PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS IN RECENT TRADE BEAD RESEARCH

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Thirty years have passed since the late Richard G. Conn presented this paper at the conference of the Canadian Archaeological Association in Winnipeg, March 8-9, 1968. It is presented here to show us how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

All over North America, glass beads continue to accumulate in archaeological collections, in museums and seemingly in everybody's laboratory. Although the volume of this material is growing, as is the recognition of its possible significance to archaeology, there is still comparatively little definite information available. What about glass trade beads? Can they be dated? Is anyone studying them? If so, who and what have they learned?

I would like to answer all these questions, but considering the time available today and limitations of my own information, this report will be concerned with the latter two: who is studying the problem and with what results.

Although many people have found glass beads in the course of fieldwork and, therefore, have reason to be interested in the material, only a handful of people concern themselves closely with the subject and conduct research in it. Of these few, I will discuss those who have published significant studies within the last ten years or those who are now conducting important research projects. This choice is admittedly selective and reflects the information available to me. In no sense is there a qualitative judgement.

The principal European contributor to recent bead research is W.G.N. van der Sleen of The Netherlands. This man has spent upwards of thirty years in study and world-wide travel pursuing his subject. Van der Sleen's interests are far broader than those of most of his colleagues, as they include bead types from all time periods, geographical regions, and even beads made of materials other than glass. His treatise, *A Handbook on Beads,* was published in 1967, by the "Journées internationales du Verre," and it reflects this breadth of interest in reporting bead types ranging in time and area from prehistoric Asia to modern South America. North American scholars are finding van der Sleen's work profitable reading with much that applies to their particular problems. For example, there is a brief discussion of the major European manufacturing centers. Although these data should have been more extensive, they stand as the best we have had to date. There is also the fullest description of manufacturing processes published thus far. This, again, is brief but more complete and accurate than any preceding statements. Perhaps van der Sleen's most useful contribution to his topic lies in his attempt to collate and organize descriptive terminology. Working for precision, he has illustrated clearly what each term means by relating it to a drawing or photo.

Mynheer van der Sleen's counterpart in North America must be Kenneth Kidd. Like the former, Kidd has devoted years of meticulous study to his subject. Kidd, however, has drawn his data principally from Eastern Canada and from a period ending in the mid-18th century. In the last several years, he has been preparing a report that promises to be a major study. Kidd's colleagues in trade bead research would surely join in wishing him well and in looking forward to an early publication date.

John Witthoft has combined careful examination of archaeological and ethnographical collections with intensive historical and archival research in a general study of trade goods in the Eastern United States. He has identified the existence and, to some extent, the products of several Dutch and other Colonial glass workers. Combining these data with documentary references to historic Indian village sites and correlating the associated European trade goods, he

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has achieved an unusually refined trade goods chronology. A portion of this sequence was summarized recently in his report at the First Fur Trade Conference, published in *Minnesota History*. Witthoft's work should remind everyone engaged in trade goods research of the necessity to be alert for any archival data applicable to their problem and to avoid the purely object-centered study.

Working in a more localized region than Witthoft, Peter Pratt has published an inventory and chronology of beads from certain Iroquois sites in New York state. This report has attracted attention for its color plates of one hundred and twenty dated bead types. Pratt has also established a repository at the Fort Stanwix Museum where he hopes to gather a complete range of North American bead types.

Other regional bead inventories in recent publication are Gregory and Webb's from Louisiana and Woodward's from the Lower Columbia River. These papers both appeared in 1965, as publications of *The Florida Anthropologist* and the Oregon Archaeological Society, respectively.

Two men who have begun bead research are Roderick Sprague at the University of Idaho, and Wayne Davis, a graduate student at the University of Calgary. Although both are far from publishing at this time, their projects will be important contributions and deserve mention in this summary. Sprague has assembled a sizeable bead collection from sites in the Columbia River Plateau and is currently analyzing his material. Presumably his work will produce a regional inventory/chronology like those cited above. Davis stands at the beginning of a major study dealing with the Northern Plains.

