

An Irish 'String' Bead in Viking York

by Carole Morris

Many members who are fans of Channel 4's Archaeological *Time Team* programmes may have watched the live broadcasts from York in September 1999 where York Archaeological Trust and the *Time Team*'s excavation crew were excavating three sites, one at a Medieval and Viking Age site in Walmgate. The star find from the whole weekend's excavations was the polychrome glass bead found in "all that medieval poo" in Walmgate to quote Patrick Ottoway (2000, 21)! I didn't see the programme live as I was away from home, but saw the bead for the first time on a video recording a few days later and was amazed (like everyone else) to see this beautiful example of a type of bead I've been researching for a few years now, since it's quite rare to find them on English sites (figs 1 & 2)

It is a welcome addition to my list and although I can only present a brief interim report on it here, my ongoing and future study (and possibly scientific analysis) should add tremendously to our knowledge of these beads, where and how they were made and their dating and distribution.

First, let's describe it, then I'll try to put it in the context of some of the others I've been looking at, and see where it fits in, where it probably came from, and how old it is.

It is a narrow oblate translucent cobalt blue glass bead decorated with eight eyes around its circumference – four opaque yellow glass eyes alternating with more complex blue and white eyes made from a bi-coloured (cobalt blue and white) twisted glass rod. These blue and white eyes are roughly spiralled. One of the blue and white eyes is damaged, but apart from this flaw, the bead is in exceptionally good condition after 1000 years in the ground. The bead can be called tripartite (made in three parts) as extra separate pieces were attached at each end by trailing a blue and white twisted glass rod (like a candy twist) around the hole. These glass rods are like strings or cables, hence the colloquial name 'string' or 'cable' bead is sometimes used to describe this type. An unusual feature of our York bead is that these end decorations have been marvered (i.e. smoothed and flattened to make them flush with the surface of the bead), whereas most other examples of this particular type of string bead have the twisted rod left as a distinct proud collar or used as a trail or three-dimensional decorative element. The Walmgate bead is only 17mm in diameter and 7mm thick and is one of the smallest examples of these beads. Its decorative elements are laid out like variation 2 in fig 3 which has a single encircling row of eyes around the mid circumference of the bead, although the eye colours may vary from bead to bead along with

the bead width and shape. Another bead of this type was found at Lagore Crannog in County Meath.

Our York bead is a unique example of a type of string bead almost certainly made in Ireland and although the beads of this type are characterised by a large number of decorative variations, they have common features which are instantly recognisable and distinguish them from other string beads made at different times and in different areas of North West Europe. These common features are a tripartite construction (plain or decorated body with two end collars) and a restricted palette of colours (always a blue body decorated with blue and white twisted rods and additional opaque white and opaque yellow decorative features such as eyes, trails etc.). All the beads include the use of the blue and white twisted rods in some way (these are sometimes referred to as *filligrana* or *reticella* in glassworking terms), and many have combinations of plain and more complex 'eye' patterns on the body of the bead or on the twisted rods. Eight common different decorative variations of Irish string beads related to the Walmgate bead are shown in fig 3, but these are by no means exhaustive, and body shapes exhibit considerable variation.

Examples of this type of bead have similar colour and design elements, and there are various different shapes which occur consistently, but the way they were made using hot-glass techniques similar to those used in temporary beadworking workshops in 7th/8th century Ribe in Denmark (Jensen 1991, 37–39) meant that no two beads were ever exactly alike. The colours and designs seem to have been combined to make unique items which in late 20th century terms would be called 'collector's items'. Where they are found with other beads on necklaces in burials, the Irish string beads are found singly or in very small numbers among large numbers of other plainer types, probably making them special collectable beads to the people who wore them in countries far from their original place of manufacture. Outside Ireland, they have been found in places such as England, Scotland, the Isle of Man, Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

The York bead was found in the very bottom of a Medieval cesspit at Walmgate which cut through Viking period levels, and it could either be an earlier bead residual in the Medieval deposits (in the same way that you find pieces of broken Victorian or earlier pottery when you are digging your modern garden), or possibly an object which had been lost and buried in a Viking house floor level and disturbed by the digging of the Medieval pit much later. Based on the small amount of firm dating evidence for these beads mentioned below, it would

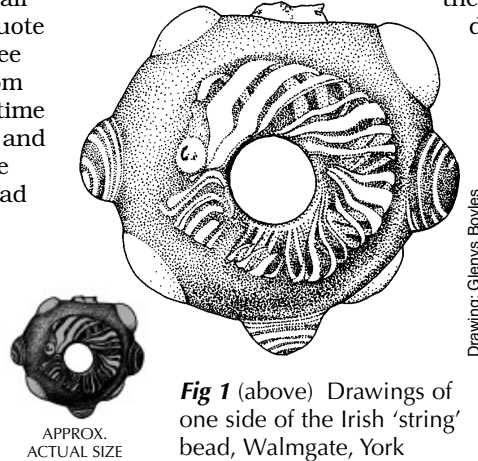
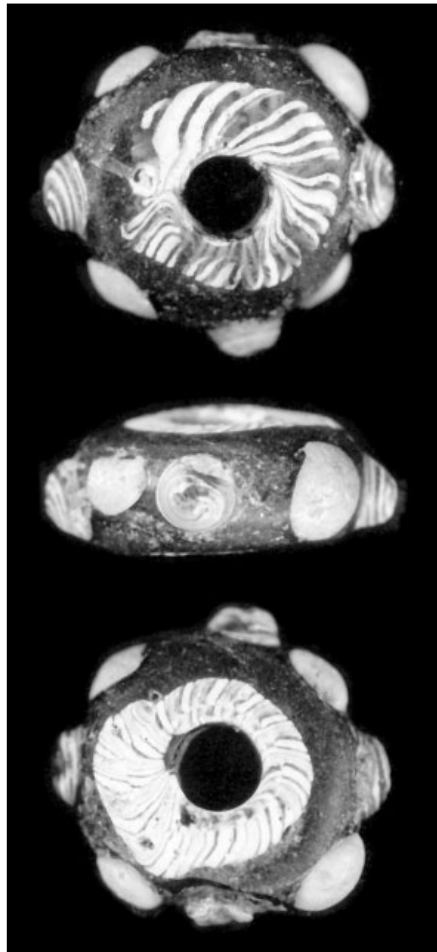


