PRE-ROMAN GLASS BEADS IN BELGIUM

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the preliminary results of the inventory of pre-Roman glass beads undertaken as part of an inventory of pre-Roman and Roman glass beads and bracelets from Belgium. This inter-university and interdisciplinary project, involving the universities of Brussels (ULB), Gent (UGent) and Leuven (KUL), brings together archaeological, historical and chemical research. Its aim is to obtain a wide-ranging and up-to-date description of all glass beads and bracelets found in Belgium – their shape, decoration, colour, manufacturing technique and dimensions together with chemical and contextual analyses.

With a few exceptions, only published information is used. No research has yet been undertaken in the different collections, institutional or private, and so only an overall picture can be provided.

CHRONOLOGY

Late Bronze Age

The oldest glass beads in Belgium dating from the late Bronze Age are almost exclusively from Trou de Han at Han-sur-Lesse in South Belgium. The extensive cave of Han-sur-Lesse is one of the most important late Bronze Age sites in Belgium, if not in North-western Europe (Warmenbol 1996a). Underwater archaeology in the river Lesse has produced hundreds of artefacts, most of bronze, some of gold and a few in quite exotic materials. A dozen glass beads dating from the late Bronze Age were identified and might be classified as the oldest glass objects in Belgium and the Southern Netherlands. They have been briefly described (Haevernick 1978; Warmenbol 1996b), but have not been the subject of a detailed academic report.

The beads of interest are the barrel-shaped ones in bluish glass, from turquoise light blue (Fig. 1.1–3) through dark blue (Fig. 1.4, 6) to purplish (Fig. 1.5), with opaque white spirals. Dated to the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 10th century BC they were most probably imported from the Mediterranean. The length of these beads varies between 10 and 15 mm and their diameter between 7 and 9 mm (Warmenbol 1996b, 54). Known as 'Pfählbau-opperlen', they are very well represented in the Swiss lake-dwellings, like Concise, Corcelletes, Corteillod and Estavayer-le-Lac (Haevernick 1978, 151–2), but also appear at their French counterparts, like Châtillon, Conjux, Grésine and Le Saut, and in the hoard of Réallon, Hautes-Alpes (Haevernick 1978, 155). Up to now the village of Hauertive-Champréveires has yielded the greatest number, where 86 of the 190 beads discovered came from layers 5–3 dated dendrochronologically from 1050 to 1030 BC. One bead was found in layer 03, dated 990–980 BC (Rychner-Farraggi 1993, pl. 115, 13–120, 4). The oldest barrel-shaped beads are to be found in Italy or in Switzerland and belong to 'Bronze final II b' (Ha A2), the youngest are to be found in France and in Germany and belong to 'Bronze final III b' (Ha B2/3).

Five other beads from Trou de Han are spheroidal (Fig. 1.7–11), two of them knobbed (Fig. 1.7–8). Four were made of light blue glass, with white spots or eyes, and one is of dark blue glass (Fig. 1.10). These beads, to which we add a possible fragment of a sixth bead (Fig. 1.12), come from the bottom of the Lesse at the Trou de Han. Their diameter varies between 8.2 and 10.4 mm and their thickness varies between 5 and 5.8 mm except A 70–161 which has a thickness of 8.9 mm (Fig. 1.10).

Sites yielding barrel-shaped beads such as Auenmier (Rychner 1979, pl. 100,13–16) and Hauertive-Champréveires (Rychner-Farraggi 1993, pl. 121,1–7) produce knobbed beads as well (i.e. 'Pfählbaupenperlen'), although the latter are much rarer. Five of the 26 triangular or quadrangular beads found were in layer 5 and only one in layer 03. These beads would thus be at least in part contemporary with the barrel-shaped ones, although most of them would be rather later (Ha B2/3), like those from the hoard of Allendorf which contained two quadrangular beads (Uenze 1950, 216, pl. 14.5–6) of a type unknown in the lake dwellings. This type of bead is perhaps not unknown in Han-sur-Lesse (Fig. 1.15).

