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Clay Pipe-Stem Beads in North America

Karlis Karklins

Beads fashioned from the stems of clay tobacco pipes have been found at a number of archaeological sites, principally in the Northeast. This practice appears to have begun in the early 17th century and continued until at least the beginning of the 19th century. Although stem fragments are ideally suited for stringing and have the appearance of tubular shell beads, beads fashioned from them are relatively scarce, possibly because researchers do not recognize them. To qualify as a bead, a pipe stem must exhibit clear evidence of intentional modification of the ends and/or show use wear at the extremities. Surface alteration not related to smoking is another indicator.

Des perles façonnées à partir de tuyaux de pipes en terre cuite ont été trouvées dans un certain nombre de sites archéologiques, principalement dans le Nord-Est américain. Cette pratique semble avoir débuté au début du 17e siècle et continué au moins jusqu'au début du 19e siècle. Bien que les fragments de tuyaux de pipe soient parfaitement adaptés pour l'enfilage et qu'ils ont l'aspect de perles tubulaires en coquillage, les perles fabriquées de cette façon sont relativement rares, possiblement parce que les chercheurs ne les reconnaissent pas. Pour être considéré comme une perle, un tuyau de pipe doit présenter une preuve claire de modification intentionnelle des extrémités et/ou montrer des traces d'usure aux extrémités. Les altérations de surface qui ne sont pas liées au tabagisme sont aussi d'autres indicateurs.

Introduction

During the historical period, millions of European clay tobacco pipes were shipped to North America, where they were smoked by both aboriginal and European American individuals until they became fouled or broke. The pipes were then discarded, but some clever individuals did find various uses for the stems, such as notching them to form whistles or heating them to curl hair (Karklins 2015: 12). As tubular objects ideal for stringing, another application was to fashion them, with varying degrees of modification, into beads or hair pipes. Though not as prevalent as one might expect, the practice was rather wide ranging, especially in the Northeast.

Clay Pipe-Stem Bead Finds

While several hundred articles and monographs were surveyed for this project, pipe stems that appeared to have been altered to function as beads were only identified at 13 sites.

The largest number of pipe-stem beads so far recorded accompanied an adult male aboriginal burial attributed to the 17th century, discovered at Burial Point, Montauk, Long Island, New York, in 1928. The deceased wore a necklace composed of 48 goose-head-shaped beads fashioned from purple quahog shell. The beads were 25 mm long and 3 mm in diameter,

with a 1 mm diameter hole. Intermingled with these were 255 beads, each measuring 25 mm in length, “a part of them worked down from kaolin trade pipe stems.” Also fashioned from pipe stems were 300 beads, each 13 mm in length, with large bores, and 35 longer beads each up to 150 mm in length, “part of them unfinished on one end—otherwise, pipe-stem bead stock from the outer end of the stems” (Lathar 1957: 5).

Carlyle S. Smith (1950: 116) reports the presence of a single kaolin pipe stem reworked into a bead at both Fort Corchaug, an aboriginal settlement on Long Island, New York, occupied during the mid-17th century, and at Fort Shantok, a Mohegan settlement in Connecticut inhabited from 1636 to 1682.

Excavations at Fort Orange, the 17th-century Dutch trading center that grew into Albany, New York, yielded two pipe-stem beads. They are 19–21 mm long and have rounded ends. That they likely functioned as ornaments is supported by their association with a number of glass beads and wampum. They are attributed to the period ca. 1640–1664 (Huey 1988: 293–294, 508–509, 516).

Dating to about the same period, “a long white bead made from the broken stem of a trade pipe” was found at the Mohawk village of Gandawague, west of Auries Creek in east central New York (Hartley 1943).

Another two beads were excavated at a site near Schoharie Creek, south of Middleburgh,

New York. The site is believed to be either a Mohawk village or possibly a fort built by Sir William Johnson in 1756. Illustrated in a newspaper article, one of the beads is oblong and appears to have rounded ends. The other is roughly globular in form (Ginsburg 1983: 6).

