

TWENTY YEARS OF THE BEAD FORUM: NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF BEAD RESEARCHERS (1982-2002)

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The Bead Forum: Newsletter of the Society of Bead Researchers was initiated in 1982 by Peter Francis, Jr., to facilitate communication between bead researchers. Over the years it has provided news about the society, announcements of relevant exhibitions, conferences, and recent publications, requests for information, memorials, and short articles and news items on various aspects of bead research. The two latter contain much useful information that is, unfortunately, not readily available to many researchers who do not own the set or have forgotten what is in the earlier issues. Furthermore, few libraries and museums have full sets in their collections. To resolve this situation, a broad selection of the articles and other items that appeared in the first forty issues are reprinted in this volume of *Beads* where they will be readily available in a more permanent format. While some of the material is dated, it is nevertheless interesting from a historical research perspective. Obsolete contact information has been deleted from some items and updated information has been added to others.

The articles are arranged by author (the author's name is appended to the title) with each author's articles in chronological sequence. The original date, issue number, and page numbers of each article appear after the author's name. A subject index is provided at the back of this issue.

1. PUMTEK—AN INTRODUCTORY REPORT UPON AN UNUSUAL CLASS OF DECORATED STONE BEADS, by Jamey D. Allen (1986, 9:6-13)

The so-called “etched,” “bleached,” or “decorated” stone beads of antiquity and more recent times are intriguing on many levels. Not only are they esthetically pleasing, with a diversity of forms and intricate patterns (Fig. 1), but they also have a sophisticated manufacturing sequence which was devised in very early times, but is not yet entirely understood even today. Interest is also stimulated by the consideration of their occurrence through a long period of time, and by distinctive sub-types that exist over a wide physical area of

southern Asia. These sub-types are remarkably different from one another, yet are obviously related by their decorative developments and their technology. Decorated agate beads have received much attention in the archaeological and popular literature (Beck 1933; Dikshit 1949; Ebbinghouse and Winsten 1982; Francis 1980; Liu 1980), in an effort to describe and classify their development and technology. However, considerable misunderstanding and/or disagreement exists among researchers (Allen 1982, 1983; Ebbinghouse 1982, 1983; Ebbinghouse and Winsten 1982; Francis 1982), pointing to a very real need for information and hard research. As is usual with beads, there are more questions (and speculations) than answers.

The purpose of this short paper is not to further this discussion, but rather to introduce a class of decorated stone beads which heretofore has been almost wholly unknown within the circle of modern bead research. These beads (Pl. IA top), collectively called *pumtek* (pronounced “poom-check”) became available on the bead market, out of India, about two or three years ago. They derive from several tribal groups living in the frontier area of northeast India and western Burma, and, until quite recent times, were apparently an important part of native costume, and rank or personal prestige. Pumtek beads were first seen only a few at a time, as components within necklaces of other sorts of beads; and this suggested that—like “etched” agates—they were possibly rather scarce and highly valued. However, in a short time, it became possible to acquire whole strands of pumtek beads. These structured necklaces commonly had ca. 60 to 100 beads, arranged in (we may assume) traditionally or locally favored conventionalized sequences—such that in a group of as many as 200 strands, the arrangements were more alike than different (personal observation). This changed the outlook on pumtek beads considerably. It became obvious that they were not rare or unusual—at least to the groups possessing them prior to mass-collection by enterprising bead merchants. Most recently, the supply of pumtek beads seems to be waning. Currently, strands of pumteks now contain filler beads (mostly what appears to be common

