



JOANNA THEN-OBŁUSKA

“JEWELS OF ANCIENT NUBIA” — A GLANCE THROUGH THE EYE BEAD FROM BERENIKE

INTRODUCTION

An exceptionally beautiful set of 22 glass beads in form of monochrome bodies decorated with eyes and crisscrossing trails was found from Meroe tomb Beg. N 15.¹ It was excavated by the early 20th-century expedition of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Harvard University. Sophisticated decoration makes these beads one of the highlights of the splendid exhibition of Nubian heritage: “Gold and the Gods, Jewels of Ancient Nubia” (July 19, 2014 – May 14, 2017), currently showing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and in the related publications.² Although it has not been mentioned by exhibition curators, the object was originally divided in two equal parts between the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA 24.721) and the Sudan National Museum (SNM 2424). Then, only eleven beads presented by the curators belong to the object under discussion (21-12-129a).³

TECHNIQUE OF MANUFACTURE

A technique of manufacture of bead body of the MFA 24.721 examples is not described by the curators and it is impossible to judge on that basing on published close up illustrations.⁴ Anyway, they consider these beads as decorated with stratified eyes what would mean that the eye discs were made of alternated layers of glass with a small pupil on the top.⁵ However, the bead eyes were indeed made

of mosaic glass cane sections. The mosaic cane was composed of a central yellow rod that was bordered by two or three alternated layers in opaque white and translucent blue. Then, the cane was sliced into discs or short cylinders. Finally, the sections were deeply applied on bead body in the same manner like associated crisscrossing decorations.

A technique of decorating bead with crisscrossing bands has been misidentified as well. Contrary to the idea presented by the curators of mechanical carving of paths in the bead body for setting gold bands in the channels, “en résille sur verre enameling”, and covering them with glass layer,⁶ pre manufactured gold-in-glass bands were deeply applied on heat bead bodies. As a result, fragments with broken off parts of decoration reveal narrow depression in bead body. The cavity discernible on bead surface in places where decoration is missing is not a result of carving but it is an impression left after pressing gold-in-glass bands on a still hot bead body. Similar depressions are visible in place where the eye decoration is missing. Yellowish traces discernible in open channels⁷ are not gold remains but later patina, the same that could be observed on the bead body surface. Then, the crisscrossing decoration was simply made by applying gold-in-glass bands. Placing the gold foil between two glass layers belongs to one of the most common features of Hellenistic and Roman glass. The technique is called a sandwich, golden glass or gold-in-glass.⁸

PARALLELS AND DATING

The same bead type, described as blue glass balls with gilt crossing bands come from the tomb Beg. N. 56.⁹ They are illustrated on the MFA website as MFA 24.1000, but incorrectly ascribed there to

1 Dunham 1957: 133, Fig. 89: a, object 21-12-129a, Plate LXVII E, to the left.

2 Markowitz and Doxey 2014a, b; Doxey and Markowitz 2014.

3 In the photo published by the curators, 11 beads do come from the object under discussion, but remaining 11 beads is of unknown provenance, what has not been clarified (Markowitz and Doxey 2014: pl. 45, fig. 7). The original photo of the excavated object is presented in Dunham 1957: 133, Plate LXVII E, to the left.

4 Markowitz and Doxey 2014: pl. 45, fig. 7.

5 Markowitz and Doxey 2014a: 135, 173, pl. 45, fig. 66 - MFA 24.721; Markowitz and Doxey 2014b; Doxey and Marko-

witz 2014: 21, Fig. 11, on the right; Liu 2014: 41.

