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GLASS TRADE BEADS IN ALASKA

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The history of glass manufacturing dates from around the 18th Dynasty of Egypt and the first glass factory was well established by 1365 B.C. at Tel El Amarna, which is located in the upper portion of Egypt. However, from an article by Prof. Bezborodov in *Slavia Antiqua* 1965, "Early stages of glass making in U.S.S.R.," he states that glass and beads were made in Russia, just south of the Caucasian Mountains in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Tashkent about a thousand years before Tel El Amarna was founded. Thus the glass factory in Egypt was not the beginning of a new period, but the full grown mastery of this art, developed over eight or ten centuries. However, the bulk of the glass beads used in trade in America from Columbus' voyage to mid-1800's were of Venetian and Dutch manufacture.

The Venetians were making glass beads since the 11th century A.D. and they monopolized the industry until the 1600's when glass factories were established in Amsterdam, France, Sweden, Spain and England. By the mid-1500's Spanish glass makers in New Spain (Mexico) were producing simple glass beads to help supply the demand created by their explorations and trade in the southwest. The first American glass factory was at Jamestown in 1608. Its existence was sporadic and the product was crude and simple in comparison to the European glass beads.

With the historical background on glass beads established, we can see the various sources of the many varieties of glass beads found in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska or "Russian America" as it was known then, especially when we compare the various dates of exploration and countries involved. In 1725 Ivan Ivanovich Bering, a Dane in the service of Russia, made his first voyage to the area of what is now Alaska. His reports stimulated further explorations, his most noted in 1728. Next came Spain in 1775. The English followed in 1778, France in 1786 and finally the Americans in 1848. There were many other voyages during that span of years and many volumes published on the findings, but for my purpose it has established the introduction of trade beads to the area.

The Russian influence was predominate due to the settlements established by the Russian American Company. They enjoyed a flourishing trade in furs, minerals and other natural wealth from their new territory, which was exported to Fort Ross and the Mother country. In return for this wealth the Eskimos and various Indians of the coastal regions received in trade tobacco, glass beads, earrings of bronze, bracelets, bells, weapons, pipes, buttons and dentalium shells (this being a form of currency among some of the tribes) and many other items of trade.[1,2]

The beads, in a variety of sizes, shapes and colors were used to adorn the neck, ears, clothing and fishing lures of the natives. Blue was the color favored on the whole. The false faceted hexagonal "Chief or Russian" as collectors call them today were highly prized. The Polychrome, Bugles, mandrel wound and Cornaline d'Aleppo or "Hudson Bay," candy stripes and mosaics are also found and the later "Peking" glass is in abundance. Without the aid of color plates to clearly show the many beads, which are known to many people by many different names it would be an impossible task to try to furnish adequate descriptions. However, some of this variety of beads is shown in Fig. 1-6.

The rates of exchange varied by the season, area and peoples involved. For example, in the Norton Sound area the basis of exchange for two matching greenish-blue beads was 3 or 4 caribou (deer) skins. In the Kuskokwinn and Yukon river areas, beaver skins were the prime wealth and it would require 9 beaver for the same 2 beads. The coastal native economy revolved around the Beluga whale, bearded and ringed seals. The rate of exchange was 3 large bearded seal skins for 2 beads, or 1 seal bladder of whale oil for 2 beads.[3]

From translations of the Russian American Company documents at a point in time of 1843, the annual outlay in beads alone from the settlement of Nulato, on the Kuskokwinn, was 3,360 strings of beads at a length of one saghen or the equivalent of 2.3 yards each. This would amount to a continuous string of beads over four miles in length.

By the mid-1800's the Hudson Bay Trading Company had extended their territory from the Porcupine river, down the Yukon on south, down the Copper and onto the Stikine river in the south which almost bisects the state. Their policy on rates of exchange was one beaver equalled ½ pound of large milk beads, and a ¼ pound of beads of color for one beaver.[4]

Hopefully this has given the reader an insight as to the past importance of the glass trade bead and that it served as a key to vast wilderness areas and the natural wealth therein. Today much of the history of glass beads still stand as a mystery and in delving into this history you too can experience many of the adventures our forebearers did. The time spent in study and research can be most rewarding; at least I find it so.

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References

[1]Woodward, Arthur 1967 Indian trade goods. Portland, Oregon, Oregon Archaeological Soc., 38 p.

