from Africa (Fig. 1, Row 8). (Author's note: Although seemingly similar to both the simple and compound faceted blue beads of figures 4 and 5, the author has no

examples of these from Alaska, and has not seen them included in examples of beads found in North America.)

Fig. 7. Details from Alaskan necklace (top) showing cylindrical Cornaline d'Aleppo that is identical to "ox eye" on strands from Africa (Fig. 1, Row 7). Shown also are two large transparent blue faceted beads (Fig. 1, Row 6); a cluster of small compound, lighter blue faceted beads (Fig. 1, Row 9); cluster of translucent red over white Cornaline d'Aleppos and grouping (far left) of small transparent simple light and medium blue beads, dentalium shell spacers. Beads on second line are similar except for multi-faceted hexagonal, clear glass bead, similar to compound bead described (Fig. 1, Row 9), and opaque red over translucent green core Cornaline d'Aleppo next to it. (Author's note: Incoming African bead strands include many simple clear and translucent glass beads, often severely worn (Fig. 1, Row 8), but none of the African material collected or seen by author has included these multi-faceted clear glass hexagonal beads.)