To the south, a single "kaolin pipestem beveled at both ends," which likely served as a bead, was uncovered at Chota-Tanasee, an 18th-century Overhill Cherokee town in eastern Tennessee (Newman 1977: 98).

Moving north to Canada, among the artifacts recovered from Beothuk houses at Boyd's Cove on the north shore of Newfoundland were eight "beads manufactured from pipe stems." They date to the period ca. 1650–1720 (Pastore 1984: 331).

What appears to be a pipe-stem bead was uncovered at the La Ronde fur-trading post (ca. 1795–1821) in North Bay, Ontario. Measuring 31.2 mm in length and 8.3 mm in diameter, the object has rounded ends and a smooth glossy surface (Barnes 1997).

Definite pipe-stem beads were excavated at the northern Alberta site of Nottingham House, a Hudson's Bay Company post that operated in competition with the North West Company's Fort Chipewyan at the west end of Lake Athabasca from 1802 to 1806 (Karklins 1983: 89–90). The 8 specimens, out of a total of 200 stems, are 11.5–56.0 mm (28.0 mm median) long and 5.2–7.9 mm (6.3 mm median) in diameter. All but one exhibit longitudinal cut marks on the surface. These marks either run the full length of the bead (four specimens; FIG. 1*a–d*), cover all but the approximate middle where there is a very slight bulge (two specimens; FIG. 1*e–f*), or are scattered over the surface (one specimen; FIG. 1*g*). The ends of four beads range from slightly to well smoothed as a result of grinding or use (FIG. 1*a–b, e, g*), while another three have only one smoothed end (FIG. 1*c–d, f*). The remaining specimen consists of an original mouthpiece that has been snapped from the pipe through an incised ring groove (FIG. 1*h*). Two of the specimens have chewed ends, having once served as mouthpieces (FIG. 1*e–f*).

Located in east central Alberta, Fort George, a North West Company post in operation from 1792 to ca. 1800, produced ten pipe stems that had been ringed and snapped at both ends, "possibly for use as beads or hair pipes." Another 70 specimens were so treated at just

one end. Three of these had one smoothed end (Kidd 1970: 153), intimating their use as beads.

A 21 mm long pipe stem, attributable to the late 19th century, was surface collected at the T'ukw'aa site on Barclay Sound, British Columbia. Tentatively identified as a bead, the object has very rounded contours (Sellers 2013: 101, 133), suggesting that the rounding is the result of wave action. This, of course, does not negate its possible use as a bead by someone who found it and decided to use it for that purpose.

Not all pipe-stem beads were fashioned from white clay pipes. The Ruth Moore site on the coast of Maine produced a short red-ware pipe-stem segment of a size and shape similar to the discoidal shell beads also found there and may have served a like purpose. About 7.5 mm in diameter, the bead is attributed to the mid-17th century (Abbe Museum 1994). So far, this is the only example of a red-ware pipe-stem bead found to date.

Forming beads from pipe-stem fragments was also practiced during the prehistoric period. Excavations at the MacLeod site, a Late Ontario Iroquois site in Oshawa, Ontario, produced 418 ceramic pipe-stem fragments, 3 of which had been "ground into beads" (Reed 1990: 54).

Discussion

The majority of the pipe-stem beads were encountered at sites in the Northeast, appearing sporadically along the coast from northern Newfoundland to southeastern New York, and then inland in east central New York State. Farther inland, a possible bead was found in southeastern Ontario. Most of the sites were occupied during the 17th century; two saw use in the early to mid-18th century. The Ontario specimen dates to the late 18th to mid-19th centuries.

Find sites in other regions were scarce. A single bead from an 18th-century context was excavated in Tennessee. A proportionately large number of pipe-stem beads were found at two fur-trade posts in Alberta occupied at the turn of the 19th century. The westernmost find was in southern British Columbia. Attributed to the late 19th century, this specimen may well be a stem rounded naturally.

