On Aggri Beads

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Mr. J. E. PRICE exhibited a collection of Aggri Beads, and read the following paper :—

On AGGRI BEADS. By JOHN EDWARD PRICE, F.S.A.

WHILE arranging the interesting collection of Romano-British antiquities in the museum at Colchester my attention has been directed by the Honorary Curator, the Rev. C. L. Acland, M.A., to some interesting specimens of ornamental beads formed of glass, stone, earthenware, and other substances which have been discovered from time to time associated with human remains in the immediate vicinity of Colchester. As an early settlement, with unbroken occupation from the time when it existed as a British city to its colonization by Claudius in the first century, and subsequent growth under Roman rule, Colchester must ever hold a prominent position in all that is connected with the early history of this country, and excavations within its area will be always watched with interest from the chances given for the discovery of objects calculated to throw light on the habits and customs of the many amalgamated tribes and races of men who lived and died there so many centuries ago. The practice of burying with the dead personal ornaments and relics worn and prized by the deceased when living often illustrates more than any written testimony the inner life of the ancients; and in studying the form, the method of manufacture, and the material selected for a simple every-day ornament like a bracelet or necklace, we may trace an association between the inhabitants of different countries, possibly far removed from one another, and the connection between them difficult to be accounted for. Among the beads referred to are some which have attracted the notice of Major J. G. Bale, A.R.I.B.A., reminding him of similar objects still prized and worn by the natives of Africa. In a note from him upon the subject he observes that what are known as Aggri beads are usually met with among the tribes on the Gold Coast, are highly valued by them, and form part of the royal jewels of the Kings of Ashantee; their manufacture is a lost art, and generally supposed to be of ancient Phœnician origin; they have probably been given in barter for slaves, gold dust and nuggets; they fetch at the present day an equal weight in gold, and the rarer sorts one-and-a-half to twice their weight in gold dust. They appear to be of various earths, of great purity and richness of colour, arranged in patterns or distinctively traverse the substance of the bead from the outside to its centre or axis, and are burned together with a brilliant baked glaze on the surface; this vitreous property, in

some instances, partly extends to the substance of the bead, giving a translucent appearance. Such as are blue like the sea, under certain conditions of tropical light, and with a white spotted pattern that resemble jelly-fish in the sea swimming at various depths, are much prized for their rarity and beauty; the prevalent colours are yellow, of a brimstone tint, chocolate, dark purple, white, green, and red, all separate in the pattern, and no indications of blending. In shape and size they are commonly like sections of the stem of a "church-warden" tobacco-pipe, in lengths of half to three-quarters of an inch; some are square, with angles chamfered or slightly rounded, a few round or shaped like an orange, and occasionally met with in segments of a circle, which, being strung together, form finger rings and bracelets: these are the most minute in the pattern, and formed with accuracy and precision in workmanship.

The local belief is that they are natural gems formed in the ground, from the fact of their being occasionally dug up where all traces of human occupation of the soil have disappeared, it being the native custom to bury the dead with valuables or gold dust sprinkled on the face according to rank or wealth. The bodies of slaves were buried with a necklace of Aggri beads attached. Slaves were also sold with these trinkets and shipped to the West Indies, and in the Island of Barbadoes the beads were to be found in the burial grounds for slaves on the estates.

The beads in the museum at Colchester reminded Major Bale of the above; he remarks that though injured by damp and usage they are so like the genuine Aggri bead that they were possibly worn by African slaves employed as servants to the Romans, as there are existing traces on the west coast of Africa of these people having been known to the ancient Egyptians, Phœnicians, and Carthaginians.

From the foregoing description all who are familiar with the beautiful groups of coloured beads which are so commonly met with in Roman, and especially in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, will at once recognise the resemblance between them and those which, according to Major Bale, are so highly prized in Africa. Similar beads have been taken from topes or burial mounds in Northern India. Dr. Schoolcraft also records the presence of polychrome beads in the graves of the Canadian Indians, which is to be accounted for, writes Mr. John Brent, F.S.A., by the supposition that they originally came from the East, through Scandinavia, and were brought to Canada in the eleventh century, when the Northmen made a temporary settlement in Vinland. They have also been found associated with sepulchral

remains in the Island of Islay; Mr. W. Campbell illustrates specimens taken by him from Viking graves in the course of excavations at Ballinaby. Similar beads were associated with a coin of Coenwulf, King of Mercia, in the eighth century.¹

Though introduced into this country by the Romans the origin of this particular form of bead is probably to be sought for in the East. The Phœnicians were great in the art of glass-making and the manner in which they fused together, with tasteful patterns, the different colours selected is beautiful in the extreme. The spiral ornament, the stripes, zigzags, chevrons, and other forms familiar with the more luxurious in glass, became repeated, especially by the Romans and Saxons of later times, in earthenware or terra-cotta. The Egyptians also were manufacturers of similar beads at a very early period. Mr. Birch, in his recent edition of Sir Gardner Wilkinson's well-known work, figures an example of a glass bead bearing a queen's name of the XVIII dynasty, and belonging to a period as early as 1500 B.C. It was found at Thebes, and singularly enough, its specific gravity, viz., 2.523 is that of our crown glass, as now manufactured. He further quotes the representation of glass-blowing on the sepulchral paintings of Beni Hassan, where an illustration is given of a workman holding beads while another is boring them with a drill. Glass beads have been found in Switzerland, and so strongly do they resemble those of Egyptian or Phœnician make that they are considered as chronologically useful in determining the age of the Lake dwellings.