It is very probable that the glass beads of Han-sur-Lesse were imported from Western Switzerland or Eastern France, like most bronzes found at the bottom of the Lesse. Since no chemical analysis has been done on the Han-sur-Lesse beads, conclusions about the origin of the knobbed beads at least seems premature as they are so widespread (Henderson 1989a). Nevertheless barrel-shaped beads are found in great quantities in Northern Italy, in settlements, such as Montagnana (Chieco Bianchi and Tombolani 1988, fig. 96), as well as in cemeteries such as those around Bologna and Este (Haevernick 1978, 154; Müller-Karpe 1959, pl. 97). In the current phase of the inventory project no chemical analyses have yet been carried out, but when they are made it will be worth checking if all the late-Bronze Age glass beads from Trou de Han and Trou del Leuve at Sinsin (unpublished) are of the group recently distinguished (Brill 1992, 16–17) which consists of mixed-alkali glass and seems to appear from the 11th century BC onwards.
and disappears during the 8th century BC (Gratuze and Billaud 2003, 13). The only production workshop for mixed-alkali glass known up to now is the Protovillanova site at Frattesina in Northern Italy (Bietti Sestieri 1981, 143–8; Nava 1984, 162–3), since recent chemical analyses have provided enough information to prove the North Italian origin of barrel-shaped beads (Brill 1992, 16–17; Gratuze et al. 1998, 17–18). These beads must have reached Trou de Han via traders of the Urnfield culture groupe Rhin-Suisse-France orientale as there is also the presence in the cave of imported bronze objects from the Swiss-French Alpine region (Warmenbol 1996a) and at least two of the gold ornaments, decorated with filigree and granulation (Warmenbol 1999, 59–61) which are to be identified as imports from the Italian peninsula. The south of Belgium might therefore be seen as a north-western offshoot of the Urnfield culture groupe Rhin-Suisse-France orientale.

Early Iron Age

Although Urnfield sites are very frequently attested all over Belgium (Desitterere 1968, 133–46) and are almost exclusively cemeteries, only the Ha B/C tomb 50 at Achelpastoorbos (Beex and Roosens 1967, 25) (Fig. 2.1), the Ha B tomb 17 at Neerpelt-Achelse Dijk (Roosens et al 1975, 19–20) (Fig. 2.2) and the Ha B tomb 1 at Court-Saint-Etienne (Mariën 1958, 148–53) (Fig. 2.3) are known to have contained glass beads. Rather than indicating that glass was rare in Belgium during this period, this might instead suggest only that glass beads were uncommon as burial gifts in the Urnfield culture. Moreover as these three tombs are dating from the Ha B and Ha B/C-period, they may rather be seen as late Bronze Age instead of early Iron Age (Warmenbol 1996b, 55).

Up to now only small undecorated annular beads (diam <15mm) in blue or bluish glass have been found within the urn and they are always limited to one specimen in each burial. As can be deduced from their deformation by heat, the beads of Neerpelt and Court-Saint-Etienne must have been a primary burial gift. The thesis might be advanced that glass beads, like a large number of bronze objects, were most probably worn when the body was put on the funeral pyre. As the deceased might have worn a number of beads there might have been an Urnfield tradition or ritual whereby the bereaved thought it appropriate to gather and deposit only one bead at the burial. Further research and more archaeological evidence are needed to find out why only one bead was collected. If the bead was worn individually and no correlation is noticeable between the presence of glass beads and burial wealth, beads might have been seen as amulets and not just as ornaments or commodities (Venclova 1990, 106). As the context of the three discussed tombs gives no reliable information on the use and significance of the beads, one might only suppose the glass beads were part of a necklace and had significance as an amulet or talisman.

The anthropological study of the cremated bone fragments attributes the tomb from Neerpelt to a child (Roosens et al. 1975, 34, no. 17). And although the Achel tomb is that of a woman younger than 25 years old, the remains of a foetus were also found within the urn (Beex and Roosens 1967, 25, no. 50). Given this evidence, the glass beads might have been a typical burial gift for children. Venclova has already stressed that the majority of the wearers and owners of beads were women and children (Venclova 1990, 104).

