

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 16/87

IDENTIFICATION OF BEADS AND A SHELL
FROM THE GOBLIN WORKS, LEATHERHEAD,
SURREY. 1985.

M E Hutchinson FGA

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Summary

Seven beads from a Saxon grave were identified. Two were amethyst, two were glass and three were shell, probably cowrie. These last were of special interest as a cowrie shell (*cypraea pantherina*) was found in another grave on the site.

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Seven beads were sent in by the FRMC funded conservator for the South East of England for identification. They were found in a grave in a Saxon cemetery dated to the sixth or seventh century AD in the grounds of the old 'Goblin' vacuum cleaner factory on the outskirts of Leatherhead, in Surrey.

The beads were examined under low power microscope and were so characteristic of their materials that no further tests were really needed. However, the identification of the amethyst beads was confirmed by a hardness test, to demonstrate that they were not fluorite, and the shell beads were taken to the British Museum (Natural History) to have their identification checked as it had been called in question. A cowrie shell from another grave was also identified there.

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The Beads.

Stone Bead no 1. GW 85 S14. K 860159.
Maximum length: 22.9mm (broken at the pointed end)
Maximum width: 13.6mm
Weight: 2.87g
Material: amethyst.

Stone Bead no 2. GW 85 S14. K860159
Maximum length: 21.8mm
Maximum width: 12.2mm
Weight: 3.92g
Material: amethyst.

Glass Bead no 3. GW 85 S14. K860159
Maximum length: 4.9mm
Maximum width: 13.3mm
Weight: 1.14g
Material: glass, pale green.

Glass Bead no 4. GW 85 S14. K860159
Maximum length: 14.3mm
Maximum width: 16.3mm
Weight: 4.69g
Material: glass, blue with red spots, one spot missing.

Bead no 5. GW 85 S14. K860159
Maximum length: 13.0mm
Maximum width: 11.0mm
Weight: 1.30g
Material: shell, probably cowrie. *

Bead no 6. GW 85 S14. K860159
Maximum length: 8.4mm
Maximum width: 7.7mm
Weight: 1.01g
Material: shell, probably cowrie. *

Bead no 7. GW 85 S14. K860159
Maximum length: 5.8mm
Maximum width: 9.7mm
Weight: 0.49g
Material: shell, probably cowrie. *

* Identification confirmed by Dr J D Taylor, Dept of Zoology, British Museum (Natural History).

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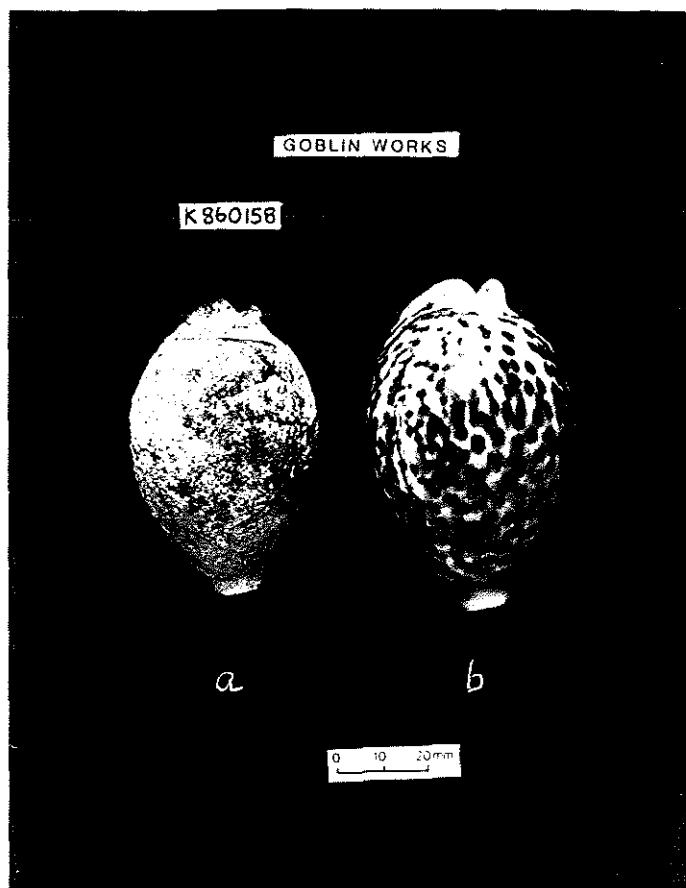
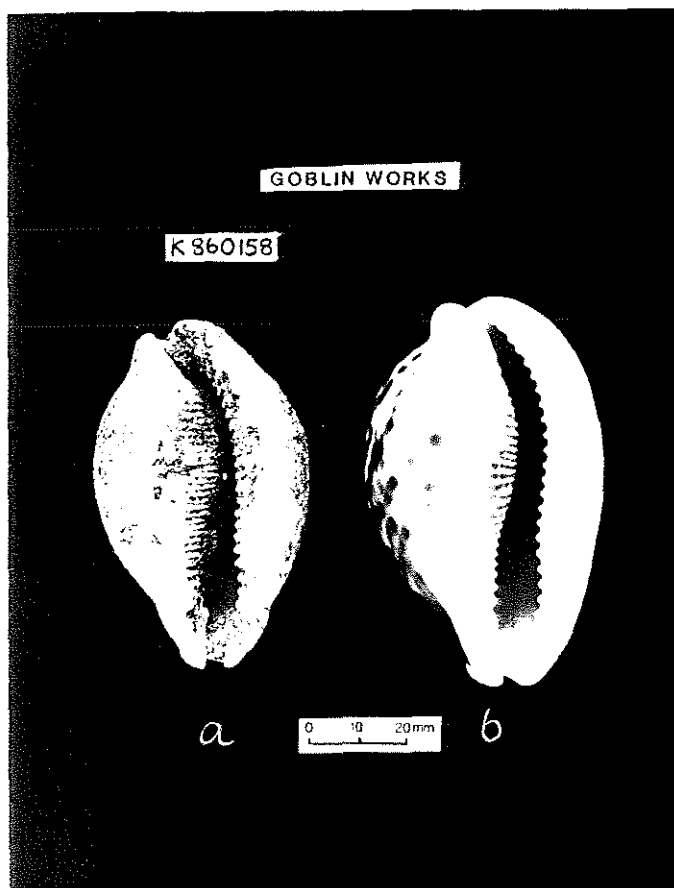
Amethyst is a mauve to purple variety of crystalline quartz and it is found in many places, including Britain.

