

A slice of the action

The millefiori mosaic beads of Anglo-Saxon Britain

Sue Heaser

Among the thousands of beads excavated from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Britain are a relatively small and beautiful group that show an exquisite beadmaking technique. They are mosaic beads found in graves dated to the 6th and 7th centuries AD and are decorated using millefiori cane slices with origins in workshops far from Britain.

Most polychrome Anglo-Saxon beads are quite large wound beads and decoration is applied as contrasting coloured dots and lines in a typically joyful and loose fashion. But the mosaic beads caught my eye from the start as being so intricate, and so different in style.

Millefiori techniques are considered to have been invented in Egypt at the end of the 1st millennium BC. They were used increasingly in Alexandria and then further developed by the Romans in the 1st century BC through to about the 5th century AD. They were further developed in the 8th and 9th centuries and mosaic beads from the Near East travelled across Europe to the Danube, Scandinavia and further east as well. They then disappeared for about 500 years but the techniques were rediscovered by Venetian artisans in the 15th century and are still the hallmark of the Murano glassmakers today.

Mosaic beads found in Anglo-Saxon graves (e.g. Fig 1) are thought to be from Roman Egypt, possibly from large workshops where the beads were made for export. They have also been found at sites across Europe in Germany, The Netherlands, France and Italy and through Central Europe. By the 8th and 9th centuries, the variety of cane patterns had increased considerably, and mosaic beads had become popular with the Vikings in Scandinavia who were making their own versions.

However, the beads found in Britain include only a small number of cane patterns and it was these that I decided to concentrate on to try to work out how they were made.

Only a few examples of these beads are found in each cemetery. Were they family heirlooms from the Roman occupation and passed down through the generations? Or were they imported in small quantities during the 5th and 6th centuries and snapped up by stylish Anglo-Saxon ladies?

Types of Beads

Mosaic beads are found as both round and cylinder beads (Fig 2). They are quite large: round beads are about 20mm diameter and cylinder beads between 20mm and 30mm long. Many have end caps, usually red but occasionally yellow or pale green. Some of the larger cylinder beads are seven-sided (see Fig. 5.)



Fig. 1. A reconstructed necklace from Dover Anglo-Saxon cemetery. Millefiori mosaic beads are combined with almond-shaped amethysts and plain glass beads to make a gorgeous colour scheme. The order of stringing is conjectural but based on known arrangements from other sites. Central bead 20mm long

Fig. 2. Some of the different types of mosaic bead found in Britain. Round bead types and simple cylinder beads

Fig. 3. Bead from Townsend Road Farm, Kent. Photo by Moa Rahlander



Fig. 4. Round mosaic beads from Icklingham, Suffolk. The cane slices are arranged round each bead, usually two different types alternating. Most beads have red caps. Courtesy of West Stow Museum



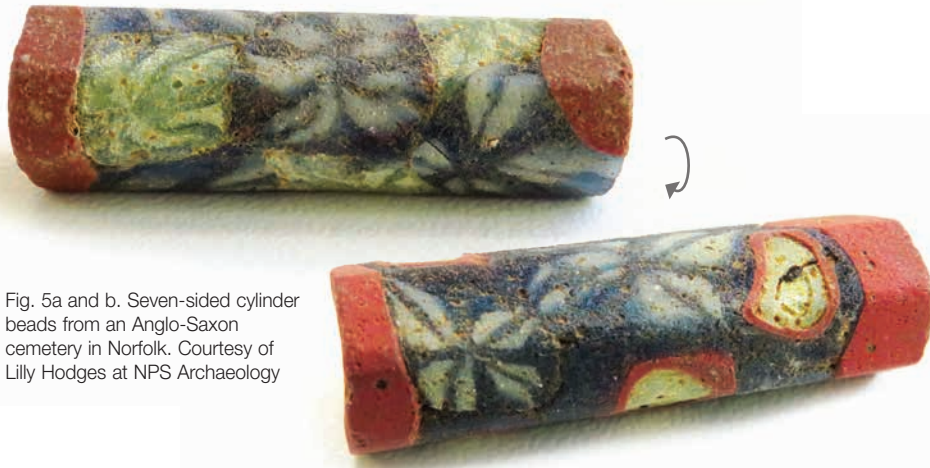


Fig. 5a and b. Seven-sided cylinder beads from an Anglo-Saxon cemetery in Norfolk. Courtesy of Lilly Hodges at NPS Archaeology



Fig. 6. Cylinder bead from Hadleigh Rd, Ipswich. Red, white and blue bullseye cane and an eight-petal white flower on blue. Courtesy of Ipswich Museum

Making Millefiori Canes

Considerable skill is needed to make the millefiori canes that decorate the beads. The hot glass is built up in consecutive layers to create a cylindrical mass of glass with a pattern running right through it, rather like a stick of rock. It is then pulled into a long thin rod or cane and as it lengthens, the diameter reduces. When the cane is cool and hardened, slices are cut from the rod and these reveal the patterns within (Fig 7). The slices are then applied

to beads and were also used to decorate fused bowls and blown vessels.

