

The W. H. Watson Site: A Historic Indian Burial in Fisher County, Texas

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ABSTRACT

An Indian burial in Fisher County, Texas, excavated in 1960, contained a number of European trade items (glass beads, brass hawk bells, brass bracelets, and other objects). Comparison with European trade items from other sites suggests that: (1) the burial dates from the first half of the 19th century, and (2) recognizable typological changes probably took place in some classes of trade goods that were bartered to Indians of the southern plains in the 18th and 19th centuries.

INTRODUCTION

In November, 1960, a young man named Marshall Billingsley found a human tibia and several heavy brass bracelets eroding out of a dry creek bank in southwestern Fisher County, Texas. Recognizing that his find might be of scientific importance, he brought the tibia and bracelets to the senior author of the present paper and generously agreed to show him the site and help him excavate it. Accordingly, permission was obtained from the landowner, Mr. W. H. Watson, and young Billingsley and the senior author excavated the remainder of what proved to be a historic Indian burial. The site has been named in honor of the landowner and has been assigned the number 41 FS 1 in The University of Texas files.

The burial was of a middle-aged Indian woman who had apparently been placed in a crevice in the ground in a standing position, her face to the southwest. The lower part of the burial, including a tibia and several brass bracelets, had been exposed by erosion in the upper part of a vertical cut-bank some 10 feet high at the edge of the dry creek. The senior author dug out what was left of the burial, passing the bones and other objects as they were recovered to Billingsley, who transferred them to a box in the dry creek bed below.

The Indian had been so covered with brass ornaments that many of the bones were stained green with verdigris over large areas, and sizable pieces of flesh and cloth were so well preserved that the weave of the cloth could still be seen. The flesh had dried out as in a mummy and was light and odorless even when damp.

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Most of the skeleton was recovered in a good state of preservation. Associated artifacts included an iron axe, 20 brass bracelets, nine brass finger rings, a small mirror, a quantity of glass beads, and a rather large section of clothing consisting of several layers of cloth to which were sewn many light-weight brass hawk bells and one small brass button. Unfortunately, the section of clothing (with most of the hawk bells), four of the bracelets, one of the tibias, the right humerus, and an unknown quantity of glass beads were stolen by an unknown bystander while the excavation was in progress. The surviving artifacts are described in detail below.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE SKELETAL REMAINS¹

Skeletal material from the W. H. Watson site consists of the almost complete skeleton of one individual. The pelvis and feet are the principal areas missing. The left humerus is circled by three copper bracelets, and owing to impregnation of the metal much of the tissue on the humerus and on the left second phalanges was preserved.

The skeleton is that of a female approximately 45 years of age at the time of death. Age determination was based on cranial sutures, long bone epiphyses, and the medial epiphyses of the clavicles. Most of the extremity bones were present and used for stature estimation. Living stature was approximately 5'1".

Table 1 shows the more important measurements of the skull. Measurements plus observations demonstrate a skull that is broad (mesocranic) and low (chamaecranic). The face is short and wide with an upper facial index of 48.9 and a total facial index of 74.4 (actually, hyperéuryprosopic). The glabella is small, the bridge arch is medium and the orbits are square. The nasal aperture is triangular and fairly wide yielding a nasal index of 54.2 (chamaerrhine). All muscle attachment areas are small and the back of the skull ends in a pronounced occipital bun.

The mandible is delicate, with gonial angles slightly everted. The chin is round and the mylo-hyoid ridge is medium.

Dental wear is extreme but caries are not present. However, abscessed alveolar pockets are evident in both maxilla and mandible.

There is nothing distinctive about the postcranial skeleton. General muscularity is moderate. Squatting facets are present.

Evidence of temporomandibular osteo-arthritis deformans is manifested by a flattening of the mandibular condyle and erosion and

¹ This section was prepared by T. W. McKern, physical anthropologist at The University of Texas.

lipping of the articular fossa. Furthermore, exostoses were formed in the central parts of the condyle, thus producing deformation in the longitudinal axis. Actually, the mandibular condyle was not normally seated in the fossa but up on the articular eminence. This relationship probably resulted in what is commonly called "snapping jaw." This pathology is purely derived from trauma, either functional or extrinsic. Some lipping of the anterior borders of the thoracic vertebrae was observed.