Fig 1 (above) Drawings of one side of the Irish 'string' bead, Walmgate, York

Fig 2 (below) Three views of the Irish 'string' bead, Walmgate, York



Photos: Jim Spriggs

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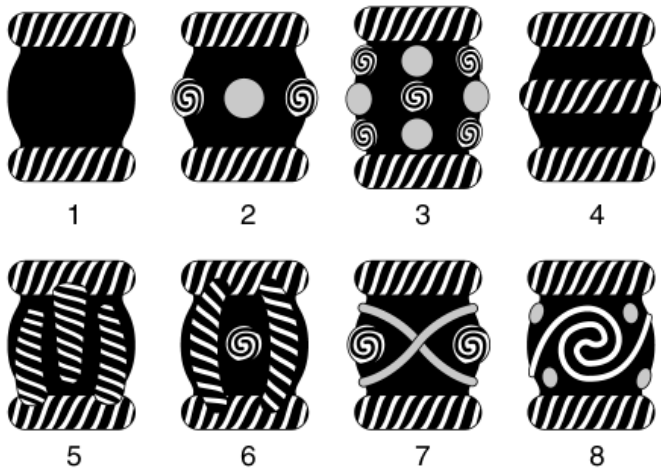


Fig 3 Stylised representations of some of the variations of design found on Irish 'string' beads (not to scale)

be safer at this stage of research to say that it was probably brought from Ireland to York and traded either in the Anglian period (8th/9th century) or in the Viking period (later 9th century onwards). It would probably also have been traded as a single bead and worn as a pendant or as a feature bead among others in a necklace.

It was suggested ninety years ago that these types of string beads were probably made in Ireland (Coffey 1910, 68–69), and although many examples of these beads have been found in Ireland, only a few have been found in stratified contexts or on dateable sites. These include examples from Lagore Crannog (the stratigraphic contexts of the beads are unclear but the site is generally dated from the 7th to early 10th century) (Hencken 1950, fig 66, 65, 125 & D), and a Viking burial at Kilmainham, Dublin where Guido suggested a date of c.840–900 AD (1985, 103). Others have been found at various Irish settlement sites generally dated to the mid-late 1st Millennium AD.

Most of the examples in the National Museum of Ireland's collection are undated and many do not have recorded findspots. Many of these beads were bought by collectors in the 19th century from people who had found them while digging the land. A very interesting fact, however, is that so far no examples have been found in the National Museum's excavations in Viking or Medieval Dublin itself, where the earliest levels date from the 930's onwards (pers. comm. P. Wallace & R. Ó Floinn). Chemical analysis carried out on various types of Irish glass beads nearly twenty years ago led to the conclusion that the string beads (part of a group then referred to as class 6) were 8th–12th century in date (Warner & Meighan 1981, 55). Twisted rods for beadmaking have been found at Armagh and a possible workshop site in the area has been suggested (Ibid, 65).

An Irish string bead was found on the necklace of the Viking period "Pagan Lady" buried at Peel Castle in the Isle of Man and excavated in the 1980's (Freke 1995, 19). It is a roughly cylindrical blue bead with the usual end collars and a single row of blue and white eyes – a different overall shape to the York bead but a similar design layout. Others have been found in Scotland (cf. Guido 1985 for a list of string beads in major known collections in the British Isles). More recently a very elaborately decorated string bead was also found in fieldwalking near Normanton, Lincolnshire (C. Spall, Field Archaeology Specialists, pers comm.) which is another welcome addition, like the Walmgate bead, to such beads found within the Danelaw in England. It is decorated similar to variation 5 in fig 3, but with added yellow eyes on the bead's body near the end of each string 'claw'.

String beads of the Walmgate type have also been found as single examples on beaded necklaces in Viking women's burials in Scandinavia, for example at Viborg, Resen parish, Fellenbaek, Denmark (probably dated to the

second half of the 9th century) and at Fasteraune, Skatval parish, Nord Trondelag, Norway which also contained two Irish mounts and was dated by Callmer to c.845–860 AD (1977, 17). Callmer recognised these beads as distinctive, and refers to them as type Bj in his classification system of beads found in Scandinavia (Ibid, 86), but he did not at that time recognise that they were almost certainly made in Ireland, suggesting a Western European (possibly Belgian) origin (Ibid, 101). In Scandinavian contexts they appear c.820–845 AD and are still found c.915–950 AD.

Hopefully, further research will help us understand more about the York bead and how it came to be buried in Walmgate!

(Glass Bead YORYM 1999.941 sf4 1013 5.16)

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