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ABORIGINAL PATTERNS OF TRADE BETWEEN
THE COLUMBIA BASIN AND THE NORTHERN PLAINS

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discover and compare the aboriginal patterns of trade that existed within three distinct but interrelated cultural areas of the northwestern United States.

The focus of the study is on intertribal trade, as distinct from trade with the whites; and the problem is to secure as clear a picture as possible of the types of exchange that were in effect before European contact, in the form of the fur trade, had disrupted and altered the prehistoric systems. Since European trade goods, such as beads and knives, reached this region through native channels long before the arrival of the whites, these goods as well as local aboriginal items will be considered.

In the widest sense, trade patterns include modes of production and distribution, types and values of exchange media employed, and the methods of exchange. A section is therefore devoted in this paper to each of these subjects. Gambling,

that many of these were Monterey shells, and that it was mainly through the Shoshoni that they reached the Northern Plains.

David Thompson (Tyrrell 1916:346) noted the use of halio-tis shells as a badge of great prestige among the Piegan in the 1780's:

They have a civil and military Chief. The first was called Sakataw, the orator....He was always well dressed, and his insignia of office, was the backs of two fine Otter skins covered with mother of pearl, which from behind his neck hung down his breast to below the belt; When his son acted for him, he always had this ornament on him.

Denig (1930:591), writing in the 1850's, indicates that Monterey shells were in possession of the Northern Plains tribes in early times, and reveals that, as was the case with dentalia, white traders later imported the shells:

The large blue or pearl California shell was once very valuable and still is partially so. It is shaped like an oyster shell and handsomely tinted with blue, green, and golden colors in the inside. One of these used to be worth \$20., but of late years, owing to the quantity being introduced by the traders, the price has depreciated to about half that amount. These shells they cut in triangular pieces and wear them as ear pendants.

Apparently white traders did not begin to traffic in Monterey shells until the late 1830's or the 1840's. Even so, an unpolished shell was still equal in value to a good buffalo robe in the latter period (Matthews 1877:28).

European Trade Beads

While crossing the Rocky Mountains and descending the Columbia River in the year 1805, Lewis and Clark noticed that although very few of the Indians along their route had ever seen a white man before, almost all of them were in possession of European trade beads (Fig. 6). Having arrived at the Cascades of the Columbia on November 1, Clark (Thwaites 1904-05, 3:183) noted a preference among the natives that was to plague the expedition endlessly in the months to come: "they are all fond of [European] clothes but more so of Beads particularly blue and white beads."

As luck would have it, the expedition had brought only a few beads of these colors with them, though they had an ample stock of the other hues. They soon found to their astonishment