The shell beads are interesting as they have been cut from the shell of a gastropod and the ridges down the side of each bead strongly suggest that this was a cowrie. An examination of various types of cowrie in the collections of the British Museum (Natural History) eliminated most species, including the mediterranean cowrie (it is too small and the teeth round the aperture are too fine) and left as the most likely species the panther cowrie (*cypraea pantherina*), or the tiger cowrie (*cypraea tigris*). The panther cowrie is confined to the Red Sea while the tiger cowrie is found near the mouth of the Red Sea, down the east coast of Africa and in other places fringing the Indian Ocean. Both are shallow water shellfish and are easily found. However, a cowrie shell (K860158), 66mm in length was found in Grave S4 in the same cemetery and this has been positively identified as the panther cowrie (*cypraea pantherina*) by Dr J D Taylor British Museum (Natural History). The balance of probabilities therefore would seem to suggest that the beads were cut from a panther cowrie.

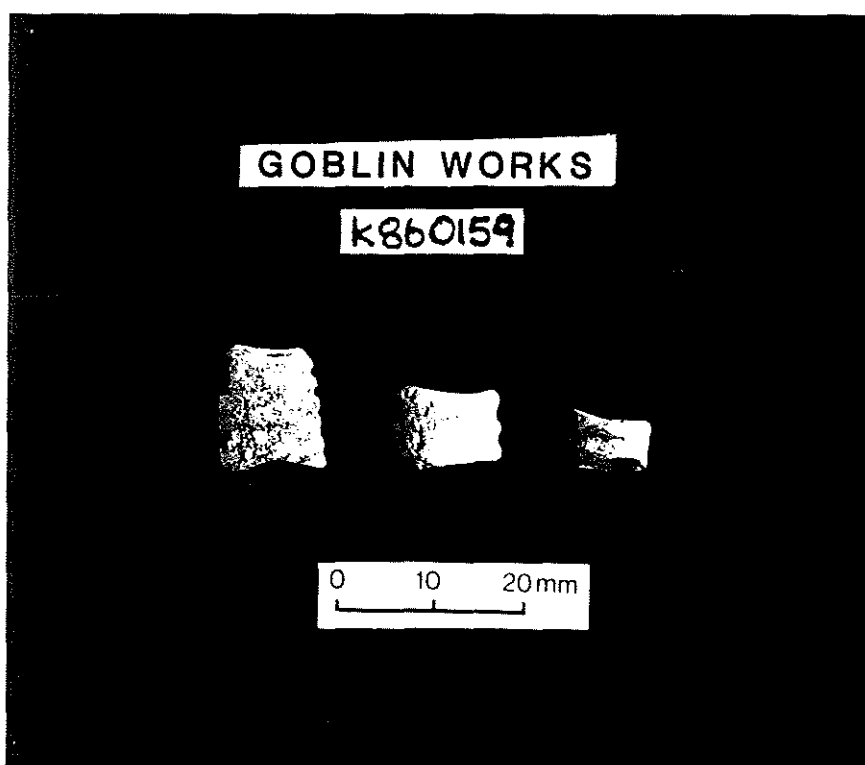
Although uncommon, this is not the first time that the panther cowrie has been found in a Saxon grave in this country. It has been found in Saxon women's graves excavated on Kingston Down and Sibertswold Down in Kent and in a grave near Wingham, also in Kent(1) and doubtless elsewhere more recently.

Acknowledgments. I wish to acknowledge assistance from Martin Read (HBMC conservator), Robert Poulton (excavator) and John Taylor (BM (Nat Hist)) in writing this report.

(1) JACKSON (J Wilfrid) Shells as Evidence of the Migrations of Early Culture. Longmans, Green & Co [1917] page 133.



The Panther Cowrie, (*Cypraea pantherina*)
a, the saxon shell; b, a modern example.



The Shell Beads