

Entangled histories: A collection of glass beads found in a dilly bag from a rockshelter in Cape York Peninsula

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In the 1970s, an intact Indigenous dilly bag cached in a rockshelter near Laura, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, was recovered by rock art researcher Percy Trezise. It was later accessioned to the Queensland Museum, where it has remained unstudied despite the unfolding Australian contact research.

We named this gallery Dillybag Gallery because of the woven dillybag and steel axe and spears which we found in a small shelter just below on a lower escarpment. The dillybag contained coloured beads, wax and other small items and steel tomahawk had some binding and wax applied to the handle to provide a better grip. On the ground below the ledge on which the dillybag was placed were 2 spears probably in course of being repaired and one of the spears was accurately hafted, the binding being absent.

Oridin, E.H. and P. Trezise 1975



The bag held a variety of material culture items, including thousands of strung and loose glass beads, resin, plant fibre objects, an iron fishhook, and a silver spoon. The spoon dates from the 1880s, coinciding with the Palmer River gold rush and colonial expansion into the traditional lands of local Ang-Gnarra peoples.



Recently, researchers have begun to consider the potential of glass bead analysis in Australian culture contact studies to inquire about the timing and nature of glass bead distribution and function within Indigenous contexts (Allen et al. 2018; Litster 2019; Litster et al. 2018; Wesley and Litster 2015a, 2015b; Wright and Ricardi 2015). Internationally, the study of glass beads has proved especially effective in understanding archaeologies of culture-contact and entanglement (Panich 2014; Wesley and Litster 2015a). With the employment of standardised classification systems (Wood 2011:68), it is possible to capture distinctive production signatures such as colour, shape, size and manufacture methods.



This assemblage is the largest known collection of glass beads from an archaeological Indigenous context in Australia and may present the clearest archaeological evidence for use of glass beads as trade goods to date. Globally, museums hold extensive collections of Indigenous material culture. While these are the product and a symbol of colonialism, they can represent a valuable resource for archaeological research and for the repatriation of knowledge and material back to communities. Collection-based research of material culture has the potential to contextualise existing items held within museum institutions and, as with the dilly bag assemblage, can offer valuable insights into the complex and dynamic entangled histories that derive from the colonial frontiers of northern Australia.

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Photo credit of dilly bag: Peter Waddington, Queensland Museum