FRIT-CORE BEADS: AN UPDATE

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This article reports a new style type of frit-core bead from a South American context and summarizes the nine types recorded to date. It also discusses modern African copies of one of the types.

THE NEW TYPE

The inventory of frit-core bead types continues to grow. The latest addition, designated Type 9, was found on a strand of faceted seven-layer chevron beads obtained from a geologist working in Colombia in 1995 (Marie-José Opper 2020: pers. comm.). It is oblong, 10 mm in length, and represented by two specimens. Unlike the other frit-core types, the outer layer is black instead of deep blue, possibly from weathering. Four rounded ridges run the length of the bead. The areas between these bow out slightly and have a raised white stripe running along them (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Type 9 frit-core beads from South America (photos: Marie-José Opper).

SUMMARY OF THE FRIT-CORE BEAD TYPES

Since descriptions of the various types are now dispersed over four articles including Karklins (2016, 2019) and Karklins and Bonneau (2018), a summary is provided here. The body of the beads is generally a dark navy blue color, though that of Type 9 is black. All the decorative elements are white with the exception of those on Types 6 and 8. There are, however, scarce variants where the body and raised decoration are dark blue with the low areas covered with off-white glaze. These beads are identified by the letter A appended to the type number (e.g., Type 4A). All have ovoid shapes except for Type 6 which is round (Figure 2).

Type 1. A loop with six dots around a single dot in its center is situated on opposite sides of the bead. The space between the two loops contains a longitudinal row of four to five dots on either side.

Type 2. This type exhibits three, four, or six longitudinal stripes between each pair of which is a row of three to five dots.

Type 3. No decoration.

Type 4. A configuration of six "petals" encircles either end of the perforation; a line encircles the middle. There are examples where the surface is covered with white glaze and the design elements are blue (Type 4A).

Type 5. There are three or more longitudinal stripes, between each pair of which is a configuration of five to six dots around a single dot with a short stripe at either opening of the perforation. As with the previous type, there are examples where the color scheme is reversed (Type 5A).

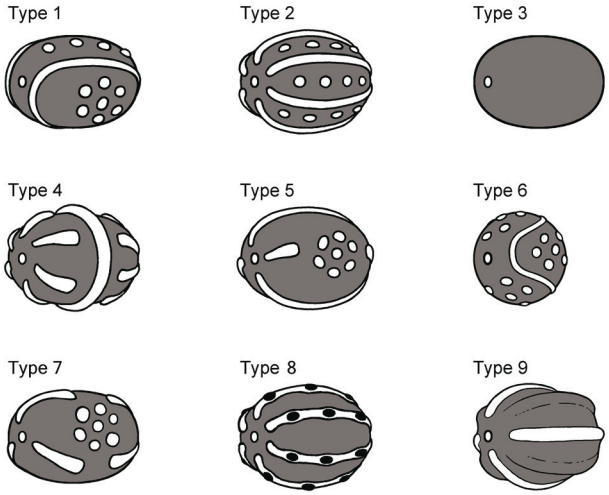

Figure 2. The frit-core bead types (drawing: Dorothea Larsen).

Type 6. An undulating white line encircles the bead. In each of the four undulations is a floral design composed of six light blue dots around a yellow dot.

Type 7. This type exhibits three or five short, longitudinal, petal-like stripes around either end. Three rosettes composed of six dots around a central dot encircle the middle.

Type 8. There are two variations. One, with a unique indigo hue, exhibits six longitudinal, slightly raised white stripes, each of which is decorated with three blue dots. On the other, the six stripes are represented by raised ridges which exhibit four white dots.

Type 9. This type has four rounded longitudinal ridges. The areas between the ridges bow out slightly and have a raised stripe running from end to end.

The core temporal range for frit-core beads is 1560-1610 at archaeological sites in northeastern North America (Karklins 2016:64), but two specimens have been recovered from much later contexts, the Seneca Power House (1640-1655) and Marsh (1650-1670) sites in New York state (Karklins 2019:75). In these cases, it is likely that they are heirloom beads.

