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AN EARLY ROMAN MOSAIC GLASS ‘FLOWER’ BEAD FROM MUSAWWARAT

In the spring season 2013 a peculiar bead (Musa 2013.122.17.4) was found on top of the foundation layer of courtyard wall 120/122 during excavations investigating the early history of courtyard 122 in Musawwarat.¹ Both, the type of the bead and the find context, are of special interest.

MOSAIC GLASS

The piece in question is a section of mosaic glass cane. Mosaic canes are made by fusing different-colored glasses to form patterns. The pattern runs through the cane and appears in the cross-section. Such a cane is stretched out and then cut with a metal blade and abrasive sand into segments. The slices can then be applied on to the surface of a glass bead body, they can be fused together around a rod, or they can be pierced by a rod to form beads.²

Mosaic glass became more common in the Early Roman period, when it was most probably also produced in Egypt, namely in Alexandria and Diospolis in Upper Egypt.³ However, other places have also been suggested as centers of mosaic glass production⁴ as well as of mosaic beads manufacture.⁵ As the first century AD *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (6,7) states, coloured glass manufactured in Diospolis was traded in Africa.⁶ The glass could be locally worked into beads. Many mosaic glass beads have been found throughout the Roman world and beyond.

THE MUSAWWARAT BEAD

The bead from Musawwarat is a rod-pierced section of a mosaic glass cane (fig. 1 & colour fig. 2). The piece is a round tabular with flat sides and smoothed edges. The areas around the opening of the hole are misshapen due to the piercing with a hot rod. The bead measures ca. 14 mm in width, 12 mm in length and 4 mm in thickness. It is highly eroded. A flower pattern in the center and a border of varicolored squares are apparent. The flower pattern consists of a white center with eight yellow pointed petals on what most probably was a translucent dark purple ground, which now appears nearly black. The flower center is bordered by a frame of 13 squares outlined in white. In each square a yellow center is set in a most probably dark purple ground.

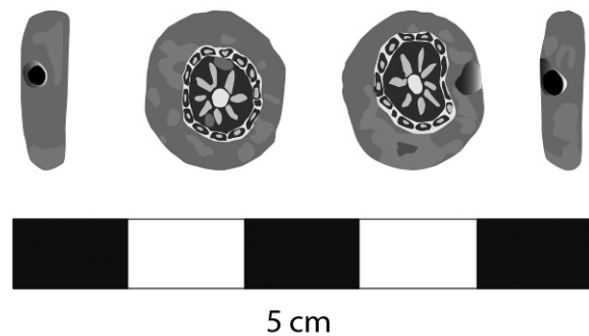


Fig. 1: The Musawwarat mosaic glass ‘flower’ bead from the upper foundation layer of wall 120/122 in trench 122.17 (drawing by Jens Weschenfelder)

SIMILAR SPECIMENS

The Musawwarat bead lacks strict parallels. The pattern of a flower encircled by a ring of metopen reminds of Greek ornaments as they can be observed in pottery decoration.⁷ Remarkably, a not dissimilar

1 Näser 2013: 7, fig. 6.

2 Dubin 2009: 60; Spaer 2001: 118-126; Arveiller-Dulong and Nenna 2011: 145; 177-178; for the Early Roman tabular mosaic glass beads, see Then-Obłuska forthcoming.

3 Kucharczyk 2011: 84; Henderson 2013: 230.

4 Nenna and Gratuze 2009; Henderson 2013: 235-251.

5 Francis 2002: 94.

6 Kucharczyk 2011: 85; for an additional interpretation of “coloured glass” in Periplus, see Henderson 2013: 230.

7 A fragment of a dish with the ornament under discussion, probably of Rhodian origin, was found in Memphis; Petrie 1909: 15, pl. XXII: 8.



incised pattern can be discerned on one face of a steatite scaraboid bead which was found in a Napatan context at Begrawiya West Cemetery.⁸

