



Glass beads from pre-European contact sub-Saharan Africa: Peter Francis's work revisited and updated



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ABSTRACT

Sub-Saharan Africa was not an area of prime focus for Peter Francis Jr. However his observations about the glass beads found there, although not copious, are both insightful and ready for update. Beginning with astute observations, he correctly noted that ruby red beads, which were found at the important entrepôt site of Kilwa in southern Tanzania, were colored with copper and that their origins were Chinese. He believed that many Indo-Pacific beads found in East Africa were made in Mantai, Sri Lanka. Such beads have only recently been recognized from two archeological sites on Zanzibar, they are likely the earliest glass beads yet recorded in East Africa. On the other hand, Francis tended to suggest that most drawn beads in most of sub-Saharan Africa were probably Indo-Pacific with origins in South Asia. This included 'nila' beads from Mali and thousands of beads from Igbo-Ukwu in the Niger Delta. Recent chemical analysis of the glasses used to make these beads has shown that most of them, which date mainly from the 8th to mid-10th century, are made of glass produced in the Middle East.

A wide variety of glass beads from 7th to 17th century southern, eastern and western Africa – and results of chemical analysis of the glass used to make them – is discussed. Beads from southern Africa are compared to those in East Africa, highlighting the probability that trading circuits to the two regions frequently differed. On the western side of the continent beads from numerous sites, including al-Basra, Gao, Kissi, Essouk, Tegdaoust, Koumbi Saleh and Igbo-Ukwu are compared and possible trade connections discussed.

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1. Introduction

Peter Francis Jr. did not work a great deal on glass beads found in sub-Saharan Africa before European trade became prevalent. But he had a predilection to suggest that most small, drawn monochrome beads were probably Indo-Pacific types produced in South Asia. One of his favorite sayings included the phrase that Indo-Pacific beads were found from Bali to Mali – it has a nice ring to it but is it true? Since Francis' untimely death in Ghana, glass bead studies have progressed dramatically largely thanks to improved techniques to chemically analyze glass, such as laser-ablation inductively-coupled-plasma mass-spectrometry (LA-ICP-MS), XRF (X-ray fluorescence) and Raman spectroscopy. Now it is possible to test those small beads from Mali to learn in what region the glass used to make them was actually produced. This discussion will examine what Francis did say about sub-Saharan African glass beads and will bring the topic up to date with current knowledge.

2. Southern Africa

I will begin by examining glass beads in southern Africa since they have been intensively studied and bead assemblages there are unusual in that throughout the time span from the 7th/8th century AD through to the acceptance of European beads in the late 17th century, only one

bead type, or series, was present at any one time (apart from brief periods between series changes when two types are found) (Wood, 2005, 2011). Francis said little about southern African beads except that they were Indo-Pacific. For example he noted (2002:49) that Beck identified Indo-Pacific beads at Great Zimbabwe [the capital of the Zimbabwe kingdom from about AD 1300 to 1450]. As will be shown, that is only partially true. Seven pre-European bead series have been identified (Wood, 2000, 2005, 2011; Robertshaw et al., 2010a; Wood et al., 2012) and will be discussed chronologically (see Fig. 1 for a map of eastern Africa and Fig. 2 for a bead timeline for southern Africa).

2.1. Chibuene series

The earliest glass beads known in southern Africa were first identified at the 6th to 17th century Indian Ocean port, Chibuene, in southern Mozambique (Wood et al., 2012); the bead series was named after the site. The beads are all small, drawn, reheated tubes and cylinders in soft grays – some with blue, green or yellow tints. The colors are unlike most Indo-Pacific beads and LA-ICP-MS analysis proved that the glass is an unusual plant-ash soda-lime-silica type with low alumina (v-Na-Ca 3) made in the Middle East, east of the Euphrates (ibid.). Subsequent work has identified beads of this glass type at several early sites in Botswana: in the Sowa Pan area