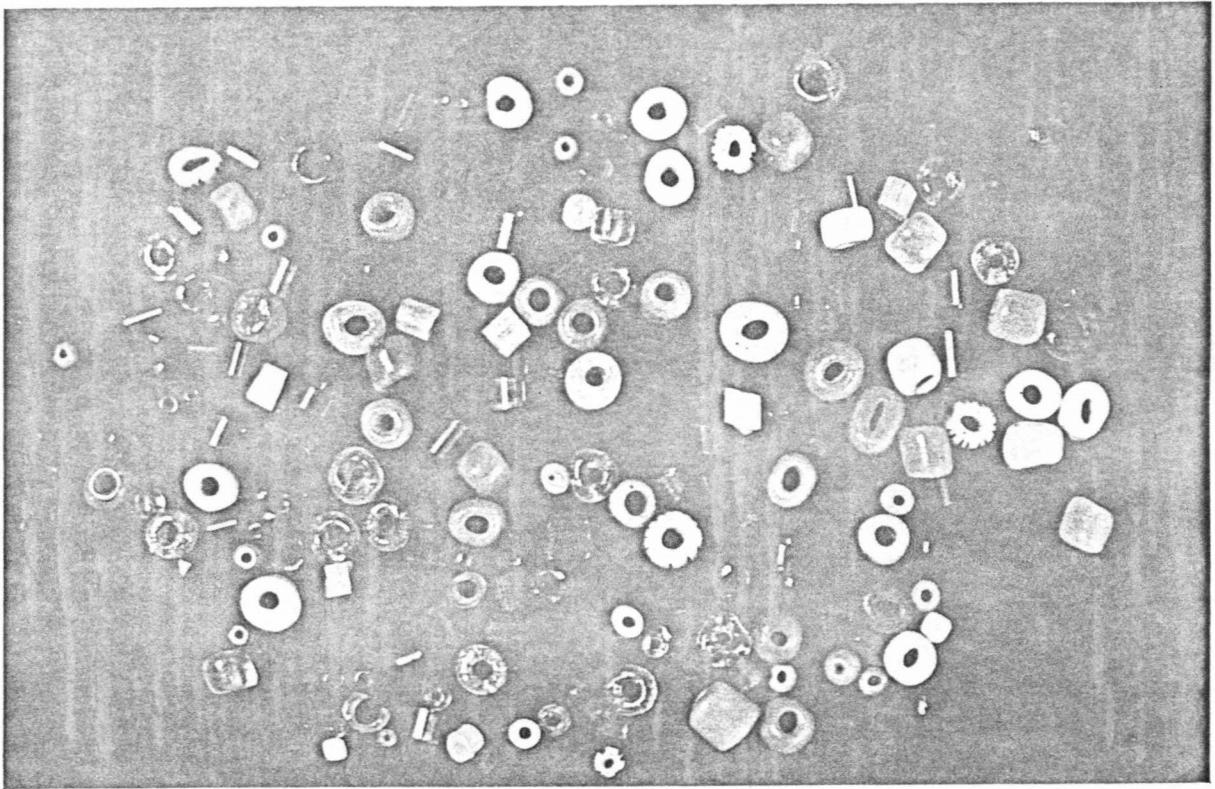


Fig. 6. Trade beads used in the Northwest in the early 1800's, from the property of Peter Skene Ogden. (Scale: 1 1/8 actual size.)

and chagrin that the latter were absolutely unacceptable to the Lower Chinook, among whom they passed the winter on the coast:

I attempted to purchase some few roots which I offered red beads for, they would give scarcely any thing for Beeds of that colour, I then offered small fish hooks which they were fond of and gave me some roots for them. (Thwaites 1904-05,3:275.)

I attempted to purchase a Small Sea otter Skin for read [red] beads which I had in my pockets, they would not trade for those beads not prise-ing any other Colour than Blue or White. (Thwaites 1904-05,3:277.)

Value Blue beads highly, white they also prise but not other Colour do they Value in the least. (Thwaites 1904-05,3:278-79.)

This morning we were visited by Comowool and 7 of the Clatsops our nearest neighbours...one of

the party was dressed in t[h]ree very eligant Sea Otter skins which we much wanted; for these we offered him many articles but he would not dispose of them for any other consideration but blue beads, of these we had only six fathoms left, which being 4 less than his price for each skin he would not exchange nor would a knife or an equivalent in beads of any other colour answer his purposes, these coars blue beads are their f[av]orite merchandize, and are called by them tia Commaschuck or Chiefs beads. The best wampum [i.e., the largest dentalium shells] is not so much esteemed by them as the most inferior beads. (Thwaites 1904-05,3:352-53.)

Lewis and Clark began to call these cut-glass trade items "wampum" beads, and in several comments made it clear that the blue variety had largely supplanted the traditional dentalium shells in the money economy of the Lower Columbia.

The natives are extravegantly fond of the most common cheap blue and white beads, of moderate size, or such that from 50. to 70. will weigh one penneyweight. The blue is usually p[r]eferred to the white; these beads constitute the principal circulating medium with all the Indian tribes on this river; for these beads they will dispose [of] any article they possess. The beads are strung on strans of a fathom in length and in that manner sold by the bredth or yard. (Thwaites 1904-05,3:328.) [Italics mine.]

those beads the[y] trafick with Indians Still higher up this river for roabs, skins, cha-lel-el bread, beargrass &c. who in their turn trafick with those under the rocky mountains for Bear-grass, quarmish [Pashico] roots & robes &c. (Thwaites 1904-05,3:186.)

It will be noted that the beads were strung and exchanged in the same general fashion as dentalia. And, like dentalia, the Chinook employed them lavishly in ornamentation:

The favorite ornament of both sexes are the common coarse blue and white beads which the men wear tightly wound aro[u]nd their wrists and ankles many times until they obtain the width of three or more inches. they also wear them in large rolls loosly around the neck or pendulous from the cartelage of the nose or rims of the ears which are purforated for the purpose. the women wear them in a similar manner except in the nose

which they never perforate. (Thwaites 1904-05,4:187.)

The Chinook did not completely neglect dentalia during this period, however, for Lewis and Clark referred to the shells also as wampum, and noted that they were worn in the same manner as the beads. It is obvious, though, that at this stage in the acquisition of European articles, the Chinook vastly preferred the blue beads as a medium of exchange.

It may be inferred that between 1806 and 1811 the coastal traders overstocked the Chinook blue bead market, for the journals of the Astorians and of later fur traders in the region make no mention of beads being used as money. Instead, the dentalium shell receives prominent mention as the medium of exchange. Apparently then, after the period of novelty and scarcity had passed, the Chinook dropped trade beads from their currency scheme, though retaining them as valued objects of decoration, and reverted to their traditional tusk-shell (dentalium) money.