Nevertheless, mosaic glass specimens similar to the Musawwarat example are known from the Early Roman period. The closest parallel, although with yellow center and white petals, could be observed at the antiquities market (MS242, 243).⁹ Five differing 'flower' beads have been traced in museum acquisitions and in private collections, but again they lack provenance details.¹⁰

Other beads with squares bordering flower patterns come from archaeological excavations in the Black Sea area, on coast sites in India, Arabia, and Egypt. Beads from the Black Sea region were recorded from several archaeological contexts dated from the 1st to the 2nd centuries AD.¹¹

A single bead was found at Arikamēdu site. Arikamēdu was an ancient emporium on the East Indian coast; the site evidently features Early Roman imports.¹² Another specimen identical to the Arikamēdu one comes from Iran.¹³

A white, brown and black bead with squares bordering a flower pattern of eight petals comes from a plundered grave in Ed-Dur (Area BR, t. 7 = G 6302, object inv. no BR 18), a site on the west coast of the Oman peninsula.¹⁴ Ed-Dur is a large coastal site with the main occupation in the first century AD.¹⁵ After that time it was deserted.

Another specimen is known from the Early Roman port site of Berenike (BE99/31/012#20). It has a red centre, bordered white, and yellow and red rectangular petals on dark purple background, which appears nearly black. The flower is framed by green squares, outlined in white. The whole pattern is encircled by a green edge.¹⁶ The bead comes from a trash dump dated to the mid to late first century AD.¹⁷

FIND CONTEXT

The Musawwarat bead was found lying on top of the upper foundation layer of courtyard wall 120/122 in the Great Enclosure. Foundation rituals include among other practices the purification of the building ground by sprinkling gypsum, digging the first foundation trench and filling it with sand, and burning the foundation deposit.¹⁸ Foundation deposits often take the form of pits and are usually placed at the corners or in the doorways of buildings.¹⁹ But votive offerings were not only placed in pits, they could also be distributed seemingly randomly in the foundations trenches and on the building site.²⁰ The nature of the offerings changed through time and could consist of building tools and materials, animal and plant offerings, or their miniature symbols, resin, small plaques of a variety of stones and metals, and sometimes beads. Throughout the Mediterranean, the Near East, Egypt²¹ and Nubia,²² the initiation of building construction was associated with bead foundation deposits. They are also known from the Meroitic²³ and post-Meroitic period²⁴ and from Musawwarat itself.²⁵

Whether, however, the single Early Roman mosaic glass 'flower' bead discussed here was a deliberately deposited object must remain open.

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8 Dunham 1963: 291-294, Beg W 571, 23-3-313, fig. 177, 1.

9 Photos available at <http://www.ancienttouch.com/ms243.jpg> (last accessed 07/09/2014).

10 Spaer 2001: 124; Schlick-Nolte 2002: 149, cat. EG-34-I; Dubin 2009 – one bead is displayed at the front jacket cover but no comment is given in the book.

11 Alekseeva 1982: 42, pl. 48: 45-47, 51.

12 Francis 1987: color plate to left; Francis 1996: 513; Francis 2002: color plate 20.

13 Francis 1996: 513.

14 Haerinck 2001: 81, vol. II: pl. 265, no. 1, top.

15 Haerinck 2001: 3.

16 Personal observation in the storage in Quft, Egypt in January-February 2014.

17 Sidebotham 2007: 44.

18 Sakr 2005: 349.

19 Van Haarlem 2012.

20 Andrassy 2003: 44; Osborne 2004.

21 E.g. Weinstein 1973; id. 2001; Hunt 2006.

22 For a presence of beads in Napatan tomb foundation deposits, see e.g. Dunham 1963: Beg. West 469, 23-3-672L, 23-3-675g – metal tablets with tiny faience beads on; Beg. West 466, 23-3-680k – about 15 faience ring blue beads; Dunham 1955: fig. 138, Nu. 29, 17-4-1295 – many faience ring and cylinder beads, some on a bronze tablet; Nu. 31, 17-4-1344 – faience amulet; fig. 130, Nu. 47, 18-2-515 – lapis lazuli bead.