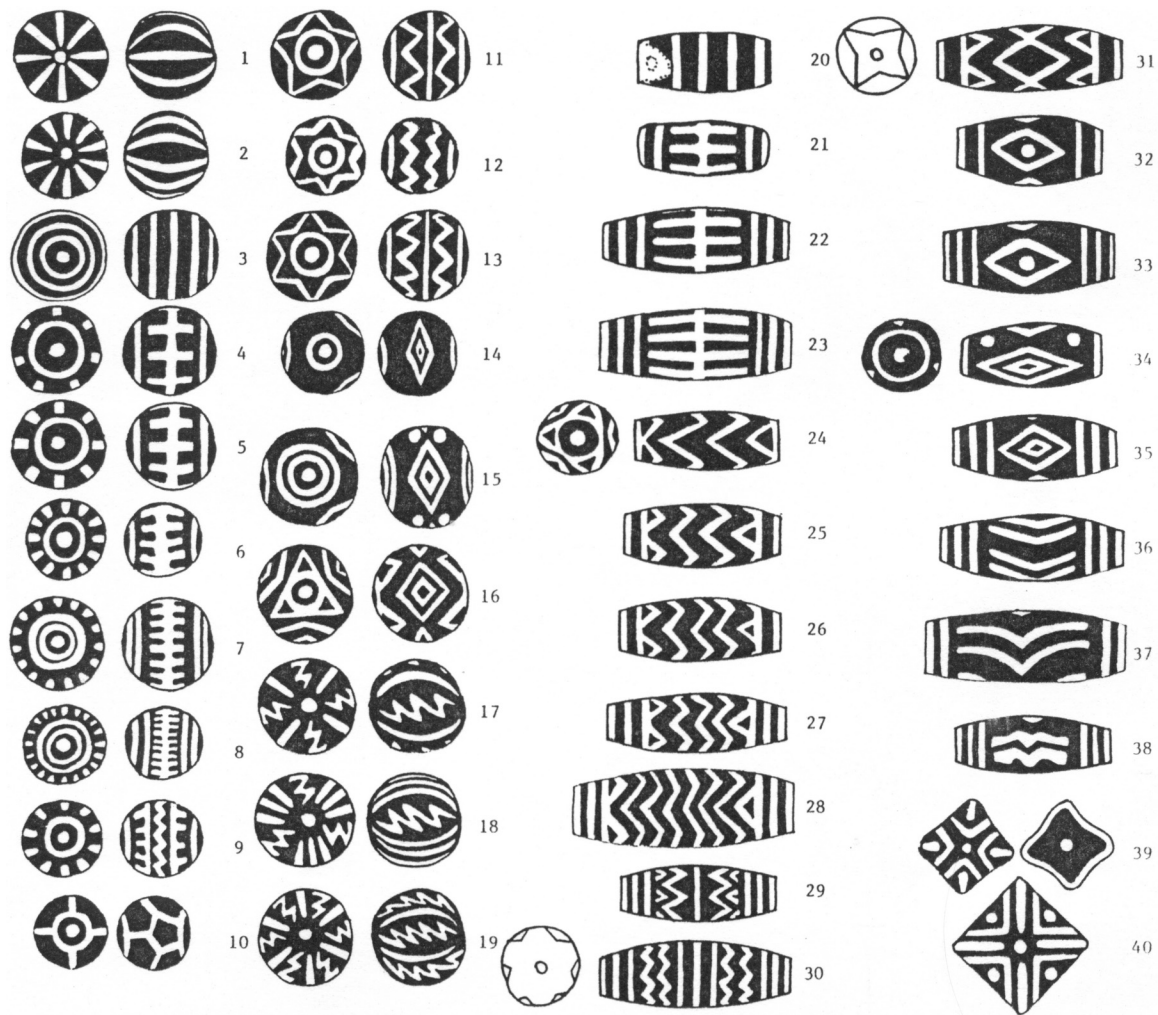


Figure 1. Forty varieties of pumtek beads from Mizoram, India (drawing: Jamey Allen).

palm or bamboo wood), and prices are rising even for these. It is likely that this class of beads has seen mass-collection from original users, and dispersion to foreign bead collectors in a remarkably short period of time. It behooves serious bead researchers to garner and report whatever information can be collected, while and if it is still possible.

