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Blue Beads: A Means of Preservation for Individuality and Cultural Ideas



Faceted blue cobalt glass beads (Photo courtesy of the NYC Archaeological Repository). **Abstract**

The history of blue cobalt glass beads can be explored to shed light on the ways in which African-Americans in Seneca Village may have represented their individuality, their heritage, and their identity. These beads were excavated from the Wilson family house at Seneca Village, and they were used for adornment. This essay explores the possible cultural and historical influences behind these beads, both from West Africa, where the production of such beads originated, and the ways in which they were traded, bought, sold, and used. Yet these beads are as much about the ways in which the African-American people of Seneca Village cultivated their own unique culture from

both their African heritage, which is represented in the history of the beads, and their own ideas and lifestyles. These beads create a visual representation of self through adorning the body, and they may symbolize a possible duality between Seneca Village African-Americans' West African heritage and the uniqueness of their own new lifestyles, ideas, and the culture they developed.

Technical Details of Artifact

It is personally surprising how even the most technical, contextual details regarding artifacts are crucial to the meaning of the object. These beads are made out of blue cobalt glass that is high in lime and aluminum, and now oxidized copper-alloy wire. The beads vary in size, but measure roughly 0.5 centimeters each. The beads were found at Wilson House, in context SC 6B, a level located approximately 45-55 centimeters below the ground. Beads were found in the foundation wall of the Wilson House as well as above and in between the layers of flat iron sheeting, which is believed to be part of the roof. Both the seller and the buyer/user had an important role to play in the background of these beads. Historical sale records, such as the account of Mr. Joseph Travis Fincher in Pike County, Georgia¹, state that blue glass beads were generally quite affordable, even to captive Africans. Yet this historical discovery of sale records for the beads may posit more questions than it provides answers to: Where were the sale records found? When were such records written? Who kept these sale records and sold the beads? Was the seller of the beads the same as the maker of the beads? Although blue glass beads were generally inexpensive, the wearer's purchase of beade signified that they had spare money to spend on

¹ Dillian, Carolyn D. "COLONOWARE BEAD PRODUCTION AND AFRICAN AMERICAN TRADITION AT 38GE560, GEORGETOWN COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA." *Archaeology of Eastern North America*, vol. 39, 2011, pp. 53–65. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23265114>. Accessed 11 July 2021.

beads as opposed to more utilitarian purchases such as food or other living expenses. The buyers of these beads could have used them for cultural ceremonies, as well as combining them with everyday clothing.

The individuality of African-Americans in Seneca Village was generally ignored by white society when they were alive, and instead black Seneca Village residents were pressured by white society to assimilate to white societal standards. The individuality of Seneca Village residents was also ignored when the community of Seneca Village was demolished, and further ignored when they were dead and governmental officials showed their denial of even their existence, let alone their individuality when governmental officials chose to construct buildings right where Seneca Villagers were buried. Yet a piece of the individuality of those from Seneca Village can be acknowledged today in the form of a string of blue glass beads. These beads served as a marker of the individuality of the unique cultures, ideas, and interactions of the people in Seneca Village even when white society tried to erase even the existence of African Americans in Seneca Village.

Social Meaning

But this type of glass bead could have had much more cultural background than the way it was sold, bought, and used only in the context of the reality contemporary to residents of Seneca Village. Historians have traced back the first known use of such beads to 11th century West

Africa, which was the commercial center for many different types of glass beads in the 11th-15th centuries. Though Seneca Village existed centuries after this trade, the beads' deep history may provide some insight into potential meanings of their existence in the Wilson home.

Blue glass beads might have had great personal and spiritual significance to the residents of Seneca Village, both rooted in their history and their present reality. Even before Seneca Village, beads were a signifier of individuality; despite how universal the use of beads were, unique attributes of an individual's beads could have signified parts of their identities such as age, social status, and political and cultural affiliations. Some beads are also connected to cultural rituals; historians have conjectured that blue glass beads were sometimes rooted in the Yoruba West African tradition of burning beads, as archaeologists have found conglomerations of beads fused together. Historians have linked this discovery to a Yoruba ritual in which all of an individual's possessions were burned after their death. While the Wilsons are not known to be linked to the Yoruba, the beads may have still held similar meanings. The beads could also be associated with spiritual significance, coming to symbolize defense from evil spirits, and eventually having associations with the evil eye. The beads' potential affiliation with defense from harm raises the question: Were people buried with blue beads to protect them from harm in the afterlife? And today, people, especially women and infants, buried with blue beads have been understood by archaeologists as crucial signifiers of the presence of captive Africans and African Americans on archaeological sites? Blue beads could serve to shed light on the ways in which African-Americans preserved their African culture predating the Middle Passage, but also created new culture. Blue beads therefore, may be a vital symbol of the evolution of culture and spirituality among African-Americans that is still present today. Blue beads might symbolize

one of the many ways in which African-Americans have preserved their culture, and the existence of these beads gives way to archaeological preservation of African-American symbols of culture and individuality.

Conclusion

How do we preserve? How do we decide what to preserve and what not to preserve? How do we recover history that someone or a group of people has made the deliberate decision not to preserve, and instead, to erase? How do we make preservation accessible to all people instead of a few in power? The existence and significance of these blue glass beads proves that these questions have been grappled with, both by African-Americans in Seneca Village who wore these beads, choosing to preserve African history that white society wanted to erase, and by archaeologists, who recovered these artifacts from Seneca Village, a community erased in order to build Central Park. Beads may have been used as a way for African-Americans to reclaim and possess a part of their culture even though many of them were enslaved during the time of Seneca Village. Even when the Wilson family's home was buried and their history wasn't even preserved enough for me to find further information about the basic details of their lives, the beads are a small but very powerful light shed into their identities, heritage, and culture.

Preservation of culture through beads was generally accessible to all, which is why it is and was such a powerful form of preservation both today and during the time of Seneca Village. And blue beads can also function as an example of the comprehensiveness, a step towards the wholeness of historical narratives, which are usually limited and controlled by people in power, of the historical narrative of preservation that makes itself inclusive. How do we today create accessible

pieces of culture for people who society has tried to strip of their culture? What do the beads say about how the wearers were able to connect with cultural symbolism and create a sense of presence for themselves, and how can people do that today?

Works Cited

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