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'Other' artefacts: Stone, bone and shell … glass, metal and ceramic

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Fifty years ago, Australian archaeology was a young discipline operating under a sympathetic Whitlam Government, during a period of significant Aboriginal rights activism and heritage protection (Murray 1998). In August 1974, the World Heritage Convention was ratified and in the following year the Australian Heritage Commission and Register of the National Estate were created, raising the profile of historical and Indigenous heritage across the nation. Increased momentum in Indigenous archaeology propelled it further into public consciousness (Wallis 2020). A number of disciplinary histories have explored this early period in detail (Griffiths 2018; Moser 1995, 2007; Murray 1998; Spriggs 2020) and commentaries have also drawn attention to a number of significant issues including ownership of the past (e.g. Langford 1983), gender and archaeology (e.g. Moser 2007; Smith and Burke 2006; Smith et al. 2023), the impacts of neoliberalism (e.g. Wallis 2020). Several 'state of the discipline' overviews have also contributed to this dialogue (e.g. Mate and Ulm 2016, 2021; Ulm et al. 2005, 2013).

I wanted to take this opportunity to offer a short comment on a specific area of understudied research—intercultural encounters ('contact') and their affiliated material culture classes in Australian archaeology. Opening the early (and recent) issues of *Australian Archaeology* reveals that stone artefacts and faunal remains were (and are) the most frequently investigated materials. This emphasis undeniably connects to their ubiquity in the pre- and post-contact archaeological record; more stone, shell and bone are recovered from Australian Indigenous site contexts than other material culture classes. Studies on glasses, metals and ceramics have been undertaken, however, they are fewer in quantity, and have emphasised one main group of artefacts: knapped glass flakes (Harrison 2005). The importance of the broader suite of introduced materials, especially those which have been modified or adopted by Australia's First Peoples, is clear and has the substantial capacity to address questions of continuity and change, and also to 'serve political and social agendas in the present', including Native Title (Harrison 2005:16).

Early 'contact' research first focused on northern Australia, with Jim Allen's (1969) research at Port Essington and Campbell Macknight's (1969) investigation into Makassan trepanging. Major theoretical advancement in Australian 'contact' research was seen in the 1990s and 2000s (e.g. Harrison 2005; Murray 1993; Torrence and Clarke 2000). A recent forum piece in *Australian Archaeology* by Tutchener and Claudie (2022) reinvigorated commentary surrounding the theorising of 'contact' in Australian archaeology, with respondents highlighting the erroneous assumption that Australian archaeology and its practitioners are naïve to issues addressed in other regional contexts (e.g. Silliman 2005).

My interest in this topic is in a particular artefact type—glass beads—which have been extensively reported from settler-colonial contexts internationally but have only recently become the subject of detailed investigations from Australian Indigenous site contexts (Clarke 1994; Litster et al. 2018; Wesley and Litster 2015) (Figure 1). The lack of attention is surprising given that they are among the earliest known foreign materials introduced to Australia's First Peoples. Early archaeological finds were assessed in a descriptive fashion, and they were often used as chronological markers for the 'contact' period. For example, the 'rather surprising find' of five glass beads recovered at the trepang processing site of Anuru Bay, were defined by their colour—green, yellow and blue—with their function and manufacture date listed as 'unknown' (Macknight 1969:315).

The investigation of glass beads through standard attribute, chemical and use-wear analysis provides a range of insights, including: (1) the object biography; (2) the networks which resulted in their distribution; and (3) an understanding of how foreign materials become localised. To illustrate the first point, one find comes to mind: a singular small

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Figure 1. Seed beads from archaeological sites in the Wellington Range, northwestern Arnhem Land (Photograph: Mirani Litster).

Cornaline d'Aleppo or 'white heart' was found at the rockshelter site of Malarrak 1 in the Northern Territory (Litster et al. 2018). This small bead was made with a vibrant translucent red exterior encasing an opaque white interior (the 'white heart') by winding or drawing thin glass tubes. The name derives from the Italian and French terms meaning 'Carnelian of Aleppo', which is somewhat misleading given the beads have no origin or connection to Syria. It is probable that the name references the orange agate it intended to mimic, as carnelian was widely exchanged throughout the Indian Ocean and further afield. White heart beads were originally made in Venice from around the 1830s and then in France and Bohemia (now Czechia) (Francis 1997:8). European expansion and colonialism rapidly saw the uptake of these beads and the popularity of Venetian beads rise. This simple typology reveals much of its biography, pointing to a production in Europe and an endpoint at the site of Malarrak 1. This bead potentially arrived in north Australia from a middle point in Makassar. The nature of this exchange will be better illuminated along other lines of evidence: linguistics, documents, oral histories and so forth. Chemical characterisation will also refine the dating of the bead as gold was added to produce a 'ruby' appearance in the early nineteenth century, with selenium used towards the end of the century, resulting in a less vibrant red (Billeck 2008:61). This short, yet incomplete, biography reveals some of the extensive global connections responsible for its distribution.

To close, I offer three main thoughts as to why glass beads might not have been as emphasised in Australian research as they have in other settler-colonial contexts. First, owing to their small size, many have simply not been captured in sieve meshes (Wesley and Litster 2015). Second, objects associated with hunting and other economic behaviours, such as knapped glass flakes, have been prioritised over ornaments (Allen et al. 2018). Third, shell and bone ornaments have been emphasised in research due to their age and perhaps perceived 'authenticity' (Allen et al. 2018; Harrison 2005). Importantly, their archaeological study acts as a counterpoint to problematic colonial archives, which are replete with 'first encounter' narratives. Although recently incorporated into the material repertoire of Australia's First People, these artefacts and their use should not be treated separate to, or isolated from, the deeper past but connected to it through the underpinning networks and behaviours that facilitated their eventual widespread use throughout Australia.

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