

EUROPEAN GOODS ON THE  
NORTHWEST COAST c. A.D. 900: WHY NOT?

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## EUROPEAN GOODS ON THE NORTHWEST COAST c. A.D. 900: WHY NOT?

By Gerald H. Grosso

A very old style European glass bead—a faceted chevron—has been recovered from the excavations at the Ozette Village Site (45CA24) on the Pacific coast of Washington at Cape Alava. (1) It appears to be from a stratigraphic unit for which there are radiocarbon dates of about 500 years BP. (2)

The discovery of this bead resulted in varied reaction among the members of the Ozette Expedition staff (before the radiocarbon dates were known):

1. The bead is out of context and through some undetected means drifted downward in the midden from its proper temporal place.

2. The bead is in context, showing that the strata believed to be "pre contact" really is only about 150 to 200 years old.

3. The bead is in context and arrived from Southeastern North America by overland trade between various groups of American Indians since the early 16th Century, placing a date of about 300 to 400 years BP on the stratum.

The purpose of this paper is to raise another possibility for consideration:

4. The bead is in context and was in the hands of the Ozette Village residents some 500 years ago, arriving from Europe as part of a long-standing transpacific movement of goods (and people.)

If this sounds like a farfetched idea, it is because of the prejudices in history and geography which were developed from our earliest elementary school lessons.

Our view of the world is biased by maps centered on the Atlantic making it hard to consider communication between the extreme left of the map and the extreme right side. I wonder whether world maps in use in Japan are so oriented. . . or do they have the Pacific in the center with the Atlantic at either edge, bisected?

For the next few minutes, forget the typical view of the world that we learned from our earliest grade school geography class. Instead, consider the world from what may be the Japanese view. To the west across the Sea of Japan lies the incredible land mass which is Eurasia. To the south is a collection of islands, large and small, reaching to the East Indies. To the east is the broad Pacific, the steadily flowing Japanese Current and, for most who went that way in antiquity, a voyage of no return.

There is an increasing body of evidence that they were going east from Japan for a very long time. Probably the earliest indications of Oriental influence in the New World have been in Ecuador at sites dated about 2000 BP. (3)

Whether such eastward voyages were planned or accidental is a matter of conjecture.

We do know, however, that typhoons and the Japanese Current are basic natural phenomena. Also, we know that the Japanese have had watercraft for some 4000 years. (4) We do have one well documented case of the early 1830s (5, 6, 7) involving a Japanese coasting vessel which became disabled virtually within sight of port, drifted for more than a year in the current and wrecked near Cape Flattery with three members of the crew still alive.

Literally dozens of Oriental ship wreck sites have been located along the north Pacific Coast, (8) though none has been as well documented as the ship of the early 1830s.

Therefore, accidental voyages have been occurring periodically for

a considerable period of time. It may be said, then, that the possibility for such accidental voyages has existed since the time of the first watercraft in Japanese waters.

As a result of such accidental voyages almost any piece of goods which could be put aboard a ship in Japan could be inadvertently delivered to the Northwest Coast within two years. . . not that much worse than modern mail service.

In the case of the ship wrecked in the early 1830s, the three survivors were made slaves by the Makah Indians but were bought by an American ship captain, turned over to the Hudson's Bay Company, provided passage to England, taken to Macao and, according to some accounts, returned to Japan. If they had not been ransomed it is reasonable to expect that they would have learned to speak the Makah language and become assimilated into the local population. As it is, they may have made some contributions to the local gene pool and introduced some aspects of Japanese technology and culture.

It seems probable that a similar voyage occurred some 500 years ago to bring the faceted chevron bead to Ozette. The same event or others like it also could account for the presence of dozens of forged steel tool bits recovered from strata of similar age at Ozette. They also could account for art motives which seem to be atypical of what is considered Northwest Coast style.

If we can accept the probability of long-standing accidental movement of goods and people from Japanese waters to the Northwest Coast, then how do we account for European goods being involved?

History can give us some clues. (9) Alexander the Great and his troops invaded India about 327 B.C. Korea became a Chinese possession in 200 B.C. The Chinese had an embassy to the Seleucid Empire in the Tigris-Euphrates region in 120 B.C. The Japanese had a mission to Korea in 57 A.D. There

was a Chinese embassy to the Roman Empire in 166 A.D. The Japanese occupied South Korea in 200 A.D. The Koreans defeated the Japanese in a naval battle in 516 A.D. There was a Japanese embassy in China in 607 A.D.

These dates should remind us that people were doing a lot of purposeful moving around Eurasia for a long time. Of course, since most of man's activities don't make the history books, it seems probable that there were many persons in Europe and Asia who knew about each other and prized the products of each other's technology for a very long time.

The Arabs were involved in middleman activities for thousands of years (10) serving to provide Oriental goods to the European market and, most likely, European goods for the Oriental market. The Arabs held a virtual monopoly on this trade until the Portuguese perfected an all-water route around Africa, into the Indian Ocean and on to Japan in the 16th Century.

We have a good idea of what was being used in Europe of the Oriental goods: spices, silk and ivory immediately come to mind, as well as rare jewels and pearls. Also delivered were important technological concepts, such as spaghetti and gunpowder.

Not so firmly fixed in mind is what European goods were flowing eastward in ancient times. Perhaps woolens, bronzes, iron and steel goods were involved. Since these were not exotic items, to the European historian, we have not received much information about this aspect of the trade as we have about the fabled exports from "far Cathay."

Sometime, fancy glass from Venice must have figured in the eastbound trade and that is where I suggest the Ozette facted chevron bead came into the flow of trade which led to its appearance on the Northwest Coast.

Other European goods should be found in "pre contact" contexts in Northwest Coast excavation. Perhaps they have been but automatically discounted as out of provenience.

It is suggested, therefore, that glass and metal objects found deep in an excavation may mean more than sloppy excavation, rodent burrow injection or intrusive pit activity products.

Because there has been contact between the Far East and Europe for at least 2000 years and because typhoons and the Japanese Current have been in existence for much longer than that, it seems rather conservative to state that European goods probably were available in limited quantities on the Northwest Coast over the past 1000 years. Putting together traders' travel times with known drift rates, it is equally conservative to add that the ancient residents of the Northwest Coast could have received these goods within five years after their manufacture in Europe.

NOTES

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