The sudden appearance of pumtek beads has created the need for a line of questioning regarding their relationship to other decorated stone beads. They share many features in common with “etched” agate beads (or, they appear to); yet there are distinctive differences as well. The most striking difference is that pumteks are not chalcedony or agate (like “etched” beads). They are made from non-precious opalized wood (quite common in many parts of the world, and certainly available in northeast India [Kenoyer 1985: pers. comm.]). It has been suggested that the wood derived from palm trees (Carlsson 1984: pers. comm.), but there is not universal agreement that all pumtek beads are of fossil

palm wood. The material is light brown in color, usually with a “dotted-looking” sort of grain in cross section, or a “line grain” longitudinally (Pl. IA bottom). The grain may be masked by the decorations, or may show through somewhat. Pumtek beads have been submitted to treatments that provide a line decoration on a dark background. The line patterns range from a strong opaque white, to more creamy and yellowish or brownish (and sometimes less distinct) colors. The dark background ranges from brown to black, and is sometimes more pale or blotchy in less well-made specimens. Pumtek beads have been favorably compared to Tibetan dZi beads, due to some resemblance in terms of shape and decoration motifs—as well as the place of these beads in the personal belief systems of the persons who owned and used them. However, the popular conception of pumteks as “a sort of dZi bead” is probably incorrect, or misleading at best. It has been easy to assume that pumtek beads have been “etched” like other agate beads, due to

the similarity of their appearance; but this is perhaps a hasty conclusion. (It is a “can of worms” to use terms like “etched” and “bleached,” since many researchers disagree about the meaning and usefulness of these terms, and I will use my preferred term “decorated” in most instances.) We cannot rule out the possibility of other methods having been used to create pumtek beads; and I hesitate to classify them as “etched” until their technology is better understood. It has been brought to my attention (Ebbinghouse 1985: pers. comm.) that opal is a material that will not withstand the sort of firing that is usual with decorated agate beads. This certainly implies that pumtek beads result from a different process than typical “etching.” The dark coloration may result from “caramelization” (Allen 1982); but, since a heating process is usually required (unless acids are used), it is not possible to determine.

I have had the opportunity to examine several hundred strands of pumtek beads, most on their original strings, in correct arrangement. I became so interested in them that I acquired several strands myself, and have continued to collect data on form and decoration. I have had much correspondence with David Ebbinghouse, who is also working with these beads, and will present a full report for publication in the near future. In the meantime, I offer the above information as an introduction to pumtek beads, and would like to present a selection of the pattern variations I have recorded thus far. The illustration (Fig. 1) I have supplied is culled from my correspondence with Ebbinghouse, and may often represent less common variations, rather than typical beads (as I do not wish to overlap or infringe upon Ebbinghouse’s publication priority). However, my drawing presents a fairly good rundown of basic design motifs and permutations, and ought to give the reader a good general view of the appearance of pumtek beads. For instance, the most common design on spheroidal or oblate beads is that of longitudinal lines. There are usually 6 or occasionally 12 lines on a bead. My examples here (Nos. 1 and 2), are less common beads that display 8 and 10 lines, respectively. The spheroidal beads (Nos. 1 to 19) are shown in cross-section (on the left) and in horizontal axis (on the right). The cross-section has been omitted from most of the long barrel-shaped beads (Nos. 20 to 38), except to show the number of design element repetitions in some instances. The “diamond-tabular” shape (Nos. 39 and 40) is the least common variety of pumtek bead, but a few of these occur in many structured necklaces (example 39 is shown front and back—not with a cross-section). As these drawings were produced free hand, over a period of time, they are not all to the same scale. However, in a general sort of way, their size relationship is evident. The smallest spheroidal bead (No. 10) is 11 mm in diameter, while the largest (No. 15) is 18 mm in diameter. The smallest tapered barrel bead (No.

20) is 7 mm in diameter, and 15 mm long. The largest (No. 28) is 10 mm in diameter, and 30 mm long. The smallest diamond-tabular bead (No. 39) is 20 mm long, while larger ones range up to ca. 30 mm in length. These are the general size ranges.