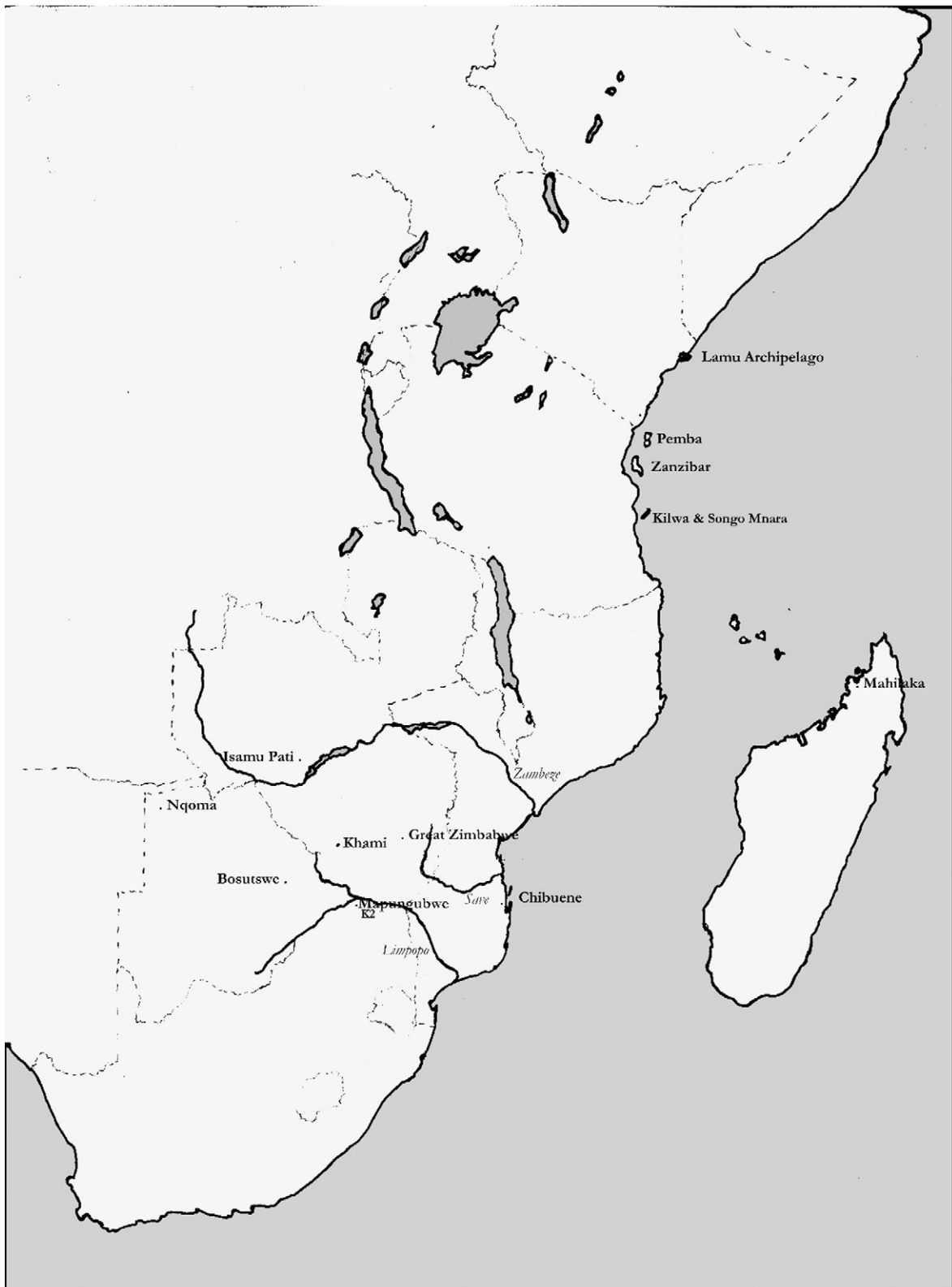


Fig. 1. Eastern and southern Africa with places named in text.

and as far west as the Tsodilo Hills (Wilmsen and Denbow, 2010; Denbow et al., 2015). No other examples of this glass type are known to date (Wood et al., 2012:66) and it did not seem to be very long-lived; it was replaced sometime around the early 8th century by a related glass used to make the Zhizo series.

2.2. Zhizo series

Zhizo beads (Wood, 2005:39–42, 2011), named after the site in Zimbabwe where they were first recognized, are mostly cut from drawn tubes that range in size from small to large. The ends are usually

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