This resume has concentrated on those persons concerned primarily with trade beads and those who have recently published important papers in the area. There is, as we all know, a much larger group interested in the subject but whose primary research commitments lie elsewhere.

In summary, the main recent study of bead technology is van der Sleen's monograph. The important works in bead chronology are the four regional inventories by Witthoft, Pratt, Gregory and Webb, and Woodward. The significant new research facility is the Trade Bead Repository at Fort Stanwix, and the most important research in progress is Kidd's major study. If there have been any omissions in personnel or publications, please make them known.

The first objective of trade bead research as it relates to North American archaeology is, of course, to provide a complete typology and chronology of foreign, domestic, and native-made glass beads. The purpose of this work would be to offer data for application to anthropological problems of dating and historical inter-relationships. Such a complete typology/chronology should include the dates of introduction and decline or disappearance of every known bead type with full consideration for the temporal discrepancies occurring from region to region. It should also resolve local or areal problems such as pony bead embroidery in the West. Realization of this objective is beyond our reach today. And, in approaching it, there are several basic problems to be studied first. Certain of these are being attacked successfully at present, with others receiving little or no attention. I would like to consider five of these basic problems, noting both the work being done and left to do.

All bead students are handicapped by the meager information presently available on manufacturers. We are all familiar with vague terms like "Venetian" or "Bohemian." But does anyone know precisely to what these apply? Can anyone identify a "Bohemian" bead made before 1900, as distinguished from the contemporaneous Venetian product? If so, let them publish at once! Archaeology has inherited a body of 19th-century bead folklore which includes these bold generalizations, along with other hardy chestnuts like the Russian beads of Alaska and the elusive French beads nobody can really isolate. But even though many now recognize these imprecise terms as being more folklore than fact, they continue to be used. We need careful research directed toward every part of Europe and Asia known or thought to have made beads for North American trade. Ideally, there should be complete accounts of each glass factory, what it produced, and when. Van der Sleen's data on European beadmakers is the most factual work directed toward this problem. In particular, his account of the 17th-century Dutch industry is recommended. However, his remarks are far too brief and much further research is needed. With respect to beadmakers in the New World, Witthoft has investigated the presence and possible products of Colonial glassworkers with good results. This raises a

further question of whether beads may have been made in Lower Canada, Mexico, or elsewhere in the United States. Obviously, there is a great need for extensive study of bead resources: who made them, when were the various manufacturing centers operative, exactly what types did they make, and how can their beads be distinguished from those of others?

Following on the above comes the problem of tracing bead distributions from factory through trading company to the specific regions of North America where they were sold. The point of this study is obviously to see how individual bead types were distributed over this continent: by whom, when, and where. There are two potential sources for attack on this problem: documentary research and historical archaeology. The archives of most fur trading companies–apart from the Hudson's Bay Company records–tend to be incomplete and almost non-existent, and their value in trade good research may well be limited. Kenneth Kidd has made a beginning in this area by studying the London Harbormaster's Office files as well as some factory records in Murano, but no results of this work have been published yet. The second potential approach could be through systematic excavation of those trading post sites occupied by only one owner or company. A good example is Fort Rivière Tremblante in Saskatchewan, occupied only by the Northwest Company and for a known period of seven years. This site, excavated partially last summer, has yielded an important bead collection. Granted more one-occupant sites, it should be rewarding to compare materials thus known to have been distributed by one trading company to those known to have been sold by another. There are perhaps few one-occupant sites, but historical archaeologists should be urged to dig them. Possibly a combination of such fieldwork and more archival research will solve portions of the bead distribution problem.

There is presently a major task in trade bead research waiting to be done, requiring only lots of time and patience. This job is important, necessary, and everyone wishes someone else would do it. It is to make a comprehensive inventory of all beads recovered from all North American archaeological sites. Moreover, it should include an examination of every documented ethnographical specimen known to have been made before some logical terminal date, e.g. 1860. The data in this inventory should be cross-tabulated to show the known occurrence of each bead type by association, by region, and by date as far as possible. The importance of such an inventory is obvious: it would show exactly what bead types were known in North America at a specified time and where they were in use. Now these data exist only in scattered field and site reports, many of them unpublished. At this point, someone is likely wondering why this inventory couldn't be achieved by merely collating all these available reports. The answer to this question brings us two inter-related methodological problems: classification and nomenclature.