Middle Iron Age

Up to now the very important early La Tène (LT A) stronghold of Kemmelberg in south-western Flanders has produced almost no glass. Only two small undecorated annular beads are recorded, a round deep-blue bead (Fig. 2.4) with a diameter of 13mm and an irregular olive-green bead (Fig. 2.5) with a diameter of 13–15mm (Van Doorselaer 1987, 40, no. 14–15, fig. 108–4). In comparison with the glass beads from Kemmelberg, those from the LT B2 chariot grave II,1 found in Neufchâteau-le-Sart are worth mentioning. The 24 undecorated beads are defined as a necklace (Cahen-Delhiaye 1997, 73–4, fig. 17,44), but the calculated length of 235mm is insufficient to go around the neck. As all the beads were concentrated in an area of 170mm between two bronze brooches on the breast near the head, it might rather be that the beads together with the bronze brooches were used to fasten a cloak.
Besides the two very common annular beads (diam 9 and 5mm) in blue glass (Fig. 2.6a–b), the 22 beads are in brown (10) (Fig. 2.7a–f) or black glass (12) (Fig. 2.8a–l) (Cahen-Delhaye 1997, 26, no. 44). The brown and black beads have an oblong shape with a thickened middle. The length varies between 9 and 12mm. The body of the beads is of olive-stone shape, but the colour is presumably an imitation of beads in amber and lignite/jet for, respectively, the brown and the black glass beads. In contrast to the intact black glass beads, the brown beads are crumbly (and therefore impossible to draw). The presence and absence of certain oxides probably contributes to the difference in preservation of the two different coloured glass beads. The chemical composition of these Middle Iron Age beads in black and brown glass has still to be analysed.

In general brown-coloured glass beads and bracelets are from the La Tène C2/D transition period (125–100 BC) onwards and remain in production until the La Tène D2 period (end 1st century BC–early 1st century AD) (Zepezaure 1993, 95–7). Nevertheless honey-brown beads are also attested in central Europe during Ha C (Venclova 1990, 98). Radiocarbon dates the chariot grave from Neufchâteau-le-Sart to between 400 and 205 BC, but typologically this tomb is dated in general between 300 and 180 BC and more specifically in the second quarter of the 3rd century BC (Cahen-Delhaye 1997, 25, 64, 87).

The so-called black glass from the pre-Roman period is in reality a very dark opaque glass in blue, purple or brown colour though in contrast the black beads from Neufchâteau-le-Sart are made of very dark olive-green opaque glass. A dark-green glass appearing black is considered to be typically Roman, yet the chariot grave II,1 from Neufchâteau-le-Sart dates from the 3rd century BC. As the Ardenques in Belgium and/or Ardenne Champagne in France can be seen as the area(s) where black glass is produced one might consider that the black glass beads from Neufchâteau-le-Sart were produced locally in the broad sense of the word.

**Late Iron Age**

Due to the paucity of publications the study of the late Iron Age glass beads from Belgium is in a very preliminary stage. What causes most difficulty is the context as many of these beads are found in early-Roman ones. An investigation in depth of context is essential for a better understanding.

From a sub-aquatic context in Trou de Han (Warmenbol 1999) comes a badly preserved large annular bead (Fig. 1.13) in dark, almost opaque, blue glass with marved opaque white spirals (alternating one large and two small). This type of bead can be catalogued as an Oldbury type of Guido’s class 6 (Guido 1978, 53–7) and as type Zepezaure IV.1.(1) (Zepezaure 1989, 113). In Great Britain a date is given between 150 BC and the first decades of the 1st century AD with a peak during the later 1st century BC (Guido 1978, 54–6). On the continent the Oldbury type is attested from the transition of LT B2 and LT C1 (270–250 BC) until LT D1 (50 BC). No example is known from a LT D2-context (Zepezaure 1989, 118).

As well as functioning as an ornament, this type of bead is also supposed to have had the function of an amulet (Zepezaure 1989, 179). The cult connotation of Trou de Han with ritual depositions from the Bronze Age onwards is noteworthy.

Another late Iron Age glass bead from the same sub-aquatic context in Trou de Han is a colourless bead with yellow opaque zigzags (Fig. 1.14). This small annular bead can be catalogued as a Meare variant of Guido’s class 11g (Guido 1978, 81–4). A similar bead is found in Ekeren (Verweeck et al. 2004, 169). Both beads have an outer diameter of 10mm. These beads are dated between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD (Guido 1978, 83). Of British origin, they are considered to originate from Meare (Henderson 1989a, 64–7).

Near Trou de Han another cave, Trou du Leveu at Sinsin, yielded a late Iron Age glass bead (Warmenbol 1984, 7, pl. 2, no. 1). This large annular bead (outer diameter 26.6mm) in brown glass has a ray design in yellow opaque
glass (Haevernick 1960, type 23) (FIG. 2.9). It comes from central Europe and seems to originate from Stradonice although other local production centres might have existed (Venclova 1990, 140–1). This type of bead is dated to the LT D1 period (100–50 BC) (Zepezaeuer 1993, 59).

This tentative and preliminary research of a limited number of sites with glass beads has already resulted in new findings. The present state of affairs only strengthens the need for an exhaustive inventory of pre-Roman glass beads in Belgium.

REFERENCES


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