

THE CHEVRON TRADE BEAD IN NORTH AMERICA

MARVIN T. SMITH*

This paper will attempt to document the use of chevron trade beads in North America from the period of earliest European contact until the middle of the 19th century. I will not attempt to deal with every chevron bead described in the archaeological literature; that would be an immense undertaking. Rather, this paper will focus on selected examples to show stylistic changes in chevron beads over time. I believe that the chevron bead can be a rather sensitive chronological indicator. Some effort will be made to show distributions of chevron varieties over time. Unless otherwise stated, all beads discussed are small necklace beads (less than 12mm) and are described by layers from outside to inside.

Chevron beads were one of the earliest bead types traded in North America. The earliest chevron bead typical of the middle part of the sixteenth century are easily distinguished from later chevron beads by two major traits: they typically have one or more layers of transparent green glass near the center of the bead, and they have sharply cut end facets exposing the inner layers of the bead so that they can be seen when the bead is strung.

Two chevron beads found in the southeastern United States have been attributed to the DeSoto expedition of 1540. One of these is from the Parkin Mound in Arkansas (Brain 1975: 133; *Personal Communication*) (Fig. 1), and the other is from a site near Chattanooga, Tennessee (Fig. 2). Both of these beads are the only glass beads recovered from these sites. They are made up of seven layers: blue exterior/white/red/white/transparent green/white/transparent green core. Orchard (1975: Plate XVIII) illustrates several beads of this type from Ontario. The two specimens shown on end are certainly of this type, but some of the large specimens may not be. Orchard also mentions chevron beads with green layers from the ruins of Hawikuh, New Mexico (1975: 96-97). He stated that the inner layers were exposed by abrasion due to wearing on a string with other beads. I suspect that the beads were intentionally faceted.



Fig. 1. Blue, seven layer, faceted chevron bead from the Parkin Mound, Arkansas. Mid-Sixteenth Century. Inner layers of transparent Green. Photo courtesy of Hester Davis and the Arkansas Archaeological Survey.

Early faceted chevron beads with green layers are also reported from Florida. Benson illustrates two from the Philip Mound (1967: Figure 2, Row 1, #2; Row 7, #5). These beads are described as being constructed of six layers: translucent blue exterior/opaque white/opaque white/red/opaque white/translucent

pale green/opaque white. Benson estimated the occupation of this site to be ca. 1600-1700 or slightly earlier (1967: 130-131), but Karklins has recently presented evidence to support a pre-1600 origin for the site (1974: 6). These chevron beads are identical to the other specimens mentioned above, except that they lack the transparent green core. The core layer is often quite thin, and may not be readily apparent. Furthermore, it is subject to string abrasion. It is also possible that these beads are indeed only six layers thick. As I hope to demonstrate, there seems to be a general trend toward fewer layers in chevron beads from ca. 1540-1640. Sorensen (1971: Plate C1 184) illustrates in color beads similar to those discussed by Benson.

Finally, one other faceted green centered chevron will be mentioned. It is a five layered bead from the Goodnow Mound in Florida (Griffin and Smith 1948: 14, Plate V A). The layers are blue/white/red/pale green. While this site has been placed in the Middle Historic Period in Florida, 1600-1700 by H.G. Smith (1956: 56), he does mention that some of the material recovered may well be 16th century. For several reasons, I prefer a late 16th century date for this site.

The small chevron beads with transparent green layers apparently disappear from the trade ca. 1580.

A site recently investigated by amateurs in northeastern Alabama on the Coosa River has yielded a few chevron beads. This site appears to date ca. 1570-1600. One blue faceted chevron bead (10mm in diameter, 7mm long, Fig. 3) consists of seven layers: blue exterior/white/red/white/translucent blue/white/clear. Several small green chevrons also occur on this site, and on the nearby Bradford Ferry site, 1-Ce-73, in the Weiss Reservoir. This site is dated ca. 1600-1630. These green chevron beads consist of five layers: green/white/red/white/clear core (Fig. 4). John Witthoft (*Personal Communication*) believes that this type dates from ca. late 1500's-1620's, and he stated that it was found at the Blue Rock Cemetery of ca. 1575-1595 (Heisy and Witmer 1962). A similar bead, lacking the clear core, was recovered from the Philip Mound in Florida (Benson 1967: 121).