The Chinook were not alone in their fondness for these two color varieties. Then and for decades following, blue beads and white beads were the favorite among the Indians from the Columbia Basin to the Northern Plains, both as concomitants to wealth goods and for esthetic display. Lewis and Clark noticed this preference among the Columbia River tribes, the Nez Perce, and the Flathead, and Maximilian called attention to the same preferences among the Blackfeet and the Mandan in 1833. During the expedition's stay with the Nez Perce in the spring of 1806, Lewis (Thwaites 1904-05,5:30) wrote that "blue beads... among all the nations of this country may be justly compared to gold or silver among civilized nations." The Nez Perce wore them "around their wrists necks and over their shoulders crosswise in the form of a double sash." They also combined them with the treasured haliotis shells as earpieces, and sewed them on the men's otter-skin frontlets.

The Shoshoni, except for bead necklaces which they seldom wore, ornamented themselves in much the same way. However, Lewis and Clark do not state what colors of beads the Shoshoni possessed, noting (Thwaites 1904-05,3:4-5,92) only that "they are remarkably fond of Beeds." The explorers did note that the beads decorating Flathead clothes were principally blue and white (Thwaites 1904-05,3:78).

Among the Blackfeet on the Marias River in 1833, Maximilian (1906,23:103) observed that:

The women ornament their best dresses, both on the hem and sleeves, with dyed porcupine quills

and thin leather strips, with broad diversified stripes of sky-blue and white glass beads.

With reference to the costume of the Mandans, Maximilian (1906,23:263,264,259) also wrote:

The chief article of their dress is the ample buffalo robe...which is often very elaborate and valuable....They are tanned on the fleshy side, and painted either white or reddish-brown, and ornamented with a transverse band of blue or white beads, and three large rosettes of the same beads, often of very tasteful patterns, at regular intervals. The centre is frequently red, surrounded with sky blue, embroidered with white figures, or sometimes the reverse. The transverse band is worked with variously dyed porcupine quills, and is then narrower. This, however, is now old-fashioned, and was worn before the coloured glass beads were obtained in such numbers from the Whites.

Their leggins...are embroidered at the outer seam with stripes, one or two inches in breadth, of porcupine quills, of beautiful various colours, and often with blue and white beads, and long leathern fringes....

...by far the greatest attention is paid to the head-dress....To these plaits they attach...two strips of leather or cloth closely embroidered with white or azure glass beads....If the ground of this ornament is red or blue, it is studded with white beads, and if the ground is white the beads are blue. They put this ornament in their hair and pull it over the temples; a long string is fastened to the underpart, which alternate rows of blue beads and white dentalium shells.

At this late date, the factors that determined this widespread preference among the Indians of the Northwest for blue and white beads can only be speculated. Perhaps, as may be implied by the Chinook designation for them, the coastal traders promoted these varieties as "chief's beads," and from the Chinook via intertribal intercourse and trade this artfully-created valuation diffused eastward across the Plateau and the Northern Plains. On the other hand, the esthetic factor certainly played a major role in the aboriginal preference for blue and white beads. Maximilian (1906,23:108) wrote in this regard:

The Indians do not like beads of other colours, for instance, red, next the skin; and their taste

in the contrast of colours is very correct, for in their black hair they generally wear red, and on their brown skins, sky-blue, white, or yellow.

Elk Teeth

The teeth of a number of animals, including buffalos and horses, were used by the Indians of the Northwest for ornamental purposes. Of these, elk teeth were considered to be by far the most valuable. Lewis and Clark (Thwaites 1904-05,4:187) noted that even at the mouth of the Columbia, where such a great variety of shells were available for adornment, Lower Chinook women and children sometimes wore elk teeth around their necks and arms. Probably, this distribution of elk teeth, and also the occasional use of bear claw collars by Lower Chinook men, represents diffusion from the Northern Plains where the practices attained their greatest vogue.

Usually only the two "tusks" of the elk were used, as these were the only teeth well-suited to the purpose (Hodge 1907-10,1:17). The tusks are actually rudimentary canines. They are found in both sexes, but are much smaller in the female. Not all elk have these rudimentary canines, however; hence, the factor of scarcity did much to enhance their value. Furthermore, because of the habits and range of the animal, no one hunter could kill great numbers of elk. Consequently, much trade and bargaining were required to collect 300 tusks, which was the usual number displayed on a Crow woman's dress (Seton 1927,3:5; Denig 1930:589).

The Crow were the biggest "consumers" of elk teeth. As late as 1901, a visitor to the Crow Reservation in southern Montana estimated that the inhabitants had 20,000 tusks in their possession, and these were still valued so highly that they could seldom be purchased. One woman had some 1,500 of the teeth on her dresses. If these were all of the best quality, at least 800 bull elk must have been required to produce them (Thwaites 1904-05,3:5-6).

The tusks were especially used to trim the garments of women and children. As ornaments, they were attached in horizontal rows across the front and back of smocks and dress shirts (Fig. 7).

Elk tusks were clearly wealth goods. The standard exchange value was 100 elk teeth for a good horse or its equivalent, which seems not to have been subject to much, if any, fluctuation, for Maximilian (1906,23:103-04,262,289), Denig (1930:589), and Kurz (Hewitt 1937:80) all give the same price for different periods.