Cane Designs

The number of different cane types in beads found in Anglo-Saxon graves are quite few compared with mainland Europe and the Near East. They consist of bullseyes, flowers, leaf motifs and the occasional spiral and composite cane.

The shape of the canes in the beads can vary from round to square or polygonal.

This can be a result of the slices being melted into the bead when they will flow together to fill the spaces between, but may also reflect the original shape of the cane when it was made.

Bullseyes are some of the most common types and come in a variety of colourways (see Fig. 8.) Flowers and leaf canes are nearly always transparent blue and opaque white or transparent dark green and opaque yellow (Fig 9).

Spiral canes are rare finds in Britain.



Fig. 7. Bullseye and flower millefiori canes made by the author and slices cut from them. Largest slice 8mm square

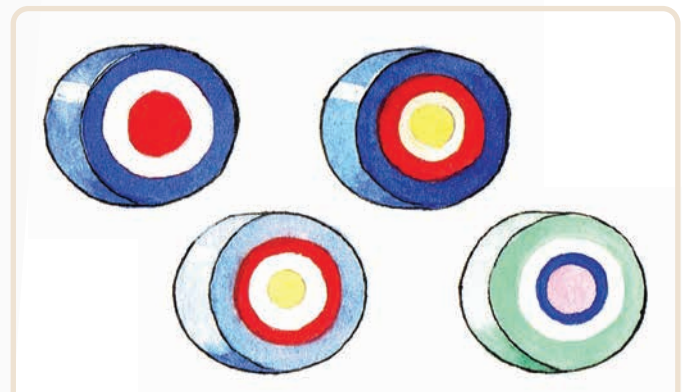


Fig. 8. Bullseye cane designs in colours found in Britain

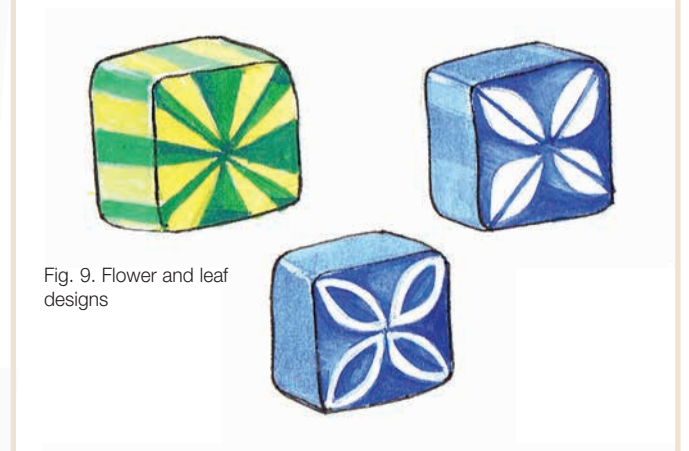


Fig. 9. Flower and leaf designs

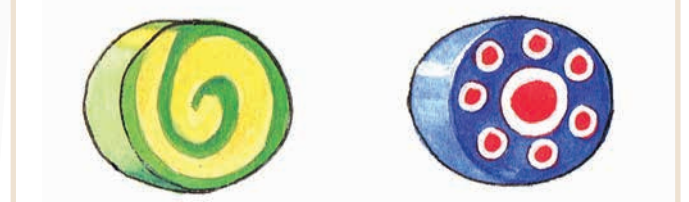


Fig. 10. A spiral cane and a composite bullseye cane

There are spirals on a bead from Dover Buckland (see Figs 1 & 10) and another from London. Sometimes canes are made by combining multiple canes into a new pattern (composite canes) such as one on a bead from Icklingham (see Figs 4 & 10.)

Recreating the Beads

I decided that the only way to really understand how these beads were made was to use my hot glass beadmaking skills to make replicas. It is probably the most difficult craft I have ever attempted but the results gave me valuable insight into the techniques of the ancient beadmakers.

I first tried making the canes. Bullseyes were relatively easy, but the flowers took a lot longer to accomplish. Once I had a stock of canes, I cut them up with nippers into slices and used to make replica beads. Figs. 11 and 12 show some of my results. I used a low heat blow torch to simulate the likely heat of wood-fired furnaces of antiquity and restricted myself to tools that would have been available to ancient beadmakers. The results have been fascinating and I have begun to feel that I am really achieving an understanding of these 2000-year-old techniques.



Fig. 11. Replica cane slices and a finished bead made using them



Fig. 12. Replica beads with end caps made by the author

