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From Cambay in India to Barbados in the Caribbean: Two Unique Beads from a Plantation Slave Cemetery

By Jerome S. Handler [1]

In the early 1970s, archaeological investigations at Newton plantation in Barbados recovered the skeletal remains of 104 individuals, interred from approximately 1660 to around 1820. Twelve of the burials were associated with close to 900 beads. These beads represented a variety of types, including two distinctive large reddish-orange carnelian beads (Handler and Lange 1978: 144-150; Handler et al. 1979; Handler 1997).[2] Despite the excavation of additional burials at Newton in the late 1990s which also recovered some beads associated with several burials,[3] and considerable archaeological work since the early 1970s in African diasporic sites in the Caribbean and North America (including the massive "African Burial Ground" in New York City [General Services Administration 2006]), as far as I can ascertain the two Newton specimens are still the only examples of their kind from New World sites. They remain unusual and unique material legacies of the transatlantic slave trade to Britain's American colonies.

The two undisturbed burials (designated Burials 63 and 72) associated with the beads were roughly contemporaneous, dating to approximately the late 17th or early 18th century, and were buried in different sections of the cemetery. Burial 72 was a male; the sex of Burial 63 could not be determined. Both were adults buried in extended supine positions and lacking coffins. Both had associated grave goods, including various types of beads. In both burials, the carnelian beads had been part of necklaces that contained a variety of other beads, virtually all of European origin (Handler et al. 1979; see Fig. 1). The carnelian beads were the only items common to both necklaces. The stringing patterns of the necklaces could only be partially reconstructed and the actual positions of the carnelian beads could not be ascertained, but they were probably the centerpieces of the necklaces.[4]



Figure 1. Burial 63, area of lower jaw, showing the carnelian bead in situ and some of the associated translucent turquoise glass beads. Over 50 glass beads, representing about 10 types, formed this burial's necklace; the carnelian bead was, presumably, its centerpiece.

The carnelian beads are remarkably similar in several characteristics: the type of agate module from which they were derived; their general reddish-orange color with embedded milky narrow, concentric bands; their tapered and cylindrical shapes; their comparable lengths (42.2 mm for Burial 72 and 44.0 mm for Burial 63); and an approximately 2.0 mm diameter perforation bored from both ends through the length of each. Moreover, each bead has 8 longitudinal facets and 4 beveled facets at both ends. The facets were apparently first chipped or ground and then polished to smooth surfaces. The only significant difference between the two beads is in thickness: the Burial 72 bead is approximately 11.7 mm at its thickest point, while the Burial 63 bead is about 14.7 mm. Generally, then, the Burial 63 carnelian bead is slightly longer and somewhat thicker than its Burial 72 counterpart (Figs. 2 and 3). The relatively minor differences between these two beads are clearly the results of a non-machine manufacturing process where variations in the products could be expected.



Carnelian does not occur naturally in Barbados. Comparative study and the help of specialists who I contacted indicate that the Newton beads were almost certainly the hand-crafted products of an industry that existed in Cambay, the local name for Khambhat, a large town or city in Gujarat, Western India. The possibility of a Cambay origin was first suggested to me in 1978 by Robert K. Liu, at the time editor of *Ornament* (formerly, *The Bead Journal*), a recognized authority on the cross-cultural study of beads.



A. J. Arkell gave a detailed account of the Cambay industry in a 1936 publication. Modern scholars frequently cite this major early study. The average dimensions of some Cambay carnelian beads are roughly comparable to those found in Barbados, but more importantly their longitudinal and bevel end facets, high surface polish and tapered, cylindrical shapes were characteristic of the "date-shaped" beads produced in Cambay. Arkell notes that after being heated, the carnelian stones were roughly shaped into beads with a saw-like instrument; next they were chiseled into final form with a horn-headed hammer; finally they were carefully polished to brilliancy with emery powder (Arkell 1936). According to Liu, who examined the Newton beads, their facets and surface polish were the result of the process described by Arkell. Moreover, the color of individual carnelian was often enhanced or made more pronounced in Cambay by exposing the beads to sun or fire; the reddish-orange color of the Newton beads was probably derived from some form of heat treatment.[5]



Figure 4. Necklace components associated with Burial 72. The carnelian bead was probably the centerpiece. Other beads in the necklace were canine teeth, cowrie shells, fish vertebrae, and glass beads of European origin.

Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, an archaeologist at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) and a specialist in this area later solidified the case for a Cambay origin. Kenoyer's personal examination of the Burial 72 bead led him to conclude that, among other diagnostic characteristics, "the polish on the surface is characteristic of high luster tumbling which was done extensively in Cambay . . . the drilling was done after the bead had been polished and the type of drill used is the double diamond drill that was unique to Cambay and western India." Kenoyer also ventured to speculate that the "whitening on the surface is a result of salt penetration either during post deposition or it can occasionally result from the heating processes used to make the carnelian redder" (pers. comm. 26 June 1995, 26 Sept. 2006; cf. Insoll et al. 2004; Karanth 1992; Kenoyer et al. 1994).