[2]Michael, Henry N. (ed.) 1967 Lt. Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America 1842-1844, Toronto, Univ Toronto Press, XVIII: 360 p. (Translations from Russian Sources #7, Arctic Instit. of North America)

[3]*Ibid.*

[4]from the Archives of the Hudson Bay Companies Library, via *personal communication* with Mrs. Sherlee A. Smith, Librarian, Jan. 5, 1972.

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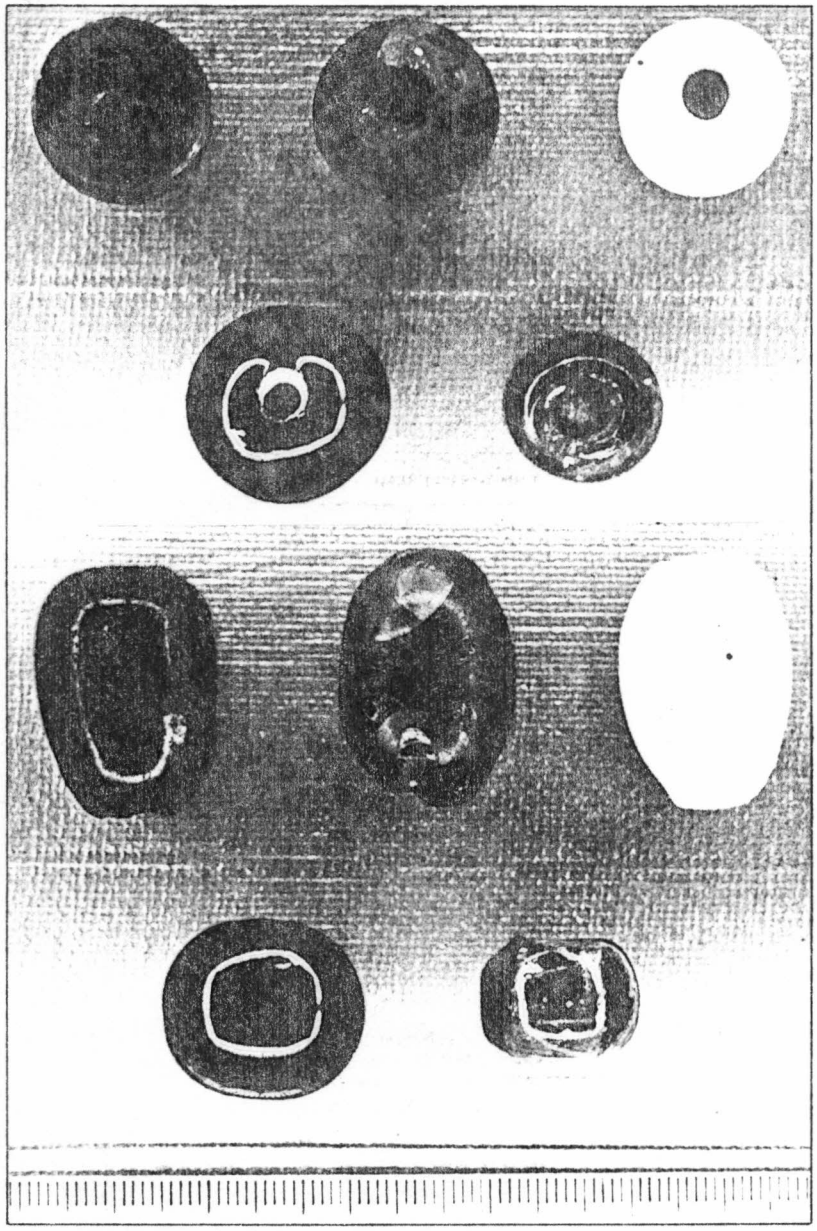

Fig. 1. Frontal and lateral views of Chinese glass beads from Alaska. Those on the first row (cobalt blue, almost turquoise blue and opaque white) strongly resemble beads which have been imported from Africa (see Bead Journal, Winter, 1975: 18, fig. 7). (The rounded, rectangular and squarish reflections are due to the photographic lights.)