TABLE 1
Cranial measurements (in mm.) and indices

Maximum length	176	Nasion-prosthion	65
Maximum breadth	139	Nasal height	48
Basion-bregma height	119	Nasal width	26
Auricular head height	104	Orbital height, right	36
Minimum frontal	91	Orbital width, right	36
Bizygomatic breadth	133	Palate breadth	59
Bicondylar breadth	125	Palate length	54
Nasion-menton	99		
Indices			
Cranial index	79.0	Upper face index	48.9
Length-height index	67.6	Nasal index	54.2
Total face index	74.4	Palate index	109.1

DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTIFACTS

GLASS BEADS (approximately 19,900 specimens; Figs. 1, 2)

Numerous glass trade beads in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors were found in the grave. The beads may conveniently be divided into two basic classes: (1) relatively large beads that were presumably strung into necklaces, and (2) small "seed" beads of the kind customarily used for making embroidered beadwork designs on clothing or other articles. Most of the beads are patinated to some degree.

Necklace beads (83 specimens: Fig. 1, A-E). These are all of prolate spheroid shape (that is, shaped more or less like a football) and all are of simple structure;² most specimens have a swirled appearance, evidently having been twisted around a wire while molten. Two colors are present—an opaque milky white and a transparent ruby red—and there are three distinct size groups: large, medium, and small. The

² As here defined, a simple bead is one of monolithic structure; a compound bead has two different structural components (see Duffield and Jelks, 1961: 40-41).

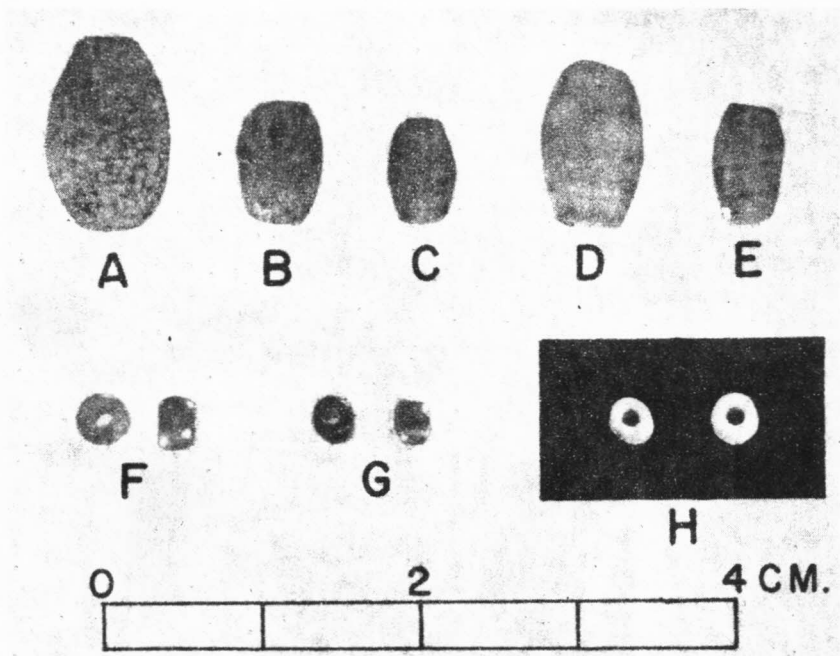


Fig. 1. Glass Beads. A-C, Red necklace beads. D, E, White necklace beads. F, G, Blue seed beads. H, Clear/Opaque White seed beads.

large ones are 9 to 12.5 mm. long and 6 to 8 mm. in maximum diameter; the medium ones are 8 to 9 mm. long and 5 to 5.5 mm. in diameter; the small ones measure 6 to 8 mm. long by 4 to 5 mm. in diameter. There are 23 large white necklace beads and 15 large red ones. Of the 41 small necklace beads, 24 are white and 17 are red. All four of the medium-sized necklace beads are red. The perforations of all the necklace beads are between 1 and 2 mm. in diameter.