Fig. 2. Blue, seven layer, faceted chevron bead from S.E. Tennessee. Mid-Sixteenth Century. 8mm long. Inner layers of transparent green. Photo by G.L. Hight.

By the end of the 16th Century and early part of the 17th Century, chevron beads became much simpler, but more abundant. They are frequently tumbled, instead of being faceted on the ends, and many are nearly spherical in shape. Most chevron beads of this period consist of only four or five layers. Typical beads are blue/white/red/white (Fig. 5, 2nd and 10th bead from right). Examples are numerous. The Blue Rock Cemetery in Pennsylvania (dated 1575-1595) produced several hundred chevron beads of this type and some other types (Heisy and Witmer 1962: 116-117). Their line drawing seems to indicate that some of the chevrons are faceted; not surprising considering

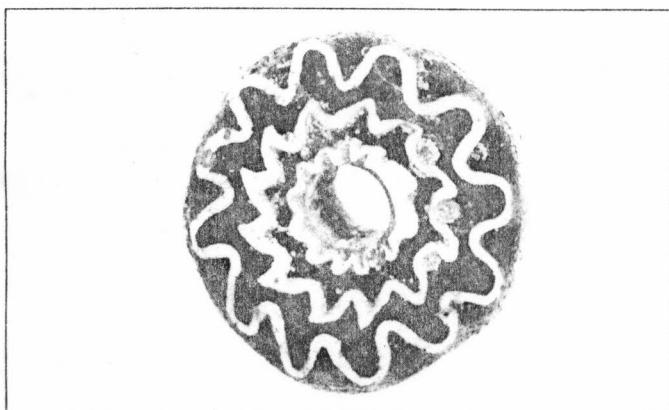


Fig. 3. Blue, seven layer faceted chevron bead from N.E. Alabama. Ca. 1570-1600. 10mm diameter by 8mm long. Transparent blue inner layer. Photo by G.L. Hight.

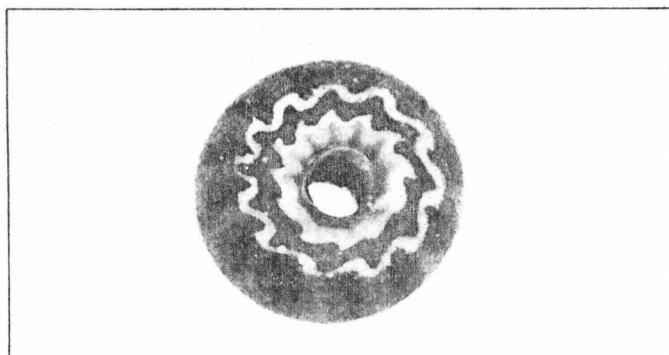


Fig. 4. Green, five layer, tumbled chevron. 8mm in diameter. N.E. Alabama. Ca. 1570-1630. Photo by G.L. Hight.

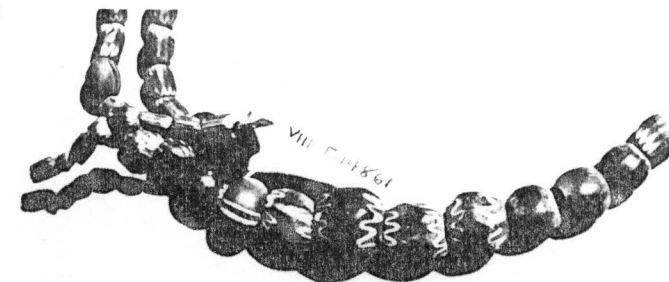


Fig. 5. Tumbled and faceted chevron beads from Canada. Ca. 1615-1650. Photo Robert K. Liu. Courtesy Dr. J.V. Wright, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, Canada.

the early date. The nearly Ibaugh site of ca. 1600-1625 (W. Fred Kinsey 1960: 91-92) produced two chevron beads of red, white, and blue glass (the number of layers is not noted). One is subspherical, and the other is tubular. Tumbled four layer chevron beads have also been found at the Trigg Site in Virginia, ca. 1610-1620 (MacCord 1975 and *Personal Communication*), the Wayland-Smith Site, ca. 1570-1595 (Pratt 1961: 7), and a site excavated by Gerald B. Fenstermaker in Pennsylvania (Liu 1974: Figure 1, Row 7). Similar chevron beads, but with five layers (clear blue core) were characteristic of Seneca Iroquois sites of the 1590-1615 period (Wray and Schoff 1953: 56; Charles Wray, *Personal Communication*). A similar four layer chevron (clear core instead of white) from a 17th Century Spanish mission, is on display at the Florida State Museum.

