

Bead-Gorrah!

An Irish 'String' Bead in Viking York

From Excavations at Walmgate, York, 1999

The star find from the Time Team weekend in September 1999 was the polychrome glass bead found in 'all that medieval poo' in Walmgate (to quote Patrick Ottaway in INTERIM 23/3, 21)! I didn't see the programme live, but saw the bead for the first time on a video recording a couple of days later. I was amazed, like everyone else, to see this beautiful example of a type of bead I've been researching for a few years now, as it is quite rare to find them on English sites. It is a welcome addition and although I can only present a brief interim report on it here, future study and possibly scientific analysis should add tremendously to our knowledge of these beads and their dating and distribution.

The bead is a narrow, oblate, translucent, cobalt blue glass bead decorated with eight eyes around its circumference — four opaque yellow glass eyes alternating with more complex blue and white eyes made from a bi-coloured (cobalt blue and white) twisted glass rod. The bead can be called tripartite (made in three parts), as extra separate pieces were attached at each end by trailing a blue and white twisted glass rod, like a candy twist, around the hole. These twisted blue and white glass rods are like strings or cables, hence the colloquial name 'string' or 'cable' bead is sometimes used to describe this type. An unusual feature of our York bead is that these end decorations have been marvered (i.e. smoothed and flattened to make them flush with the surface of the bead), whereas most other examples of this particular type of string bead have the twisted rod left as a distinct proud collar or used as a trail or three-dimensional decorative element. The Walmgate bead is only 17mm in diameter and 7mm thick and is one of the smallest examples of these beads.

Our York bead is a unique example of a type of string bead almost certainly made in Ireland. Although the beads are characterised by a large number of decorative variations, they have common features which are instantly recognisable and distinguish them from other string beads made at different times and in different areas of North

West Europe. These common features are a tripartite construction (plain or decorated body with two end collars) and a restricted palette of colours (always a blue body decorated with blue and white twisted rods and additional opaque white and opaque yellow decorative features). All the beads include the use of the blue and white twisted rods in some way (these are sometimes referred to as *filligrana* or *reticella* in glassworking terms), and many have combinations of plain and more complex 'eye' patterns on the body of the bead or on the twisted rods.

Although examples of this type of bead have similar colour and design elements, and there are various different shapes which occur consistently, the way they were made (using hot-glass techniques similar to those used in temporary workshops in 7th/8th century Ribe in Denmark) meant that no two beads were ever exactly alike. The colours and designs seem to have been combined to make unique items which in late 20th century terms would be called 'collector's items'. Where they are found with other beads on necklaces in burials, the Irish string beads are found singly or in very small numbers among large numbers of other plainer types.

G. Coffey suggested as long ago as 1910 that these types of string beads were probably made in Ireland and although many examples of these beads have been found in Ireland, only a few have been found in stratified contexts or on dateable sites. These include examples from Lagore Crannog, Co. Meath (the stratigraphic contexts of the beads are unclear but the site is generally dated from the 7th to early 10th century), and a Viking burial at Kilmainham, Dublin where Guido suggested a date of c.840–900 AD (1985, 103). Others have been found at Garryduff ring fort, Co. Cork, Ballypalady rath and Lough Revel crannog, Co. Antrim, and possibly at Deerpark Farm ringfort, Co. Antrim (although I have not yet been able to examine the latter). Most of the examples in the National Museum's collection are undated and many do not have recorded findspots. Very interesting is the fact that so far no examples have been found in the National Museum's excavations in Viking or Medieval Dublin itself, where the earliest levels date from the 930's onwards (pers. comm. P. Wallace and R. Ó Floinn). Chemical analysis carried out on various types of Irish glass beads nearly twenty years ago led to the conclusion that the string beads (part of a group then referred to as class 6) were 8th to 12th century in date (Warner and Meighan 1981, 55). Twisted rods for

beadmaking have been found at Armagh and a possible workshop site in the area has been suggested (Ibid., 65).

An Irish string bead was found on the necklace of the Viking period 'Pagan Lady' buried at Peel Castle in the Isle of Man and excavated in the 1980s. Others have been found at various sites in Scotland including Dunadd, Argyllshire (cf. Guido 1985 for a list of string beads in major known collections in the British Isles). More recently an elaborately decorated string bead was also found in fieldwalking near Normanton, Lincolnshire (C. Spall, Field Archaeology Specialists, pers comm.), like the Walmgate bead, this is another welcome addition to the group of such beads found within the Danelaw

String beads of the Walmgate type have also been found as single examples on beaded necklaces in Viking women's burials in Scandinavia, for example at Viborg, Resen parish, Fellenbaek, Denmark (probably dated to the second half of the 9th century) and at Fasteraune, Skatval parish, Nord Trondelag, Norway which also contained two Irish mounts and was dated by Callmer to c.845–860 AD (1977, 17). Callmer recognised these beads as distinctive, and refers to them as type Bj in his classification system of beads found in Scandinavia (Ibid., 86), but he did not at that time recognise that they were almost certainly made in Ireland, suggesting a Western European (possibly Belgian) origin (Ibid., 101). In Scandinavian contexts they appear c.820–845 AD and are still found c.915–950 AD.

The York bead was found in the very bottom of a medieval cesspit at Walmgate which cut through Anglo-Scandinavian levels. It could either be an earlier bead residual in the medieval deposits, or possibly an object which had been buried in Anglo-Scandinavian levels and disturbed by the digging of the Medieval pit. Based on the small amount of firm dating evidence for these beads, it would be safer at this stage of research to say that it was probably brought to York and traded either in the Anglian period (8th/9th century) or in the Anglo-Scandinavian period (later 9th century onwards). It would probably have been traded as a single bead. Hopefully, further research will help us understand more about it and how it came to be buried in Walmgate!

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Bibliography

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