Seed beads (approximately 19,850 specimens: Fig. 1, F H, Fig. 2, A-E). There are four different colors of these tiny beads: white, amber, aquamarine (blue-green), and several shades of blue. Except for a Clear/Opaque White³ variety, all are of simple construction. The

³ A Clear/Opaque White bead is one that has an opaque white core which is covered by a superficial layer of clear glass (see Duffield and Jelks, 1961: 40-41). To the casual observer a Clear/Opaque White bead appears to be made *entirely* of opaque white glass. However, if an end of the bead be viewed from an oblique angle its compound nature is usually apparent on close inspection: the superficial clear layer still looks white, but the core looks even whiter. The only way the clear glass can be seen is to look at a section of a cut or broken bead, and even then the clear glass is often visible only under magnification.

seed beads were made by drawing out a thin tube of molten glass, breaking the tube (after it had cooled) into bead lengths, and then removing the sharp edges of the beads, probably by heating them in a revolving drum. Thus, prior to rounding off of their sharp edges, the beads were all essentially cylindrical in shape, albeit some were longer than others. Longitudinal sections of the finished beads tend to be curvilinear rather than angular in outline (see Fig. 2), the degree of curvature on a particular specimen depending on the intensity of the final heating and rolling operation as well as on the length of the bead.

The variations in shape of the seed beads found at the Watson Site are shown in Figure 2 and their dimensions are given in Table 2. Although the basic shape of all the seed beads is pretty much the same, there are some differences in size between beads of different colors (see Table 2).

HAWK BELLS (45 specimens; Fig. 3, A-B')

These tiny subspherical bells consist of four structural parts: (1) an obverse body half made of thin sheet brass and pierced by two round holes that are connected by a narrow slit; (2) a reverse body half, also of thin sheet brass and shaped like the obverse half, but without the holes or the slit; (3) a narrow strip of sheet brass bent to form a small loop and riveted through the center of the reverse body half; (4) a tiny pellet of iron enclosed within the body of the bell to make it jingle. The iron pellets are all highly oxidized and their original form cannot be determined. The two halves of the body were soldered together, and a small drop of solder was placed at the juncture of the attachment loop and the body of the bell. The solder, both for joining the two body halves and for securing the attachment loop, is of a silver-colored metal.

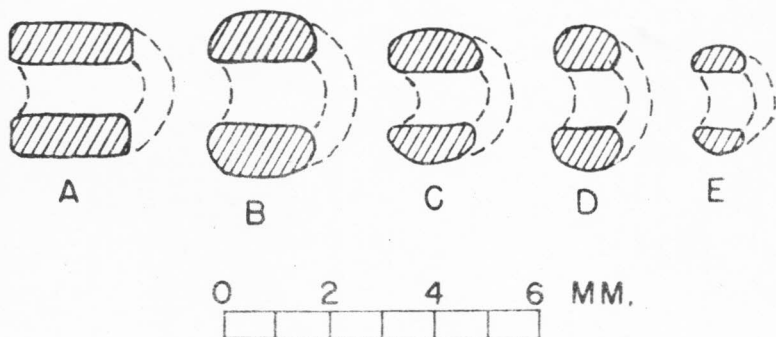


Fig. 2. Cross sections of glass seed beads, showing variations in form and size.

TABLE 2

Seed beads: Significant data (dimensions to nearest $\frac{1}{2}$ millimeter)

Bead varieties	No. of specimens	Diameter	Length	Diameter of perforation	Remarks
Simple beads					
Opaque pale blue	136	2+ — 3-	1- — 2½	1- — 1+	Total sample measured.
Opaque amber	210	2- — 3	1- — 2	½ — 1½	Appears black or dark brown to naked eye. Total sample measured.
Opaque white	6,600 (est.)	2- — 3-	1 — 2	½ — 1	Surface usually looks chalky. Sample of 262 measured.
Translucent aquamarine	7,400 (est.)	2 — 3	1- — 3	½ — 1+	Conspicuous longitudinal striations visible on surface. Glass very bubbly (microscopic examination). Sample of approx. 300 specimens measured.
Translucent blue (several shades)	406	2 — 4-	1- — 3+	1- — 1½	These run larger in diameter than the other simple seed beads. Sample of approx. 200 specimens examined.
Compound beads					
Clear/Opaque white	5,100 (est.)	2½ — 4	1½ — 3	1- — 1+	Somewhat larger than the simple seed beads. Surface is shiny. Sample of 238 measured.

DISCUSSION

Because, with our present knowledge, none of the items associated with the Watson burial can be dated precisely, it is difficult to assign a narrow date to the burial. Typological comparison with material from other historic sites, however, offers evidence that the Watson Site almost certainly dates between 1800 and 1860, and it is our opinion that the actual date probably is between 1820 and 1840. The reasons for arriving at this estimate are given in the following brief discussion.