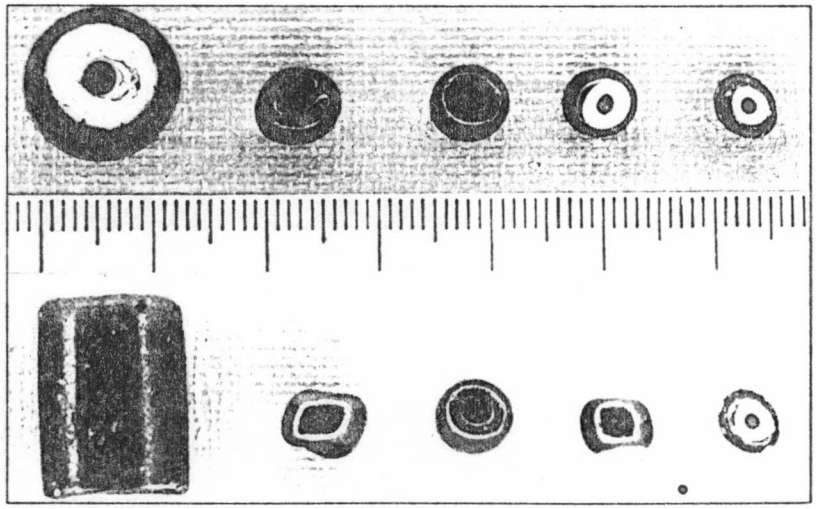

Fig. 2. Various types of Cornaline del Alleppo beads, with opaque white or transparent dark green cores. The latter cores appear black unless held up to the light.

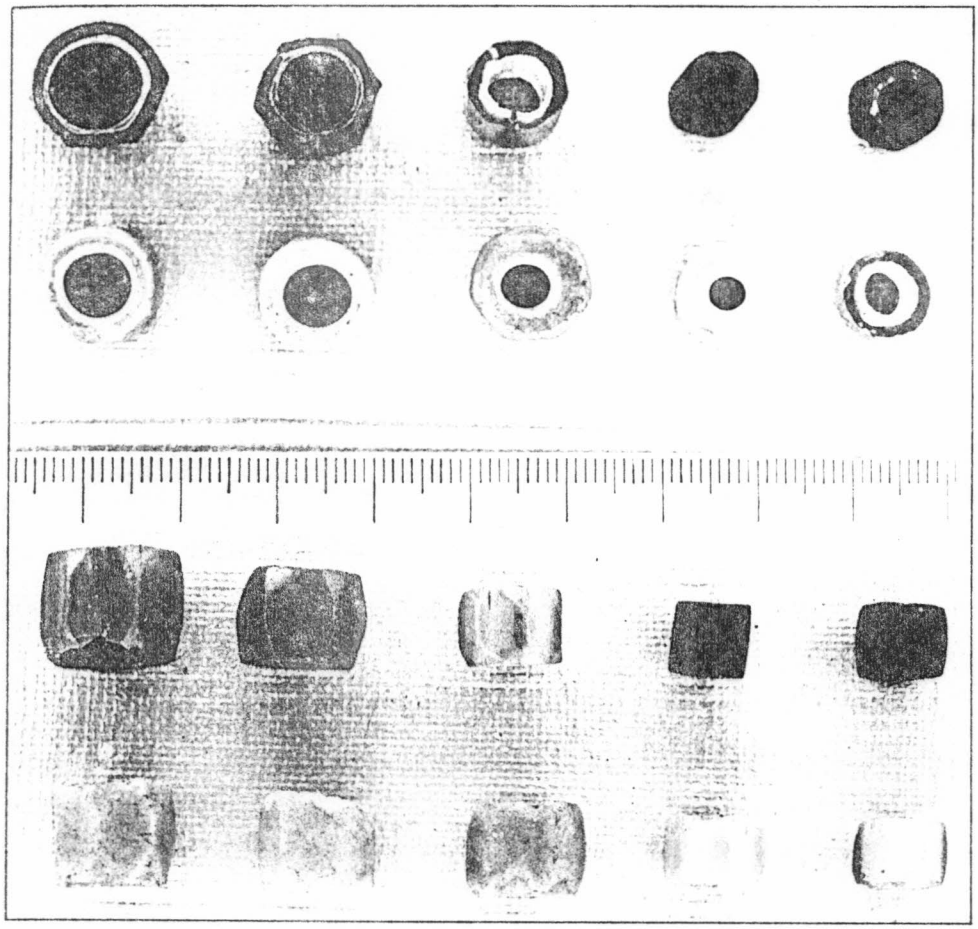

Fig. 3. Tube or cane beads, in dark and light blue colors, some with the inner layer lighter in color than the outside. These are either six or seven-sided; at the ends of the beads, at the junctions where the sides meet, a portion of the bead has been ground off, to give an overall illusion of facetting to the bead. Woodward discusses these "short bugles" or "cut beads." These beads, especially the dark blue ones, are often called "Russian or Bristol Blues"; in the Northwest, pristine examples of such beads in cobalt blue are often commercially available. One wonders how so many beads survived for so long in such excellent condition; a rumor exists that someone has been duplicating these beads in contemporary times. The light blue and non-cobalt blue ones are also frequently imported now from Africa.