MODERN AFRICAN IMITATIONS

Earlier this year, several members of the Bead Collector Network (http://beadcollector.net/) informed me of a number of Type 6 beads obtained from traders in several parts of West Africa over the past few decades. While some appear to have some age to them (Figure 3),

> Under the microscope, the "black" glass is revealed to be a finely ground mix of bright blue and beer bottle brown. The stripes and dots are "painted on" fused yellow and white powder glass. I say "painted on" because this powder glass does not resemble the stuff from Ghana? ... I still think they're Kiffa beads, based upon manufacture technique and what strikes me as a feminine design (Prussing 2008).

Figure 3. Modern African copies of Type 6 frit-core beads. These were likely made prior to the 1950s (photo: Chris Prussing).

Other examples are bright, shiny, and obviously quite modern (Figure 4). Jürgen Bush (2020: pers. comm.), a long-time student of Mauritanian powdered-glass beads, examined images of the various beads and opined that some of them are "certainly pre-1950 or older" (Figure 3) and while they are of "Unusual irregular-round shapes. Unusual colors! Unusual designs, [they are] still definitely Mauritanian Muraqat." Thomas Stricker (2020: pers. comm.), an expert on Mauritania Kiffa beads, agrees.

Figure 4. Recent (21st century ?) Type 6 imitations collected in Cotonou, Benin, in 2014 (photo: Hans van der Storm).

Certainly the cores of some of the beads consist of a compact gray mass (Figure 5, top) similar to that observed on broken Kiffa beads (Figure 5, bottom), although some others have black granular cores (Figure 6). A number of beads exhibit bubbling or burned spots (Figure 6), having been overheated during the production process. This suggests they were made by artisans not well versed in beadmaking, possibly those at the Cooperative Nasser in

Figure 5. Modern Type 6 imitations with compact gray cores (top) (photo: Thomas Stricker) and the core of a traditional Kiffa bead (bottom) (photo: Karlis Karklins).

Kiffa which revived powder-glass beadmaking there around 1992 (Jürgen Busch 2020: pers. comm.). The Oppers (1993:43) report that the new beads "are markedly different in appearance from the older ones, indicating the use of less-perfected techniques by beadmakers whose experience is not as profound as their predecessors."

The beads are all a dark blue color and the form of the applied decoration matches that of the early Type 6 frit-core bead recovered from excavations in Rouen, France (Karklins and Bonneau 2019), which has a white undulating line around the middle and a floral pattern of six light blue dots around a central yellow dot in each of the four undulations (Figure 7). In the case of the modern beads, only one is an exact match while all the others have white dots around the yellow one (Figure 4, bottom).

Figure 6. Imitation Type 6 bead exhibiting bubbling and a burned spot, having been overheated during the production process. The unusual black core is clearly visible (photo: Hans van der Storm).

Where the inspiration to produce this stylistic variant came from is a bit of a mystery in that, to my knowledge, there was no published image of a Type 6 bead until 2019 when the Rouen specimen was described and illustrated in vol. 31 of this journal (Karklins and Bonneau 2019). The bulk of the modern beads examined for this study were collected before the turn of the century. One possibility is that someone saw the Rouen bead at the Musée des Antiquités and passed the description on to Mauritanian artisans. The modern beads are 14-18 mm in diameter and 11-16 mm in length (Hans van der Storm and Thomas Stricker 2020: pers. comm.). This matches well with the Rouen specimen which is 16.8 mm in diameter and 13.8 in length. The one measurable Type 6 frit-core bead from a North American site is 9 mm in both diameter and length (Karklins and Bonneau 2019).

Figure 7. The Type 6 frit-core bead from Rouen, France, attributed to the early 17th century (© Musée-Métropole-Rouen-Normandie; Cliché Yohann Deslandes).

The majority of the imitations are round but there is one dumbell-shaped example (Figure 8). Whether this is an intentional form or represents two beads accidently fused together during firing remains undetermined.

It is interesting to note that no copies of the other eight frit-core bead styles have been encountered... so far.

Figure 8. Dumbell-shaped Type 6 imitation from the Ivory Coast (photo: John Picard).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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