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Randall T. Milliken and Al W. Schwitilla: California and Great Basin Olivella Shell Bead Guide

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REVIEWS

California and Great Basin Olivella Shell Bead Guide

Randall T. Milliken and Al W. Schwitilla
Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc. 2012,
viii+80 pp., \$64.95

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Beads are one of the most ubiquitous kinds of artifacts in California and also one of the more challenging to classify accurately. Beads inform us about exchange, wealth, status, and social identity, and are one of the most chronologically sensitive artifact types in California. It is imperative that we identify them systematically, using standardized measurements and criteria. This short, well-illustrated book serves as an excellent guide to Olivella bead classification and should be on the shelf of every California archaeologist. It was not born from a void, but is based on decades of research.

We are indebted to the early bead researchers in California, especially James Bennyhoff, for spending endless hours analyzing burial lots, and—through the use of seriation—creating detailed sequences of beads, ornaments, and other artifacts for many parts of central California. Bennyhoff relied on the work of Jeremiah Lilliard, Robert Heizer, and Frank Fenenga, who published the first typology of shell beads in 1939. In 1947, Edward Gifford refined their descriptions and chronologies of beads and other shell artifacts. Eventually, Bennyhoff and Richard Hughes (1987), after years of research, published a new shell-bead classification system that became the gold standard for shell-bead identification and research, especially in central California and the Great Basin. In southern California, Chester King, who was mentored by Bennyhoff, analyzed burial lots of shell beads, ornaments, and other artifacts from the Santa Barbara Channel in his 1982 dissertation. This became a major resource for shell bead classification, especially after it was updated in 1990. More recently, Robert Gibson (1992) published an article that focuses primarily on shell beads from

south-central California, and provides details on how to distinguish different types of beads. Both King and Gibson discuss beads and ornaments made from other materials, including stone, bone, clam, mussel, abalone, cowry, and limpets. It is important to remember that more than 21 species of shellfish were used for beads in the state. The most recent key publication on Olivella shell beads is an article by Randall Groza, Jeffrey Rosenthal, John Southon, and Randall Milliken (2011); it is significant because the authors provide a more recent version of Scheme D with a total of 140 AMS dates, versus the 103 that are in Milliken and Schwitilla. These new data have resulted in some minor differences in dates for particular periods. Whenever I undertake any analysis of beads, I always have copies of Bennyhoff and Hughes (1987)—who provide details on the distribution of Olivella bead types, in addition to other important information—King (1990), and Gibson (1992) at my side, among various other reports and publications. I now add Randall Milliken and Al Schwitilla's shell bead guide to that list; it is a significant and useful addition to the current major publications on the subject.

This new book differs from the others in that it is more of a hands-on guide, with beautiful color images of bead types, usually from at least two views. Milliken and Schwitilla's classification system relies on that used by Bennyhoff and Hughes (1987), with significant updates, particularly with regard to chronology. A major update involves the use of the new "Dating Scheme D," which is based on AMS dates of 103 Olivella shell beads. This new scheme has shifted some of the dates up to 200 years in time. A table in the book compares Dating Scheme D with Scheme B1, the one used by Bennyhoff and Hughes.

For those who can afford it, the book also has a useful shell bead replica set made by Al Schwitilla, which is a significant resource that was previously unavailable. All of the major Olivella bead types found in California and the Great Basin over the last 10,000 years, especially in central California, are in this set of 154 polymer replicated beads. This collection represents a considerable effort, and it is helpful for both scholars who are new to shell bead analysis and to more experienced analysts. The book starts out with a brief section on

the history and purpose of the replica set (written by Schwitilla), followed by the bulk of the book (written by Milliken), which basically presents the typology, with some commentary. Although the book is intended as an accompaniment to the replica set, it certainly stands on its own.

In the main section, Milliken describes Olivella shell bead categories in terms of attributes and statistical indices of measurements, the latter of which provide even greater rigor in comparison to previous publications. After a brief discussion of differences between Olivella species, Milliken presents the different classes and types of shell beads. There are color photographs of the beads along with their descriptions, followed by sections on temporal significance and bead types that are similar; the latter is especially helpful for the identification of beads that might fall into two or more categories. The authors warn the reader when there are significant chronological differences between different regions. Nevertheless, the focus is on central California, as it was in Bennyhoff and Hughes (1987). The photographs, the systematic descriptions of beads, and the clear layout of the book are especially handy when searching for any given class or type. The book is a comprehensive analysis of Olivella beads, with sixteen classes described. I warn the reader, however, about the cover of the book, where several types of Olivella shell beads are displayed and the portion of the Olivella shell from which they originated is depicted. Unfortunately, this illustration is in error—I spent quite some time trying to figure out what they were showing, only to conclude that it does not make sense. I believe it may have something to do with the use of differing scales for the beads and the whole shell, but I am still uncertain. In this case, the old adage that

‘you can’t judge a book by its cover’ should be taken literally. However, this relatively inconsequential error does not take away from the usefulness of the book. The *California and Great Basin Olivella Shell Bead Guide* is an excellent resource for anyone working in California and the Great Basin.

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