

Shell Beads Culture of Prehistoric Ryukyu

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Shell beads are part-ornaments made by perforating the shells of small sea snails. They are found at archaeological sites across the entirety of the Ryukyu Islands. The Ryukyu Islands comprise the Osumi Islands, Tokara Islands, Amami Islands, Okinawa Islands, Miyako Islands, and Yaeyama Islands from north to south, with the Yaeyama Islands situated close to Taiwan in the South. Prehistoric Ryukyuan people crafted shell beads from a variety of small shells that were washed ashore on coral reefs. These beads were used as ornaments and burial accessories. This is a defining feature of the prehistoric culture of the Ryukyu Islands. I define the entire process, from production to use, as "shell bead culture".

Shell beads made of small Conidae are Ryukyu's most common type of bead. In this study, I focus on Conidae and categorize beads based on their shapes and production techniques. I demonstrate that each region's bead culture has a distinct genealogy. The cultural relationship between the areas of the Ryukyu Archipelago as seen in the shell beads is quite independent, which is an important finding that challenges the results of previous pottery studies.

The specific work includes 10 sites dating from 3300 B.C. to 1000 A.D. and focuses on the shapes and production techniques as follows:

Tokara Islands: The oldest Conidae beads in the Ryukyu Islands are from 3300-3000 B.C. They are made by perforation by pecking, a unique technique, and the roll and polish method. Their technology is undoubtedly autochthonous.

Amami and Okinawa Islands: Finds date from 3300-3000 B.C. onward, the roll and polish method begins later, while horizontal grinding is used more frequently than in the Tokara Islands.

Miyako Islands: We know of only two examples from the first millennium BC, but the characteristics of the Conidae beads suggest a relationship with the Okinawa Islands and other distant areas.

Yaeyama Islands: Conidae beads made by the roll and polish method and the horizontal grinding method are highly finished and date to 2300-1300 y. BC. The beads were undoubtedly related to Taiwan.

Osumi Island: A large number of Conidae beads have been found at the Hirota site, dating from

300 to 400 years AD. Researchers are divided on the cultural genealogy of the beads, with Okinawa, China, and Japan being the most likely candidates.

Key words: Neolithic, Ryukyu Archipelago, Shell Bead, Roll and polish method, Horizontal grinding method