

BEADlieve or not! it,

BEAD FACTS AND FOIBLES.

AN EXAMPLE:



BEADS FOR BULLETS

Centuries ago when the Ewe immigrated from what is now Togo to Ghana in West Africa, they were met with resistance. The men bravely fought their enemies, but began to run out of ammunition. Then they appealed to their wives and children, who sacrificed their beads to take the place of bullets. At least that is what they say. BEADlieve it or not!



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Center for Bead Research
Lake Placid, N.Y.

The Pequot War, the first Anglo-Indian war, was waged over the control of the wampum trade.

Wampum was not "Indian Money." Only the white settlers used it as a currency. Lacking coins, they substituted the small cylindrical shell beads to pay for everything. However, wampum was very important to the Indians for many reasons, ranging from ceremonial to a show of status. The Iroquois of New York traded with the Indians of the seaboard, who made wampum, and with the Dutch, who controlled the wampum-making areas. As the English learned about this trade, they waged war to control the wampum makers and their trade and ultimately the fur trade.

TOOLS OF SIN AND TOOLS OF PIETY

As the Black Death swept a terrified Europe in the 14th century, killing a third of the population, lofty thoughts began to replace old vices. Gilles Li Muisies, the Abbot of St. Martins in Tournay, France, wrote that many people who had been living "in sin" got married and that a new bead industry sprang up.

Small round wooden beads for rosaries with which to pray for deliverance were made by the very men who used to make dice. As the market for gambling goods disappeared, they turned their dice into prayer beads.



THE HISTORY BOOKS ARE WRONG!

Virtually every book on the history of New York written in the last 120 years have a major mistake concerning beads. They all say essentially the same thing: Manhattan Island, heart of the world's greatest city, was bought by the Dutch from the Natives for \$24 worth of beads and trinkets.

Some of this is correct. The Dutch did exchange 60 guilders of trade goods for a claim on Manhattan, but no contemporary document mentions beads at all. The deed is now lost; the surviving copy of the Staten Island deed mentions no beads except wampum, which was used to affirm the deal.

American historians didn't know that the island was purchased until John Brodhead returned from Amsterdam in 1842 with copies of all documents in the Dutch archives relating to New Netherlands. Among them was an incidental reference to the purchase of Manhattan, but no beads. Other documents have surfaced since, but again, no beads.

So, where does the story come from? Martha J. Lamb's History of the City of New York of 1877 was apparently the first book to mention it. She had no proof and was just elaborating on the idea of trade goods to buy the island. But the story was too good not to be true, and dozens of historians, not to mention cartoonists and TV comics, have spread it around the world. It is now very much a part of the American mythology, but it is an old historian's hoax.



When Cortez first met Moctezuma, the Emperor of Mexico, he was given four jade beads to present to the King of Spain. Moctezuma told him they were each worth two loads of gold or between 100 and 200 pounds of gold per bead.

The Emperor died while in Spanish hands, and the people of what is now Mexico City arose in anger. The Spanish fled for their lives. Cortez let his men take as much as they wanted, and most loaded up on gold. Many who did slipped on the causeways leading out of the island city and drowned. But Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who lived to write the story, took only the jade beads. Not only could he run faster than the soldiers loaded with gold, but he traded them on the way back to safety for the food and medicine that kept him alive.

THE BEAD THAT REPRODUCES

The Bodom bead, which is highly valued among the Ashanti of Ghana, is the only bead said to be able to reproduce itself or other beads. In each village there are different instructions as to how to make them reproduce, but most follow simple rules: put the bead into a pot and let no one touch it for a year. At the end of that time there will be two, three or more Bodom, or perhaps some other sorts of valued beads in the pot.



THE MOST VALUABLE AND LEAST VALUABLE BEADS

Value is in the eye of the beholder and measured in different ways. In terms of money, expensive glass beads can fetch fancy prices. An American collector recently paid \$1000 for a single glass bead, made in China about 300 BC. Even more money was paid for a single Bodom bead: in 1931 one was sold for the equivalent then of about \$1500.

However, the most expensive beads are probably those of jade. In 1988 over \$700,000 was paid for a jade necklace. But the price per bead (about \$8000) was less than that paid for a jade necklace sold in 1973 coming to \$12,000 per bead. These were eclipsed by a single pendant sold at auction in 1988 for \$958,974.

And the least valuable beads? Well, few people put much value on -- to put it delicately -- excrement. Beads made out of s---? Yes, a few years ago David Bowley in Maine sold necklaces with beads of moose droppings. Much less publicized were beads made from rabbit droppings and even horse manure produced in the 60s and 70s and sold without disclosing their natures. These were done as jokes, but it can also be done in piety: Tibetan monks wear an amulet with some of the same material of the Dali Lama himself inside.



HOW LARGE WAS THE BEAD TRADE?

The European Glass Bead Trade reached enormous proportions in its heyday. As early as 1821 the Bohemians were selling 2,400,000,000 beads a year. In the 1860s Venice exported 20,000 pounds of beads a day. They were bought eagerly. In 1846 beads accounted for 15.7% of all imports by value into the small African colony of the Gold Coast (now Ghana); imports between 1836 and 1936 came to more than 10,000,000 pounds of beads for this one small West African country alone.

EGGSHELL BEADS

Ostrich eggshells were once an important early bead material. Of course, they could only be used where the ostrich was found, but the range of the ostrich was once much wider than it is now. After prehistoric hunters stole the eggs from the big birds' nests they would eat them; a single ostrich egg is as large as 40 chicken eggs. The empty shells make great storage containers for people who have no pots, and when they broke they could be made into beads. Ostrich eggshell was used for some of the earliest beads found in Africa, China, and India.

In China, when ostrich eggs were not available, the people of the Gobi Desert substituted DINOSAUR EGGSHELLS!



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* The director has been around the world six times to visit more than 50 countries in pursuit of bead research. He has published over 200 papers and monographs in all corners of the globe, and has lectured in a dozen countries.

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