6 Markowitz and Doxey 2014a: pl. 45.

7 Markowitz and Doxey 2014: pl. 45.

8 Paer 2001; Francis 2002: 91.

9 Dunham 1957: 128, object 22-1-97, Fig. 86, Pl. LXVI S and p. 130, object 23-2-79b, Fig. 86b.

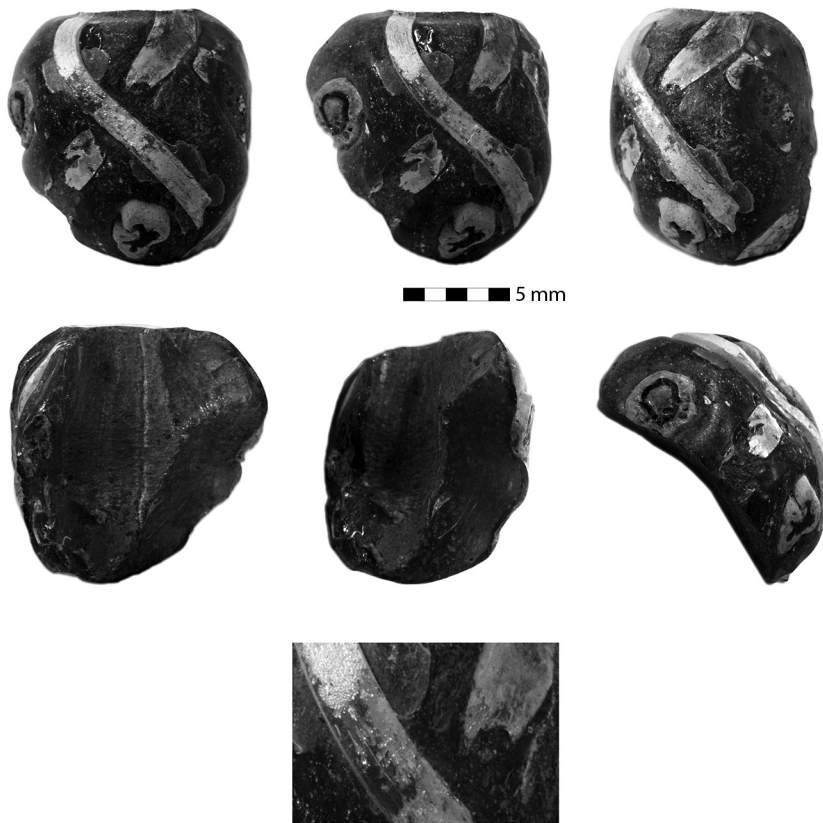


Fig. 1: A fragment of crisscrossed eye bead from Berenike (photo: J. Then-Obluska)

Napatan tomb S 152. Bodies of the beads are drawn single segmented glass barrels.¹⁰ Their crisscrossing trails were described by excavators as gilt bands.¹¹ Although they appear as white, it could be simply a whitish patina that covers the glass as it happened with an example from Berenike (compare below).

The exhibited beads are said to have no parallel in the ancient world and they are considered as a specialty of Meroitic glassmakers.¹² However several analogies from the Black Sea region¹³ have been already published. Others beads are stored at the Corning Museum of Glass¹⁴ as well as some objects seem to be presented in *A Bead Timeline*.¹⁵ In all cases, the beads are dated to c. the 1st century AD.

A fragment of bead of the type under discussion was excavated in port of Berenike (Fig. 1, colour fig. 3). It was found in the Early Roman Trash Dump from west baulk collapse of the trench BE99-31. Pottery and glass recovered from that trench dated

the locus to mid- to late first century AD.¹⁶ Interestingly enough, the beads from the Museum of Fine Arts are said to be dated to the early second century A.D.¹⁷ If it were correct, the Nubian beads would be later than other known from Egypt and the Black Sea region examples (but compare below).

The Berenike example measures 12.2 mm in diameter and in length, and 4.3 mm in hole diameter. Fragments of a gold leaf are discernible in some restricted areas where the whitish patina does not cover transparent glass layer in the trail. The Berenike example has a clearly drawn and segmented body similarly to Meroe object as presented online as MFA 24.1000 (compare above). Such applying of mosaic eye cane sections on drawn glass bodies is a common technique in the Early Roman period.¹⁸

FINAL NOTE

As mentioned in the introduction, the remaining eleven beads from the object under discussion, 21-12-129a from tomb Beg. N 15, were left in the Sudan National Museum. Later on they have been published in number of eleven beads,¹⁹ although currently ten of them are displayed at the Sudan National Museum.²⁰ Interestingly, together with the objects, many carefully handwritten catalog cards were left in the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum by George Reisner, the excavator of Meroe cemeteries, a century ago. In one of them G. Reisner described the eleven beads (SNM 2424) and he dated the find context to A.D. 20-40 while referring to excavation “diary 1921-22, pp. 21&22”. The beads’ eyes are correctly labeled as made of “millefiori glass”, the other name used in the past for mosaic glass.