Two historic burials have been reported in the same general region of western Texas as the Watson Site: the Yellowhouse Canyon burial in Lubbock County (Newcomb, 1955) and the White Site in Yoakum County (Suhm, 1962). The White Site clearly dates from the middle to late nineteenth century while the Yellowhouse Canyon Site certainly dates after 1858 (an associated pistol is a model first manufactured in that year) and probably before 1875. A comparison of beads and other trade objects from the Watson, White, and Yellowhouse Canyon sites suggests that the Watson Site predates the other two by a few years.

Specific stylistic changes appear to have taken place in the seed beads traded to Indians in the southern Plains during the 18th and 19th centuries. Seed beads of the 18th century tend to be of somewhat larger size than those of the 19th century; also, certain forms that were in common use during the late 18th century evidently had disappeared from the trader's stock of goods before the middle of the 19th century. A quantity of white seed beads found at the Pearson Site in Rains County, Texas, for example, are all of compound Clear/Opaque White structure (Duffield and Jelks, 1961: 41-48). This site dates somewhere in the 1700 to 1835 period, probably between 1750 and 1820 (*ibid.*: 76-79). The white seed beads from the White Site, in contrast, are all of simple rather than compound form (Suhm, 1962: 95) as are those from Yellowhouse Canyon (the latter have been examined personally by the junior author). There is much unpublished data from an extensive series of sites which support the conclusion that there was probably a change through time from compound to simple white seed beads.

Since the white seed beads from the Watson Site are about evenly divided between compound and simple forms, it appears likely, on this basis, that the Watson burial dates later than the Pearson Site but earlier than the White and Yellowhouse Canyon sites. Similarly, the size range of the seed beads from Watson falls between those from Pearson on the one hand and those from the White and Yellowhouse



Fig. 8. Tooled Leather.

Canyon sites on the other. The seed beads from Pearson are from 1 to 3 mm. long and 2 to 4 mm. in diameter; but a large majority fall between 2 and 3 mm. long by 3 to 4 mm. in diameter (Duffield and Jelks, 1961: 43-50). The seed beads from the White Site are appreciably smaller, being from slightly less than 1 to a maximum of 1½ mm. long, and from 2 to 2½ mm. in diameter (Suhm, 1962: 95). The seed beads from Yellowhouse Canyon are of similar size. The Watson seed beads are from slightly less than 1 to slightly more than 3 mm. long and from slightly less than 2 to a maximum of 4 mm. in diameter. Thus, their size range falls between that of the relatively large Pearson seed beads and the significantly smaller ones from the White and Yellowhouse Canyon sites.

The bracelets from the Watson Site are made of considerably larger wire (5 to 7 mm. in diameter) than those from some late 19th century sites of the region. The White Site bracelets, for example, all measure between 2 and 3 mm. in wire diameter (Suhm, 1962: 94). This suggests the possibility that the gauge of the wire used for making bracelets may have some chronological significance; but this is, of course, conjectural at present.

The hawk bells also suggest a date between 1800 and 1850 as they are identical to a specimen from Kipp's Post, a North Dakota trading station of the 1820's (Woolworth and Wood, 1960: Pl. 60, n). Most of the hawk bells from the White Site (Suhm, 1962: 87, Fig. 1, A), represented by 49 examples, differ from the Watson specimens in these respects: they are larger, they are spherical rather than oblate, they have wire instead of strap attachment loops, and they have crossed slits in the obverse face rather than a single slit with a round

hole at each end. Perhaps these differences are indicative of stylistic changes through time. Two fragmentary hawk bells from the White Site are generally similar to the Watson specimens, but they are larger and possibly also differ in structural details.

In summary, there are suggestions that certain typological changes took place in some kinds of European trade goods that were bartered to the Indians of the southern plains in the 18th and 19th centuries. Although firm typologies—including accurate chronological ordering—have not yet been established, certain trends can be discerned, trends which suggest that the Watson burial dates from the first half of the 19th century, probably between 1820 and 1840. There are no specific indications as to the tribal affiliation of the buried woman, but in view of the site location, the mode of interment, and the estimated time period, it is our guess that she was Comanche.

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