Perhaps the latest, well-dated example of a chevron bead was excavated in Ontario by Kenneth Kidd (1953) from the Ossosane Ossuary. This Ossuary contained Huron Indians who died ca. 1624-1636. Kidd (1953: Figure 123) illustrated a chevron bead, which may be faceted. Quimby (1966: 184) describes these beads as barrel shaped, about 1/2-inch by 1/2-inch, built up of concentric layers of deep cobalt blue, opaque brick red, opaque white, and sometimes other colors, in six or more bands.

These beads sound like 16th century beads since they consist of 6 or more layers and other colors beside red, white, and blue are present.

After this period (ca. 1640), small chevron beads are virtually nonexistent in North American sites. A few large chevron beads occur up to 1660, but these are probably heirlooms. In the Seneca Iroquois sequence from New York, "Some star beads of unusual size, up to one inch in diameter, were available" in the 1630-1650 Period (Wray and Schoff 1953: 57). One large chevron 3.5 cm by 2.25 cm excavated by Charles Wray from the Power House site in Lima, New York has seven layers; outer layer of blue/creamy white/red/creamy white/aqua/white/aqua (Charles Wray, *Personal Communication*). Witthoft (1966: 207) in discussing the 1640-1660 period in the northeast, mentions a "Chevron bead the size of a pullet egg" is found only in this stage. These beads are not described in detail.

I have been unable to find references to chevron beads in the late 17th or early 18th centuries. I have been told that late 18th century chevron beads do occur in Tennessee, but I was unable to get detailed descriptions. Stone (1974: 101; Figure 49 Q) illustrates a chevron type bead from Fort Michilimackinac, Michigan (1715-1781). This bead has an opaque white core, and a toothed red layer, the grooves between the exterior teeth being filled with longitudinal white and blue glass insets. This bead is quite different from the earlier chevrons. An identical bead is also illustrated by Good (1972, Type 170) from the Guebert site in Illinois, 1719-1833.

Finally, I was able to locate two references to chevron beads in the 19th Century. Nine long cylinder shaped, four layer (Yale blue/white/henna red/white) chevron beads with end facets were recovered from the Leavenworth site cemetery, ca. 1800-1832 (Bass *et al* 1971: 114, 117, Plate XII S). One additional 11mm spherical star bead of four layers (Translucent Yale blue/opaque white/opaque brick red/opaque sky blue) is also reported from this site (Bass *et al* 1971: 117, Plate XII U).

The latest archaeological specimen that I could locate is from Fort Vancouver, Washington, 1829-1860 (Ross, 1975). Lester Ross kindly furnished a description of this bead as follows:

"A multi-layer tube bead consisting of a single-layer central tube (opaque white) which had been rolled on a grooved board to form a 12 ridged tube. This ridged tube was subsequently dipped and coated with two different layers of glass (first an opaque red, then an opaque white); and, once again, this three-layer tube was rolled to form another 12 ridged tube. For a third time, the tube was dipped and coated with another layer of glass (a translucent green); and finally, multi-color canes were applied to the surface. In all, 8 canes were laid on — 4 opaque red-yellow-red and 4 opaque yellow-black-yellow canes. After cooling, the tube was cut into sections and 12 facets were ground on the bead — 6 at each end." It is quite large (ca. 7/8" long x ca. 3/8" diameter), being comparable to specimens currently imported from Africa.

In conclusion, chevron beads were important in the North American trade only in the early period. I believe that there is a general evolutionary trend from seven layer chevrons with green layers and faceted ends, to simpler, four layered tumbled chevron beads by ca. 1590. These four layer chevrons would be easier and thus cheaper to manufacture, and would thus be more suitable for trade in large quantities. Any chevron bead, is, of course, a complex bead to manufacture, so for economic reasons, and perhaps stylistic ones, they rapidly dropped out of the growing fur trade economy. By 1640 chevron beads were virtually absent from the trade. A few chevron beads do occur in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but never in large quantities.

*105 Bass Ave.
Rome, GA 30161

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