The various persons who have written on glass beads over the years have come to their subject from different viewpoints and with different particular interests. While some have seen beads as parts of larger problems, others were interested in the material for its own sake. Consequently, the kinds of data collected and presented in the literature run the gamut from pure typological description to more complex presentations in which every possible association and implication has been considered. This difference in approach is crystallized when we compare two of the suggested classification systems. The first, developed by H.C. Beck in 1928, is based upon physical characteristics of the beads themselves: shape, size, etc. The second, from van der Sleen's recent monograph, considers place, date, and process of manufacture foremost, with physical qualities subordinate. Beck's system doesn't seem to be widely known to archaeologists–in fact, it isn't in general use among bead students; van der Sleen's is too recent to have provoked much discussion yet. Thus, there is no generally accepted bead classification system, and anyone who finds himself with beads to sort must work out his own methods. This means, in turn, that bead data as found in reports range greatly in the type and amount of information presented. Consequently, the proposed comprehensive inventory of North American collections could not be done without direct re-examination of the material. There would be gaps in published data to fill and a consistent terminology to be established.

The lack of a bead classification system used by all is in itself a reason for making the general inventory. Both Beck's descriptive scheme and van der Sleen's historical system have their strengths and weaknesses,

and either could be improved. I suggest that the data assembled by a general inventory of North American collections might provide the necessary basis for a better classification system than any developed so far. And with this possibility in mind, it is apparent that data gathered should be as complete as possible.

If beads are classified in a spirit of individualism, terminology is conceived in anarchy. Like the vague terms used to indicate a supposed European source, many of the words used to describe qualities and characteristics are part of a folklore we have inherited from the 19th-century Keeper of Curiosities. Nothing is semantically wrong with most of these words. They are, in fact, useful terms, but they have never been precisely defined. As a result, everyone adapts or coins his own words in discussing size, shape, or color, and another new dialect is added to the world's only technical jargon with no Mother Tongue. Beck tried to bring order into this confusion by proposing a standard nomenclature in his 1928 paper. Van der Sleen expanded Beck's lists and even worked out equivalents in five additional languages. Unfortunately, Beck's proposals have not had the consideration and acceptance they merit. It is to be hoped that Beck's or some other precise terminology will come into general use and clear the muddle that exists.

The most confusing area of terminology is color designation. Generally, colors are defined by nouns with qualifying adjectives such as "corn yellow" or "royal blue." References like these carry personal associations that make them subject to misinterpretation. Moreover, beads come in shades and tints that have no customary English names. There are, for instance, about forty Venetian blues. Would it not be better to adopt a number designation system for colors as the bead manufacturers themselves do? This idea has been found effective in several museums where pieces of beadwork are described by reference to the numbers on a manufacturer's sample card.

The last problem I would like to mention is the need for more intercommunication between those working on trade bead problems. As we have seen, there are only a few individuals working with basically the same materials and problems. Yet each seems to be working almost in isolation. One wonders, in fact, to what extent each man is aware of his colleagues' existence and interests. By an increased exchange of data and ideas, most of the problems outlined in this paper could be attacked more effectively. There ought, for example, to be a confrontation of some kind to straighten out terminology. The general inventory of North American collections might also be undertaken by a team of workers, providing they worked according to a pre-agreed methodology and kept contact with one another as the work advanced.

Intercommunication could be stimulated in several ways: a special session at an archaeological conference, a newsletter, or even in a smoke-filled hotel room at the Society for American Archaeology meetings. No doubt there are other means and they should be explored. As trade bead research stands today, we have several dedicated people trying valiantly to invent the wheel on their own. With increased interaction, they stand to do it much sooner.

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