

Late-Roman bead necklaces and bracelets

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This paper examines Late-Roman bead necklaces and bracelets, firstly through a comparison with precious metal jewellery and secondly by considering elements within strings of beads. Previously, glass beads mainly have been studied in isolation: their individual forms, colours, and decorative motifs have been examined, often with a view to determining original provenance (e.g., Guido 1978; Swift 2000). Studies of their combinations in necklaces and bracelets have not been attempted, largely because of scepticism over the authenticity of their arrangement in reconstructed necklaces (Johns 1996, 103). However, recent cemetery excavations have provided better information, and in a small number of cases the exact arrangement of a necklace has been preserved.¹ In a larger number of cases, beads have been found around the neck or wrist of a skeleton or deposited in a particular spot in a grave, thereby being treated in the report as a single find. In these cases, while it is not always possible to be sure that the original arrangement of the beads has been preserved, it is still possible to examine the colour combinations, non-glass elements and metal fastenings.

The style of glass-bead strings clearly derives from precious metal jewellery. In addition to jewellery depicted on mummy portraits or gravestones (Johns 1996, 87-90), precious metal jewellery has recently been discussed (Oliver 1996) on the basis of the increase in site finds. Pfeiler (1970) examined the stylistic development of precious metal jewellery in the 1st and 2nd c. A.D., using dated finds. There are two main co-existent trends: jewellery which is derived from Hellenistic prototypes, preferred in the East (Stout 1994, 78); and, more popular and longer-lasting in the West, jewellery derived from an Italo-Roman tradition, based on geometric shapes and linear patterns (Pfeiler 1970, 106). In the late 2nd c. jewellery exhibits an increased use of colour, coloured stones now being used in alternation with ornamental linking sections of gold (ibid. 100). This trend continues in the 3rd c., with a particular emphasis on coloured stones, which are the principal element in many sets of jewellery (Oliver 1996, 134).

Comparing numerous precious jewellery examples from a variety of sites² from the Western provinces, and taking into account the general trends established by Pfeiler which were developing towards the end of the 2nd c., the following observations can be made about jewellery in precious materials dating from the late 2nd into the early 4th c.:

1. Stones of the same material are of the same shape; where two materials are used on one item, each material will take a distinctive shape.
2. Emeralds or green stones are invariably of hexagonal or octagonal cylinder shape (the form of the naturally occurring crystal)³.
3. Precious stones are separated by alternating links of metal chain or metal beads.⁴
4. One-colour necklaces with the addition of gold are most frequent.
5. Sets of jewellery found together are often made up of different items featuring the same one stone or colour.⁵

Based on these criteria, I will consider the degree to which glass-bead strings imitate precious jewellery.

Information was gathered on 273 strings⁶ of beads from a wide variety of Late Roman sites

1 This is explicitly stated, for example, for SF363, from Lankhills (Guido 1979, 299) and for several necklaces from Linz (Ruprechtsberger 1996).

2 E.g., the collection of 3rd-c. necklaces from the Eauze treasure (Guirard 1992), additional 3rd c. examples discussed by Oliver (1996, 134), and those from Vermania (Garbsch and Kos 1988) and Beurains (Bastien and Metzger 1977) which date to the early 4th c.

3 See also Johns 1996, 97-98.

4 Pfeiler 1970, 100.

5 E.g., Bonn, red settings; Vermania, blue settings: see Böhme-Schönberger 1997, Abb. 72 and 8.

6 Strings of beads include both necklaces and bracelets; sometimes they cannot be precisely distinguished, hence the term 'string' used here.