Cambay had a well-known stone bead industry of considerable antiquity, and for about 2,000 years its beads were widely traded. The trade network reached its greatest volume between around 1300 and 1800 and linked Cambay with the Arabian and Red Sea areas and the east coast or Horn of Africa. From the East African coast, Cambay carnelian beads and other items generally moved through the overland Sahara and Sahel trade to West Africa, where they were present in the first millennium AD. Carnelian beads from India were one of several bead types that were relatively expensive and considered especially

valuable in many areas of West Africa (Arkell 1936; Carey 1991: 8, 26; Kenoyer et al. 1994; Curtin 1975 (1): 314, 319; Jones 1984: 13, 31; Opper and Opper 1989: 7, 9, 14, 15; cf. DeCorse et al. 2003).[6]

However likely it is that the beads were originally manufactured in India, it cannot be demonstrated how they came to Barbados. (It is also impossible to determine if the necklaces of which they were a part were brought intact to Barbados or constructed on the island from different components that arrived through diverse routes and with different human agents.) It is reasonable to assume they arrived indirectly through Africa since a trade network linked Cambay with the Red Sea and the east coast of Africa as early as the 16th century. Moreover, they probably came aboard slaving vessels, perhaps directly from Western Africa, the regional source of most slaves to the British West Indies during the period of the Newton cemetery. It is possible, however, that the beads were brought directly from southeast Africa. Since Cambay beads were traded along the East African coast some may have found their way along the southeast African coast or even to Madagascar. From the 1670s until 1698 and then from 1716 to 1721, British slavers acquired large numbers of slaves from Madagascar and southeast Africa (Curtin 1969:125; Platt 1969: 548). During these years some slaves were brought directly from this area to Barbados. Although the Madagascar-southeast Africa trade was small in relation to that from Western Africa, at certain periods -- particularly in the late seventeenth century -- slaves from the former areas were numerically significant in Barbados and sometimes constituted a consequential percentage of enslaved Africans brought to the island (Handler and Lange 1978: 293-94).[7]

By whatever routes they traveled, it will never be known if the beads came across the Atlantic separately or together. Nor can it be known if they arrived with the persons with whom they were ultimately interred. It is highly unlikely, and I have encountered no documentary evidence to the contrary, that the Carnelian beads, because of their rarity and value, were used by Europeans as trade goods on the West African coast. And although in most cases enslaved Africans were probably divested of personal jewelry before they boarded the slave ships, it is possible that these beads were smuggled aboard by their owners or their owners were otherwise permitted to retain them either by their African captors or European purchasers (cf. Handler 2006). By whatever means these beads came to Barbados, they had clearly traveled over a vast distance from their point of manufacture in India to their final resting place in the Newton graveyard.[8] They are dramatic archaeological illustrations of the global reaches of the Atlantic slave trade.

Notes

[1]. The author is a Senior Fellow at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities in Charlottesville. Thanks to Jonathan Kenoyer, Timothy Insoll, Christopher De Corse, Adria LaViolette, Charles Orser, and Neil Norman for their help and advice on various issues. Jama Coartney of the University of Virginia Library's Digital Media Lab diligently made the best of old and often not very good slides to produce the illustrations shown here.

[2]. These beads were initially excavated by Crawford Blakeman and Robert Riordan, at the time doctoral students in anthropology at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. The excavations took place under the general supervision of Frederick W. Lange and the author. Today, the beads are housed in the Barbados Museum (St. Michael, Barbados).

[3]. In separate excavations conducted in 1997 and 1998 by Kristrina Shuler and Ray Pasquariello, respectively, about 30 new burials were recovered. Pasquariello excavated 14 individuals, and although Shuler excavated a total of 34, some of these were possibly reinterments that had been excavated in the early 1970s. No carnelian beads were found with any of these burials (Pasquariello, pers. comm. 23 July 2004; Shuler, pers. comm. 2 Oct. 2006; cf. Shuler 2005).

[4]. One of beads was found with Burial 72, the richest burial in the cemetery in terms of its associated artifacts -- all of which were intentionally placed grave goods. This burial still apparently represents the most distinctive example of African influences on grave goods in a North American or Caribbean site. The bead was part of an elaborate necklace with obvious African-like characteristics and was composed of seven money cowry shells, five drilled vertebrae from a large bony fish (possibly shark), 21 drilled canine teeth (from an unidentified dog), and 14 European-manufactured glass beads representing four or five types (Handler 1997; Handler et al. 1997; Fig. 4). Among some Gold Coast peoples, the distinctive bead necklaces worn by priests occasionally contained one long red carnelian bead (Ellis 1996). Although carnelian beads are not specifically mentioned, Joshua Carnes, visiting West African coastal areas in the earlier part of the 19th century, reported on the ubiquity of "fetishes" or protective amulets worn by people throughout the region, including the Gold Coast. These amulets were "formed of different things" and were "attached or suspended in some way or other from the person . . . [as] . . . a string of coral, or common glass beads, the claw of a tiger, or a leopard [or dog], or part of the back-bone of a fish" (Carnes 1970: 407).

[5]. Karanth (1992) gives a detailed description of the technical procedures used in the manufacture of beads in Cambay; these procedures have remained essentially the same for many centuries.

[6]. Carnelian beads of likely or possible Cambay origin have been found in early historic sites on the East African coast and in Western Africa as well, but none reported appear to be as large as the Newton ones or have the same shapes (e.g., Chittick 1974; 1: 236-37; 2:482; DeCorse et al. 2003; Insoll et al. 2004; Ogundiran 2002; Connah 1996-1997; Roy 2000:102-05; cf. T. Insoll, pers. comm. 2 Oct. 2006; DeCorse, pers. comm. 19 Oct. 2006). Carnelian beads of Cambay origin were apparently also used as trade goods by the Dutch in West Africa in the seventeenth century; they were considered "expensive" (A. Jones

1995: 45, 316).

[7]. In fact, David Eltis and his colleagues now estimate that 5,266 slaves disembarked at Barbados from Southeast Africa before 1722. One cannot be certain, however, how many of these enslaved Africans were actually sold on the island and were not transshipped elsewhere (David Eltis, pers. comm. 27 Sept. 2006).

[8]. Measured by Google Earth, the distance between Gujarat and Barbados is over 8,000 miles as the crow flies (M. Tuite, pers. comm. 2 Oct. 2006).

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