Later Prehistoric Finds Group
Object Datasheet No. 4
A Short Guide to Iron Age Glass Beads from Britain

Prehistoric glass beads first appeared in Bronze Age contexts. These were very small in number, but they occur in Iron Age (c.800 BC – AD 43) contexts more frequently.

**Terminology & Typology**
Iron Age glass beads vary by size, shape, colour, and decoration. Dependant on shape, the key measurements indicated in Fig.1 should be taken to permit comparison between collections.

Typologies have been developed to discuss beads with similar characteristics (Guido 1978, Foulds 2017), which are based primarily on colour and decoration. The Foulds typology expands and refines the typology set out by Guido. It splits beads first by the number of colours (monochrome vs. polychrome) and then groups them by decorative motif or other characteristics. Shape was considered to be a secondary characteristic due to the nature of glass working and limited number of shapes used at this time.

During this period, the most popular colours used were: translucent blue, colourless, opaque white, and opaque yellow. Frequent decorative motifs included: spirals, wave, and 'eyes'. Many measured c.10mm in diameter and height, although there are larger and smaller examples.

**Dating**
Many glass beads are difficult to date, because so many are undecorated. However, recent research has shown that the majority of glass beads were deposited in Middle Iron Age contexts (c.3rd-2nd centuries BC) and that there were very few glass beads found in Early and Late Iron Age contexts (Foulds 2017). These trends varied regionally, so there may have been differences in access to beads or raw material. **Distribution**
In general, Iron Age glass beads are found throughout most of Britain (Fig.2). There were notable concentrations of finds at Meare Lake Village, Somerset, and from the square barrows in East Yorkshire. However, these were exceptional sites. In settlement contexts it is normal to find individual beads within features. ‘Strings’ of beads, often interpreted as necklaces, are usually only found as grave goods in burials. Typological analysis of beads suggests that there is regional patterning in the use of some colours and decorative motifs (Foulds 2017).
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Figure 3. Illustrated typology outline from Foulds 2017.

- **Class 1** Single colour beads in either annular or globular shape. 1: Type 102 (G39), 2: Type 104 (G6), 3: Type 106 (G11), 4-5: Type 110 (G12, G13)

- **Class 2** Single colour beads in more complex shapes. 6: Type 202 (KINCM: 2010.7.307), 7: Type 203 (G35)

- **Class 3** Beads made from multiple colours, but without a consistent decorative motif. 8: Type 301 (OS.AA-5/17), 9: Type 304 (ELGNM:1967.48)

- **Class 4** Beads decorated with eyes: (A) simple eye: Type 427 (DZWS:2006.29.56), 11: Type 411 (YORYM:1948.913.1), 12: Type 429 (G8), (B) complex eye (four layers): Type 503 (KINCM:2010.7.309), (C) compound eyes 14: Type 601 (A273).

- **Class 7** Colourless beads with a colour (almost exclusively yellow) around the inside of the perforation. 15-16: Type 701 (SF7, C908)

- **Class 6** Beads decorated with linear motifs, divided into subtypes: (B) wave/zig-zag: Type 901 (G38), (C) chevrons: Type 1002 (G1968/23/2000/5), (G) spirals: Type 1417 (G8), 20: Type 1407 (BCM:F710)

- **Class 8** Beads decorated with whirls. 22: Type 1604 (SF6)

- **Class 9** Beads decorated with rays. 23: Type 1704 (SF6)

- **Class 10** Beads decorated with tiny dots (not illustrated).

- **Class 11** Beads with complex designs made up of two or more simple decorative motifs. 24: Type 2201 (G68EV), 25: 2401 (G4), 26: Type 2706 (GLAHM:B1951.971.10)

References


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