23 For Meroitic foundation deposits from Meroe, see e.g. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 23.791, 23.792 – gold wires from pyramid W2.

24 For ostrich eggshell or faience beads in foundation deposits at post-Meroitic settlement sites, see Then-Obłuska, in progress; for early Christian bead foundation deposits in Nubian churches, see Then-Obłuska 2013: 688; ead. in progress.

25 Andrassy 2003: 47.



interpretation of the find context. The study of the Musawwarat bead is part of a research project aiming at an interdisciplinary analysis of Nubian beads, which is funded by the National Science Centre, Poland grant DEC-2013/09/D/HS3/04508.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In der Frühjahrskampagne 2013 wurde während der Grabungen in Hof 122 der Großen Anlage von Musawwarat eine ungewöhnliche Perle (Musa 2013.122.17.4) gefunden. Sowohl der Perlentyp als auch der Fundkontext sind von besonderem Interesse. Die Perle ist ein durchbohrtes Segment einer Mosaikglasstange. In frühromischer Zeit wurde Mosaikglas vermutlich in Alexandria und Disopolis hergestellt. Die Perle aus Musawwarat zeigt ein Blumenornament bestehend aus einem weißen Zentrum und acht gelben, spitzen Blütenblättern. Die Blume ist von einem Band aus 13 weißen, gelb gefassten Vierecken umgeben; der Hintergrund war vermutlich ursprünglich ein dunkles Purpur. Eine ähnliche Gestaltung findet sich auch bei anderen sogenannten

‘Blumenperlen’, die auf archäologischen Fundplätzen in der gesamten antiken Welt, in der Schwarzmeerregion, Indien, Arabien und Ägypten, zu Tage kamen. In allen Fällen ist der Fundkontext ins 1. Jahrhundert n. Chr. datiert. Die Perle aus Musawwarat wurde auf der oberen Fundamentschicht der Hofmauer 120/122 gefunden. In der gesamten antiken Mittelmeerwelt, dem Nahen Osten, Ägypten und Nubien war die Initiierung von Baumaßnahmen mit Gründungsdepositen verbunden. Perlendeposite sind aus der meroitischen und postmeroitischen Zeit und auch aus Musawwarat selbst bekannt. Die Votivobjekte können dabei anscheinend willkürlich in den Fundamentgräben und auf dem Bauplatz verteilt sein. Ob es sich bei der hier vorgestellten Perle um eine solche Gründungsbeigabe handelt, lässt sich aber nicht letztendlich feststellen.

THE FOURTH CATARACT AND BEYOND

Proceedings of the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies
British Museum Publications on Egypt and Sudan, 1

Editors: Anderson J.R., Welsby D.A.

The 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies was held at the British Museum, London, from 1st-6th August 2010. The conference, held every four years, is the only international gathering of archaeologists and scholars from associated disciplines which considers all aspects of Sudan and southern Egypt's ancient and more recent past. The main sessions, and main papers published herein, were devoted to a consideration of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project, its aftermath and impact. Over the previous decade this has been the major focus of archaeological activity on the Middle Nile. The dam is now complete and the reservoir is full drawing a line under the fieldwork component of the project. It was felt timely, therefore, in the interim to obtain an overview of what was found during the many years of intensive work and the first main paper speaker in each session sought to do just that. They were followed by reports on sites, categories of objects and more thematic papers arranged broadly by period. These highlight that, while the focus of archaeological activity still remains the Nile Valley where there is the densest concentration of sites and also where there remains the most concentrated threat to their survival, much work is being undertaken away from the river and in some cases outside its catchment area. The role of the deserts is increasingly being appreciated while the role of the savannah and areas even further south has yet to be given the prominence that it probably deserves.

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