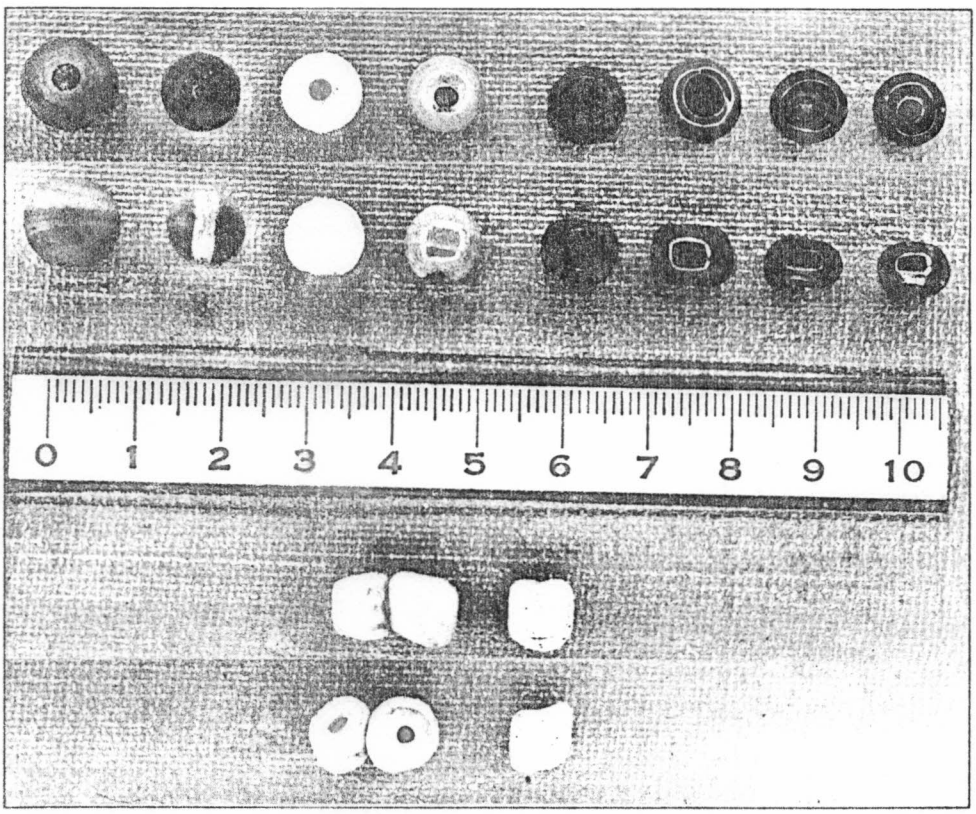

Fig. 4. Various Chinese beads (last 4 specimens, right hand side, above the ruler), Czech molded beads (2 next to Chinese, with broad equatorial mold line) and beads of unknown European origin (first 2, left hand side). (A possible explanation for the presence of these relatively modern beads in Alaska will be discussed in an article by Polly Mille.) Below the scale are opaque white beads, mistakenly called porcelain, which were widely traded to North American natives. They are especially common in the central valley of California. Two of the beads have been fused together, most likely in a cremation fire, and show crazing from heat.