As a rule, pumtek beads are fairly well made. The external shape has good form and proportion. They are usually well drilled (from both ends, meeting in the center), and do not have a great tendency for an internal constriction that makes stringing difficult (with some exceptions). The technique of their decoration is fairly variable, ranging from quite good to somewhat poor (good is reckoned as having strong white lines on a uniformly dark background, while poor means that lines are indistinct or discolored and/or backgrounds are pale and blotchy). Some strands of beads are extremely dark in appearance—probably due to being hung within the home, near an open fire. The soot deposit that accumulates is practically impossible to remove.

It is tempting to speculate regarding the inspiration, origin, and age of pumtek beads. However, very little of a tangible nature is known for sure. Certainly, they have been mentioned in the writings of previous ethnographers (Head 1917; Lehman 1963; Parry 1932), so it is possible to know some of the tribal groups that have possessed them, names of individual types, favored arrangements (pictured in photographs and drawings), and some folkloric beliefs.

Some pumtek patterns are identical to beads which Beck (1933:Pl. LXXI) determined to be “Middle Period” etched agate beads (dating from ca. 300 B.C. to A.D. 200), and several more are quite similar. This may suggest that pumteks were inspired by Middle Period etched agates—though they need not be as early in production. However, at least one of my correspondents believes them to be “ancient”—possibly reclaimed from earlier graves by current peoples in India and/or Burma. Let us hope that future research brings more information to light.

Acknowledgements

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2. THE NORDIC GLASS BEAD SEMINAR: A REVIEW, by Jamey D. Allen (1993, 23:4-10)

The Nordic Glass Bead Seminar was a three-day event held just outside the town of Lejre, west of Copenhagen, Denmark, from October 16th to 18th, 1992. The event was sponsored by The Historical-Archaeological Experimental Centre—a private institution with the goal of conducting practical experiments to explore, reconstruct, and explain the crafts, buildings, and physical conditions of the past. The centre is located on a large tract of beautiful, unspoiled land, and features a reconstructed Iron Age village, complete with domestic and farm-use buildings, agricultural fields, and

workshops for weaving and pottery, as well as an iron forge. In addition, the grounds feature a cultic dance labyrinth, a sacrificial bog, and megalithic tomb (all constructed in areas of great beauty, with thought given to the nature of such Stone Age monuments).

In all, 18 papers or presentations were given, and some 36 participants attended—many of whom were from the European archaeological community. This reviewer was the only American in attendance, and was quite grateful that all papers were given in English. In most respects, the Seminar was conducted as an archaeological conference, and seemed very similar to the various bead conferences that have been held in America during the past ten years. However, this was the first opportunity that European researchers have ever had to gather together for the purpose of sharing information about bead studies.

The theme of the seminar was to consider the occurrence of glass beads that were prevalent during the Viking Era in Scandinavia (from ca. A.D. 700 to 1100), although papers were given that concerned earlier and later beads, and beads from outside Scandinavia proper. Some of the highlights will be mentioned below.

The seminar was opened by Morten Meldgaard, director of the centre, who introduced Ulf Nasman, a Danish archaeologist from Aarhus University. Dr. Nasman gave an introductory talk related to the general topic of why it is helpful and necessary to study beads—but with the concern that possibly it might not be a good idea to accomplish this apart from traditional archaeology. He expressed the opinion that he was not entirely in favor of conferences that segregated beads from other artifacts in archaeological assemblages, though he welcomed the opportunity to perform such an experiment, and was pleased to be in the company of his interested peers.

Dr. Johan Callmer, the author of *Trade Beads and Bead Trade in Scandinavia, ca. 800 - 1100 A.D.*, was introduced as the moderator of the first-day program, and first presenter. He spoke on the subject of the inundation of oriental beads into Scandinavia in the 8th century. Dr. Callmer is regarded as the father of Scandinavian bead studies (particularly because of his well-researched and thorough dissertation, named above), and led the session with authority and with the respect of those in attendance. In his talk, he discussed the proposition that beads provide data for five points of archaeological interest: 1) beads are chronologically significant and crucial; 2) they are technological indicators, and indicate both technological diffusion and cultural preference; 3) they provide socio-economic considerations; 4) within grave finds they are a “display of wealth,” and had magical functions; and 5) they indicate exchange and trade