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Authors	Handler, Jerome S.
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Problematical Glass Artifacts from Newton Plantation Slave Cemetery, Barbados

Jerome S. Handler, The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Charlottesville, & The Center for Archaeological Investigations, Southern Illinois University [1]

In the early 1970s, archaeological research in several plantations addressed a variety of issues in the sociocultural life of early Africans and their descendants in Barbados, once England's wealthiest and most populous New World colony; this research ultimately focused on the Newton plantation slave cemetery. Over the years, the Newton research has been extensively reported, and is well known to scholars of the early African Diaspora in the Caribbean [2]. Although the 104 burials recovered from Newton represent a small percentage of the total number interred at the cemetery, there was a diverse artifactual inventory that included coffin hardware, clay pipes, pottery, metal jewelry and knives, metal and bone buttons, and many different types of glass beads. Some of these artifacts are unique to New World African descendant sites (see Handler 1997).

This paper focuses on two virtually identical small glass objects of apparent European manufacture. Each was found associated with a different burial. Although the objects were excavated in May 1973 and published in 1978 (see Handler and Lange 1978: 119-122, 306 for more details on the objects and their burial contexts), as far as I am currently aware no similar objects have been reported from other African descendant sites.

Both objects are of translucent glass that, relative to modern glass, is unusually heavy or hard; they are virtually identical in size, shape, weight, and number of facets. Roughly conical in shape, they have circular flat bases and faceted sides (Fig. 1). The facets (six in the center, 12 on the outside) are irregularly and crudely shaped. Under magnification (100x), they show no signs of grinding or chipping, and air bubbles suggest they were pressed or mold-made. The objects are very small (3.6 mm high and about 8.0 mm in diameter at the base) and light (one weighs 0.3368 grams, the other 0.3813 grams).

Figure 1: Two identical glass objects were recovered from burial contexts at Newton Plantation. (figure omitted from this online reprint)

The objects were associated with two different, albeit roughly contemporaneous, coffinless burials located relatively close to one another in the same 3-meters square excavation unit (see Handler and Lange 1978: 117-123). The burials were probably interred sometime in the 18th century.

Burial 60 was an older female. When her leg bones were removed, a 4.5 cm pipe stem section was found close to the right knee. One of the glass objects was found next to this pipe stem (see Handler and Lange 1978: 119, fig. 13). The pipe stem fragment was clearly not the pipe's original mouthpiece, and was not attached to a bowl or additional stem fragments; that is, no whole pipe was associated with Burial 60 -- as occurred in the other glass object described below. Although the Burial 60 object appears to have been closely associated with the pipe fragment, the fragment

may have been disturbed after interment; thus, the object's association with the pipe stem may have been accidental. However, the other glass object was more certainly associated with a pipe.

Burial 55 was an older male interred with two complete long-stemmed white clay pipes, dating roughly 1710-1750 (based on bore-stem diameter; median bowl date was 1705; a maker's mark suggested 1700-1740; see Handler and Lange 1978: 123, 255, 270). One of the pipes was found over the chest, the other by the pelvis; a glass object was found lying, apex down, exactly at the mouthpiece end of the pipe by the pelvis (Figs. 2 and 3; also, see Handler and Lange 1978: 120, fig. 14; 259, fig. 34). Both the pipe and glass object were apparently undisturbed since the original interment.

Figure 2: Plan indicating location of the glass object associated with Burial 55. (figure omitted)

Figure 3: In situ location of glass object, Burial 55. (figure omitted)

Although the objects were almost certainly manufactured in Europe, their original function is uncertain. European-manufactured glass beads were associated with both burials: Burial 60 had about 290 of various types around the neck, while 8 were found with Burial 55. But the glass objects were not beads; they were not perforated and were not associated with other beads.

Ivor Noel Hume (personal comm., Oct. 1975) provisionally suggested the objects may have "been from an item of paste jewelry and would have originally been backed with metallic foil or perhaps by colored paper. [They] could come from a finger ring or possibly from a shoe buckle" -- perhaps dating from the second half of the 18th century.

In January 1998, over twenty years later, several curators in the Department of Metalwork at London's Victoria and Albert Museum (Clare Phillips, pers. comm., Jan. 1998) gave the following opinion after personally examining one of the objects: "The object is clearly shaped to imitate a rosecut diamond. It is therefore of a kind found in the jewelry -- perhaps a buckle or brooch -- of the late 17th to late 18th century It is odd that no trace of a mount has survived." The curators had "no means of dating it more precisely," and "although England was famous for making glass stones for jewelry, so too was Paris." Since Barbados had such an intimate long-standing trade and colonial relationship with England/Britain, it is assumed the objects are of English/British, not French, origin.

How the enslaved at Newton originally obtained these objects is unknown, and neither burial had associated rings, shoe buckles, brooches, etc.; thus, the use of the objects was secondary. The secondary use of European-manufactured items recovered from African descendant sites is now well known in historical archaeology, and some of these artifacts may have been modified by slaves and used in their own cultural contexts, perhaps following West African patterns (cf. Handler 1997:122 and references cited therein; Orser 1994; Wilkie 1997). Although the two objects were closely associated with clay pipes (one case more certain than the other), there is no historical or archaeological evidence from Barbados or elsewhere that the objects had any functional relationship to pipes or pipe smoking. It is therefore more likely that they were placed with the burials because of their personal value to the decedents and/or had some other role in slave mortuary beliefs. However, from the early 1970s -- when the objects were excavated and

originally analyzed -- to the present, I cannot offer an explanation or suggestion for their role in slave culture: the use or meaning of these objects among Barbadian slaves remains problematical.

I bring these objects to the attention of this Newsletter's readership in the hope that someday similar objects may be found at other archaeological sites or contexts; perhaps with a wider data base we will be able to resolve another small enigma in the lives of early Africans and their descendants in the Americas.

Notes

[1]: A version of this paper was presented at the 1998 SHA meeting in Atlanta. In the 1970s, Frederick Lange played a crucial role in the archaeological research strategies and data interpretation while Crawford Blakeman and Robert Riordan actually excavated the objects discussed here; I rely on their field notes for descriptive materials on the objects in situ. Jen Ho Fang (X-Ray and Optics Laboratory, Southern Illinois University), using a refractive index determination, initially identified the glass composition and weighed the objects, and John Richardson (Office of Scientific Photography, Southern Illinois University) provided additional details through microscopic analysis. I am also grateful to Clare Phillips, Richard Edgcumbe, Anthony North, and Tessa Murdoch of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London for their assistance in identification. One of the objects is in the Barbados Museum (with other Newton artifacts); the other is in my possession, pending further investigation, and subsequent delivery to the Museum.

[2]: Principally, Handler and Lange 1978; more recent publications, which cite many of the earlier ones in archaeology, history, and bioanthropology, include Handler 1996, 1997.

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