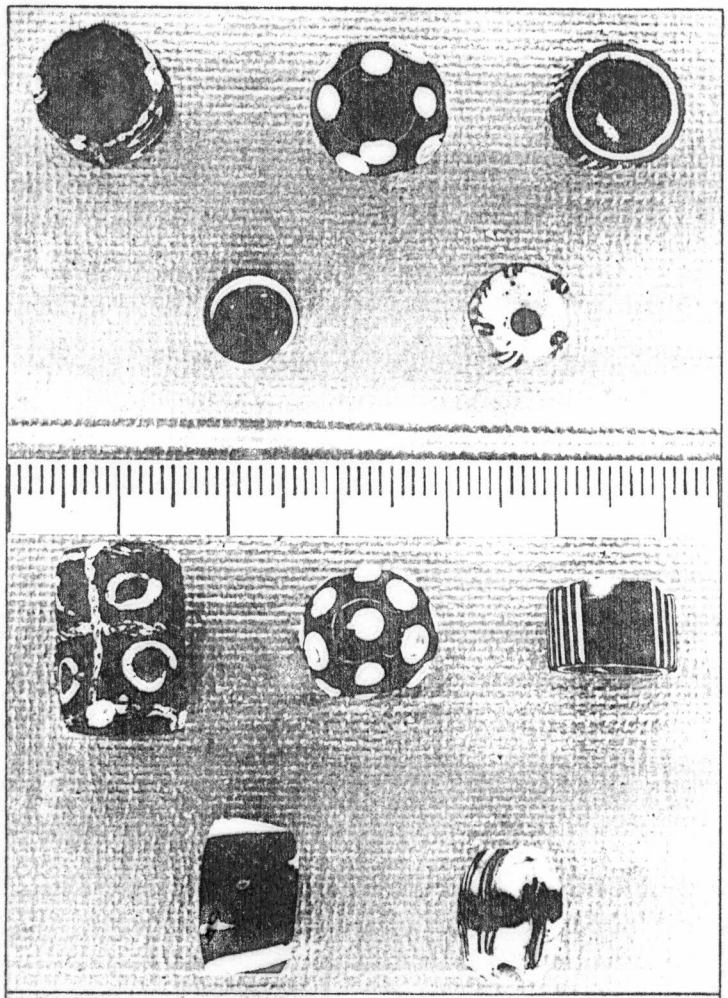

Fig. 5. Polychrome and cane beads from Alaska. The cylindrical (brick-red) bead with eyes is often seen in shipments of beads from Africa, as is the black eye bead (also compare with Fig. 7, Johnson article in this issue). Woodward has figured other polychrome beads traded on this continent.

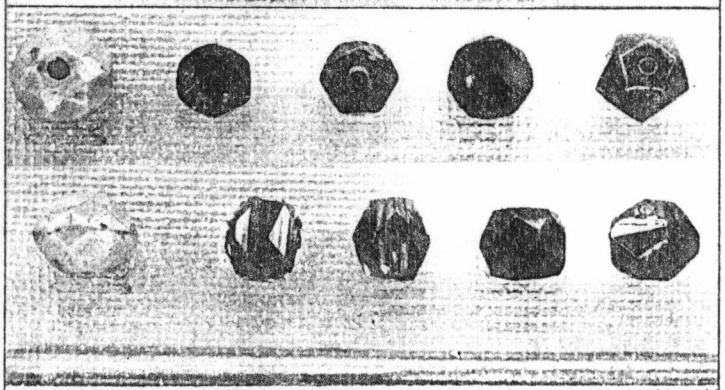

Fig. 6. Various faceted beads (above the scale). From left to right: molded blue bead, mold line visible as band of darker-colored glass in lateral view; two hand-faceted cobalt blue beads with small perforations and consequently thicker wall; black molded? bead and transparent molded red bead.

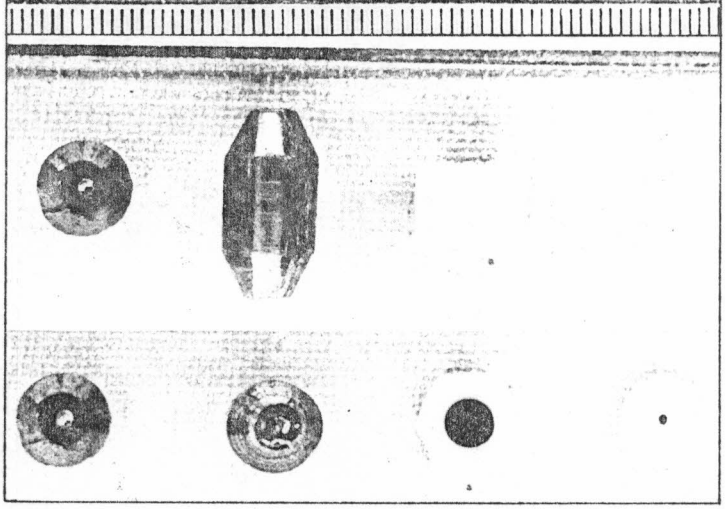

Fig. 7. Miscellaneous beads, from left to right: two molded transparent blue beads, an opaque pink six-sided cane bead and a white convex bicone disc. These all appear to be relatively modern.