Without exception, all the beads were found at aboriginal habitation sites and fur-trade posts. Based on the finds, fashioning pipe

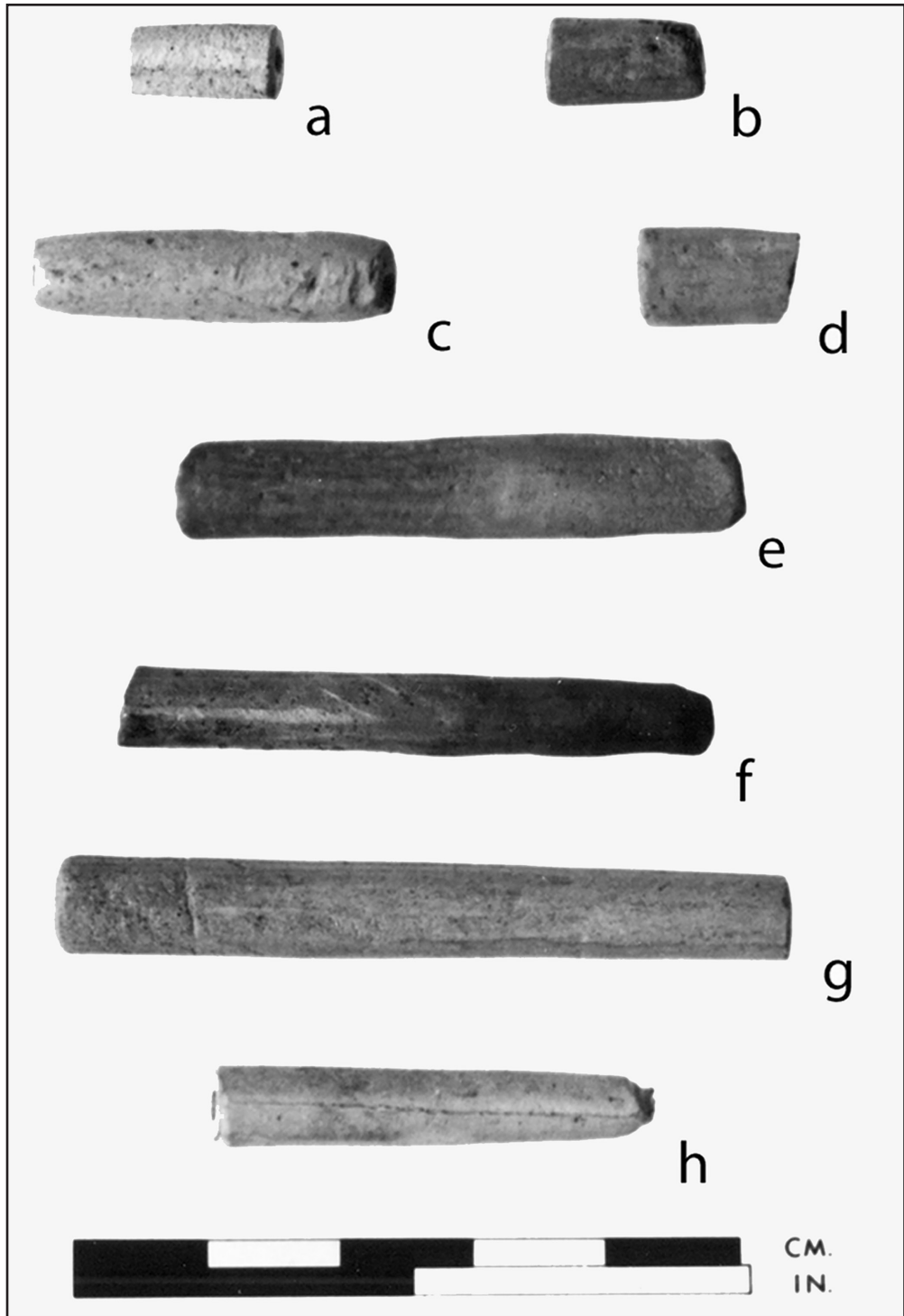


Figure 1. Pipe-stem beads recovered from Nottingham House, a Hudson's Bay Company post that operated from 1802 to 1806. (Photo by Rock Chan, 1977.)