Of the subject generally I hope to speak in a future paper, for it possesses many points of interest; for example, the profusion which may be noticed in the use and application of certain substances to the purpose in one locality, which are rare, if not entirely absent, in another. Amber has been put to such a use for ages. The graves of Etruria, pointing as they do to a civilization which makes Rome itself seem young, abound in bracelets and necklaces formed of amber beads, yet, plentiful as it was on the shores of the Baltic, it lay disregarded by the Germans until Roman luxury gave it utility and a name. Tacitus speaks of its collection by certain tribes whose language resembled the British, and remarks upon the surprise they manifested at the price they were enabled to obtain for a substance for which they had hitherto no use.² Amber beads are the rule among British graves, so also with interments in Denmark and Scandinavia; it is also frequently met with among Egyptian, Greek, and Assyrian remains, but although a large number of beads of various kinds are described by Major di

¹ Proceedings "Soc. Antiquaries of Scotland," 1879-80, vol. ii, p. 67.

² De Mor, Germ., chap. xlv.

Cesnola as having been found by him in his recent excavations at Cyprus, he remarks on the total absence of amber as a circumstance worth noting. As regards Major Bale's suggestion that these variegated beads might have been worn by African slaves employed by the Roman colonists, we are reminded of the association which undoubtedly existed, and which is more than once referred to in classic literature. In the "Moretum" of Virgil is reference to a negress who appears as a house slave to a poor market gardener. On rising in the morning he calls to her to prepare his breakfast :—

"Interdum clamat, Cybalen, erat unica custos,
Afra genus, tota patriam testante figura,
Torta comam labroque tumens, et fusca colorem,
Pectore lata, jacens mammis, compressor alvo
Cruribus exilis, spatiosa prodiga plantam."

The race is also mentioned in the last quarter of the third century. Vopiscus writes of the Blemmyes, viz., the Nubian blacks, as pouring into Central Egypt and becoming formidable enemies. They were included in the great triumph of Aurelian, where Zenobia walked in the procession. In similar honours to Probus, the Blemmyes also appear; their looks astonished the Romans—"Qui mirabilem sui visum stupente," &c., writes Vopiscus.

A further connection is also shown by certain of the legions being sent to Africa; at Lambœsa, a Numidian city, the third legion was stationed for no less than three hundred years, and during so long a period recruits would often be found among the native races. In some interesting remarks by the Rev. John McCaul, LL.D., upon a collection of inscriptions relative to longevity in ancient Africa, published by M. Léon Renier in the year 1858, reference is made to the manner in which the legions were so recruited, and attention is directed to the words "legione renovata" as indicating action in repairing the third legion; and other records go to show that in process of time the great majority of the corps were in reality natives of the country.

An interesting paper on Ancient Irish Beads and Amulets has been recently published by Mr. J. W. Knowles, a member of the Institute. He figures some beautiful examples of variegated beads lately found in Ireland; the glass specimens resemble in many particulars those commonly met with in this country, but there are points of difference which, if I am quoting the author correctly, lead him to the opinion that they are of native manufacture. He remarks on the prevailing theory that those found in Africa, in Europe, and the British Isles had a common source in Egypt or Phœnicia, and were carried along various

trade routes to countries far apart, and calls attention to the fact that the Irish beads are not only larger and more highly ornamental, but more numerous, than the English examples. He speaks of the "Aggry" beads at South Kensington Museum, which are thought to be of Phœnician origin, but it does not appear that he has met with any of a similar pattern in the course of his discoveries in Ireland.¹

MARCH 7TH, 1882.

Major-General PITT RIVERS, F.R.S., *President, in the Chair.*

The Minutes of the last meeting were read and confirmed.
The following presents were announced, and thanks voted to the respective donors:—

FOR THE LIBRARY.

- From Sir JOHN LUBBOCK, Bart., F.R.S.—Recent Discoveries at Notabile. By A. A. Caruana, D.D.
- From the GERMAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY.—Archiv für Anthropologie. Band XIII, Supplement.
- From L'ACADÉMIE ROYALE DES SCIENCES A AMSTERDAM.—Verslagen en Mededeelingen. Afd. Natuurkunde. 2e Rks. Dl. XVI.
- Jaarboek, 1880.
- Proces Verbaal, 1880–81.
- From the UNIVERSITY.—Calendar of the University of Tokio, 1880–81.
- From the ACADEMY.—Atti della R. Academia dei Lincei. Vol. VI, Fas. 6°.
- From the SOCIETY.—Journal of the Society of Arts, Nos. 1527, 1528.
- Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society, March, 1882.
- From the CONDUCTOR.—The Scientific Roll. Part I, No. 6.
- From the EDITOR.—"Nature," Nos. 643, 644.
- Revue Scientifique. T. XXIX, Nos. 8, 9.
- Correspondenz Blatt. February, March, 1882.

Mr. E. T. NEWTON, F.G.S., exhibited a Romano-British Burial Urn, found in recent excavations in Cheapside, and containing portions of human bones, with fragments of green glass melted around them.

¹ See "Journ. Roy. Hist. and Arch. Assoc. of Ireland," July, 1881, vol. v, pp. 522–37.