10 For manufacture technique of segmented beads, see Then-Obluska and Dussubieux forthcoming and references given there.

11 Dunham 1957: 130.

12 Markowitz and Doxey 2014a: 135.

13 Alexeeva 1978: Plate 32: 55, 58.

14 Goldstein 1979: 269, cat. 806-807.

15 Lankton 2003: no. 562 to the left.

16 Sidebotham 2007: 44.

17 Liu 2014: 41.

18 Then-Obluska and Dussubieux, forthcoming and references given there.

19 Eisa 1999: Fig. 28, object 21-12-129a.

20 SNM Khartoum no. 2424 – personal observation.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Iwona Zych and Prof. Steven Sidebotham, co-directors of the University of Delaware / Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw Berenike Project for making the study of the Berenike object possible. I appreciate the help of Dr. Ghalia Garelnabi, the Director of the Sudan National Museum (SNM), and Sarah Abdulatteeef from the SNM in checking the catalog card of the Meroe object. The study at the SNM is a part of the broader research project aimed at interdisciplinary analyzing of Nubian beads and funded by the National Science Centre grant DEC-2013/09/D/HS3/04508.

RESUME

An exceptionally beautiful set of 22 glass beads in a form of monochrome bodies decorated with mosaic eyes and crisscrossing gold-in-glass trails was found from Meroe tomb Beg. N 15. It was excavated by an early 20th-century expedition of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Harvard University. Sophisticated decoration makes these beads one of the highlights of the splendid exhibition of Nubian heritage currently showing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Nevertheless, many features of their morphology, which were misidentified or omitted in the associated publications, are given in the paper. Also parallels known from literature are here provided. Additionally, a macroscopic analysis of a bead fragment that comes from the Early Roman Berenike port, gives details on technique of manufacture and decoration, and chronology for the type under discussion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alekseeva, E.M. 1978, *Ancient Beads of the Northern Black Sea Littoral 2*. Archaeology of the USSR. Moscow: Nayka.
- Doxey, D.M. and Markowitz, I.J. 2014, *Gold and the gods*, *Minerva* 25 (4): 18-21.
- Dunham, D. 1957, *The royal Tombs at Meroë and Barkal. The Royal Cemeteries of Kush IV*, Boston.
- Eisa, K. A. 1999, *Le Mobilier et les Coutumes Funéraires Koushites à L'Époque Méroïtique*. [=Meroitica 16], Wiesbaden.
- Francis, P. Jr. 2002, *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade 300 B.C. to the Present*. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.
- Goldstein, S.M. 1979, *Pre-Roman and early Roman glass in the Corning Museum of Glass*, Corning: New York: The Corning Museum of Glass.
- Lankton, J. W. 2003, *A Bead Timeline, Vol. I: Prehistory to 1200 CE. A Resource for Identification, Classification and Dating*, Washington: The Bead Museum.
- Liu, R. K. 2014, *Nubian Mosaic Face Beads*, *The Enigma of Variations, Ornament* 37 (5): 40-46.
- Markowitz, Y. J. and D. M. Doxey 2014a, *Jewels of Ancient Nubia*, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts.
- Markowitz, Y. J. and D.M. Doxey 2014b, *Gold and the Gods. Jewels of Ancient Nubia*. *Ornament* 37 (4): 32-37.
- Sidebotham, S.E. 2007, *Early Roman Trash Dump*, in: W. Wendrich and S.E. Sidebotham (eds), *Berenike1999/2000. Report on the Excavations at Berenike*, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles, 44-49.
- Spaer, M. 2001, *Ancient Glass in the Israel Museum Beads and Other Small Objects*, Jerusalem.
- Then-Obfuska, J. and Dussubieux, L. forthcoming, *Glass bead trade in the Early Roman and Mamluk Quseir ports – a view according to the Oriental Institute Museum assemblage*, *Archaeological Research in Asia*.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ein besonders schönes Ensemble von 22 Glasperlen mit monochromem Körper, dekoriert mit mosaikartigen Augen und zickzack-förmigen Goldfäden wurde im Grab Beg. N 15 in Meroe gefunden. Es wurde am Anfang des 20. Jh. von der Expedition des Museum of Fine Arts, Boston und der Harvard University ausgegraben. Die anspruchsvolle Dekoration macht diese Perlen zu einem der Höhepunkte der prächtigen Ausstellung des Nubischen Erbes, die derzeit im Museum of Fine Arts, Boston gezeigt wird. In diesem Artikel werden einige Besonderheiten ihrer Morphologie, die in den Begleitpublikationen der Ausstellung fehlinterpretiert oder übergangen wurden. Auch bereits bekannte Parallelen werden vorgestellt. Darüber hinaus gibt eine makroskopische Untersuchung eines Perlenfragmentes, das vom frühromischen Hafen von Berenike stammt, Details zur Technik der Herstellung und Dekoration sowie zur Datierung der hier besprochenen Perlen.