stems into beads appears to have begun in the early 17th century and continued until at least the beginning of the 19th century. The alteration of pipe stems into beads follows a common pattern of object repurposing in these cultural contexts, especially during the 17th and 18th centuries (Karklins 1992, 2015). While the pipe stems had the appearance of the white shell beads that were popular in the Northeast during that period, their scarcity suggests that they were definitely not considered on a par with them.

Of the 13 sites that produced pipe-stem beads, only at one—the Montauk burial—were they found as components of necklaces or other strung adornments. All the other specimens came from nondiagnostic contexts, so it is impossible to state unequivocally that they actually served as beads, though the likelihood is that they did. The problem is compounded by the fact that several reports lack details about which features of the stems led to their identification as beads.

It is difficult to say much about the size range of the beads, since few of the reports provide this information. Based on what is recorded, the beads attributed to the 17th century range from 13 mm to 150 mm in length, though most fall in the 13–25 mm (0.5–1.0 in.) range. This is in keeping with some of the long, tubular shell beads produced by the indigenous peoples of the Eastern Woodlands during this period; see e.g., Sempowski and Saunders (2001). The beads from contexts dating to the late 18th and 19th centuries were 11.5–56 mm in length and 5.2–7.9 mm in diameter. These are similar to the large wampum beads produced, beginning in the late 18th century, by the Campbell brothers in New Jersey, which were 13–25 mm long (Keagle 2013: 226). The similarities in size and form bolster the belief that the pipe stems were used or intended to be used as beads.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this article will inspire researchers to examine their pipe finds more closely to see whether some have been modified into beads or hair pipes. They are most likely to be encountered in material recovered from aboriginal sites and fur-trade establishments, especially those occupied

during the 17th and 18th centuries. Other likely contexts would be frontier homes and places where pipe-stem beads might be produced for the amusement of children.

Unless they are found in a definitive context, such as at the neck or breast of a burial, identifying beads fashioned from clay pipe stems in an archaeological assemblage can be difficult. Stems that were at or near the surface of the ground in heavy traffic areas or subjected to water action or frost heave in the ground may exhibit rounding of the ends to some degree, which may be misidentified as intentional grinding. The surfaces of such stems are usually also much abraded, however, and this should help weed out naturally rounded stems. Of course, some stems may have been used without any preparation of the ends whatsoever, but, if they were strung together, there should be some use wear on them.

Another characteristic that should help identify pipe-stem beads is surface alteration, as seen on most of the Nottingham House specimens. Keep in mind, however, that the owner of a pipe with a broken stem sometimes whittled the end down for a more comfortable fit between the teeth or to allow it to be slipped into a reed or wooden stem. If this piece broke off, in turn, and ended up in an archaeological assemblage, it might be interpreted as a bead. If such a piece is found, the ends should be checked to see whether one or both have been rounded. If they were, the likelihood is that the object was intended to be a bead.

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After 32 years with the Federal Archaeology Office, National Historic Sites Directorate, Parks Canada, Ottawa, Karlis Karklins retired as Head of the Material Culture Research Section in 2002. Since then he has continued research on various artifact categories, but with emphasis on beads, their production, classification, dating, and sourcing. He also has a major interest in the beadwork produced by the indigenous peoples of eastern North American, especially that of the Six-Nations Iroquois. In 1989, he initiated *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* which continues to publish peer-reviewed articles on various aspects of research on beads and beadwork. Karklins has published many articles and several books, including two bibliographies on glass trade beads and *Trade Ornament Usage among the Native Peoples of Canada*. He is also the compiler of “Researching the World’s Beads: An Annotated Bibliography” which may be viewed on the Society of Bead Researcher’s website.

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