



Shell Beads | The ancient Choctaw ‘bling’



Figure 1. Necklace of whelk shell disk beads with native copper gorget, made by author

One basic and timeless characteristic of human nature is that people like to look good. Observation shows us that, whether back in 10,000 B.C. or today, individuals were and are often willing to go to extraordinary lengths to have a “knockout” appearance. This month’s edition of Iti Fabussa will focus on what was traditionally one of the most important personal accessories for both Choctaw men and women: shell beads.

Choctaw ancestors made beads from a variety of different types of shell, but the largest and most impressive beads were made from the columella of the Busycon shell. Some readers from last month may remember that the outer part of Busycon shells was removed and used as the raw material in making gorgets. The remaining, inner, part of the shell is the columella. These long, thick, solid, spiraling pieces of shell were a highly prized material for making clothing pins, ear ornaments, and of course, beads. The ancient Choctaw word for these columella beads was probably “oksup” (see Byington 1915:301).

Due to the hardness and toughness of the shell, making columella beads requires patience, skill, and good tools. In the early 1700s, English blacksmiths experimented with trying to make Native American-style columella beads. Even with their hardened steel tools, they were unable to do it effectively (Lawson 1813). Native Southeasterners stopped making columella beads more than 200 years ago, and unfortunately the few written descriptions of how they did it are very incomplete.

However, by examining archaeological materials left behind in ancient villages, and experimenting with replicas of the ancient tools, it has been possible to reconstruct this Indigenous technology (Kinsella 2002; Kozuch 2003; Thompson 2008). Recovering this knowledge is important because it documents one specific way that our ancestors applied their



Figure 2. Heating a whelk columella

intelligence and ingenuity to accomplish a difficult technical process.

The first step in making columella beads often involved heating the columella in a fire (Fig. 2). Temperatures high enough to turn a freshwater mussel shell into powder will only somewhat soften the tough columella.

After the columella cooled, ancient artisans carefully chipped away and remaining edges of the whorl with a sharp-edged stone (Fig. 3-A). Thereafter, the columella was more finely shaped by grinding its edges on sandstone. Then, it was cut into blanks (Fig. 3-B), using a flake of stone dipped in wet sand that was sawn back and forth over the shell. After the columella bead blanks were cut, artisans individually smoothed up each of them by grinding them one at a time on a piece of sandstone (Fig. 3-C).

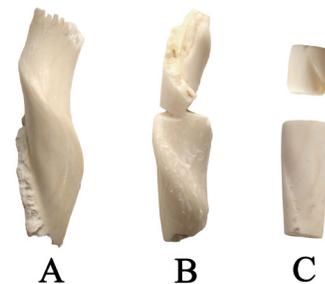


Figure 3. Making bead blanks: (A) columella after chipping; (B) mid-way through cutting bead blanks (C) bead blanks ready for drilling

The hardest challenge in making columella beads lies in drilling holes through them so that they can be strung.



Figure 4. Holding a columella bead in a mulberry branch vice, drilling with a bow drill.

Figure 5, below, shows a close up of the drilling.



The first difficulty to overcome is finding a way to hold the small, round, slippery bead blank so that it can be drilled. An ingeniously simple vice can be made by tightly bending a section of a green mulberry branch in half. The wood splinters at the bend, but the tough bark remains, making a flexible joint. The two sides of the bent branch are pushed together and then bound with leather. Each wrap makes the vice tighter and tighter (Fig. 4).

Tools made from tiny chips of stone are common at pre-contact Native American villages in the southeastern United States. Studies on the edge wear and residues on these tools make it clear that many of them were used for drilling shell (e.g. Ensor 1991:30-31). These

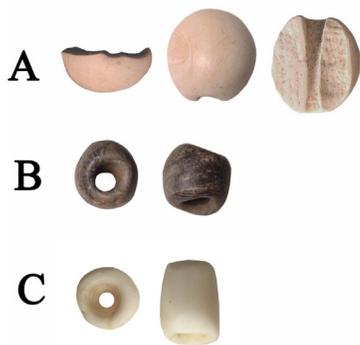


Figure 6. Columella beads: (A and B) Ancient Choctaw columella beads, Lubbub Creek Site; (C) Columella bead made by author with stone tools

grips the drill shaft and spins it many times with each stroke. Using this technique, the author has attained drilling speeds of nearly 3,000 rpm (faster than most modern high-speed hand drills). Once a small hole is started in the shell, the effectiveness of this setup can be increased by dipping the drill point in a cutting slurry made from water and very finely crushed pieces of flint (Fig. 5).

Even with this bow-drilling technique, it still takes several hours to make even one columella bead (Fig. 6). Making a

tiny drill bits are quite effective if they are slid into a hollow piece of river cane, which serves as a drill shaft.

The simplest way to use these drills is to spin them back and forth in the hands. With this technique, the author has been able to sustain drilling speeds in excess of 950 rpm. This setup is effective, but it can be improved by wrapping the string of a small bow around the drill shaft, pushing down on the top of the drill shaft, and pulling the bow back and forth. The string of the bow

necklace would have taken weeks. Judging from some surviving pre-contact artwork, it appears that people sometimes wore many strings of these beads around their necks, and others around their ankles, wrists, and knees. Such an outfit would have had hundreds, and hundreds of hours of work invested in it. The beauty of a white, glistening shell necklace is pretty breath taking today. The way it moves, the way it sounds, and the cold, smooth feel that it has in the hands, are all pleasing to the senses. Today, we are surrounded by hard, smooth shiny objects made of glass, plastic, and polished metal. Our ancestors had little or no contact with these types of materials, and so the sensation created by a beautiful shell necklace must have been even greater for them than it is for us. Making these beads was clearly worth the effort.

Because of their beauty, compact nature, and the high amount of labor investment, shell beads represented a standard of wealth, and were often used in trade. Adair said that in Choctaw/Chickasaw country one shell bead the length of a finger (1775:170) was worth four buckskins in trade value. According to Byington: "Ikonla apakfopa achvffakmvt isuba iti illibekatok," "One necklace was worth a horse" (1915:301). However, it is uncertain how standardized the value of these beads originally was. They were probably not used exactly like European money.

What is certain is that from an early date European traders did all they could to quantify the value of Native shell beads. Their purpose in doing this was to standardize trade with Native groups so that they could ultimately control the market and dictate the terms of trade. Sadly, these efforts were pretty successful. In the 1700s, beads mass-produced by Europeans flooded the market, and all but ended Native manufacture of columella beads.