

# Making Romano-British Glass Bangles: Inside the Craftsperson's Mind

Tatiana Ivleva

The main aim of the paper is 'to bring the makers out of the shadows and to celebrate the creativity of their achievements'.<sup>1</sup> This case-study concerns Romano-British glass bangles, seamless ring-shaped adornments made of coloured glass. A maker of these glass bangles is placed at the centre of attention to allow them to tell their stories of how knowledge of making a glass bangle can grow and what this growth tells us about the craft itself.

To achieve this, the author has worked with an experienced glass artisan, Connor Garton from GartonGlass, who was commissioned to make replicas of Romano-British glass bangles. The questions addressed were: a) what does the maker of a replica of an archaeological artefact have to say about how he experienced the production of a glass bangle; and b) as the craftsman had never before produced a seamless glass bangle and only attempted it with the author's guidance, how might his experience inform us about training of craftspeople and the craft development in Roman Britain?

Glass bangles appeared in Britain in the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century AD, coinciding with the Roman conquest of the southern regions of England. Prior to the Roman invasion, Britain had no history of seamless glass bangle production, although on the continent glass bangles had been in circulation already for two and half centuries.<sup>2</sup> Romano-British bangles are usually divided into three main types based on the colour of their glass core and the colour of the applied decoration.<sup>3</sup> The objects occur predominantly in north-eastern England and southeastern Scotland.<sup>4</sup>

Various ethnographic studies have provided clues to how a glass bangle can be made seamlessly.<sup>5</sup> The information from these studies was used by a French team that tried to replicate Late Iron Age glass bangles by following a number of the techniques currently known.<sup>6</sup> The experimental research and application of scientific techniques showed that the method most likely used was winding and stretching with the help of two iron rods or pontils.<sup>7</sup>

Equipped with this information, Connor Garton made numerous attempts to reproduce the Romano-British glass bangles; however, this technique, which was seemingly easy in theory, was difficult to replicate in practice (fig. 1). In essence, the provision of necessary information did not guarantee that the knowledge was easily replicated. The technique of winding and stretching is easier to see and describe than it is to execute. Instead, Connor found he had to follow the material at hand and not impose onto the material the form and knowledge that was offered to him. He had to work things out as he went along, following the rules and guidance of the glass, and the constraints laid down by the material itself rather than following procedures precisely laid down in advance by someone else.



Fig. 1: Misfires of glass bangles produced with the winding and stretching technique.

The failure to replicate, however, has provided compelling insights into the process of making a glass artefact in the past. Most likely the makers of glass bangles in Roman Britain had to follow the material and learn from it as well. Trial and error would have been key and indeed attempts to produce a seamless glass bangle with insufficient skill or poor knowledge of the material has been detected for at least 12 fragments found on different sites breadth and length of Britain. Moreover, it became clear that the craft of bangle making in Roman Britain did not develop in a progressive sequence – with bangle production continually improving across the province; instead, the craftspeople responsible and the craft itself went through multiple phases of self-discovery, learning by doing, trial and error, with knowledge probably spread via a system of apprenticeship that was necessary highly localised. These processes were not confined to one place or one workshop but rather occurred simultaneously in various Romano-British regions. This underlines that the development of craft does not follow a linear sequence but very much depends on the developing knowledge of the craftsman involved in the making process.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ingold 2013, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Haevernick 1960; Gebhard 1989; Wagner 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Kilbride-Jones 1938.

<sup>4</sup> Ivleva 2018, 2 and fig. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Korfmann 1966; Rolland et al. 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Rolland – Clesse 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Video on the production of Late Iron Age Continental glass bangles by experimentation can be accessed here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoW19SkpxLY>> (accessed 12.09.2018).

### Image Credits

Fig. 1: T. Ivleva.

### References

#### **Gebhard 1989**

R. Gebhard, *Der Glasschmuck aus dem Oppidum von Manching* (Stuttgart 1989).

#### **Haevernick 1960**

T. Haevernick, *Die Glasarmringe und Ringperlen der Mittel- und Spätlatènezeit auf dem Europäischen Festland* (Bonn 1960).

#### **Ingold 2013**

T. Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Abingdon 2013).

#### **Ivleva 2018**

T. Ivleva, *Romano-British Glass Bangles*, Roman Finds Group Datasheet 9.

#### **Kilbride-Jones 1938**

H. E. Kilbride-Jones, *Glass Armlets in Britain*, *PSAS* 72, 1938, 366–395.

#### **Korfmann 1966**

M. Korfmann, *Zur Herstellung nahtloser Glasringe*, *BJb* 166, 1966, 48–61.

#### **Rolland – Clesse 2014**

J. Rolland – J. Clesse, *Filer le verre, porter le bleu; enjeux techniques et sociaux de la production de parures en verre dans le monde celtique du second âge du Fer*, *Bulletin Association Française pour l'Archéologie du Verre* 2014, 9–12.

#### **Rolland et al. 2012**

J. Rolland – Y. Le Bechennec – J. Clesse – S. Rivoal, *Des parures celtiques aux verriers du Népal: un projet d'expérimentation des techniques de fabrication des bracelets en verre*, *Bulletin Association Française pour l'Archéologie du Verre* 2012, 6–10.

**Wagner 2006**

H. Wagner, Glasschmuck der Mittel- und Spätlatènezeit am Oberrhein und in den angrenzenden Gebieten (Remshalden 2006).