Glass Finds on Bahamian Island Open Up New World of Thought about Site of Columbus’s Landfall

Christopher Columbus made his first landfall in the New World at 2 a.m. on October 12, 1492. Later that morning, he rounded the tip of a small island and went ashore, taking possession of it for Isabella and Ferdinand. He named the island San Salvador, and he met some of its gentle and timid Lucayan Indian inhabitants.

Columbus’s journal records that on that same day, he traded with the Indians, giving them numerous objects “of slight value,” including glass beads (which they hung around their necks), fragments of broken platters, red caps, hawk’s bells, and small coins. In subsequent entries, he added brass rings and a shoe buckle to the list, and he specified that the beads were green and yellow. Apparently, the Indians prized the hawk’s bells more than the beads; even so, the crew once bartered a half-dozen strings of beads for a piece of gold.
The actual location of Columbus’s San Salvador has long been thought to have been the Bahamian island bearing that same name today. (Until 1926, it was called Watling’s Island.) Most specialists still believe this today despite the flurry of controversy raised recently by a National Geographic Society team who announced their belief that the landing took place on Samana Cay, some 60 miles southeast of San Salvador.

In 1984, the archeologist Charles A. Hoffman, working under the auspices of the Bahamian Field Station of the College Center of the Finger Lakes, excavated a site on a shallow, sandy ridge about 100 meters in from the beach at San Salvador’s Long Bay. Here, tradition has it, is where Columbus is most likely to have made his landing. A previous survey by John Winter had located numerous prehistoric Indian artifact remains there. Hoffman’s excavation produced items of European manufacture mixed with local Indian artifacts. They included seven tiny glass beads (and fragments of three others), a small bronze shoe buckle, a slightly larger bronze D-ring, sherds of lead-glazed pottery, and a small coin.

Hoffman, along with Donald and Kathy Gerace of the field station, requested that The Corning Museum of Glass learn whatever was possible about the artifacts through laboratory analyses and examinations.

The glass beads turned out to be extraordinarily interesting. The green examples have a sparkling and unusual emerald color. Unlike most beads of that time, which were made by breaking up thin, drawn-out canes, these were made by winding threads of softened glass around a wire. Electron microprobe analyses of the glasses by Dr. Stephen S. C. Tong of Corning Glass Works showed that the beads also have an extremely unusual chemical composition. They contain about 70% lead oxide. Only four other examples of beads like this are known. All of them came from early Spanish colonial sites in the New World.

The coin was very badly corroded, and a piece had been broken from it in the distant past. Microscopic examination revealed that it is a blanca of Henry IV of Castile, who reigned in Spain from 1454 to 1474. The coin is made of billon, an alloy of copper containing small amounts of silver, with traces of lead as an impurity. After Henry died, no other small copper-based coins were minted until long after the succession of his half sister Isabella, so the blanca uncovered at Long Bay is just the kind of small change Columbus and his crew were likely to have carried in their pockets in 1492.

Lead-isotope analyses carried out for the Museum at the National Bureau of Standards established that the artifacts examined — two glass beads, the blanca, the buckle, the D-ring, and the pottery sherds — contain leads which match lead ores from mining regions in southern Spain. These analyses, along with other studies, confirm that all the artifacts came from Spain.

It will not have escaped the reader’s attention that the items excavated at Long Bay are the very types of objects Columbus said he gave to the Indians. Only the hawk’s bells and the red caps (which would long since have disintegrated) were lacking. But these finds alone do not prove that Columbus made his first landing at Long Bay. After all, the objects could have been brought there by the Indians themselves anytime until 1513. (By then the island had been depopulated as a result of slaving raids.) On the other hand, the beads and their companion finds do constitute very persuasive collaborative evidence. If, for whatever independent reasons, one believes that Columbus made his first landingfall on San Salvador, Long Bay would have been the site, and the most straightforward explanation of how the artifacts came to be there would be that they were among the items that Columbus and his crew gave the Indians on that momentous occasion.

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Further Reading:

Robert H. Brill, Stephen S. C. Tong, I. Lynus Barnes, Emile C. Joel, and Martin J. Murtagh, “Laboratory Studies of Some European Artifacts Excavated on San Salvador Island,” Proceedings, First San Salvador Conference, Columbus and His World. Available from Dr. Donald Gerace, Director, College Center of the Finger Lakes, Bahamian Field Station, c/o Red Aircraft, 270 Southwest 34th Street, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33315.