

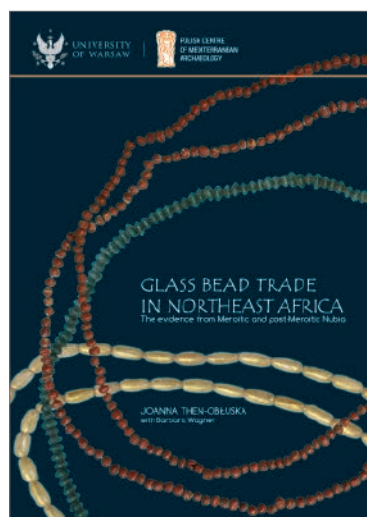
# Reviews

**Joanna Then Obluska**, *Glass bead trade in Northeast Africa. The evidence from Meroitic and post-Meroitic Nubia*, with contribution of Barbara Wagner, Warsaw: Univerity of Warsaw Press, 2019, 316 pages, soft cover with flaps, ill. color; ISBN 978-83-235-3899-8; <https://doi.org/10.31338/uw.9788323539070>

*Glass Bead Trade in Northeast Africa. The evidence from Meroitic and post-Meroitic Nubia* by Joanna Then-Obluska with Barbara Wagner is an outstanding addition to the history and archaeology of the southern Nile Valley from the late centuries BCE until the 6th century CE. By combining careful consideration of archaeological context with morphology, production technology and detailed chemical analysis including trace elements the authors hits the trifecta of serious bead research, showing that the devil may indeed be in the details, but the prize is a new understanding of emerging trade patterns in northeast Africa. To top it off, the photographs of the studied beads are some of the best this reader has seen. It is rare indeed to have so many well-focused images in sufficient magnification to convincingly illustrate the points made in the text, and the authors and series editors deserve special recognition and gratitude.

The book is well organized, beginning with a brief historical review (Chapter 1) of Nubia through the 6th century, summarized in Table 1-1. This chapter includes the first of three maps, highlighting the geographical areas of the southern Nile valley. Two additional maps, Figures 3-1 and 4-1, focus on the archaeological sites from which samples were used for the study.

Chapter 2 presents details on how beads were used, based on representations of beads on statues and stelae and information on beads found in burial contexts, while Chapter 3 gives important details of the museum and excavation sources of the samples in the study. It is



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a great testament to the author's perseverance that altogether 22 different collections were consulted, 17 of these by personal observation.

Chapter 4 presents the author's summary of the bead typologies based primarily on manufacturing technique, summarized in the 'Mind Map' on page 26. Tables 4.1 to 4.18 provide detailed information on the approximately 23,000 beads on which the study is based, listing individual beads or groups of beads by color and manufacturing technique as well as find number, archaeological context, dimensions, chronological period and museum number. For convenience, Table 4-19 gives the same details for only the samples selected for chemical analysis.

In many ways Chapter 5, Chemistry of Glass Beads, is the heart of the investigation, and provides a useful and accessible example of how chemical compositional data is obtained and interpreted. A brief review of some of the factors important in the final glass chemical compositions is followed by a description of the LA-ICP-MS (laser ablation-inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometry) method of analysis. One hundred seventy samples were selected for chemical analysis, resulting in 252 separate analyses because many of the beads were polychrome and the LA-ICP-MS technique allows the measurement of each color of glass. The results for 41 chemical oxides or elements are shown in Table 5-3 with the samples arranged by the ten main chemical types identified. The inclusion of the full results is particularly welcome since it will allow other scholars to build on the data

presented here as new information and techniques of data analysis become available. The results are discussed by chemical group in Table 5-3. Even though the content may be unfamiliar, close attention to the clear explanations in the text will reward the diligent reader. Average concentrations of each group are given in Table 5-4.

Perhaps easier to follow and more germane to the arguments regarding glass exchange is the discussion of the provenance of the various glass groups, given in section 5-4. Here, the inclusion of recently-identified Egyptian plant-ash glass and the distinction between Egyptian and Levantine glass are particularly timely and hint at the wealth of information hidden in glass chemical compositions. A useful summary of the distribution of samples by chemical type is given in Table 5-8. Chapter 6 provides an important discussion of how the glass groups identified may be incorporated into chronological and regional patterns, with Table 6-1 listing the samples selected for chemical analysis by period, manufacturing technique and glass compositional type.

This chronological and regional information is further discussed in Chapter 7 in terms of the central questions of the work: how the glass bead evidence shines a light on trade contacts in Nubia between both the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds. Based on data from the study, the author concludes that in the Meroitic Period, mainly from the 1st to the 3rd century CE, essentially all glass beads found in Nubia were Mediterranean, initially from both Egypt and the

Levant but increasingly Egyptian as time went on. Trade links across the eastern desert between the Nile Valley and Red Sea ports such as Berenike and Myos Hormos played a major role, although it is possible that trade up the Nile from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt was active as well. By the 4th century, a new wave of glass beads with chemical compositions proving a South Asian origin became increasingly important; by the late-4th century up to 40% of the glass beads found in Nubian graves were coming from South Asia. This study provides the first strong evidence for this crucial development, mirrored by the presence of Indian imports such as pepper at Red Sea ports and Indian glass beads in Merovingian graves in western Europe. The author also discusses the important issue of what factors may have influenced Nubian bead trade, emphasizing the role of consumer preference in determining the actual products exchanged.

The combined morphological, technological and chemical compositional studies presented here allow other observations that have not been as clear prior to Then-Obluska's monumental work. There is now little doubt the beadmaking technique of shaping and segmenting drawn tubes of glass on stone molds was exclusively Egyptian; this information will be very useful in the study of beads found at Indian Ocean trade sites and beyond into China, Japan and Korea. At the same time, the study highlights the pitfalls of using manufacturing technique alone to suggest geographical origin. An example here is the common use of the label 'Indo-Pacific' to describe all small, monochrome drawn beads that have been

cut from tubes of glass and subsequently heat-treated to round off the sharp edges. While there is no doubt that millions of these most common trade beads were produced at sites in southern India, Sri Lanka and probably Southeast Asia, the current work shows that beads morphologically identical were being made both in the Levant and in Egypt by the 1st to 3rd century CE. The manufacturing technique may have been different in detail from the lada method thought to have been used in India, but the resulting beads are indistinguishable. While 'Indo-Pacific' may be too ingrained in common use to ever be dislodged, the author's term 'drawn, rounded' is descriptive without implying a source area unjustified by morphology alone. The catalog of the studied beads and pendants on pages 189-256, including excellent color photographs, manufacturing technique, dimensions and glass type, will be an essential source for any future research on early Roman beads. My one quibble here is that probable production zone based on chemical type is not included, although this information is available in Table 6-1 and the discussion of chemical types in Chapter 5.

*Glass bead trade in Northeast Africa* is unparalleled in integrating careful and thorough study of material culture with archaeological and historical research and will serve as a standard for all future work, not only for glass beads but any archaeological remains. Further, by generously providing such complete descriptive and scientific data the author has challenged us all to build upon her painstaking work for further lessons and interpretations as new methods for

data analysis and research frameworks become available. All those interested in the history and archaeology of Nubia will find this study essential reading, as will scholars of the early Maritime Silk Routes, since we now know that the Nubian kingdoms shared in Red Sea trade going to and coming from sites to the south along the African coast and to the east from Arabia to India and beyond.

Available from <https://www.wuw.pl/product-pol-10477-Glass-bead-trade-in-Northeast-Africa-The-evidence-from-Meroitic-and-post-Meroitic-Nubia-PAM-Monograph-Series-10-PDF.html>